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THE TRANSPARENCY PROBLEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION: USING A GROUNDED THEORY TO CREATE A MODEL FOR REBUILDING TRUST

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FOR REBUILDING TRUST

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ABSTRACT

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Tuition-dependent higher education institutions face myriad external and internal challenges, including waning public confidence, demographic shifts, systemic sluggishness, and reduced workforces. Research on higher education administration tends to focus on senior-level leaders, with the operational experience of rank-and-file administrators largely absent from scholarly inquiry. This research endeavors to address the gaps in research by centering the experiences of entry and mid-level non-unionized administrators at tuition-dependent institutions. Guided by systems theory and using Kathy Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory methodological approach, this research presents a grounded theory of broken trust and a foundational pipeline model to mitigate this breakdown in trust and foster systemic resilience among administrators at tuition-dependent higher education institutions. If implemented, the foundational pipeline model presents an opportunity to provide essential administrative members within individual higher education institutions the ability to both weather current challenges and be prepared to successfully navigate future internal and external disruptions. By cultivating systemic resilience among higher education administrators, this research can

play a role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of higher education as a larger social system.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the many people who have supported my academic journey. My father, our family's first doctor, has believed in my ability and nurtured my intellectual curiosity for my entire life. My mother, who set the extraordinary example of being a working mom (to four headstrong kids) and full-time student, sustained me when I wanted to quit. My sisters' professional devotion and service as medical providers (and random text messages) help provide me with much-needed perspective.

My wife, a gifted academic, professor, mentor, furniture assembler, researcher, artist, and partner, has been with me every step of the way. Her quiet (and not-so-quiet) confidence in my abilities has been transformative. My daughter's questions, encouragement, and excitement at finally being able to call me "Dr. Mama" kept me smiling and motivated. My colleagues and friends humored me, cheered me on, and celebrated with me throughout this very long journey. It takes a village, and mine is spectacularly helpful, and fun!

My mentor, Dr. Aquino was simply the best. She truly embraced my methodology, recognized the opportunity it presented, and knew exactly how to move me through this process with the perfect mix of questions and encouragement. My committee members were thoughtful, reflective, and supportive of my future growth as a researcher and academic.

And finally: this is dedicated to my participants. Your insights, perspectives, and experiences have not only informed my research, but have also made a profound difference in my own orientation to higher education leadership. I am incredibly grateful to you and hope that what we have created together through this research will make a difference in the lives of people doing the often invisible but always essential work of higher education administration.

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CHAPTER 1

Higher education institutions are typically slow and reluctant to change (Blass & Hayward, 2014). This systemic sluggishness presents significant challenges to tuition-dependent schools that rely on tuition to fund over 60% of their operating budget. These institutions are already wrestling with financial uncertainty, changing perceptions about the value of higher education, and relentless competition for students in the face of demographic shifts affecting the entire United States (Blass & Hayward, 2014). Since 2020, there has been drop of 14 percentage points in the public's confidence that higher education has the ability to lead the country in a positive direction (Fischer, 2022). These concerns are increasingly linked to the cost of an education; Americans do not believe that the benefits of higher education outweigh the costs and increasingly perceive college as out of reach for low-income students (Fischer, 2022). At the same time, enrollment in higher education dropped nearly seven percent during the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating a known trend and dovetailing with a decline in the college-age population across many regions of the United States (Nadworny, 2022).

Often referred to as a "demographic cliff," the United States will see a sharp decline in the number of "traditional" undergraduate (i.e., those enrolling in college directly after high school) students, although there are growth opportunities in other sectors, including adult learners. These demographic shifts correspond with a higher education workforce that is rebounding from a dramatic decrease in its workforce. In 2020, over 50,000 employees within higher education were either laid off, furloughed, or offered voluntary separation agreements, representing the largest departure from the sector since the recession of 2008 (Staff, 2020).

Although higher education workforce levels are approaching the same level they were before the pandemic (Bauman, 2022), as I will explain in Chapters 2 and 3, systems theory posits that the full impact of disruption to a system, especially social systems such as higher education, may not be known for years or even decades. The employee churn experienced in 2020 has undoubtedly had ripple effects, including the loss of institutional knowledge creating a resource strain on those employees who remain, a decrease in employee morale, and a shift in how current and prospective employees view the professional opportunities available to them within the field of higher education.

Extant scholarly inquiry about resilience in higher education is primarily focused on how senior-level leaders cope with acute disruptions or provides a top-down mandate for facing more endemic challenges. While it is important to understand how the highest levels of leadership approach challenges, eliminating the perspectives of entry and mid-level non-unionized staff and administrators means that our understanding of resilience in higher education is disconnected from the lived experience of most people who work within that system. This research endeavors to address the gaps in research by centering the experiences of entry and mid-level non-unionized staff and administrators and using that data to provide tuition-dependent institutions with a well-defined, practical pathway for cultivating sustainable resilience regardless of the challenges that arise.

Purpose of the Study

My study is focused on non-unionized, entry- and mid-level higher education administrators. Non-unionized employees are “at will” employees; their employers determine salary, benefits, and policies, and they can be terminated without cause. As such, they do not have a larger organization advocating for them and are solo actors in navigating the terms of their employment within the larger system of their institution.

This independence creates challenges when trying to create a systems-based theory and framework that incorporates the perspectives of non-unionized higher education administrators. To address this notable gap in research and lack of a framework, my study explores three main themes: 1) how non-unionized higher education administrators at tuition-dependent private institutions define their professional function and the way in which their job connects to the larger goals of their institution; 2) what participants identify as professional challenges, both internal (i.e., those that exist within the context of their specific institutional), and external (i.e, threats to higher education as a system); and 3) the resources participants believe they have available to address the identified challenges.

The limited scholarly inquiry around higher education resilience primarily focuses on rebuilding or returning to some level of normalcy after an acute incident, such as a natural disaster or communications crisis. Although there is some exploration of the resilience required to navigate pervasive issues, that literature over-represents the perspectives and actions of senior-level administrators. To address these gaps, my participants have at least two managers between themselves and the president of their institution. By collecting these participants' perspectives, my research offers insight from individuals whose roles comprise a large section of the overall higher education system but whose voices are underrepresented in scholarly inquiry.

Although I am using constructivist grounded theory in my research, as per the parameters of this methodology, it is important to acknowledge that this research has been influenced by both systems theory and resilience in social systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). My research also fills gaps found in specific recommendations made by Rosowsky & A.G. (2020) for building institutional resilience at colleges and universities. Their recommendations focus on operational action steps and leadership adjustments but do not adequately consider several fundamental tenets of systems theory: that changing one element in a system causes all other elements to change and re-ordering elements in a system also effects change. Most critically, their 14 recommendations do not richly incorporate the perspectives of the administrators and staff members tasked with carrying out these operational steps or on the receiving end of senior-level administrative actions and mandates, thus their recommendations lack true contextual relevance. As such, in addition to using constructivist grounded theory to create a new framework, I am specifically collecting and analyzing data from non-senior administrators to inform this framework. The ultimate purpose of my research design and methodology is to develop a holistic framework that is both specific to private, tuition-dependent institutions and inclusive of the myriad people whose work affects the long-term survival of higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Although this study utilizes constructivist grounded theory, it is essential to understand institutions of higher education through the framework of systems theory so that the model of resilience developed is relevant and applicable. Developed in the 1940s by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in response to the limits of reductionism, systems theory is “centered on reducing complex phenomena into their most basic parts” (Cherry, 2020 p.1). While reductionism seeks to simplify and isolate elements, von Bertalanffy’s framework focuses on how individual elements are organized and interact with each other inside a system.

Systems contain elements that are bounded and interact, or exchange, with each other. A system’s boundaries can be open, closed, or somewhere in between, and the environment around the system can influence the exchange that happens within the system, known as input, and the exchange within the system can in turn influence the environment, known as output (Gregory, n.d.). In defining types of systems, Ackoff and Gharajedaghi (1996) categorize universities as a social system, which "have purposes of their own, contain parts…that have purposes of their own and are usually parts of larger social systems that contain other social systems" (p. 15). Purposeful members have choices but can also replicate an outcome under different circumstances and can generate different outcomes in different systems. In essence, purposeful members have both agency and transferability. Examples of other social systems include corporations or towns. In exploring higher education as a system, Bridgen (2017) asserts that social systems are driven by the need to survive, and it can often take years for a system to fully understand the full impact of a system's input and output.

Significance of the Study

Financial uncertainty in higher education is not new, nor is it solely a result of COVID-19. Between 2010 and 2020, tuition at private four-year institutions increased by 19% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Education expenditure per student has not kept pace, increasing by only 10% from 2009–2019 (Duffin, 2022). In addition, since 2016, 22 institutions in the United States have merged with other institutions, and there are additional mergers on the horizon (Mayorga, 2021). COVID-19 placed even greater financial pressure on tuition-dependent institutions. As Blankenberger and Williams (2020) highlight, colleges and universities with intense budget threats do not have the luxury of waiting to comprehend the ripple effects of COVID-19 to fully settle into their systems. In fact, they may not fully understand the impact of disruption that occurred prior to the pandemic.

Scholarly inquiry about the ways in which higher education supports and cultivates resilience tends to focus on those in higher-level leadership positions (Fernandez et. al, 2022). However, the onus of creating true organizational resilience does not fall solely on high-level administrators. Operating as if it does may cause further harm to an institution, which is especially true when taken in tandem with research illustrating that senior-level higher education leaders often overestimate their leadership capability (Lamm, et. al, 2021). If leaders consistently overestimate their abilities, especially as they ascend into higher-level positions, they may not understand the extent of their roles in institutional missteps and errors. They may also underestimate the resources they require to achieve their aims, potentially alienating the mid- and low-level administrators and staff who can not only serve as resources themselves but offer insights into how to creatively redistribute additional financial and relationship resources. This overestimation increasingly shrinks the choices available to institutions and diminishes their ability to actively build the resilience they need to face current and future threats to their survival.

In social systems, understanding one's purpose in the system is essential to taking actions that help a system thrive (Bridgen, 2017). In addition, Fath et. al (2015) posit that resilient social systems must successfully move through an adaptive cycle of growth, equilibrium, collapse, and reorientation. For these reasons, providing staff and administrators at all levels of an institution with a framework for resilience is a necessary component to giving these key actors the tools they need to ensure the long-term survival of higher education as a social system.

Connection with Social Justice and Vincentian Mission in Education

While St. Vincent is likely most known for his charitable work in supporting the poor, his true gift to the church was his commitment to “establish structures that would help the poor emerge from poverty” (Maloney, 2010). The structures he created in his in his own community were adopted by other churches in France, ensuring a more broad-scale, sustainable way to provide community support. He scaled his understanding of systems and structures to the church itself, shaping the training and education of clergy throughout France and setting the stage for the modern seminary model. This research, which endeavors to strengthen a system to ensure its sustainability, is therefore intrinsically connected to the Vincentian mission.

The Vincentian mission is shaped by the question “what must be done?” While typically asked in the context of serving our most vulnerable communities and individuals, this research asks the Vincentian question about a sector that is undoubtedly in need: higher education. The implications of losing administrative talent, students, and confidence in higher education are profound. Although the public may be losing confidence in higher education, pursing a college degree provides tangible, evidence-based benefits. The median income of those ages 22-27 who hold a bachelor’s degree is over $20,000 higher than those who hold a high school diploma, and the poverty rate for those who hold a bachelor’s degree is nearly four times lower than for those who hold a high school diploma (Edelson, 2022). A college degree also provides an advantage during economic uncertainty. During The Great Recession, bachelor’s degree earners had the lowest unemployment rate. Bachelor’s degree holders are also more likely to have health insurance and a longer life expectancy (Edelson, 2022).

By exploring creating a framework for systemic resilience in higher education, my research can play a role in ensuring the long-term survival of a social system that directly contributes to people's overall social mobility, their ability to either create or sustain generational wealth, and their overall quality of life.

Research Design and Research Questions

My research was guided by constructivist grounded theory (CGT), which was developed by Kathy Charmaz and synthesizes elements of traditional grounded theory and Straussian Grounded theory. In traditional grounded theory, researchers engage with their inquiry as a "blank slate," quarantining themselves from existing research and theories. This allows a new theory to emerge that is *grounded* in their original research. In contrast, CGT recognizes the researcher's engagement with the research that came before their work and does not require the researcher to discard that connection recognizing that what came before has created a passionate engagement with the new research. CGT also encourages the researcher to undertake creative interpretation of the research findings while engaging in constant comparison to develop a theory specific to the original context, in this case, tuition-dependent institutions of higher education (Singh, S., & Estefan, A., 2018). Given my positionality and relationship to the topic, which I will expand upon in chapter 3, CGT is well-suited to my research.

My research questions are: 1) How do higher education administrators understand their professional purpose within the institution? 2) What do higher education administrators perceive as internal and external threats to the institution? 3) How do higher education administrators understand the resources they can access to address the identified professional obstacles? I conducted several rounds of in-depth interviews, following up with participants as aspects of my grounded theory emerge from analysis. I also collected artifacts from participants' institutions, including publicly available information about enrollment, endowment, and relevant employment policies to gain a more well-rounded understanding of each participant's work environment and perceived challenges.

My analysis was guided by the four steps outlined in the Ünlü-Qureshi Analysis Instrument (2020): code, concept, category, and theme. I also followed Charmaz's recommendations about line-by-line coding leading to grouping, focused coding leading to categories, and Theoretical Coding, where categories are mapped to larger themes, leading to theory construction. I followed Charmaz's reflexivity recommendations, including frequent memo writing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a situation snapshot about the state of higher education, illustrated the gaps in current research about resilience in higher education, and provided a brief outline of my research focus, methodological approach, and data analysis plan. In the next chapter, I will explain the unique relationship between CGT and literature review and will share the existing theoretical frameworks that have influenced my research.

Definition of Terms

Higher Education Administrator: A classifications of non-faculty employees who manage and oversee operations. They often manage employees and play a role in shaping institutional policies (Johson Bowles, 2022).

Higher Education Staff: A classification referring to non-faculty employees who perform operational functions at a college or university but do not instruct students. Higher education staff do not typically manage other employees (Kallenberg, 2020).

Higher Education Union: A group of employees belonging to the same classification who work in tandem to negotiate and determine their pay, benefits, and terms of employment.

Private College/University: A postsecondary institution controlled by a private individual(s) or a nongovernmental agency. A private institution is usually not supported primarily by public funds and its programs are not operated by publicly elected or appointed officials (U.S. News & World Report).

Resilience: The ability for a system to navigate all four stages of the adaptive cycle: growth, equilibrium, collapse, and reorientation (Fath, et. al, 2015).

Social Systems: Systems that have their own purpose that both contain parts of other social systems and are part of other social systems, each with their own purpose. Individual elements within social systems have both purpose and agency. (Ackoff & Gharajedaghi, 1996)

Tuition-dependent Institution: Institutions that rely on tuition to provide more than 60% of total revenue (Shewey, 2022).

CHAPTER 2

In this chapter, I will explain how using constructivist grounded theory necessitates a unique approach to both a theoretical framework and a literature review. I will provide a brief overview of the core elements of constructivist grounded theory, and briefly explain extant theories and review existing literature to explain the information and factors that are shaping my research.

The Role of a Theoretical Framework and Literature Review in Constructivist Grounded Theory

Because my dissertation is using constructivist grounded theory (CGT), there is no explicit theoretical framework to present in this chapter. However, in keeping with the characteristics of my methodology, it is essential to explain the theory that is most strongly influencing my perspective and orientation to the topic. In Chapter 3, I will provide a more robust overview of the history, philosophical foundations, and characteristics of both grounded theory and CGT. For the purposes of this chapter, I will provide a brief snapshot of grounded theory, CGT, and the role of existing theory and prior research in a CGT research design.

Glaser and Straus, the founders of grounded theory, believe that in a true grounded theory study, the researchers must be blank slates. Naturally, in this methodological approach, there is no theoretical framework. They also argue that literature review must come after the research to ensure that the theory is not actually grounded in extant literature and instead emerges from the theory.

Glaser and Straus ultimately traveled different paths as their research continued. Straus began working with Corbin, and this new work produced the first meaningful divergence from Glaser and Straus' original grounded theory approach. Straus and

Corbin maintained that researchers are not meant to exist as blank slates but can — and should — provide a critical analysis of both what has come before their own research and what emerges from their own inquiry (Reiger, 2018). In this new dynamic, there has undoubtedly been at least some influence from existing theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, a literature review cannot be avoided and in fact can help the researcher pinpoint what is important in their particular study. However, researchers must practice reflexivity to ensure that they set and keep distinct boundaries between available scholarly inquiry and their own emerging theory (Dunne, 2011).

Kathy Charmaz, a student of Glaser and Straus, developed a new approach to grounded theory that diverges even further from the original concept of the methodology. Charmaz posits that researchers are not standing outside of the existing body of work, nor are they just the interpreters of what has come before them; they are inexorably linked in ways that cannot be ignored or dismissed. As Charmaz (2014) notes "the theory depends on the researcher's view…it cannot stand outside of it" (p. 239). Charmaz accepts that researchers will be in dialogue with existing research, but the data gathered by the researcher should be the driving force behind the development of a grounded theory. By acknowledging the intwined nature of the researcher and existing theories and literature, Charmaz also recognizes that theories emerging from a CGT methodology cannot be generalized to a context wider than the context of the individual study (Singh & Estefan, 2018). In CGT, reflexivity takes on an added level of urgency and meaning, as it provides a pathway for the researcher to fully differentiate between that which exists and has influenced the researched versus that which is being actively co-created by the researcher and participants. In this way, reflexivity is a necessary component of shaping the emerging grounded theory and ensuring that it is applied to the proper context.

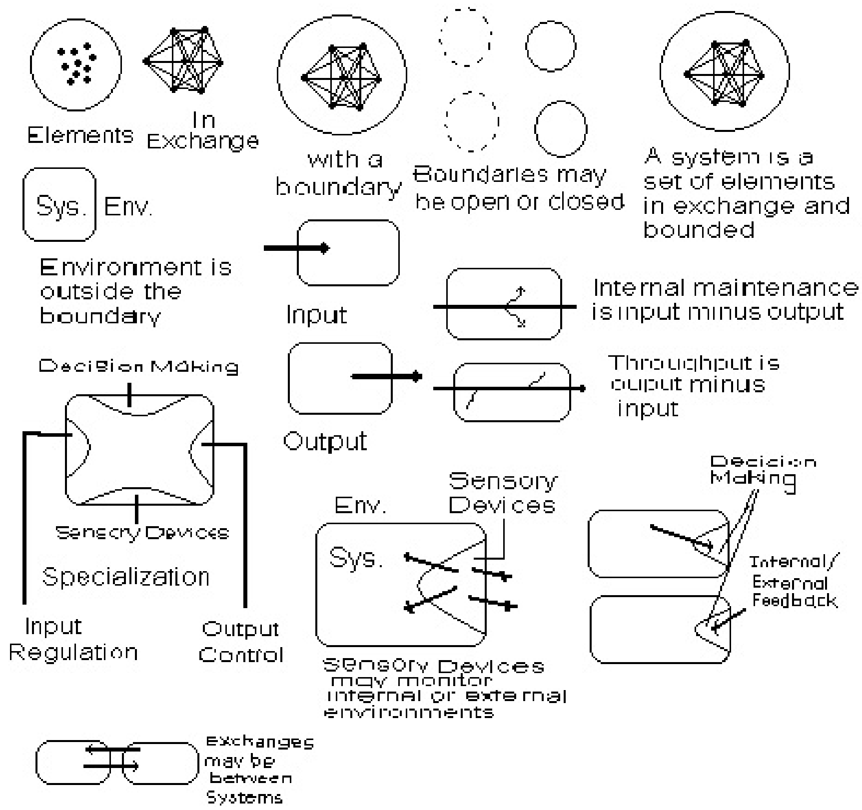
For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge that in developing my research, I have been most influenced by systems theory (von Bertalanffy), which I will briefly as well as by the adaptive cycle in social systems (Fath, et. al, 2015), both of which I will briefly outline. I have also been influenced by existing literature on crisis management and institutional resilience in higher education. This work does align with my interests but, as I will illustrate, it either explores crises as isolated events or over-represents senior leadership while ignoring the voices of the other individuals whose work is vital to the long-term survival of individual institutions.

Theoretical Framework: Systems Theory

Systems Theory was developed in the 1940s and first published in the 1950s by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, in response to the limits of reductionism, "a theory in psychology centered on reducing complex phenomena into their most basic parts" (Cherry, 2020). While reductionism seeks to simplify and isolate elements, von Bertalanffy's new framework focused on how individual elements are organized and interact with each other inside a system.

Figure 1

Systems Theory Diagram



Note: Concepts and drawings by Robert Gregory, Massey University, and translated to digital format by Luke Rondinaro. Retrieved from https://wsarch.ucr.edu/archive/papers/gregory/gensysTh.html

As illustrated in Figure One, systems contain elements that are bounded and interact (exchange) with each other. A system's boundaries can be open, closed, or somewhere in between, and the environment around the system can influence the exchange that happens within the system (known as input), and the exchange within the system can in turn influence the environment (known as output).

General Systems Theory (GST) also maintains that it is the very *organization* of the elements that play a pivotal role in how the element functions. In GST, changing one aspect of one element in a system means that other elements adapt in response. Likewise, placing an element from System A into System B would alter the way that element functions.

There are many types of systems, and they vary in complexity. Ackoff and Gharajedaghi (1996) categorize universities as a social system, which are among the more complex types of system because they “have purposes of their own, contain parts…that have purposes of their own and are usually parts of larger social systems that contain other social systems” (p. 15). Purposeful members have choices but can also replicate an outcome under different circumstances and can generate different outcomes in different systems. In essence, purposeful members have both agency and transferability. Examples of other social systems include corporations or towns. As a social system, universities have purposeful elements (people). Every person within a university has, to some extent, choices about how to act, how to interpret input (information, communication) and what kind of output they will generate. However, this very ability to make choices is a danger to social systems, as choices foment conflict (Ackoff and Gharajedaghi, 1996), and conflict threatens the survival of a social system.

Bridgen (2017) also identifies two core tenets of systems theory that are particularly salient to higher education. The first is that “the underlying purpose of…a social system, is survival” (p. 12), and that systems have control mechanisms in place to ensure this survival. Known as feedback loops, one control mechanism maintains a system’s stability (balancing loop), while the other, the “reinforcing loop either increases or decreases the effect of incoming information” (Bridgen, 2017 p. 12). Bridgen asserts that is can take years for a system to realize the impact of recalibrations caused by disruption.

The second core tenant Bridgen (2017) identifies is that “complex systems do not serve a single purpose…[and] usually accommodate more than one purpose” (p. 11). Higher education is a multifaceted system with a variety of moving parts, and different people have different purposes within that system. As per systems theory, the various elements are accustomed to adjusting and adapting in kind in response to these myriad purposes, although the effects of this adjustment are not always easy to discern as they occur. Conflict between elements is not the only threat to social systems; the elemental characteristics of social systems also pose a threat to the system’s ultimate survival. Social systems are a more advanced type of system because elements within the system (i.e., the people) can act of their own accord. However, this same autonomy can also *undermine* a social system’s chance to survive. Ackoff and Gharajedaghi (1996) observe that when members of a social system take in information or learn new skills, it helps them function and become better equipped to achieve their goals. However, this learning also creates a disconnect between those who manage the larger system and may make it challenging to marshal system members towards some common understanding or action.

The multifaceted impact of autonomy, the short- and long-term effects of conflict within social systems, and a system’s prioritization of survival are driving my research questions. As elements of a social system, higher education staff and administrators are purposeful elements that play a pivotal role in both maintaining equilibrium and mitigating the impact of disruptions (incoming information), but there is limited scholarly inquiry into how these actions are affecting the larger system of higher education. There is also limited information about how widespread confusion about purpose, which is a known threat to social systems, manifests and can be corrected within higher education specifically. If all elements — not just leaders— in a social system do not know their purpose or the purpose of the system, they cannot act to preserve it, and they cannot recover from systemic trauma.

Furthermore, social systems carry with them a high risk of creating distance between those designated as leaders and those not designated as leaders. This distance contributes to systemic confusion, which further disconnects rank-and-file administrators and staff from leadership. For this reason, it is suboptimal to consider only the perspectives of leadership because that myopic scholarly focus exacerbates, rather than ameliorates, systemic confusion. Creating a framework for resilience that considers the elements, actions, and purposes of an entire system rather than just a select group of stakeholders is essential to an institution's long-term survival.

Resilience in Social Systems

In their exploration of resilience in social systems, Fath, et. al. (2015) built upon Walker et al.'s (2002) exploration of participatory resilience in socio-ecological systems and applied it to social systems. In identifying an adaptive cycle, they pinpoint four stages a social system must successfully navigate to be a resilient system: growth, equilibrium, collapse, and reorientation. They also identify traps at each stage of the cycle: the poverty trap hinders growth because it does not allow for any room to scale, the rigidity trap hinders equilibrium because it does not allow the system to innovate, the dissolution trap is present during the collapse stage where a crisis introduces too many new elements into the system to maintain its core function, and the vagabond trap leaves a system grappling with how to reorient itself to a new way of functioning as a cohesive system.

This framework of resilience is the most closely aligned to higher education because it specifically considers social systems. However, it comes only from an analysis of extant literature and does not consider the specific context of tuition-dependent institutions, nor does it include the perspectives of any stakeholders who operate within that system. Furthermore, it does not necessarily provide a framework for social systems that are dealing with compounding external and internal disturbances, which, as I will outline below, is the case in higher education.

Review of Related Literature

Higher Education: Recent Historical Enrollment Data

Public colleges and universities are generally funded by state or city budgets, which means those who work for those institutions are employees of that state or city. Private institutions are funded through a combination of tuition, alumni giving, and endowments (Epps, 2022). Endowments are essentially savings accounts with a principal that cannot be spent but generates interest that can be spent at the discretion of either the university or the original donor (Staff, 2022).

Across the United States, higher education enrollment reached its peak in 2010, when 21.02 million students were enrolled, and 72% of those students attended a public institution. Since then, enrollment has declined 10.4%; notably, enrollment between 2010 and 2021 (the first fall after a full academic year of COVID) fell nearly 12%. As of fall 2023, 18.94 million students are enrolled across undergraduate and graduate programs, with 73.2% enrolled at a public institution. Of the nearly 27% of students enrolled in a private college or university, 80.3% attend a non-profit institution (Hanson, 2023).

Higher Education: Impending Demographic Shifts

Future higher education enrollment projections are bleak, due to what is commonly known as a “demographic cliff,” as well as the long-term impact of COVID-19. The demographic cliff is the result of a nearly 20% decline in U.S. birthrates dating back to 2007. The United States will see an 11% decrease in the number of students attending a post-secondary institution through 2029, however the demographic shifts are not equally distributed across all geographic regions of the country. The Mountain and West South Central regions of the country will see 2% increases, whereas New England will see a 24% decrease and the East North Central region will see a 22% decrease (Hyde, 2022).

Similarly, although the overall population of college-age students will decrease, the impact of that decline varies across racial and ethnic demographics. College enrollment among Hispanic/Latino students continues to grow annually, with the enrollment of Hispanic females increasing more quickly than any other racial or ethnic demographic. Before 2010, Black or African American Enrollment increased steadily; since then, there have been small but consistent enrollment declines among that demographic group. Across that same period, multiracial enrollments have increased 133%, although data on multiracial enrollment is not available pre-2010. Finally, females have a higher immediate matriculation rate than males, meaning a larger percentage enroll in a 2- or 4-year institution immediately after graduating from high school. Overall, nearly 63% of high school graduates immediately enrolled in college (Hanson, 2023).

Public Perception of Higher Education

Over the past 10-15 years society's perceptions of higher education's role have shifted. The desire to take in a diverse array of general knowledge is no longer a key driver in the pursuit of a college degree, with a majority of people indicating that career outcomes are now the primary motivation to matriculate into a college or university (Strada & Gallup, 2018). However, data also reveal that just one-third of enrolled students believe they will have the skills they need to compete for jobs once they graduate (Strada & Gallup, 2018). This signals a questioning of what once was considered a fundamental truth: a college degree is a "must" to be competitive in the modern workforce.

More recent survey data indicates two notable concurrent trends: confidence in higher education has somewhat decreased, but perceptions of the value of college vary greatly by political affiliation. The percentage of Americans with "very little confidence in higher education has increased from 9% (2015) to 15% (2018) to 22% (2023). However, there are significant differences in confidence levels among Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. Between 2015 and 2023, Republicans showed the greatest decline in confidence (-37%), followed by Independents (-16%), and Democrats (-9%). However, this still represents a decline in overall confidence in higher education (Blake, 2023).

The politicization of higher education's value further complicates and compounds the demographic shifts among college-aged students in the United States. Institutions located in New England, which is poised to see a 24% decrease in its college-aged population, may have benefitted from being in a part of the country that leans overwhelmingly Democratic. If these institutions attempt to expand their recruitment efforts to regions with a higher percentage of Republican and Independent voters, they may face several hurdles, including raising awareness of their institution and overcoming perceptions of the inherent value of pursuing higher education.

Leadership in Higher Education

Private colleges and universities are led by presidents, who typically report to a Board of Trustees, which is appointed. Over time, the responsibilities and purviews of college presidents have evolved, as have the skill sets necessary to occupy the position. College presidents must be prepared to integrate technology and innovation into their institutions; develop a strategy to ensure financial sustainability; recognize opportunities to capitalize on globalizations; seamlessly manage emergencies and crises; address the increasing consumer mindset among students and their parents; interact with local, state, and national elected officials; and compete for enrollment in a shrinking pool of prospective students (Lu et al., 2017). In addition to these relatively new responsibilities, college and university presidents are still expected to fulfill the more traditional aspects of the role, including fundraising and managing the overall operations of the faculty, students, and staff (Lu, et al., 2017; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017).

The most common path to becoming a college president is academic, that is, college presidents begin their careers as professors. Over three-quarters of college presidents come from previous academic positions (American Council on Education, 2017), and there is some indication that this experience may correlate to a more successful tenure. This is especially true for presidents at large research universities, where having an in-depth understanding of the academic zeitgeist may translate to an increased ability to successfully understand the dynamics of a large university, providing them with both greater leverage in dealing with colleagues and competitors, as well as greater capacity to fundraise (Goodall, 2006).

The current body of work on higher education agrees that the sector has adopted a more “business-focused” mindset which has slowly, but steadily, infiltrated all aspects of college and university life. This mindset has created pressure on people at all levels of colleges and universities to quickly respond to fast-moving and ever-changing demands from individuals, technology, and society as a whole.

Despite changes in what is needed from college presidents, their demographics have not shifted much in the past decade. In 2010, 45.5% of college presidents identified as female; in 2021, that number rose to only 47.63%. Diversity in race and ethnicity is even more profoundly stagnant. In 2010, 70% of college presidents were White, 12% were Black, 12% were Hispanic or Latino, and 4% were Asian. In 2021, those numbers slightly shifted and 65% of presidents were White, 11% were Black, 14% were Hispanic or Latino, and 4% were Asian (Zippia, 2020). These demographics mirror the larger demographics of college and university administrators and staff, which I will further explore in Chapter 3.

Overall, the leadership structure of higher education institutions is a hierarchy and there is, at least on paper, a clear chain of command illustrated by an organizational chart. Presidents lead their institutions in conjunction with senior administrators, who are often at the level of a Vice President, vice chancellors, chief officers. As a group, these senior administrators may be known as the senior staff, the president's cabinet, or the president's executive council, but they are essentially upper management. Each member of this group oversees a functional area of an institution, including academics, student life, enrollment, advancement, communications, and other areas. Within each functional unit are middle managers who manage departments, schools, or other initiatives. A president or other senior leader may also create cross-departmental or cross-functional councils but those act in an advisory function and do not necessarily have any cross-functional authority or decision-making capacity at their institution (Johnson Bowles, 2022).

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) (2022), the average salary for college presidents at private, independent doctoral-granting institutions in 2021 was $849,406 which is nearly $293,000 more than the median presidential salary at public institutions and nearly $177,000 more than the median presential salary at religiously affiliated institutions. At master's institutions the average presidential salaries were $459,062 (private, independent), $316,419 (public), $362,336 (religiously affiliated). At baccalaureate institutions the average presidential salaries were $444,021 (private, independent), $264,900 (public), and $316,294 (religiously affiliated).

In 2021, the average salary for a chief academic officer (also known as a Provost at some institutions) at doctoral-granting institutions was $481,93 (private, independent), $379,834 (public), and $395,667 (religiously affiliated). At master's institutions the average chief academic officer salary was $236,288 (private, independent), compared to $226,935 (public), and $203,701(religiously affiliated). At baccalaureate institutions the average chief academic officer salary was $218,405 (private, independent), $167,332 (public), and $171,572 (religiously affiliated) (AAUP, 2022).

Higher Education Staff and Administrators

As of fall 2022, higher education employees 4.7 million people, almost matching its 2020 employment levels. From March 2020 through December 2020, the sector lost almost half a million jobs, with private colleges and universities accounting for nearly half of that job loss, and with workers of color and lower-paid workers overrepresented in that pool. Since then, the sector has mostly recovered, with private institutions gaining employees back more quickly (Bauman, 2022).

Because non-executive administrators and staff occupy myriad roles at institutions, there is greater salary variance. However, across all functions and levels, non-executive administrator and staff salaries are far below the salaries of executive leadership. For example, in 2019 the average salary for the head or director of a campus learning center was $70,098 (private, doctoral), $67,901 (master's) and $65,273 (baccalaureate). The average salary for a financial aid counselor was $43,227 (doctoral), $41,029 (master's), and $41,757 (baccalaureate) (College and University Professional Association of HR Professionals, 2022).

Larger economic trends and conditions also have a more notable impact on non-executive administrators and staff. According to the College and University Professional Association of HR Professionals (2022), administrative salaries between 2017 and 2020 rose 3.4% but staff salaries rose only 2.9%, while inflation was nearly 7% across the same time period, meaning that salaries effectively dropped. As the United States grapples with persistent inflation, higher education salaries are even less competitive than they were just two years ago.

During the emergence of COVID-19 in March 2020, higher education quickly upended its delivery of not just teaching and learning but also providing services, as colleges and universities moved to a fully remote model. Even as colleges developed return to campus plans, in-person classes were prioritized over a return by administrators and staff. As such, higher education administrators and staff functioned as a distributed workforce for a longer period and have not entirely returned to in-person work.

Recent data from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources indicates that roughly 14% of administrators and staff are working fully remotely, 23% have a hybrid work arrangement, and 63% work fully on-site (Bichsel et al., 2022). Employee modality varies by job function, with 25% of business affairs administrators and staff working almost completely remotely and only 1% of food service professionals working remotely (Bichsel et al., 2022). These numbers do not reflect the desire of higher education staff and administrators, 28% of whom want to work either fully or mostly remote. In total, nearly 70% of higher education administrators and staff want to work at least partially off-campus.

COVID-19 has also resulted in vacant positions not being filled, and in those who remain in their positions working more hours than they are being compensated for, with 23% working an additional one to five hours per week, 23% working an additional six to 10 hours per week, and more than 10% working an additional 10 to 15 hours per week (Bichsel et al., 2022).

These factors mean that the current higher education workforce is simultaneously underpaid, lacking agency about their work location, suffering a significant loss of institutional knowledge due to furloughs, layoffs, and retirements during COVID-19, and working well beyond their compensated purview. These represent significant threats to the systemic functioning and survival of higher education.

Resilience in Higher Education

There is limited scholarly inquiry into systemic resilience in higher education, although there is a larger body of work about resilience for college and university instructional employees and students. When examining resilience within the administration and staff of a university, the current body of work focuses on a discreet crisis while overrepresenting the impact, perspectives, and contributions of leadership.

In addition, existing resilience studies focusing on higher education use frameworks that are not specific to the context of the sector. For example, when Fernandez e al (2022) conducted a qualitative case study that asked the question *How can a team of administrators support organizational resilience to respond to natural disasters?* their theoretical framework came from Vogus and Sutcliffe's management model on organizational resilience. Vogus and Sutcliffe contend that resilience can be actively developed and that resilience in one context has the potential to facilitate resilience in another context, although it is not guaranteed. Their framework includes three primary facets of organizational resilience: broadening information processing, where leaders take in new information that they use to update plans to manage crises/threats); loosening control, where leaders recognize the expertise of their human capital who are empowered to leverage it as needed; and using resources, where leaders are willing to use resources in flexible and adaptive ways. Although their second facet does acknowledge that resilience depends upon leveraging the expertise of those not in positions of leadership, it is dependent upon leaders being willing and able to recognize the capacity of their teams. This is particularly challenging in a sector where those in positions of leadership have been shown to significantly overestimate their own capacity for transformational leadership (Herbst & Conradie, 2011).

While COVID-19 has offered an opportunity to examine the systemic strengths and flaws of higher education, the literature on resilience to date has focused on either student resilience, as well as the resilience of delivering instruction throughout periods of disruption. Bozkurt's (2022) mapping study on the transition to a "new normal' after COVID-19 broadly mentions the need for institutions to develop resilience, but it provides limited guidance on what that looks like or how the various people who work at an institution can play a role in developing that resilience.

Even when attempting to develop a framework for resilience that *does* consider the unique context of higher education, the voices of leadership are consistently overrepresented. Rosowsky (& A.G., 2020), an engineer by trade, writes on how universities, like infrastructure, are complex systems, drawing from that technical expertise to make 14 recommendations about how institutions can develop resilience in the aftermath of COVID. His recommendations deal with scenario planning, developing a contingency budget, ensuring functional reciprocity among senior leadership, organizational emergency planning, creating chain of command structures, planning for "return to normal" operations, establishing internal and external communications point people, reviewing data management, refreshing emergency plans, securing IT resources, establishing an on-campus housing emergency plan, sourcing external consultants who can help senior leaders, and planning for mental health needs of returning community members.

Rosowsky's resilience is operationally robust, in that it accounts for the "what" that is required to return to functional sustainability. However, his checklist is almost completely disconnected from considering the who, why, and how. It does not illustrate an understanding of the intricate functions of social systems, nor does it account for how a shift in one domain might unintentionally degrade the functioning in another domain. Furthermore, it again prioritizes senior leadership's role in "shifting the leadership's mindset and decision-making processes to explicitly include consideration of institutional resilience" (Rosowky, 2020, p. 9). This perspective is unsurprising considering his background is engineering, a field in which resilience is primarily concerned with "a system's ability to sustain or quickly recover function following the experience of a stressor or disturbance" (Stronik, 2020). If speed of recovery is the priority, then adopting a top-down approach might seem like the most efficient way to achieve that type of recovery. However, this framing of resilience may be ill-suited to the context of higher education, which may not be optimally restored by quickly getting back to "business as usual." A more holistic framework of resilience could help higher education recalibrate and adjust to successfully manage both acute disruptions and chronic issues.

Creating a Holistic Understanding of Resilience

On September 28, 2022, X (then Twitter) user @edburmila observed:

> Universities pay staggering salaries to Presidents, Chancellors, VPs and provosts by the dozens, etc and in every administrative office there is a 57 year old woman named Peggy with a title like "Admin Assistant II" and that's the person who actually runs the university.

This has been retweeted 37,300 times and liked 312,1000 times, suggesting that this sentiment taps into widespread perceptions about the disconnect between those who are designated and paid as leaders and those who are nether designated or paid as leaders but nonetheless perform essential labor in a university. It also perfectly illustrates the flaws in existing literature on resilience and sustainability in higher education. Continuing to frame resilience through the lens of leadership will create more and more distance between "senior staff" and everyone else who works at a college or university. Furthermore, adopting a top-down approach to creating resilience ignores the very real fact that there are people who play an integral role in the functioning of an institution but are not compensated financially or recognized hierarchically as leaders. Codifying and incorporating their experiences into scholarly inquiry may in fact hold the key to higher education's long-term survival as a system.

Conclusion

Because I am using constructivist grounded theory as my methodology, the research explored in this section was meant to not only illustrate not only a gap but also to clearly illustrate the ways in which prior scholarly inquiry has influenced my own research questions. In the next chapter, I will provide a more robust overview of grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory, thoroughly explain my research design, and review how I will ensure trustworthiness in my research.

CHAPTER 3

In this chapter, I will explain the methodological design and procedures of my research on cultivating systemic resilience in tuition-dependent colleges. I will detail the setting of my participants as well as my criteria for selecting them. In addition, I will outline my data collection and analysis procedures. I will conclude this chapter with an exploration of strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of my design, researcher ethics, and my role as a researcher.

Research Design

I used constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to guide my research. CGT has its origins in grounded theory, which was first developed in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss as they investigated the experiences of patients dying in hospitals. Glaser and Strauss, who were sociologists, did not believe that prevailing qualitative methods sufficiently captured the nature of what their data revealed to them. Qualitative inquiry to that point had followed a somewhat traditional scientific method of conducting research to validate an extant theory or hypothesis. By proposing their grounded theory approach, Glaser and Strauss moved away from deductive reasoning in qualitative research and advocated for an inductive approach, where theories could only emerge from data collected by participants who were best situated to speak meaningfully about the phenomenon being investigated.

This recognition of the potential that participants possess to shape theory is a significant departure from how existing research methods viewed the role of the researcher versus the participant. By moving away from the traditional, hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant (Mills et al., 2006), grounded theory also represents the "democratizing of theory construction" (Wertz, et. al, 2011, p. 65).

At its heart, grounded theory

> is a systemic yet flexible method that emphasizes data analysis, involves simultaneous data collection and analysis, uses comparative methods, and provides tools for constructing theories (Wertz, et. al, 2011, p. 165).

Glaser and Strauss formalized this methodology as grounded theory in their 1967 book *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research* (Singh & Estefan, 2018). Although Glaser and Strauss continued to collaborate, Strauss' work with Juliet Corbin in the 1990s led to a new approach to grounded theory. In Straussian grounded theory, "the researcher is not viewed as a blank slate and has an interpretive role" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015 in Reiger, 2018, p. 6). What came to be known as Straussian Grounded Theory is also less inductive in nature based on its approach to data analysis. The researcher essentially creates a "hypothesis" in early data analysis and uses future data collection to deduce its utility in a new theory, vs. analyzing data and inducing a new theory without the guidance of a formalized hypothesis (Reiger, 2018).

Influenced by her mentors Glaser and Strauss, Charmaz synthesized their work into a new approach: constructivist grounded theory. Building on Struass and Corbin's recognition that researchers cannot be blank slates, Charmaz continued this line of thinking and posited that the research process and subsequent theory are not discovered or unearthed but are constructed by both the researcher and the participants. While CGT has both inductive and deductive characteristics, its most notable difference from the preceding versions of grounded theory is its acknowledgement of the researcher's influence and values as an integral part of the entire research process.

The original grounded theory paradigm has an objective researcher who must turn away from their values and influence during their research. Glaserian grounded theory is less draconian about the relationship between the researcher and prior data, and its recognition of the researcher's own values and influences. The researcher may have a distinct orientation to his or her topic of inquiry but is expected to remain disengaged from prior research to the point where there is no room to develop research questions prior to data collection. Only after data collection and analysis does the researcher engage with relevant scholarship to evaluate the merit of their emerging theory.

In CGT, the researcher's perspective and creative analytical interpretations are not only expected but encouraged. To mitigate researcher bias and ensure the quality of research, Charmaz also emphasized the need for consistent and deep reflexivity, with later theorists providing practical frameworks to ensure that the perspective of the researcher, while considered, acknowledged, and encouraged, does not take *priority* in the emerging theory. Unlike the findings from the iterations of grounded theory that came before CGT, findings that come from a CGT approach cannot be generalized across a range of areas. The theory that emerges from CGT are specific to the context from which the participants were sampled (Singh & Estefan, 2018).

In contrast to Glaserian grounded theory, both Straussian and constructivist grounded theory allow for "theoretical sensitivity," wherein researchers are guided by—but not constrained to—existing theory. As Charmaz notes, theoretical sensitivity is simply a jumping off point and does not affect the development of new theory. Awareness of what exists is essential to ensuring the ultimate quality of grounded theory research. As such, a literature review is not anathema to either of these approaches, which also support developing research questions prior to engaging with research participants is logical (Rieger, 2018).

It would be disingenuous for me to feign disconnect from prior scholarship and theory, especially since the gaps uncovered in this existing body or work are the driving motivation behind my research. As illustrated in Chapter 2, resilience research for higher education does exist, but it focuses on guiding institutions through acute situations. In treating crises like isolated incidents, these frameworks do not robustly address the long-term impact and implications of the incident, nor do they address systemic issues that may have exacerbated the progression of the crisis and may degrade an institution's overall sustainability. Extant systems theory research, especially Ackoff and Gharajedaghi's work on why failing social systems should become social-systemic, are not specific enough to higher education's specific set of challenges.

Rosowsky's (2021) 14-point outline of building institutional resilience draws a parallel between infrastructure and institutions of higher education. While he makes a strong case for the analogy, which does have its place in discussions on institutional resilience, his recommendations seem completely disconnected from the lived experiences of those who work in higher education, other than the highest-level administrators. Just like infrastructure, even the most optimized systems will, at some point, depend upon a human being who likely does not sit in a position of senior leadership. The benefits of a new monorail connecting an airport to a city will be limited if the company in charge of transportation can't retain engineers who understand the nuts and bolts of ensuring that the monorail actually travels along its designed route.

This emphasis on senior leadership is supported by Fernandez et al (2022), who point out that the limited scholarly inquiry of how administrators support resilience in higher education tends to focus on those in higher-level leadership positions. The onus of creating true organizational resilience does not fall solely on high-level administrators, who often misjudge their own managerial effectiveness (Herbst & Conradie, 2011). For these reasons, constructivist grounded theory is the best choice for my research.

When it was first introduced into the research space, grounded theory truly seemed like a democratization of theory development. It differed so notably from the deductive approaches that dominated research methodology, but CGT comes closest to achieving democratization because it does not over-emphasize one perspective over another. It attempts to establish a semblance of equity between researcher and participant and, in doing so, allows a theory to emerge that is truly relevant and connected to the subjective realities of both researchers and participants.

Charmaz's iteration of grounded theory is by far the approach best suited to my research because CGT embraces the researcher as an integral creator of knowledge, who is also uniquely tuned into and focused on the context of each participant (Reiger, 2019). As I will explain in the following sections, this approach will not only allow me to develop a new framework for systemic resilience in tuition-driven institutions of higher education, but it will also allow me natural opportunities to practice meaningful reflexivity and ensure the trustworthiness of my research.

Setting

My research focuses on how administrators and staff at private, tuition-dependent institutions answer three research questions: 1) How do higher education staff and administrators understand their professional purpose within the institution? 2) What do higher education staff and administrators perceive as internal and external threats to the institution? 3) How do higher education staff and administrators understand the resources they can access to address the identified professional obstacles?

There are currently 1,640 private, non-profit institutions of higher education in the United States: 1,555 are four-year, 85 are two-year institutions. (Digest of Education Statistics, 2021). As per The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (2021), across the United States, private non-profit higher education institutions rely on tuition and fees for roughly 19% of their total revenue. Other notable revenue sources include investment returns (45.5%), private gifts, grants, and contracts (7.6%), and Federal grants and contracts (6.6%). This varies by region. For example, for institutions in New England, tuition and fees make up 14.3% of revenue, whereas in the Great Lakes region, tuition and fees make up 20.7% of revenue.

Given the revenue variance among institutions, I was somewhat successful in recruiting participants from a range of locations. This is particularly important because, as explained in Chapter 2, the demographic shifts occurring in the college-age population are not equally distributed by geographic region. As such, institutions located in different regions are likely approaching the demographic shifts in ways that directly affect the experiences of the administrators and staff who work there.

On an individual level, my participants all worked at tuition-dependent universities but hold different roles at their respective institution. For that reason, there was some variance in their individual settings, and even more variance in where and how they are working, given that the higher education workforce is more distributed than it was pre-COVID, as explained in Chapter 2.

As grounded theory sampling suggests, my initial sample comprised significant individuals who are best situated to contribute to theory creation based on their setting (Table 1).

Table 1

Institutional Profile of Sample

Participant	Total UG Enrollment	Region	Published Tuition	Endowment Size
Ben	1,000-5,000	Midwest	$50,518	$81 million
Ava	5,000-10,000	Northeastern	$70,744	$391 million
Charlotte	1,000-5,000	New England	$36,006	$40 million
Zoey	500-1,000	Southeastern	$31,564	$9.7 million
Janet	1,000-5,000	Midwest	$35,888	$26.5 million
Holly	5,000-10,000	New England	$55,587	$53.2 billion
Natalie	1,000-5,000	Northeastern	$60,794	$178 million
Sarah	5,000-10,000	Northeastern	$64,325	$202 million

The most pressing bias for the setting of participants is the fact that in leveraging my own professional network, I may have overrecruited from the Northeast/New England region. This will be further explored in the limitations section in chapter 5.

Participants

In keeping with the sampling guidance for grounded theory research, my participants were "significant individuals" (Baker, et. al, 1992 in Cutcliffe, J., 2000 p. 1477), who are best situated to speak in depth about their experience working in tuition-dependent institutions. As discussed in Chapter Two, the perspectives of senior administrators are overrepresented in extant literature, which also suggests that these senior administrators are unaware of their leadership capabilities. Rosowsky [& A.G., 2020]'s 14 recommendations for institutional resilience are similarly focused on upper-level administrators and leader and show no recognition that there are staff members who play pivotal roles in an institution's long-term survival.

For these reasons, my participants hold entry, mid- and upper-middle roles at the university, meaning they have at least two managers between themselves and the president of their institution. Their position and role are significant because these perspectives will contribute to a more robust understanding of how professional challenges are approached across all levels of a university. Through this sampling approach, I was able to create a more holistic framework that is grounded in the lived experience of the people who do a bulk of the "boots on the ground" work at tuition-dependent colleges and universities.

I recruited my participants using existing professional networks, including LinkedIn and Higher Education Professionals List Servs. Before selecting interview participants, I developed a short questionnaire to collect basic demographic information about each potential participant and their professional role (Appendix A).

Higher education administrators are overwhelmingly White (68.5%): 13.8% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 10.6% identify as Black or African American, and 4.6% identify as Asian (Zippia, 2019). These demographics are typical among clerical and office staff: 71.2% identify as white, 7.4% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 13.7% identify as Black or African American, and 2.2% identify as Asian (American Council on Education, 2017). The lack of diversity in higher education administration and staff is compounded by the fact that the demographic make-up of the sector has remained largely unchanged since 2010. Although there is slightly more diversity among technical, maintenance, and service staff members, these roles are often outsourced to external vendors. I met several challenges in recruiting staff and my sample included employees designated as administrators.

Table 2

Demographic Distribution of Sample

Participant	Position Function	Years in Role	Race/ Ethnicity	Sex
Ben	Fundraising/Development	2	White	M
Ava	University Systems	1	White	F
Zoey	Student Life	1	Black/ African American	F
Charlotte	Student Life	9	White	F
Janet	Academic Administration	27	White	F
Holly	Departmental Administration	4	White	F
Natalie	Enrollment Marketing	2	White	F
Sarah	Program Director	20+	White	F

As my research progressed, I engaged in theoretical sampling. A hallmark of grounded theory research, theoretical sampling can only occur after initial data collection from, in my case, a purposeful sample as explained in Tables 1 and 2. Upon coding, comparing, and memo-writing, theoretical sampling "is designed to serve the developing *theory*. Analysis raises questions, suggests relationships, highlights gaps in the existing data set and reveals what the researchers do not yet know (Sbaraini et al., 2011)." In keeping with CGT, data collection and analysis were happening simultaneously so I was able to select participants who offered greater representation related to years of service, age, and geographical location.

Data Collection Procedures

The two main sources of data collection were interviews and artifact collection. As indicated earlier in this chapter, I utilized the demographic screener to create my first purposeful sample. As I determined my participants, I conducted in-depth interviews with administrators at private, tuition dependent colleges and universities. Before each interview began, I walked the participant through the informed consent form, allowing time for questions or for the participant to opt out. Each interview was recorded so that it could be transcribed for coding, which was noted in the informed consent form.

I minimally engaged with artifact collection, primarily utilizing it to check participant's reflections on the feedback available to them in their professional capacity.

Data Source: Interviews

While interviews are a cornerstone of qualitative research, in GGT, interviews are not considered as efforts to mirror reality but as emergent interactions through a mutual exploration" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 315). To facilitate the co-creation that defines CGT, semi-structured interviewing is the optimal approach, as it allows for the researcher to be responsive to the participants'' answers and delve into potential themes that will later guide theoretical sampling (Foley et al., 2021). While I have developed an interview protocol with probes (Appendix C), it is flexible enough to accommodate additional questions that may emerge from not only my participants' answers but also from my own orientation to the topic and setting. For example, addressing the demographic homogeneity of higher education is not explicitly mentioned in my protocol, however, I am acutely aware of the role it plays in the sector. I remained attuned to identifying pathways for exploring that dimension if my participants signal that it is significant to their experience.

My interview protocol was "merely the starting point for interviewing, and the focus of interviewing needs to evolve as the study progresses" (Foley et al., 2021). As I engaged in data analysis, my interview questions often shifted in order and the interview was more organically connected to how each participant interacted with the initial questions I asked them, most specifically the question about how they came to work at their current job.

Data Source: Artifacts

In qualitative research, collecting artifacts is seen as a relatively non-invasive way of gathering information about a research topic. Goetz and LeCompte (1984 in Jonassen et al., 2004) advise that researchers must locate, identify, analyze, and evaluate artifacts. They also "recommend that the more informed the researcher is about the subjects and setting, the more useful artifacts may be identified and the more easily access may be gained to those artifacts" (Jonassen et al., 2004).

Recognizing my own positionality as a higher education administrator who works in the communications space, I have a unique understanding of how information is made available to higher education employees via public-facing websites and on other digital platforms. This information can include internal communications that are posted online, benefits information used to recruit new employees, statistics gathered and shared by internal institutional research departments, or social media posts. These kinds of artifacts can help me in several ways: it can help to establish trustworthiness by illustrating how each participant's experience aligns with what their institution communicates about itself. In addition, understanding how the participants are making meaning of the artifacts, i.e., their role as epistemic objects as unearthed through data analysis, can also help me hone subsequent iterations of my interview protocol.

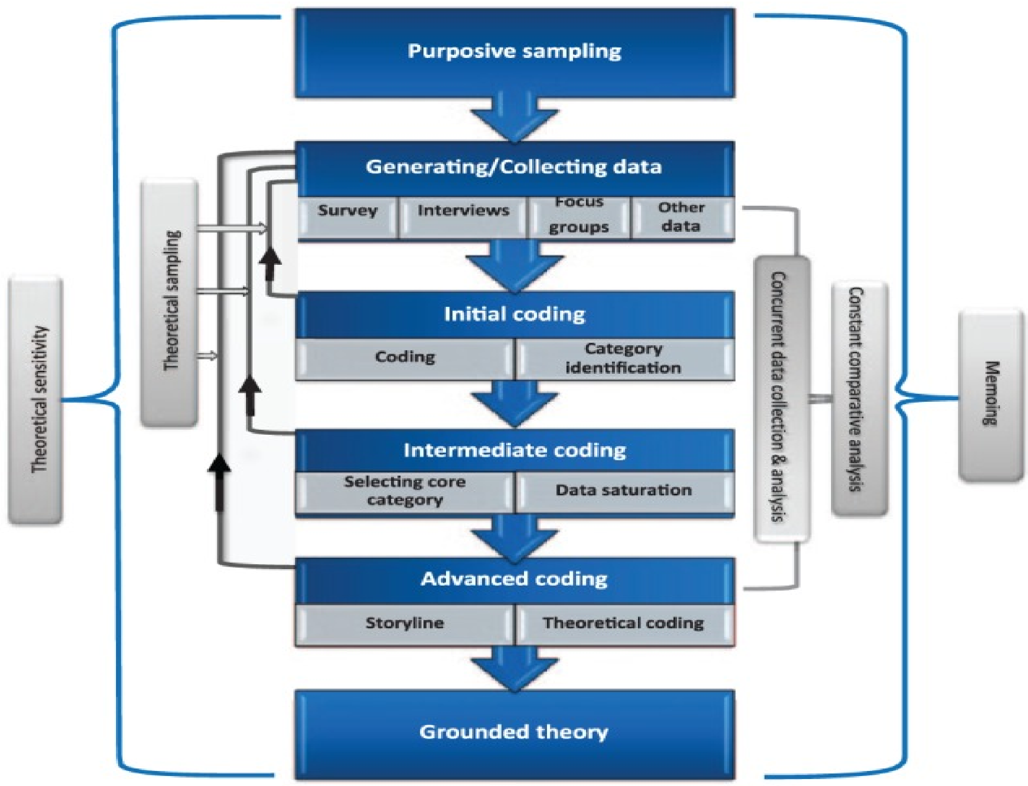
However, these articles were ancillary to my primary approach for collecting artifacts, which was driven by the framework of artifacts as epistemic objects. The epistemic object framework is especially salient in a grounded theory study because artifacts are not assigned an established meaning but “gain situated meanings within the process of being used in knowledge” (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005 in Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 5). For this reason, I minimally engaged with artifacts, as my participants did not specifically reference artifacts that held particular meaning to them throughout our interviews.

Data Analysis Approach: Interviews

The most prominent difference in the three grounded theory approaches is in each one’s approach to data analysis. As Figure 1 indicates, CGT analysis does not happen in a linear fashion, it is a fluid, somewhat circular process that involves a certain amount of simultaneous sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

Figure 2

Summary of the Interplay between the Essential Grounded Theory Methods and Processes



From Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded Theory Research: A design framework for novice researchers. *SAGE Open Medicine*, *7*.

Qureshi and Ünlü (2020) recognize that this debate over differences may present challenges for novice researchers, delaying the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, which is a hallmark of all grounded theory approaches. The Ünlü-Qureshi Analysis Instrument provides an easy reminder for new researchers about the four key steps needed for successful data analysis.

In this instrument, codes are labels, concepts are interpretations (words/phrases) that cluster codes into similar groups, categories are a more abstract expansion on concepts, and themes are the pinnacle of abstraction in the process (Quereshi and Ünlü, 2020). The authors of the instrument suggest using short phrases or "ing" words to capture each step.

With this instrument in mind, I followed Charmaz's recommendations for data analysis, which begins with initial line-by-line coding and continues with grouping these codes into concepts. I then moved to focused coding, which Charmaz believes allows for quicker analysis while also streamlining future data collection. In this stage, I generated categories, which were what I came back to as I continued to collect, analyze, and compare data. After asking if the categories identified in initial coding held up as more data is collected, I moved into more abstract coding — what Charmaz calls Theoretical Coding. This is the stage at which categories get mapped to larger themes and an ultimate theory is constructed.

Data Analysis Approach: Artifacts

Collecting artifacts serves several purposes in data analysis. One purpose is to collect artifacts that establish the inherent trustworthiness of the interview data collected. For example, participants who spoke about the informal ways they received feedback do work at universities where formal feedback mechanisms are in place for them, whether or not they are implemented successfully. That collection was relatively simple. I let the participants guide my artifact collection, using initial coding and data analysis to determine those artifacts that are particularly meaningful to each participant.

Data Analysis Software

To assist with my interview data analysis, I used Delve, a software that assisted me in the organization of codes and the exploration of themes. As I analyzed my data, I also used word clouds, thematically illustrative iconography, and heat mapping – to provide me with different ways to engage with the data as I developed a theory and accompanying model.

Trustworthiness of the Design

Because grounded theory differs from other qualitative methods, Charmaz (2006, 2014) posited that trustworthiness in grounded theory must be centered around "credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 315). Credibility is achieved by collecting enough data to ensure that the researcher can both ask enough questions and has a large enough body of information to engage in constant comparison among data collected (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). It also is achieved by engaging in constant reflexivity with the aim of "gaining 'methodological self-consciousness' of how hidden beliefs can enter the research process" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 316). Charmaz & Thornberg (2021) assert that this self-consciousness is not constrained to methodology – it must extend to the researcher as well. At all stages, the researcher must be open, transparent, and willing to accept ambiguity until additional data is collected (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

To address originality, chapter 5 will pinpoint the ways in which my work provides a novel perspective on an acknowledged issue and will be sufficiently transparent about my data analysis and the ways in which it contributes to the development of a new framework (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The processes of memo writing and engaging in theoretical sampling as my research continues provided additional assistance in ensuring originality.

Resonance deals with the relationship between the participants and the findings, “that is, to what extent the findings make sense to the people involved (affected) by the findings” (Alemu et al., 2015). Given CGT’s rich understanding of the relationship among the researcher, topic, and participants, I utilized situational iteration to ensure that the theory and accompanying framework proposed were relevant to each one of my participants.

Usefulness refers to whether the findings can be applicable to a context larger than the parameters of my study. Throughout the entire data analysis process, I gathered rich data and undertook analysis with the goal of becoming increasingly more focused in the questions asked in future rounds of collections. Transparency is critical to my work, and I endeavored to keep that top of mind as I move through my data analysis (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Research Ethics

Before beginning research, I went through the St. John’s University Institutional Review Board training and approval procedure to ensure compliance. Participation in this research was entirely voluntary. Only relevant professional demographic information was shared in my findings, and all participant names were changed. Interested participants were asked to fill out a preliminary questionnaire, which introduced the research topic and reiterated that their participation was voluntary. All informed consent documentation was reviewed prior to conducting each interview, and participants had the opportunity to opt out.

Because CGT holds the researcher and the participants as co-creators of theory, my research requires particular attention to reciprocity. If there truly is to be no hierarchy between my participants and myself as a researcher, then it is essential that I took steps to create a more equitable dynamic. Seibold (2000, in Mills et al., 2006), provides guidance around specific questions that help researchers focus their reflexivity on reciprocity:

How is this [person] like me? How [are they] not like me? How are these similarities and differences being played out in our interaction? How is that interaction affecting the course of the research? How is it illuminating or obscuring the research problem? (Mills et al., 2006, p. 9).

Establishing equity also involved flexibility on my part: I deferred to my participants' schedules and interview parameters and allowed enough room to ask additional questions that surfaced from each participant's answers. This required me to delicately balance the interview protocol to ensure commonality of questions while allowing each participant's unique experience to come through in a way that will allow a meaningful theory to emerge (Mills et al., 2006).

Researcher Role

The researcher is integral to all aspects of a constructivist grounded theory study. Charmaz went so far as to say that "in a constructivist GTM, the resulting theory 'depends on the researcher's view, it does not and cannot stand outside of it'" (Charmaz, in Ramalho et al., 2015). This extraordinary potential to co-create a novel framework that makes meaning of my participants' experience while acknowledging my own also presents challenges around reflexivity.

There is no doubt that I am inexorably linked to my research in ways that may have an impact on data collection and data analysis. As a higher education administrator who matches the selection criteria, my most prominent potential bias is my own mindset about higher education. I have a strong perspective on the challenges facing higher education and even stronger convictions about how institutions are situated to handle them. I have also assigned importance and made my own meaning to artifacts I encounter in my professional life. In coding my data and making decisions about artifacts that shaped theory and framework development, I had to be open to artifacts that align with my participants' experiences. In short: I ran the risk of being "too close" to the topic and needed to ensure that I didn't over emphasize data that confirms my perspective rather than challenging it.

Because grounded theory encourages memo writing and constant reflection, I took advantage of natural steps built in to ensure I mitigate this issue. Following Seibold's guidance, I constantly questioned and wrote memos about my reactions to my participants' answers and how they might differ from my own. I referred to these memos to ensure I was not over relying on codes generated from my own perceptions rather than the lived experience of my participants. I also directly addressed my role and perceptions as I memo wrote, making a point to specifically look for and name instances where data collected challenges my experience and opinions.

My positionality presented a potential barrier to establishing a meaningful rapport with my participants. I represent the demographic majority in the sector, and it is entirely possible my participants viewed me as someone who both represents and wants to uphold higher education's homogeneity. Establishing baseline trust, let alone equity, was paramount to successfully engaging with participants who are underrepresented in the field. Seibold's guiding questions were a useful tool, as was naming the homogeneity when the opportunity to engage in that discussion organically emerged during interviewing.

Conclusion

Guided by Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory, my research created a framework for institutional resilience at tuition-dependent institutions. In keeping with CGT’s methodological recommendations, I began with a purposeful sample comprising significant individuals within the larger context of tuition-dependent institutions. After initial coding and an analysis of collected artifacts, I engaged in theoretical sampling and refined my interview protocol to focus my inquiry as a theory is co-created.

In the next chapter, I will provide in-depth findings for my three research questions: : 1) How do higher education staff and administrators understand their professional purpose within the institution? 2) What do higher education staff and administrators perceive as internal and external threats to the institution? 3) How do higher education staff and administrators understand the resources they can access to address the identified professional obstacles?

CHAPTER 4

In this chapter, I present the results of the grounded theory research study conducted to answer three research questions:

RQ1: How do higher education administrators understand their professional purpose within the institution?

RQ2: What do higher education administrators perceive as internal and external threats to the institution?

RQ3: How do higher education administrators understand the resources they can access to address the identified professional obstacles?

I will also share information about my sample and illustrate how my analysis maps to grounded theory methodology, ties back to the research questions, and facilitates the development of a model to cultivate resilience among higher education administrators at tuition-dependent institutions.

Sample

The eight participants interviewed for this study were selected using a demographic screener (Appendix A) to ensure they met the criteria for reporting structure, unionization status, and professional classification. There were seven white participants and one Black/African-American participant. One participant was male and seven were female. Table 1 provides a detailed demographic profile of each participant. Table 2 provides an institutional profile for each participant., who came from institutions with a range of profiles. Please note that the demographic characteristics and institutional profiles of the sample will be discussed in the following chapter as part of a larger discussion on the limitations of the study.

Table 3

Demographic Distribution of Sample

Participant	Position Function	Years in Role	Race/Ethnicity	Sex
Ben	Fundraising/Development	2	White	M
Ava	University Systems	1	White	F
Zoey	Student Life	1	Black or African American	F
Charlotte	Student Life	9	White	F
Janet	Academic Administration	27	White	F
Holly	Departmental Administration	4	White	F
Natalie	Enrollment Marketing	2	White	F
Sarah	Program Director	20+	White	F

Table 4

Institutional Profile of Sample

Participant	Total UG Enrollment	Region	Published Tuition	Endowment Size
Ben	1,000-5,000	Midwest	$50,518	$81 million
Ava	5,000-10,000	Northeastern	$70,744	$391 million
Charlotte	1,000-5,000	New England	$36,006	$40 million
Zoey	500-1,000	Southeastern	$31,564	$9.7 million
Janet	1,000-5,000	Midwest	$35,888	$26.5 million
Holly	5,000-10,000	New England	$55,587	$53.2 billion
Natalie	1,000-5,000	Northeastern	$60,794	$178 million
Sarah	5,000-10,000	Northeastern	$64,325	$202 million

Participant Profiles

Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) emphasizes that a model arises because of the co-creation of meaning between the researcher and participants. To facilitate this co-creation, it is vital, within the bounds of ethical research practices, to understand each participant in a context beyond demographic information. While conducting this research, I was in constant reflection about how each participant's experience contributed to their perspective as well as aware of how my perspective might influence the ways in which I decided how to code and ultimately analyze their data for the development of larger themes.

Ben's affinity for higher education extends not only to his own job but to the general environment of being on and around a college campus. Ben, who has worked at non-profits in addition to work at higher education institutions, is relatively new to his institution, but is not new to working at an institution that faces enrollment pressures. Ben has a strong understanding of revenue drivers in higher education and understands how fundraising, and careful management of the endowment, contribute to an institution's long-term survival. Ben is also attuned to the many hierarchal dynamics at play within a college, both within the administrative realm and between the administration and faculty sectors. He spoke most directly about how his work is perceived by faculty and about how having to adhere to those hierarchal dynamics can often make his job more challenging than it needs to be.

Ava essentially spent her life on a college campus due to her father's job. She ultimately enrolled in that institution and speaks passionately about the transformational experience of pursuing a college education. Ava has a terminal degree in higher education and has worked in the sector for her entire career thus far. She has a rich understanding of the multifaceted challenges the field faces and is actively thinking through them both in the context of her current job and in the context of the sector's long-term sustainability. Although Ava is new to her role, she is not new to her institution; staff departure led to her being promoted into this position. She was one of the few participants to speak directly to the ways in which higher education administrators in her field tended to be older, and about how her age might affect the ways in which she is perceived.

Charlotte is a first-generation college student who "was completely unprepared for college." She didn't know anyone who had gone to college, and she points to her co-curricular involvement and connections with advisors as guideposts that helped her thrive during her college years. Charlotte has spent her entire professional career in higher education and genuinely believes in its transformative potential. Charlotte has had a positive experience growing as a professional at her institution, and she is a deeply intentional manager. She feels particularly supported not only by her direct boss but by her president, whose larger strategic vision maps to the activities of her department.

Janet was two weeks into a new higher education job when we had our interview. As such, her reflections come from 27 years' experience at her prior institution. Janet left her institution as part of a large-scale voluntary severance initiative because she knew that she would not be able to move higher up in the org chart than she already was at her institution. Before working in higher education, Janet had some experience in the corporate sector and was also an adjunct instructor where she ultimately accepted an academic administrative role. Janet has taught, grown, and built online learning courses and degrees for over a decade, and spoke about how those programs had previously been seen as the "stepchild" of her institution and now are being seen as pathways to stave off enrollment pressures.

Holly arrived at higher education administration by way of being a student. When it became clear that she would not move into the career that aligned with what she studied in graduate school, she began looking for career alternatives and ended up taking a staff role at the same institution where she obtained her graduate degree. Holly works in a department that is somewhat ancillary to her larger institution and is not located on the main campus, and while she feels connected to the larger institution, she also feels that it does not necessarily understand how to support her area functionally. The economic profile of Holly's institution is markedly different from other participants' institutions. While every other participant observed that budget constraints made their institutions risk-averse, Holly attributed her institution's risk aversion to its relative prominence in the sector and their fear of reputational damage. She mused that perhaps working at a school with a smaller reputational footprint might provide her with more flexibility and would mean that processes would be expedited.

Natalie did not necessarily intend to pursue a career in higher education. Natalie is a committed manager who takes the professional development of her team and of each individual member very seriously. She shared that her department is one of the few that has not experienced mass turnover of employees. Having worked in higher education for her entire professional career so far, Natalie has cultivated a rich and nuanced understanding of not only her role, but of the larger higher education landscape. Natalie is aware of the challenges facing higher education but is also vocal about how the prevailing public narrative about higher education is not always connected to the reality of what is happening in the space. She was the only participant who, when talking about external threats to higher education, posited that institutions might need to work in collaboration rather than in competition to tackle the many challenges they all face. Sarah has worked at her institution for nearly 25 years and has seen an array of changes to her role, to her reporting structure, and to her institution's leadership. Although she is passionate about higher education, Sarah is actively struggling as she watches an institution she loves change in ways that she does not support. She loves the fact that she can work remote, but acknowledges that, compounded by a mass exodus of employees, this fosters a sense of disconnection in many ways. Before working in higher education, Sarah worked in the corporate sector.

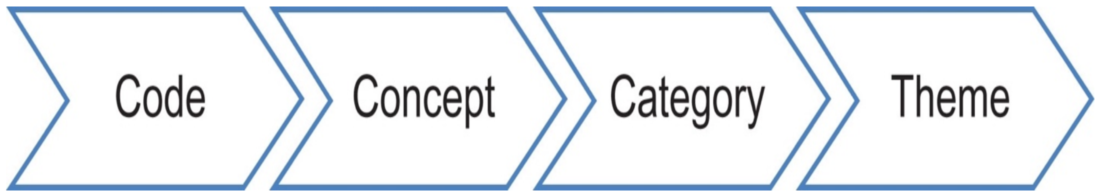
Zoey is new to her institution and new to higher education administration. She spoke openly about how being new to a career meant that she is still "figuring things outs" about her current job, her professional comportment, and whether higher education is the best place for her to spend her career. Zoey expressed that her age, her passion for higher education, and her newness to her institution made her something of an oddity at her current institution, which she perceives to be extremely wed to legacy practices and policies even as new leadership comes into the system. Due to the nature of her role, Zoey had the most interaction with students of all the participants, and she spoke about how as she was figuring things out for herself, she felt drawn to helping these young people develop the skills that they would need to be successful beyond college.

Data Collection and Coding

In keeping with grounded theory methodology, sampling, data collection and analysis happened in tandem. As indicated in chapter 3, analysis was guided by Qureshi and Ünlü (2020)'s four-step process, designed to help newer researchers preserve the simultaneous activities that are hallmarks of grounded theory methodology.

Figure 3

Sequence of Key Terms Inside the Coding Instrument



From Qureshi, H. A., & Ünlü, Z. (2020). Beyond the Paradigm Conflicts: A Four-Step Coding Instrument for Grounded Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*.

I coded all data using Delve, following Charmaz's recommendation for line-by-line coding, which I then grouped into concepts. As I continued data collection, I generated categories that I revisited as new data was collected. Finally, I landed on themes that drove the development of a grounded theory and accompanying model to address the theory's core tenets.

Themes

Eight themes emerged through data analysis: sense of individual professional purpose, motivation for entering system, understanding of system purpose, organization of system, relationships between elements in the system, internal threats to the system, external threats to the system, and ability to mitigate systemic disruption. These themes map to various tenets of systems theory, which will facilitate the development of a model that prioritizes systemic resilience vs. individual resilience.

Sense of Individual Professional Purpose

Understanding of Their Specific Role within Their Institution. In social systems such as colleges and universities, an understanding of one's purpose within the system is necessary for individuals to take actions that ultimately help the system survive

(Bridgen, 2017). Every participant had a strong sense of their individual professional purpose and understood how their work contributed to their institution's ability to function.

> We're the heart of university, not like the romance heart…we are like the, physical…pumping the blood, the organ…that keeps the university running because we are the people who set up the classes (Ava).

In addition to understanding how their roles contributed to the overall functioning of their institution, participants were also aware of the skills they needed to be successful in their individual roles. They also understood what aspects of their job fell outside of their specific purpose or area of expertise, especially when involvement from academic colleagues was required. As Janet explained, understanding her strengths helped her collaborate with faculty colleagues so that they could collectively ensure the success of activities that were central to the institution's ability to offer new courses and programs.

> I helped develop courses…not that I was a subject area expert…but I understand process….and how to present documentation….The faculty…would consult with me…when they're stuck…and I would work with them…to put things in a format that our curriculum committee needs in order to review and either approve or not approve.

There were several participants who illustrated an understanding of how the teams they managed were both part of their professional purpose and also contributed to the team's larger professional purpose within their specific institution. While not every participant had management responsibilities, those who did were supportive of their direct reports and und understood the importance of a strong team. Holly expressed the ways in which the ability of her team to navigate challenges took work off her plate but also shared how her team relied on her leadership to guide them through particularly challenging situations.

> My job all day long is to solve problems. I have two great teams, and they're very good at their jobs, so the hard and interesting stuff comes to me, and we work through those things together.

Natalie articulated that her served a functional purpose, while giving her a unique ability to foster cultural changes, including increased collaboration and an increased connection to shared goals.

> My team, probably of every other team, works the most with other people [in other departments]…partially it's the nature of their job and what they're trying to accomplish…but partially I do think it's because I've set that tone about working with other people and collaborating to an end goal…we build our plans around that goal…it's very transparent, it's something they're very aware of…everyone knows where we are in any given moment of where we're tracking towards our goal.

Performance-Related Feedback. While Natalie was intentional about communicating goals and her team's responsibility for achieving them, when discussing how they gauged if they were successfully performing their perceived professional purpose with their system, participants reported a range of methods. Their typical sources included a mix of formal and informal feedback sources that provided varying levels of detail, as well as specific outcomes that they knew they had to achieve. For Ava, the most meaningful feedback happened on an informal, peer-to-peer level.

> [My colleagues and I] are very close with each other…I regularly have very frank conversations with my colleagues…where they are very open in giving feedback. So hearing from them…that's a very informal way of knowing that I'm doing my job well. Being able to pick up 'where did it feel chaotic before vs. where does it not feel chaotic now' is my primary way of trying to decipher [if I'm succeeding].

As signaled by Natalie when discussing her team, several participants were very frank about how their success was tied specifically to hitting larger organizational goals, which took priority over any other indicators of professional success. Natalie explained that

> the bottom line is enrollment. We're completely undergraduate, traditional, tuition-driven college. 85% of the budget is reliant on enrollment. So there can be other things that you're looking at [to gauge success] but it all come back to how is what we're doing driving enrollment and revenue at the college.

Ben had a similar outcome-based approach to understanding his performance, although qualitative feedback did provide him with some sense of his capabilities.

> Money in the door is usually a good sign…sometimes I'll hear positive things being said about me to leadership…I had a donor write a two-page

> letter about how much she liked me to the president…but money in the door is really the primary way.

For participants who did not speak about specific outcome-driven goal (enrollment, funds raised), feedback came from their bosses but not at a regular cadence, and usually because there was some specific improvement their bosses wanted them to make. As Zoey shared:

> I don't really get too much feedback…the feedback I did get last week, because last week was the first time [my boss and I] had a one-on-one in a couple of weeks…was to be a little bit more positive…we have a totally new team, so she needs my optimism and positivity to come back, so I'm working on finding that back….[but] why should I be so happy and so optimistic when things are not actually moving in the right direction?

Sarah, who also received very little feedback, seemed both resigned to that fact and aware that this lack of feedback was affecting her sense of purpose.

> I don't necessarily need to do good work for someone above me. I'm very self-motivated to be successful but there comes a point in time where you need to get the recognition from someone above you…otherwise you kind of feel like…what…am I doing this for?

Even participants like Janet, who spoke about more formal feedback processes also reported that they were minimally useful because performance did not determine compensation.

> I could talk this talk to say '…my goals were all met and so that means then I was doing a good job.' But at some point that whole performance management system was a box checking exercise. I felt like we never could really tie compensation to it…because there wasn't a lot of compensation advances…or opportunities to give that.

Further research about the participants' institution revealed that they each offer a formal performance management process that includes specific assessment forms and one-on-one meetings with a direct supervisor. Given that policy, it is notable that most participants did not reference this formal process as a meaningful way to better understand their performance within their institution, and that those who did, recognized that the process did not produce significant operational changes.

Ability to Describe System. As much as participants understood their individual professional purpose as well as the professional purpose of their colleagues, participants universally acknowledged that it was difficult to explain what they did to people who did not work in higher education. For Ben, this involved trying to fight misperceptions within his own family.

> I was talking about what I do with my uncle…and he was like, oh, it's just like telemarketing, call somebody up and they say yes or no…and I was like 'no, that's not quite right.'

Charlotte shared a similar inability for even her closest family members to understand the nature of her job.

> [My parents] don't really get it…my dad thinks I get paid to volunteer…so if I'm talking to somebody who doesn't know anything about higher ed…I normally give an example…which is honestly like a small sliver of my job, but it tends to be the thing that people can understand (Charlotte).

In keeping with this general lack of external understanding, when asked the question "how would you describe your job to someone who knows nothing about how higher education works, what would you say?" participants, by and large, shared that they usually choose to highlight their job function *outside* the specific context of higher education, or share a small portion of their overall job function, but even that did not always help to provide clarity. For Zoey, this meant using a job that is well-known culturally to facilitate an initial understand and following that up with context that is unique to higher education.

> I say that I'm like a life coach…I support them outside the classroom, where the live, where they grow, where they develop, where they grow community.

Holly took a similar approach, opting to avoid discussion higher education work altogether in favor of more broad-based functions that she believes are better known to people.

> I guess I don't talk about what it's like to work at a university in general. I talk more specifically about the work that we do…and why I think it's important…because everybody kind of knows what HR and Finance and

> Facilities are…so…that's the thing…that most people are interested in talking about (Holly).

Natalie attributed this lack of understanding to larger societal misperceptions of higher education.

> I think…when people talk about higher ed…most people think about either….the big public school names…the football schools…or they think about the Ivies…and we're not…like any of those so [talking about my job function] is just honestly the path of least resistance, I think it would be really hard to explain what I actually do okay on a daily basis to anybody.

In general, participants shared a strong understanding of their individual professional purpose, although they did not always have a formal feedback loop related to their specific purpose or performance. Participants largely felt unable to explain their professional purpose within the context of higher education, choosing instead to focus on more broad and universal aspects of their jobs that would be better understood by their family and friends.

Motivation for Entering System

Elements in social systems are generally purposeful in their actions and have transferability; this means they can produce the same result in a different system. For this reason, it is important to understand why participants chose to enter and lend their expertise to higher education specifically, as they theoretically could enter a new system and continue to do similar work.

Participants came into a career in higher education for myriad reasons; some, like Natalie, had a specific skill or wanted to explore a particular career function and higher education was where they ended up initially employed: “I went here, and there was an opening when I was graduating, so I applied for it….it wasn’t about higher ed…it was more about the role.”

Another participant who did not necessarily seek out higher education for their career specifically mentioned the benefits, including free tuition, as a motivating factor for pursuing a job in higher education. Others like Ben expressed affinity for the overall environment of a college.

> I like the intellectual culture of it, the stability…everybody’s in a constant state of learning, even if you’re not necessarily learning something relevant to your job, you’re still actively engaged, you can go to a lecture…if I’m working with faculty, they’re probably going to say something smart and interesting to me and I can pick up on that and have my life enriched by that.

While Holly wasn’t originally motivated to enter higher education because of the overall environment, that ended up becoming one of the most appealing parts about working at a college.

> I’d been a student for three years, I’d learned something about navigating this place…I just really love the experience of still being in the higher ed environment but without the stress of being a student…I loved learning little bits about different things…my boss is great, she would encourage

> me to go to some of the seminars and things so I can learn more about the student work and faculty that we were supporting.

There were a few participants who actively sought out a career in higher education, like Zoey, who had strong feelings about what motivated her decision.

> I have a master's in higher ed….when I was a senior in undergrad, that's when I really learned about the field of higher ed…I worked hard to get here…I think I'm meant to be around young adults and students and to help.

Ava, who was also drawn to higher education, fostered that connection from an early age.

> I grew up on [a college campus]…I spent my entire childhood hearing about higher ed…so that was the world I knew….it feels like a calling to me. College was so transformational for me as an undergrad…and I am passionate…that everybody should go to a place that will make them the person they want to be.

While their reasons for becoming a higher education administrator varied, participants in general expressed a genuine affinity for higher education, even in the context of describing their professional challenges. Sarah articulated this most succinctly:

> I love higher education… that's the double-edged sword of it….I get into this, and it's so exciting because I'm making an impact on these kids…if they're not successful, this will impact the rest of their lives, so I'm very

passionate about that. And that part of me was drawn to [higher education].

Understanding of System Purpose

System confusion is one of the biggest threats to a social system's survival, so understanding how the participants made meaning of both higher education and their individual institution's purposes is essential to gauging the capacity for survival. Participants, by and large, articulated that the larger mission of higher education was to transform lives. They were often able to express their connection to that mission as professionals because of their own experience obtaining a college degree. As Ava shared

I feel a passion for students. I feel a passion for the mission of higher education…and I've seen it play out in my life and others…the people we are putting out into the world are changing the world in ways I am not able to, but through my little piece, I'm helping to make that change happen.

Natalie shared a similar sentiment about how the ultimate goal of higher education is to create transformational leaders whose work would have a long-lasting impact on the world.

> My interpretation of our mission is to serve and graduate students that are gonna to lead change for better in the world…it's really about educating people that are going to make those changes, even small…in whatever their realm is, that they're going to graduate with that kind of mindset. Be the kinds of leaders that people want to work for (Natalie).

While talking about the larger mission of higher education, several participants were very clear on how their individual institution translated the larger mission of higher education into their specific culture and environment. Janet shared that her institution had a robust and regular process for sharing its specific mission and vision with those who worked there.

> They do a strategic planning exercise every five years, so that always outlines the things we're focusing on based on the vision or the mission…you would develop your yearly goals around that…so honestly I will say they did a really good job of articulating what the vision was and then…trickling that down into the more granular goals that everybody had (Janet).

Like Janet, Charlotte also attributed her understanding of mission to her institution's broad commitment to communicate the mission as often as possible.

> Messaging from our university is pretty clear and focused and pointed…it's in every room at our institution. It's everywhere. Part of our institution's mission and part of our center's mission is around the transformative power of education both in terms of transforming individual lives but also transforming communities.

Ava shared how her professional interactions helped her come to understand her institution's mission in a deeper way.

> [My institution] has always been about being a place where people can come and learn in new and unique ways…it is meant to be a haven for

> people who want to do things differently….There is an enormous focus on equity, inclusion, and social justice…I have come to understand all of that from sitting through…meetings. Seeing it in action, is very obvious…that we are doing our best to serve all of our students in an equitable way (Ava).

Participants like Holly, who understood their institution's mission, were also able to directly connect it to their professional purpose.

> [My institution]'s mission is to educate the next generation of leaders and to continue to learn more about the world and understand the world and to have a powerful impact on the world and on decision-maker. My small corner of that universe is to understand the [research area I support] and to education the next generation of [people working in that field] (Holly).

However, other participants spoke about difficulties they had reconciling their understanding of the larger mission of higher education, the stated mission of their institution, and their operational realities. Sarah spoke about how senior-level leadership articulated a mission that was completely disconnected from the "true" mission.

> I mean, they come up with all these lofty things that they say, and it's not reality. We're in the business of educating, holding people in a place for four years until they're mature enough to go out into the workforce. Hopefully providing them with some foundation of a desire to be lifelong learners. And giving them tools to be able to go out into the world and find

gainful employment in some fashion. The real mission, as far as I'm concerned, is to make money (Sarah).

This sentiment was echoed in part by Janet. She understood her institution's mission and believed that her institution successfully communicated that mission but knew that ultimately the mission might take a back seat to more urgent operational matters.

> Operationally…[the vision] didn't always work that way. You know, enrollment almost everywhere just sucks so, you know, we may just like throw everything at the door, all hands on deck, we need to get more students in the classroom….[Our most recent mission planning exercise] was around DEI…and we had a pretty robust DEI [department]….but in the last two months, probably 25% of the workforce is gone…one of the layoffs was the director of DEI so…the [vision statement] is supposed to be the North Star, but when push comes to shove, you fire your DEI Director…

Like Janet, Zoey, who had been in her role for only a year, also sensed this dynamic at her institution. She expressed a burgeoning understanding of her institution's mission and a growing awareness of a fundamental disconnect within her institution.

> I'm still figuring that [mission] piece out. I'm beginning to understand how [my institution] is designed to support marginalized people and to help them excel…and become citizens of the world…but…I don't really

> know what we're all working towards because it seems like some departments are being aggressive with where we need to be compared to other schools, but for others that are really important…like what is the actual goal? Because… I know what [my area] is supposed to do but when other key partners are not doing their part, it makes us not be able to fulfill the goal, and that messes with my brain a little bit.

While participants universally understood the larger purpose of higher education, this clarity dissipated somewhat as they held that larger purpose up to their specific institution's mission. This confusion poses a distinct threat to each institution's long-term survival and ultimately the potential for higher education as a larger system to sustain itself.

Organization of System

General Systems Theory (GST) maintains that the organization of elements within a system plays a pivotal role in how each element functions. In GST, changing one aspect of one element in a system means that other elements adapt in response. Understanding the organization of each participant's system can help provide greater context about how they have adapted in kind and how this adaptation affects their ability to successfully operate within their institution.

When talking about how their departments were organized relative to their professional purpose within their institution, participants had diverse experiences. Participants like Charlotte, who was involved in determining how her department was organized felt more positively about their structure.

> I determined the organizational structure…I've been there for a long time…when I started…I was only the second-ever full-time staff member [for my unit]. Most of the people who were there I have hired. Some I have inherited…I'd say it works well for me (Charlotte).

Holly was also an active participant in reorganizing her department, but that reorganization was motivated by an unbalanced workload distribution rather than her guidance around best practices.

> I decided about [my department's reorganization]…the main reason is that my job is too big for one person. Supervising 11 people in a meaningful way I don't believe is possible….I can't devote the time to any one thing that needs it.

Ben, who is newer to his role, gained a direct report after a reorganization. While he was not the primary architect of the reorganization, he was generally supportive of the efforts.

> We've added probably six or seven staff…including the one person that reports to me…and [adding that direct report] was something I was for, but it was…less my decision that somebody making the decision…[but] I was all on board with it and sort of very actively trying for it, but it definitely wasn't my decision.

Zoey, who played a role in restructuring her department worked for nearly a year devoid of departmental support and organization, and she shared its impact on her professional experience.

> I didn't have a direct supervisor for the first eight month of my career here. Right now, we are part of a restructure…I helped write the job descriptions [for the new positions]. Up until a couple of weeks ago, when we hired one new staff member…that's when I really felt a bit more support.

There were several participants who were not as involved in their organizational structure. They largely expressed frustration about their departmental organization and how it hindered their ability to fulfill their professional purpose. Sarah was most visibly frustrated about being promised an organizational structure that has yet to materialize due primarily to budget constraints.

> When I was tapped on the shoulder to take over this program, I was promised that I would receive a full-time coordinator and a part-time administrative assistant….I took on a disaster…I spent a lot of time untangling all the webs that had been created…and I said, 'ok, where is my department, my people?' And I was told, 'sorry….things are really tough…you're gonna have to do this on your own. We will give you a person, but she won't directly report to you.' [That person] is helping me out, but she doesn't report to me…[and] she could be pulled out from under my feet at any time.

Ava also voiced frustration about inheriting an organizational structure that did not suit her functional needs. Her predecessor's lack of understanding of the day-to-day realities of the job continue to create obstacles she has to navigate.

> When I became [the role I am now] the other two people [on my level] left to start a new team that is focused on systems…and those lines just kind of faded into the mist and so I've been advocating and am moving forward now with creating two new positions. I got the shaft, for lack of a better word. The previous [person in my role] is the one who orchestrated this vision. And she wasn't very involved in the day-to-day work. So, when she created this systems unit, she was like 'oh it'll be great, they're going to take all this work out from everyone.' In reality, the work they took from [my office] specifically was…5 hours a year. And her advocating for this change this really tainted everyone's opinion when she left and I kept saying 'no, I need staff.' They had been told that this was unnecessary for me to have….so it was this uphill battle of trying to justify everything.

When asked the question "If you could instantly change one thing about your job, what would it be?" Ava specifically referenced her organizational and reporting structures.

> I would change my reporting structure….it is very….insulting…I would like to feel respected…and to be acknowledged that the institution could not run without us. Decisions made on the [senior leadership team] directly impact the things that have to happen in my office, and I don't have a voice at that table…because of our structure and my current reporting structure.

Charlotte and Holly, who did not directly reference departmental organization per se, answered that question with a wish to change a larger organizational challenge: their office location. Charlotte's office location affected her ability to fulfill a primary responsibility of her role. As she explained it, "we're…on the outskirts of campus [and] it can be hard to get students in the door."

Holly's office location presented several challenges. She found that policies determined for the larger institution were not always as useful or applicable to her unique situation. Holly specifically talked about policies surrounding securing external vendors or accessing IT support/networks. However, when asked what she would immediately change if she could, Holly referenced the leadership void experienced as a result of her location:

> [If I could instantly chance one thing] it would be having [one of my bosses] on site more, which is something we hope to happen with the new one. I feel it, and my colleagues feel it too…there is a bit of leadership lacking that none of my other colleagues and the staff leadership team have the ability to fill.

The organization of a system is integral to how a system functions and how it is situated to navigate threats. Every participant was keenly aware of their organizational structure and, as explained in the following section, aware of how the pace of higher education meant that they knew they would be left navigating a suboptimal organizational structure for a relatively long period of time.

Speed of System's Ability to Add New Resources. Whatever their level of involvement in determining their organizational structure, participants generally acknowledged that the process of re-organizing, resourcing, or staffing up their department was slow. Ben's process involved his direct boss, senior leadership, the President, and the Board of Trustees.

> It took about two years [to add my direct report as part of a larger staff expansion]. About a year-and-a-half into working here, and then…it took us six months to actually hire somebody. It was a big deal. It had to go through the board of trustees…we had to do a…comprehensive study of similar schools and what would be a return on investment from us adding staff, and what do other schools do, how are other schools staffed…and the president approves every single person that's hired here.

The protracted nature of adding more members to their team was a phenomenon experienced by all participants. Charlotte, who was the first full-time person hired in her department, has a long-term understanding of the process of adding new staff.

Adding an FTE is a long process. It's been a slow adding of resources over the years. There have been years where I've asked for additional resources and haven't gotten them, and years that I've asked for additional resources and have gotten them.

Natalie expressed a similar sentiment: simply identifying the need for more staff (or financial support) was not enough to get it. She specifically referenced the politics of advocating for resources and how those politics slowed down an already sluggish process.

> You have to play a long game…it's not a situation where you can go into one meeting and say, 'this is what we need' and everyone's gone and doing it. It…can be political at times…so you have to really…be careful about what's being said and when… You have to be strategic about it to move the ball forward…..And sometimes it doesn't go as fast as we would like.

An already slow process was sometimes hampered by additional factors. Holly cited having to navigate her internal team and the larger budget calendar, and also shared that it takes a relatively long time to simply schedule a meeting with her direct boss.

> [Getting a new] admin position that was probably about six months…getting feedback from the team…making the case to my boss…I did it outside of the budget process because I was like 'we can't wait to start hiring this person.' And then another month to get onto the calendar of my boss…so about six months to come up with the plan and get approval for it…and then it's taken another nine months to actually make it happen.

When I asked Holly how it felt that it takes a month to get on her direct boss' calendar, she expressed a mix of understanding and resignation.

> You know it's not ideal, but…I know if I had a crisis he would talk to me that day. And I know that he can't talk to me for a month because of other crises and other stuff that's been scheduled, so I'm ok with that.

In general, whether they were actively involved in creating their organizational structure or not, participants were acutely aware of how slowly their institutions move to make adjustments and did not express much ability to affect that pace.

Relationships Between Elements in the System

Elements in systems are always reacting to other elements. In social systems, this interaction can happen between elements on the same level or among elements of different levels. During our interviews, participants shared their experiences of interacting with colleagues at various levels of their institutions.

Colleague Relationships. Several participants talked about the importance of being connected to colleagues, typically those who were either hierarchal peers serving different purposes or members of a team they managed. Janet's colleague connections came about informally. As she described,

> we met once a month for an hour, hour and a half, and kind of talked about, you know challenges we were facing, and tried to leverage what the other person was doing and share information and knowledge. Nobody directed us to do this, we just said 'hey, we really need each other. Let's formalize this and make sure we're meeting regularly so we can share knowledge' (Janet).

Holly had a similar group she connected with, although it seemed more embedded into the workflow of departments at her institution and it sometimes involved her boss.

> There is a group of us, the other department administrators…we meet together monthly and so sometimes with my administrative boss and so sometimes people will bring things to that group where they're like, oh, we're thinking of making this change, and we want to know…usually it's, 'we want to know what your faculty will think about it, because really, those are the people who, can change things….' But sometimes it's like, 'how will this actually work and what feedback do you have on it?' So that's nice because then we can help them see things from…how it's gonna be on the ground…Sometimes things come bubbling up from us [in that forum].

Sarah, who once enjoyed meaningful connections with colleagues at all levels of her institution, noticeably missed this interaction. She attributed the loss to a remote workforce and a large-scale staff exodus: "There is no water cooler conversation anymore. I don't have that anymore. The friends that I had at the university…I would say 75% of them are gone."

Zoey also felt disconnected from most of her colleagues, but she attributed this to her age and background. She did recognize that this was not necessarily personal and could pinpoint how she was able to connect on some level with select colleagues.

> I'm the newbie here…the young lady when it's all these old people…running this show like it was in 1820…so I know that I'm not

well received by a lot of people…. A few of the new people who came in with the background of higher ed, there are three of us…. we're trying to move the school in this direction, we get our purpose….but I don't really trust a lot of people here.

In general, participants recognized the importance of having peer-to-peer connections, even if they did not necessarily enjoy them in their current role or institution.

Hierarchal Relationships. Participants had complex hierarchical relationships. Several felt very supported by their direct boss, including Charlotte.

> My manager is fabulous…he's very good about clear communication and letting me know when I can push back and when I need to just, you know, do the job…that doesn't happen all the time, but he is really good about that.

Charlotte explained how she leveraged this positive relationship with her boss to assist her in setting priorities when she was under-resourced.

> I have a really phenomenal supervisor...so in the years where I've said we really need some extra support, and we haven't gotten that I've just been really clear about…tell me what the priorities are and what needs to go. I've got four people's worth of work and only three people… help me set priorities for what continues and what we let go of.

Natalie also had an affirming and positive relationship with her boss. In addition to working well with her boss, Natalie felt her boss excelled at supporting her team and being intentional about providing growth opportunities.

> [My manager] is really focused on giving people leadership opportunities and strategic opportunities um where we can, where we can experience that growth, hands, on, not, just, theoretical. He's very keyed into the whole team…he's a very empathetic leader in that way.

Although Holly did not have frequent contact with her boss, as evidenced by it taking a month to get on her boss' calendar, Holly acknowledged that they generally have a positive relationship. This made the already-long process of re-organizing her team easier in some ways. "It wasn't a very hard sell…we've developed a lot of trust so…I would say my bosses didn't have a hard time with it."

These participants' experiences were in direct contrast to Zoey, who began her career with no direct supervisor and referenced a notable difference in her experience at work due to her relationship with a new manager.

> I did get a new director in February…we work really well together, we communicate, we're passionate about getting this place back on the tracks…so that makes things so much easier.

Several participants felt relatively disconnected from their direct bosses. For Sarah, this did not deter her from fulfilling her responsibilities and she accepted this disconnect as something of an inevitability.

> I report to the associate provost who has no clue as to what I do. Absolutely none. No idea what my job is. We meet once a month….It would make no difference if I met with her more, because, again, she doesn't know what I do, so literally, our once a month meeting, when she doesn't cancel it, which…I would say is three out of ten times she cancels…are more social than anything. She really has no idea what I do.

On the other hand, for participants like Ava, this lack of understanding and disconnect affected their overall morale.

> Something as simple as not being invited to participate in commencement…even though [my work is critical to graduation]. And when I got upset about it, it was like 'why would you be there'?

Participants, who had at least two managers between them and their President, by and large did not feel a strong sense of connection to senior-level leaders. Their feelings about that disconnect varied. Natalie acknowledged disconnect from senior leadership but recognized that it was a natural byproduct of being in a higher-level role.

> [My senior leader] doesn't understand…the struggles we face…it's almost like she couldn't possibly…there's so much…other things that she has to attend to….it doesn't concern me that she doesn't…it's not something I worry about.

However, for Zoey, senior leadership's disconnect created major pain points for her professionally and for the students she served.

> I would love to see people…in the upper-level administration positions…be around more. If they had more of a presence….[have] a meeting with the division to hear how we actually felt. Just invite us a little bit more and hear us out, instead of [making] their decisions just at the top, because you're not even factoring really student voices. You don't even know how the students feel.

Sarah was more pointed in her criticism about senior leadership's disconnect from the larger administrative and staff community. She was certain that senior leadership lacked the foundational understanding to implement mandates and ideas that could actually help her institution.

> They sit in the tower of [the administration building] and come up with these ideas but don't operationalize it. They don't include people that are operational people. We [are the ones who] can say how this is possible, what steps do you need to do.

Ben, who had generally positive feedback about his senior leadership, shared that while they knew how to communicate big picture information, his senior leadership team was generally less skilled in knowing how to communicate information that was more relevant to his day-to-day job function.

> It can be very frustrating…to hear the big picture stuff…consistently, but not a lot about the granular stuff that we kind of need to know to do our job. Sometimes our leadership will go tell something to a donor that we don't know…and I haven't been told about. Or our president will have a

conversation with a donor and not tell us whatsoever about it. And sometimes they're substantial conversations…the signals are crossing on some of that minute stuff.

Ben cited this as something he would change instantly if he could, both because it would make his everyday life easier and because it was something of a double standard:

[If I could change one thing instantly, it would be] making our leadership get better at documenting their conversations and doing all the check boxes and things that we are expected to do.

Zoey articulated more acute dismay at what seemed like inconsistency and double standards among senior leadership, especially related to financial priorities.

The old people who are stuck in their ways…they're cool with that AVP or that VP…so they just are able to get away with it. We're going through some financial things…the facilities need a lot of work…and we're bringing in all these [students] which means more money, but the facilities still look like this, and my couch is ripped, and I have a leak….Then I hear that this [senior leader] is going to China, and this [senior leader] is going to Canada…but we don't have enough professors….[and] the front of my school, the front of the campus, is beautiful, immaculate. But then when you go to the back of the campus, it just looks like the slums.

Unsurprisingly, participants had more contextually rich relationships with colleagues closer to their organizational level and were generally disconnected from higher levels of leadership.

Internal Threats to the System

Higher education is a social system, with purposeful elements that can both make their own choices and can adapt to the system as they take in new information about the system's organization and functioning. Both of these factors present threats to the system's survival: choices can create conflict, and adaptive behaviors can create distance between elements in the system and those who are managing the larger system.

Budgets. Participants frequently cited the overall financial health of their institutions as an internal threat. As Janet expressed: "The budget woes were everywhere, they were omnipresent. Everybody experienced that, and everybody was trying to do more, with less."

Because of senior leadership's communication and transparency, Ben was able to draw a direct connection between enrollment, budget implications, and how that trickled down into not only his own job but other jobs at his institution.

> We basically…missed our enrollment goal by 50 students…so that's $1.6 billion out of a $70 billion budget…that's a big chunk…and that's not going anywhere anytime soon. We're a very tuition-dependent university…and if we're not meeting class needs it's like…ok…we can't do as much travel…we have to stop doing the mailing…and we have a lot of adjunct faculty that probably would not return the next year… our leadership is very transparent about all of those things.

For Sarah, the budget challenges had more than just financial consequences: “It scares me…I mean, financially we’re doing so bad, and morale wise we’re doing so bad.”

However, as Ava expressed, there was often uncertainty and a lack of specifics about the overall financial health at participants’ institutions: “Money is the one thing that feels very like don't ask, don't tell at our institution.”

Janet described the phenomenon of knowing there were budget issues but not knowing enough specifics to make decisions that might better serve her institution.

> When…this shrinking of the staff happened, there were all sorts of numbers floating around. Like once it was 2-3 million…and of course these are all rumor numbers, and I understand why the university did what they did but…had we known where we were from a budget perspective, maybe we could’ve made some different decisions based on that. The financial situation was always very closely held.

When further drilling down to their specific function and level, budgets were a source of frustration or confusion, and often prevented participants from more successfully performing their professional function. Zoey explained how a lack of understanding from budget decision-makers prevented her team from performing their core function and meet the expectations of their senior-most leaders.

> [The VP of Finance] determined the budget but…he doesn’t really know student affairs. We didn't have a programming budget…we had an office supply budget that we converted into a programming budget. Then the President has an expectation to have a vibrant campus.

For Ava, this top-down budgeting approach created a feeling of helplessness and meant she lacked a fundamental pathway to add capacity to the budget planning process even when her direct boss asked for her input.

> I feel like a kid who has been given a credit card with a limit on it, and I don't know why that's my limit. I don't know where the money's coming from…and because…I don't know where it's coming from…it's hard to make the case for why I should get more money. I'm not involved in budgeting…My supervisor will ask for input for…a budget proposal but I very rarely can give a dollar amount to go with it because so many things are vague.

Ben, who received a frequent cadence of high-level communication around his institution's enrollment and financial health, was not necessarily able to translate that communication into something that helped him make decisions about operational spending.

> I don't actually have an idea of what my budget is…We don't have a clear sense of whether spending $250 a night on the hotel is any less acceptable than spending $100.

Even Natalie, who enjoys a strong relationship with her boss, expressed a sense of consternation about the misalignment between budgets and performance expectations.

> I've had the same budget since about 2017…I wish I was in a place where I could say no, what the college really needs is this amount if you want

> this goal, but what we're normally doing is trying to eke out the same goals with money that's worth less every year.

Charlotte and Holly had slightly different relationships to their budgets due to endowments earmarked specifically for their departments. Charlotte in particular recognized the unique position she was in being both adequately resourced by her institution and by donor funds.

> I have a lot of colleagues in higher ed who do not have the resources that we have access to. The other thing that has been really helpful, honestly, is that…an alum gave us a very significant and sizeable endowment…and that made an enormous difference. Where the endowment helps…is when we want to add resources…we have the endowment to go to.

Holly's experience was not the same as Charlotte's, although endowment funding did provide a level of consistency and transparency. Holly did not necessarily benefit from the flexibility to add resources appropriately.

> The thing that's hard is to get any new…[non-temporary] positions…it's very hard, and that requires approval from above me. Adding new temporary staff, starting new programs, spending money on operations and maintenance…is all within our control. They'll tell us…your [endowment] distributions are gonna increase, you know, 2 % from last year, or zero from last year…yes, I have control, but there's not a lot that actually changes year to year in some senses.

Although Charlotte does not have full control over her budget — only what she asks for each year — her department's endowment gives Charlotte more certainty that her department can weather whatever else happened at her institution, even if a generally supportive leadership team changes:

> I think I would have been [worried] pre-endowment, but I'm not anymore…at this point we're a named center…it's a pretty significant program…I do think it would be challenging for them to cut it.

Several participants spoke about how budgets telegraphed something bigger about their institution's priorities. As Charlotte expressed "budgets are moral documents. I think that we put our money where our values are."

In that vein, two participants were particularly aware of their institution's financial commitment to providing them with professional development and training. For Zoey, this was a positive development.

> We're starting to go to conferences…I got invited to go to a week-long conference…And so I think that's an investment into me…and the expectation is for me to bring some things back to aid in my operations. It was…less than ten people that got invited to it…so that made me feel special, but also it made me feel like they were investing in me. This is the first time I feel like they invested in me. They could be putting their money to other places.

But for Sarah, the notable absence of the opportunities she once enjoyed represented another way in which her institution was falling short.

> I was very fortunate, I worked with people who were very support of me, who gave me opportunity, who sent me to conference, who wanted me to grow within my position. Now…[I don't have] even a glimmer of that.

Staffing and Workforce Challenges. Two participants expressed that shrinking workforces were a serious internal threat to their institutions and hindered their ability to capitalize on positive changes their institutions had made.

Janet shared a frustrating dynamic where she and her colleagues had put in significant effort to streamline a previously cumbersome process, but insufficient staffing levels prevented it from ever being implemented.

> I…mentioned earlier, that new program development process.. that was one thing we were attempting to launch new programs easily, but it's to the point now where there's…such a significant staff reduction, all new program development is on hold…we're not gonna focus on that because we just don't have the resources to do it.

For Janet, this also affected her day-to-day existence and her ability to be a bigger asset to her institution.

> At the end of the day, my role should have been a strategy role, right? My role should have been…to make strategic decisions [but] you're just doing day to day stuff just to keep afloat. That was the problem with any academic administrator at [my institution]. You never really had a chance to do the strategy pieces that would have been helpful for, I think, the university in the long run.

At Sarah's institution, widespread staff departures meant not only a lack of people to get work done but also meant a significant loss of institutional knowledge and the introduction of new threats that her institution was not addressing.

> I mean they let go a lot of people…they had massive early retirements…and all of those people that have been there forever, who have the knowledge…the love…they didn't replace, they just automated, which comes with its own intrinsic problems…or [they've been] putting in people who are paid less, knew nothing, and then wonder why there are problems.

Staff departures have also left Sarah in a unique limbo, where she is expected to perform a new function with little guidance, but then also looked to as someone who can keep doing what she had been doing before she was moved into a new role. As such, there are aspects of work that can't be attended to fully with no plan for having them absorbed elsewhere.

> When I took over this position, I asked for a job description, and they told me, 'yeah yeah yeah, we're gonna get you a job description.' Which I was very curious to see if they were going to include [the functions that had been my prior job]. Because I told them, when I took over, I'm not doing [my old job]. You did not get me the staff you said you were gonna get me, so I'm not doing that part… so no one's doing [it]….My review came up and I said, well, I'm not gonna do a review unless I see a job description and they never did job description and…. everything is still up

> in the air. And as a matter of fact, I just got an email from [a colleague] asking me about doing [my prior job function]. And I sent my boss the email and said ‘who do you want to be involved in this? Not me.’

In general, participants cited budgets and a changing workforce as the two biggest internal threats; it is notable that a general disconnect between themselves and their senior most leaders underpinned many of their reflections on these challenges.

External Threats to the System

Every participant was aware of the myriad challenges facing the larger system of higher education and largely believed these challenges were shared across institutions of all kinds. Janet articulated the threat posed by a shrinking population of prospective undergraduate students.

> The higher ed landscape…has a lot of challenges…there's just not as many students…Demographics. There are fewer students graduating from high school. If you look at Gen Z and young Millennials, they're not having kids, so….we're all gonna be competing for that same shrinking pot. I think everybody's gonna struggle I really do.

Several aspects about the public perception of higher education were cited, including the question of higher education’s value compared to cost. Charlotte acknowledged that “people are questioning the value of higher education in a way that maybe they haven't historically, and so that certainly feels like a challenge.”

Ava, who passionately believes in the value of higher education, recognized that this was not necessarily a widespread belief, and that the zeitgeist is more outcomes-based, especially in regard to the financial payoff of a college degree.

> I can sit here all day and talk about the fact that I think sitting and thinking for four years has value in and of itself…but…a lot of what we see coming out of high schoolers and college students is…show me that this is going to get me the good job, give me the money…why should I spent so much money?

Natalie pushed back against the mainstream narrative about higher education and expressed that at individual institutions, the reality is more nuanced.

> What's in the media…about higher ed is not very representative of what actually is happening in higher ed. Even when they talk about student debt and stuff like that, when you really dig into a lot of that. I mean…our students are not graduating with $200,000 in debt that they're saddled with for the rest of their lives but that's the story that's out in the media, right? Our students are graduating with very manageable amounts of debt…they're almost never defaulting…but the story that gets told is that one, so it for better or for worse, that affects us even if it's not something that we've been responsible for.

While she did not dive into the intricacies of student debt, Sarah, who has worked in the field for over two decades and has also sent two children to college, has noticed a generational shift in perceptions of higher education's value.

> I think that that my children's generation are now reevaluating the cost. They're coming out with such incredible debt that is insurmountable…and they're concerned about being able to move on with their life and have the American Dream huh. So they're questioning the cost they're willing to pay to get that education.

Ava surfaced a different strain of generational challenges: higher education's workforce tends to skew older and most young people so not understand higher education as a career choice:

> Is it's just an aging field…and you see that in both faculty and administration. So how can we recruit young people to want to do this? And it's a hard thing because most college students are…not thinking that there are people behind the scenes doing this as a job but…how can we make that more visible? How can we make this a career that people know about? If we're going to have to adapt, if we're going to have to change…we need young people to do that.

When talking about the generational realities of the higher education workforce, Natalie reflected that true change in higher education could only come from mid-career professionals. Failing to see this change would mean the very people who could bring it about would leave the system.

> It's gonna have to be people who are mid careers [who will need to make changes]. Because nobody at the end [of their] career is going to be the change maker. That's not where their role is, that's not where they are in

> life. But if you want to keep [mid-career people]…we have to be seeing change in this industry because people are jumping ship.

Several participants believed that higher education's sluggish pace and larger legacy perceptions and notions of what a college "should" do converged to create a notable external challenge. Ava both recognized the problem and understood the challenges in overcoming this tension.

> [Higher Education] is not moving fast enough. It's not changing fast enough, as a field. College is…very tied to our own individual experience…it's hard to imagine somebody going through that in a way that's drastically different than our own experience.

In general, participants understood that being proactive instead of reactive was a necessary ingredient for sustainability. Ben reflected on the difference between a previous institution he had worked at and his current one, which he evaluated as nimbler and thus better situated to adjust to ever-changing headwinds.

> I used to work at another institution that had [a very large endowment]…and since then, [their endowment] has really dropped precipitously…and their ranking has gone down…The school I used to work at is very dedicated to having a traditional understanding of being a liberal arts institution…where I work now has a much broader understanding of that…and I think pivots to different realities…they're going to be a happier school in the long run (Ben).

In general, participants understood that being proactive instead of reactive was a necessary ingredient for sustainability. Ben reflected on the difference between a previous institution he had worked at and his current one, which he evaluated as nimbler and thus better situated to adjust to ever-changing headwinds.

Ability to Mitigate Systemic Disruption

Participants had mixed feelings about their institutions' ability to adjust sufficiently in response to the confluence of challenges they faced. As Sarah reflected: "I seriously question whether [my institution] is going to survive. And that is the hot question. "What is [my institution] doing to get through this?"

Zoey understood her institution's shortcomings but tried to maintain some faith that they could get through the difficulties.

> The school is not gonna stay open if it doesn't get better. My faith is just telling me that people are working on it…I don't really see it yet, but hopefully once the new budget is released, people will start making it happen. The schools that have more money, more resources, more talent, like, I don't think they're going through this.

When reflecting on potential closures, Natalie was the only participant to talk through the broader implications of a college shutting its doors.

> [Higher ed] is already seeing enrollment declines, we're already seeing difficulty in filling positions…you're not being able to retain good talented people so what happens when there's less students and less people to work with…there's going to be massive closures…it's going to be

> really impactful…When a college closes, it's not just a college that's affected. A lot of times, a college is supporting an entire community…there's a major economic impact at stake for the country as a whole if this happens.

In most instances, participants had opinions about what their institutions had to do to weather threats and where their institutions might fall short. Ava described a somewhat frantic reality where managing the more immediate internal disruptions and challenges prevented any long-term and deep contemplation around the threats her institution faces.

> We as an institution don't talk about [external challenges] enough…we're just…flying by the seat of our pants in so many ways, it's just kind of like…I don't think [my institution] has the bandwidth to [address these challenges].

To that end, Janet believes that the institutions that can take a breath, focus, and remain committed to their path were most likely to sustain and survive.

> Finding who you are and focusing on that is…ultimately really important and not trying to do everything for everybody. Focusing on your core competences…is really important…In the next ten years, there's gonna be a lot of fallout….you're gonna see a lot of privates go under like we already have seen (Janet).

Janet contrasted this need to focus with the realities of her institution.

I don't have that intimate knowledge of where they are in terms of budget but I feel like… you can't expect different results when you're doing the same thing, and I think unless the university makes some changes at the top and the president retires, quite honestly, I think they're gonna struggle.

However, there was not necessarily confidence that institutions were prepared to take these steps, and that even if they were now, their ability to weather the storm was not a constant. Ben, who is generally confident in his institution's leadership, acknowledged that his institution's long-term survival hinges on the people in place rather than systemic strengths that would sustain regardless of who was in a position of leadership at his institution.

My university itself is very nimble and is going to survive because we certainly have such a really good leadership now…leadership are willing to experiment and make changes…but….once our leadership changes ten years down the line or 15 years down the line, all bets are off, you never really know.

Contrast this with Sarah, who has little confidence in her senior leadership, and believes that their fear is preventing the productive evolution of her institution.

We spend all this money on freshman recruitment. How many freshmen are there? We're all...competing for the same little slice…and there's only so many. I think [senior leadership] is very afraid to [do something different]….and they want [the institution] to be what it was….there's a

> hope it will return to what it was…pre-covid, or something else…pre- I would say pre-demographic shift.

Natalie, who is generally more sympathetic to her senior-most leaders also has regular opportunities to share her expertise with senior leadership. However, even she recognized that the information she shared about mitigating systemic disruptions would likely not effect changes that she believed were critical to her institution's long-term sustainability.

> I think that they're open, they're listening, it's…the making decisions based on what I'm saying…that is the hard part. I don't know that I'm not convincing them…it's just…making a decision to invest more [in my business unit] what does that mean elsewhere? That's a hard decision.

Investing more money would be particularly difficult for Natalie's institution because she perceives them as relatively risk-averse in the realm of budgeting.

> We have a very budget-conscious board….Having even a small surplus every year…is everything. It would really be at the top level of the college, almost a cultural change of what matters. Because what would be needed is this mindset that even if we have to have a budget that's in the red for a year, that it's an investment that makes us money in the following year. [My department] was given an additional amount of money during Covid to shore up enrollments because there was fear. And we were able to get $4 for every $1 we were given…but it was a one-shot deal. But we know what the return on investment is. So it might be…that

> when the college finally gets backed into a corner and gets scared into it and they know they have to do it? It might mean that we have to have a budget that's not a surplus budget for a year. So then you can fuel it, then you make the money for the next year that you can re-invest, but it's this vicious cycle.

Natalie's situation reflects a commonality among all of the participants: an awareness of increasing financial pressure without the knowledge that their institutions had the space and resources to minimize the effects of this pressure.

The impact of failing to mitigate systemic disruptions was best articulated by two participants at opposite ends of the career spectrum. For Zoey, who has just started her career in higher education, the challenges she faces make her question where to lend her talent and drive: "Do I keep putting in the work because it's important? Or do I just walk away from [my job] because…I don't wanna waste [my] passion in it?"

For Sarah, who is approaching the end of her career, the changes and challenges she is navigating have soured what was once a lifetime commitment to her institution and her job.

> If you had, asked me ten years ago when am I going to retire, I would say…they're gonna have to take me out on a stretcher because I loved…[my institution] and I loved my job, even though my job was frustrating and…things would happen…and I really felt like I made a difference. And now I'm counting the months to retire.

Participants were generally uncertain about their institution's ability to navigate and weather external threats they faced. Every participant was acutely aware that college closures are a distinct possibility, and they pinned their institution's survival or downfall squarely on their president or senior leadership team.

Conclusion

This chapter enumerated eight themes identified during data analysis: sense of individual professional purpose, motivation for entering system, understanding of system purpose, organization of system, relationships between elements in the system, internal threats to the system, external threats to the system, and ability to mitigate systemic disruption. Using participant data, these themes were mapped to various essential aspects of systems theory. In chapter 5, I will utilize these themes to develop a theory that is grounded in this data and practically apply that theory by presented a model for systemic resilience specific to higher education administrators at tuition-dependent colleges and universities.

CHAPTER 5

This chapter will present a model for cultivating systemic resilience based on a higher education trust theory that is grounded in data from my eight research participants who are administrators at tuition-dependent colleges and universities. I will first summarize key findings and connect them to prior research and to my research questions. I will then synthesize my findings into a theory and propose a model derived from that theory that provides a framework for tuition-dependent institutions to cultivate systemic resilience among administrators. In addition, I will discuss the limitations of my study and explore implications for future research and practice.

Key Findings

Three key findings emerged from my research: higher education administrators experience systemic disconnect (both internally and externally), are uncertain as to the resources they have available to not only mitigate challenges but simply function as intended, and fundamentally mistrust their specific institution's ability to adapt to changes and ultimately sustain as a system. Because this work represents a significant gap in higher education research, as illustrated in the literature review, these findings are dialoguing with a currently underexplored topic in need of attention from both the research and professional sectors.

Systemic Disconnect

The most salient finding from my research was an overall disconnect both internally (within participants' specific college or university) and externally (between people working within a college or university and anything outside the system of higher education).

Internal Disconnect: Mission. My participants detailed internal disconnect in several ways. While they all understood the mission of their institution, several participants, most notably Sarah, Janet, and Zoey, expressed feeling disconnected from it in the context of their everyday realities. As Sarah articulated, institution mission statements "are lofty things that [senior leadership] puts up on the website that has no basis on what we do on a daily basis at all..it's not reality." Zoey questioned why her unit, which is exclusively student-facing, was not provided with more human and financial resources to help with student development, given her institution's mission to provide a rich and vibrant on-campus experience for their students so that they could develop leadership skills that they could take into their lives and careers. Janet had the most pragmatic orientation to this disconnect; she realized that while her institution might put significant effort into creating and communicating its mission, ultimately if her institution faced more urgent financial threats, the mission would recede into the background and take a back seat to solving the immediate crisis. While understandable, this diminished her institution's credibility while simultaneously diminishing her own sense of professionalism.

Internal Disconnect: Senior Leadership. Participants largely perceive that senior leadership's guidance and actions are not grounded in operational reality, which is another prominent source of internal disconnect. Even though senior leadership held the bulk of power in terms of determining resource allocation and setting higher-level policies, participants largely accepted that their senior leaders simply didn't understand their reality and participants were almost completely functionally disconnected from senior leadership. Furthermore, even when participants received regular communication from senior leadership, that communication was not, in most cases, useful to their everyday responsibilities.

Ben’s orientation to senior leadership best encapsulates this: Ben was well-briefed on the larger priorities of his institution and its enrollment and big-picture financial situation. He could put a dollar figure on what it meant to his institution if they fell short of their enrollment goals by X number of students. However, Ben did not have a clear understanding of how much budget he should spend on one of his primary responsibilities: travel. For the purposes of Ben’s primary professional purpose, working in a system where that big-picture communication is explicitly translated into his everyday reality is essential to ensuring his connection to both his professional purpose and the overall purpose of his institution. Who decided which information Ben can access as a member of his institution’s administration?

It is also important to note that this disconnect was also present with participants who more regularly heard from or interacted with senior leadership, or those who had more confidence in their senior leadership. It did not necessarily manifest as a critique of senior leadership for these participants, but it manifested in an acknowledgement that the disconnect made certain aspects of their jobs more difficult or did not help them obtain the resources they needed to perform their jobs at an optimal level.

External Disconnect

Participants, across the board, could not adequately explain their jobs to people who worked outside the system of higher education. This phenomenon does not represent a failure or knowledge gap on the part of my participants. In fact, all participants understood their jobs and their institutions, and were well-informed about the greater landscape of higher education. This was true for participants who actively sought out a career in higher education and those who simply found themselves contributing their professional acumen to a college or university. They also genuinely appreciated being enmeshed in a campus community, citing the many ways in which a learning community enriched them. Every participant was also well-informed about how higher education functions as a system and felt deeply passionate about the role higher education plays in society, even with the challenges they know the sector faces.

Nevertheless, my participants struggled to make meaning of this when speaking to anyone who exists outside the system, with several acknowledging that people in general don't understand higher education as a profession. Ben's uncle considers his nephew to be a telemarketer, which is not a career title that enjoys broad-based prestige. Charlotte's parents have synthesized her job as one in which her daughter is paid to volunteer. Again, the inability to understand the work of higher education administrators is not a failure on the parts of my participants or their families; it is a troubling bellwether for higher education in general, as it does not establish higher education administrative as a desirable career.

This external disconnect is not necessarily something that comes up in discussing the challenges facing higher education, but if left unaddressed, it will have an insidious effect on the system's ability to sustain. As illustrated by both my literature review and participant data, higher education is already experiencing two external threats that are primarily reputational: decreasing public confidence in higher education and increased questions about the value of a college education.

The inability for the people who work inside the higher education system to get people outside the higher education system to understand their work will further degrade the reputation of the sector. Even worse, it will hamper higher education's ability to recruit new generations of talent into the system. Who would willingly enter a system with as much administrative dysfunction as higher education, especially if their jobs are not understood or respected by anyone outside the system, even their peers or families?

Resource Uncertainty

Participants could not necessarily name consistent resources that were available to them. Some spoke about being able to rely on their bosses or colleagues, but the primary focus of their reflections revolved around the resources they did not have sufficient access to or knowledge of: money and people.

Financial Resources. Participants in general were aware that their institutions were working with extremely tight budgets, but that awareness did not necessarily translate to a robust understanding of the full financial picture. Ben, for example, was able to map budget shortfalls directly to enrollment numbers, which he said might mean that his team would cut back on different activities. He spoke primarily in the hypothetical, however, and did not necessarily feel able to say that he should be spending a certain amount on basic functions of his job such as travel.

Participants like Natalie, who has full control over how her budget is spent each year, did not determine her overall budget, despite having a data-informed understanding of how an increased budget could help her team provide even more essential support to her institution. Holly, whose department was partially endowment funded, has a similar set up: control over how the funds could be spent but not necessarily the total budget she was allocated each year.

Whereas Zoey pointed to signs of financial trouble but hoped for financial rebound at her institution, participants like Janet and Sarah believed their institutions were in much worse shape with little relief on the horizon. Janet, who was supposed to serve in a strategic capacity at her institution, did not even know if she had an operating budget, as it was never communicated to her.

Ava best summed up the approach of most institutions towards money as having an air of “don’t ask, don’t tell” surrounding budgets. Ava’s budget process was analogous to an authoritarian stye of parenting where “because I said so” was the only rationale for financial decisions that were passed down the org chart. Even in moments where her bosses attempted a more authoritarian approach and invited her input, Ava felt unable to fully engage because so much about her institution’s budget process had been kept from her and she could not find an entry point that was relevant to her work as she understood it.

Gatekeeping around how the overall financial picture of an intuition was related to functional budget allocations were detrimental to all participants and their ability to perform their professional functions at an optimal level.

Human Resources. Part of what shaped Sarah and Janet’s dire outlook on their institution’s overall financial health was the general lack of human resources. Both spoke about large-scale employee departures and in the crunch that created in their day-to-day lives. Janet described a truly exasperating situation about working to expedite the program review process to help their institution more quickly onboard in-demand degree programs. This involved significant effort from a cross-departmental collection of faculty and administrators who collaborated and re-imagined a legacy process that they understood was no longer serving them well. When it came time to utilize the new expedited process, there simply were not enough people employed to implement it. In the end, all the work was discarded, and the expedited process was never brought to fruition in a way that could help her institution create new programs to attract students, their primary source of revenue.

Sarah, who had been moved into a new role without anyone to take over her prior responsibilities, had been promised a staff member that she has yet to receive. She has also never received a job description for her new job, despite asking for it repeatedly. In addition, there is a tacit expectation that she will perform both her new job and her old job, and she must push back against that expectation.

Zoey worked for the first eight months of her job without a direct supervisor. She spent the most formative part of her career at her institution without any sort of official support and did her best to "figure it out," as she was fond of saying during our interview. By the time her supervisor arrived, Zoey had figured out how to perform her job functions but in doing so, had formulated several negative impressions of her institution. With the introduction of a new boss, Zoey is experiencing more support but also finds herself challenged by her manager to be more positive and change certain practices she had established in the absence of more formal guidance.

Charlotte, who along with Ben and Natalie was the most positive in general about her institution, also alluded to an inconsistency of human resource allocation; sometimes she would get the new people she requested to manage an increasing workload, and sometimes she wouldn't. It wasn't clear that she could accurately predict the outcome or understood how she might affect it from one year to the next. What differentiated Charlotte from other participants was that she could leverage a strong relationship with her direct boss to determine how to right-size her workload when the size of her team did not increase as requested. Sarah is an example of a participant who did not have the support to organize the many requests she received against the resources she had or did not have.

While Holly could not necessarily push back about the volume of her work, she did have a generally supportive boss who helped advance her department reorganization. Holly did express that even in reorganizing her department, she had to tread carefully about the ways in which she spoke about onboarding new human resources: “we don’t call them permanent positions anymore…it’s not permanent, we can’t use that word…so we would [ask for and try to] get an ‘open-ended regular position.’”

The combination of tight budgets, a lack of clarity about the overall financial health of their institutions, and shrinking workforces created a general sense of uncertainty around how to navigate internal and external threats. Across the board, participants were not able to leverage institutional policies, nor did they benefit from clear and consistent procedures to facilitate asking for new staff and in some cases additional budget. Participants had to piecemeal together information they gleaned from a variety of sources to “figure out” how to advocate and were often unsuccessful in that advocacy for reasons they could only surmise due to a large-scale lack of transparency. If they were unsuccessful, they had no recourse to act on that decision, precisely because there had been no formal process through which they could advance their initial request.

Systemic Mistrust

Systemic disconnect and uncertainty about resources contributed to participants’ overall mistrust of their systems. Participants did not express widespread confidence that their individual institutions had the capacity to withstand both internal and external challenges. The overall disconnect, lack of communication, and uncertainty around resource allocation all contributed to this mistrust.

Another key contributing factor to this mistrust was how slowly participants perceived things moved at their institutions. There was not a single participant who was in a situation where they would ask for something they need, make a case for why they need it, and simply receive it after a timeframe that would be considered reasonable. Consider the case of Holly, who had a boss supportive of her departmental reorganization, meaning she was already starting from a more advantageous position that other participants. Before she could even begin the search for a person, she worked for six months to bring her team to consensus, line up the documentation to support her ask, and then wait a month to get on her boss' calendar to ask him to advance this request and get the new role approved. From there, it took another nine months to fill the new role.

This means that Holly and her team were under-resourced for a significant period and had to then re-orient themselves when a new person joined their team. Given Bridgen's (2017) assertion that it can take years for a system to realize the impact of disruption, Holly's team may be recalibrating for years to come before they can achieve a semblance of equilibrium. Even worse, either members of Holly's team or Holly herself might leave her institution before their system can recalibrate. It is especially interesting to note that Holly's process to bring on more staff was just as slow, if not slower, than that of the other participants even though Holly works at an institution with a significantly larger endowment and stronger external reputation than other participants.

Participants spoke about the lengthy process of advocating for their asks, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully. They expressed varying levels of frustration and confusion around how priorities were determined — this was especially true in the case of Zoey, who juxtaposed her campus' moribund residence halls with the pristine condition of the campus grounds and senior leadership's robust international travel schedules. Because she, like most participants, was so fundamentally disconnected from senior leadership, she could only draw the conclusion that their emphasis on offering a vibrant student experience was simply a talking point that would take so long to manifest that she seriously questioned the value of waiting around for it to happen.

This mistrust also manifested in participants' general recognition that college closures were a very real outcome for institutions with similar profiles to theirs. Ben, who had confidence in his senior leadership team, appreciated and felt secure in their ability to navigate the increasingly complex higher education landscape. He also understood that this was not a constant and that things could change very quickly. If senior leadership were to leave, Ben would not necessarily be as certain that his institution would be able to weather the challenges, and he alluded to an institution with a profile similar to his that had quickly declined due to less capable leadership and careless financial management.

Janet and Sarah had little confidence in their institutions, and both indicated that it would not be a surprise to them if their institutions were to close. Zoey tried to remain optimistic and "have faith" that her institution was on the upswing, but when she compared her school to other schools "with more money," she did not necessarily trust in her institution's ability to sustain.

As evidenced by my key findings, higher education administrators experience both internal and external systemic disconnect, do not enjoy security about accessing resources, and do not trust their institution's ability to adapt to a confluence of threats and ultimately survive.

Connection of Findings to Prior Research

My findings connect in several important ways to prior research. Most notably, they support Ackoff and Gharajedaghi's (1996) findings that the autonomy of individual elements in social systems can foment conflict and discord. Ackoff and Gharajedaghi also found that individuals in systems use their autonomy to learn new skills that they can apply to their primary function within the system. While potentially helpful, these new skills increase the distance between the higher-level managers of the system and those in lower-level positions. As explained earlier in this chapter, my findings clearly illustrate this discord and disconnect, as participants need to learn new skills to adapt to shrinking budgets and reduced workforces and to mitigate unclear communication.

Fath, et. al. (2015) identified that systems must undergo growth, equilibrium, collapse, and reorientation as part of an adaptive cycle that helps them survive. They also identified traps that hinder each one of those processes. My participants clearly articulated that their institutions are struggling to grow and achieve equilibrium and is experiencing the two traps that are hallmarks of those stages. Shrinking budgets and workforces are catching higher education in the poverty trap and hindering its ability to scale. This poverty trap in turn feeds into the rigidity trap; with fewer financial resources and fewer people, higher education systems simply cannot innovate to keep pace with challenges. While my participants did not provide information that leads me to believe their institutions are in the collapse phase, they did describe scenarios that aligned with characteristics of the dissolution trap, which is common in that phase. The dissolution phase presents so many crises into a system that it simply cannot maintain its core function. When reorientation is needed, the vagabond trap leaves a system floundering for what its new purpose should be; there are whispers of this trap in the ways in which several participants struggled to connect their institution's stated missions to their jobs.

Rosowsky (& A.G., 2020)'s model for resilience in higher education makes 14 recommendations about how institutions can be resilient in the aftermath of COVID. In his model, senior leaders should deal with scenario planning, developing a contingency budget, ensuring functional reciprocity among senior leadership, organizational emergency planning, creating chain of command structures, planning for "return to normal" operations, establishing internal and external communications point people, reviewing data management, refreshing emergency plans, securing IT resources, establishing an on-campus housing emergency plan, sourcing external consultants who can help senior leaders, and planning for mental health needs of returning community members.

His list is relatively comprehensive. It covers a wide range of factors that are essential to manage in the throes of a crisis and is a more like a crisis playbook than a framework for resilience, especially in the context of systemic disconnect and mistrust. Consider a participant like Zoey, whose Vice President allocated her a budget without money to run student programming, an essential aspect of her primary professional purpose. Zoey ultimately had to make the decision to use her office supply budget and was not able to advocate for additional budget until her institution was able to fill the position of her direct boss. While that same VP is likely best situated to provide budget guidance during an acute crisis, that expertise may not necessarily extend into non-emergency situations, and assuming that it does causes a significant challenge to Zoey's ability to fulfill her professional purpose.

Connection of Findings to Research Questions

The findings from this research connect to the original three research questions as follows:

RQ1: How do higher education administrators understand their professional purpose within the institution?

Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of their professional purposes within their institutions. They also understood their specific job function and how to interact with colleagues across administrative and faculty departments to fulfill their responsibilities. Participants were also aware of their institution's purpose, or mission, as well as the larger purpose of higher education as a field. For many participants, it was easy to connect their specific function to the larger purpose of higher education, but some participants struggled to reconcile their institution's mission with the day-to-day realities of their jobs, especially since many of them felt that their institutions did not sufficiently resource them.

RQ2: What do higher education administrators perceive as internal and external threats to the institution?

Participants reported myriad internal and external threats to their institution, and they often intertwined. Internally, participants were most concerned about the financial health of their institution. Every participant spoke in some way to budget when discussing internal challenges, even those who had more secure budgets due to endowment allocations. Participants also cited their institution's staffing levels as an internal threat. Many participants reported that because their institutions were not staffed at the right levels, they themselves faced challenges in their roles and found themselves either unable to perform their job at its optimal level or scrambling to take on multiple roles. A closely related internal threat was the pace of their institutions. Participants felt their institutions moved too slowly in onboarding internal resources and in responding to external threats.

Participants cited several external threats to their institution: changing demographics are leading to increased competition for students, and college closures are a distinct possibility mentioned by all participants.

RQ3: How do higher education administrators understand the resources they can access to address the identified professional obstacles?

Participants were generally unclear of the resources they had at their disposal to address their professional obstacles. Most participants did acknowledge that they could count on their direct supervisor as a resource and for support managing internal obstacles, although they were not certain that this support would continue up to a leadership level beyond their direct boss. Sometimes participants looked to leverage peer-to-peer relationships that assisted in giving them both informal feedback and information they may not otherwise have access to without those connections. Participants who managed teams counted on their teams as a resource. However, in general, there was no streamlined or explicit framework through which administrators could identify or access resources to minimize the impact of professional obstacles.

A Grounded Theory and Model for Systemic Resilience

Higher Education Administration Trust Theory

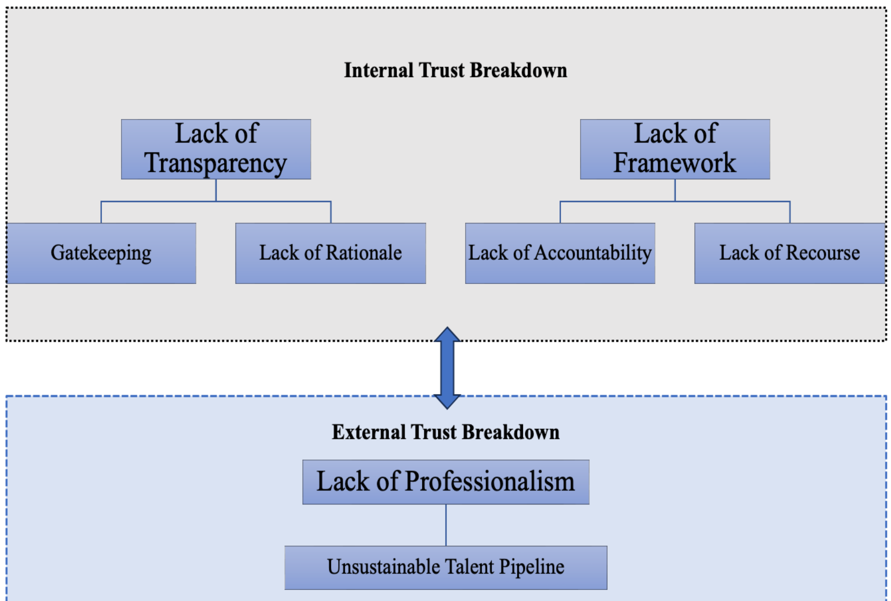
The theory that emerged grounded in my participants' experience is a trust model. As illustrated by Figure 1, higher education administrators experience vulnerability within their institutions that is rooted in two sources: 1) The lack of transparency, which is hampered by gatekeeping functionally relevant information and a lack of rationale for said gatekeeping; and 2) The lack of a framework by which to access resources or information, which perpetuates a lack of accountability and a lack of recourse when resources or information are not obtained. Higher education administrators are subject to additional vulnerability outside their institutions that is rooted in a lack of professionalism, which results in an unsustainable talent pipeline.

Because this theory is derived directly from the data, the themes therein clearly represent lack; to identify areas of deficit and label them as such (i.e. lacking) is to account for there being an expectation on the part of participants not being met in their experience. It is true that the degree of this lack may vary at specific institutions— for example, Ben has access to big-picture information about his institution’s budget health but not access to information about how that overall health translates to his specific professional budget decisions, whereas Janet has access to neither information stream. To use language that does not capture such lack would be disingenuous to the data and contributing participants, since the objective of the research is to capture thematic elements from the participants’ experiences.

Labeling and centering lack in this work, and thereby maintaining an accurate depiction of participant experience within the theory, is vital in emphasizing the serious nature of the work dynamic in question. It will also add urgency to the subsequent proposed model, which presents a tangible call to action and recommends adjustment to the current dynamics higher education administrators experience.

Figure 4

Higher Education Administration Trust Theory (Breakdown of Systemic Resilience)



Lack of Transparency. As illustrated in the key findings section, higher education administrators suffer from an overall lack of informational transparency, which exacerbated by gatekeeping of functionally relevant information and a lack of rationale for this failure to share information. Because of this lack of transparency, higher education administrators do not have all the information they need to make decisions to perform their professional functions optimally, and thus they are unable to make decisions that have the potential to help their institutions.

Recall that Janet did not talk bring up being confused about the exact nature of her institution's budget woes simply because she wanted to take in more information. She drew a straight line between having access to that information and being able to perform her job in a way that could help her institution: "had we known where we were from a budget perspective, maybe we could've made some different decisions based on that."

Ben, who had much more knowledge about the big-picture financial state of his institution did not always have access to "the granular stuff that we kind of need to know to do our job." In most instances, participants were not questioning why they didn't have this information, they seemed to accept that there would be an inconsistent flow of information to them and that sometimes the information would be applicable to their everyday jobs and sometimes it would not.

Lack of Framework. Higher Education administrators do not have a codified process through which they can obtain resources that they need to perform their professional functions. To advance a resource request, they must rely on their boss' ability to move their request up the org chart. If they have a strong connection to their boss, they have an initial advantage, but then they must hope that their boss has a strong enough connection to their boss and enough contextual understanding of how senior-level leaders make decisions to be successful. A participant like Sarah, who has no connection to her boss, starts out with an even greater disadvantage because she cannot leverage any relationship with the person closest to her on the org chart. This was also true for Ava, who had spent a considerable amount of time trying to get everyone above her on the org chart to understand why it was problematic that she was down two team members.

The only constant they can rely on is that it will take a significant amount of time to hear back about the ultimate decision when they do make an ask. In keeping with the overall lack of transparency they experience, they also have no idea exactly how long they can expect to wait, nor do they know what kind of feedback they will receive about why their request was accepted or denied.

The ad hoc nature of advancing requests fuels two harmful trends: a lack of accountability and a lack of recourse. In the typical resource request process, accountability only happens between those immediately next to each other on the org chart. Senior-level leaders are never meaningfully accountable to those more than one level beneath them on the org chart because they don't have to be. A Vice President will pass a decision down to their direct report who then communicates it to their direct report. There is no motivation or impetus for the Vice President to think about how this decision manifests as it progresses down the org chart, and thus once the decision is decreed, the Vice President simply turns his or her attention elsewhere and leaves those below him or her to manage the impact of not allocating the resource.

This lack of accountability further fuels extant feelings of disconnect between rank-and-file administrators and senior leadership. While a certain amount of disconnect between higher-level managers and those below them on the org chart is a natural byproduct of social systems, a lack of multi-dimensional accountability is not a requirement of social systems. In fact, introducing more inclusive accountability measures into higher education can help to mitigate the impact of this disconnect while also fostering a greater sense of professionalism into the administrative sector.

The lack of a framework also means that those asking for resources have no recourse after a decision is made. They are either told yes or no, and if they did not receive the resource requested they have a series of decisions to make about how to proceed, each which requires significant work by the person who requested it, with no guarantee of any benefit to them. Do they regroup and try to reframe the ask? Given the lack of access to relevant information, they have no assurances that their second ask will fare any better. Do they just accept that they won't receive the help they need and do their best to minimize the lack of support? This will further degrade the overall functioning of the person making the request, reduce credibility among the team they manage, and create additional workload strains, all while furthering a general lack of professionalism.

Lack of Professionalism. The work performed by higher education administrators is simultaneously essential and invisible, which poses a significant threat to higher education's ability to welcome future administrators into the system. Ava's reflection best summarizes this phenomenon:

> Most students are going through college not thinking that there are people behind the scenes doing things. This is a job, but how can we make that more visible? How can we make this a career that people know about and are interested in…if we're going to have to adapt, if we're going to have to change…we're going to have to sell this to gen Z or whatever comes next…. Finding ways to get people interested in working in higher ed…is going to be critical.

As explained in my key findings, the external disconnect between those inside and outside the higher education system compounds the many external threats the system is facing and may further contribute to internal threats such as decreased staff levels due to layoffs and those who choose to exit the sector. If people outside the system cannot (or will not) understand or value the unique aspect of higher education administrative professionalism, it will never be considered a viable career path for people entering the workforce and thus there will be a diminished input of human resources into the system over time.

Taken together, a lack of transparency, the lack of a framework, and the lack of professionalism leave higher education administrators wondering how their work connects to their institution's mission and results in their experiencing systemic confusion. Confusion about purpose is one of the biggest threats to the survival of a social system. Higher education is not only failing to protect itself from this threat; it is actively increasing the impact of the threat by creating it by failing to be transparent with information, refusing to set up formal frameworks through which administrators can operate, and neglecting to foster a sense of professionalism among its administrative workforces.

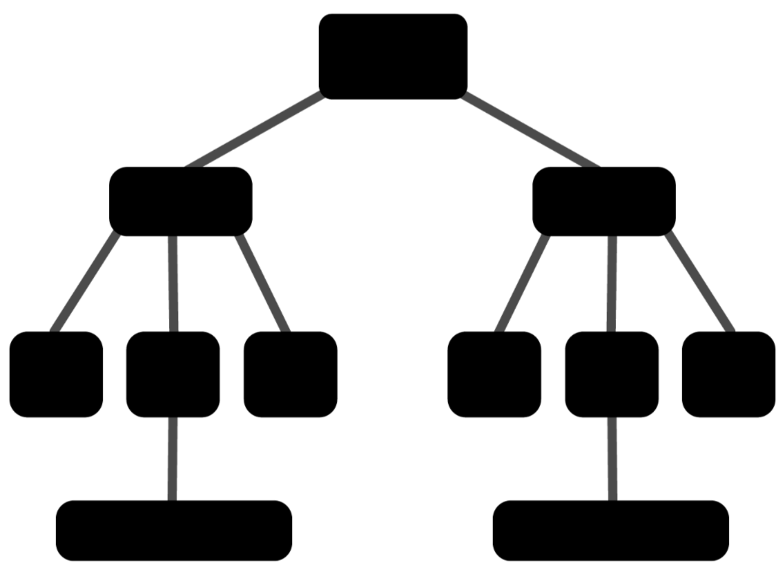
These three factors are constantly at play with each other and compound to create an increasingly unattractive work environment for higher education administrators. Addressing one at a time would be helpful but insufficient. If you addressed the lack of transparency and administrators had sufficient information to both perform their jobs and understand the greater context of resource availability in their institution, it would certainly inform their requests. However, if you do not put a framework in place through which administrators can leverage this information, the transparency will serve no functional purpose and instead stands to make administrators even further frustrated and disengaged because they are both aware of their reality and unable to practically apply this new knowledge.

Relationship Between Higher Education Administration Trust Model and Administrative Organization

Higher education institutions tend to utilize relatively common iteration of an organizational chart to manage and arrange administrative departments and people, as illustrated by Figure 2. An institution's president (top row) has a team of senior-level leaders (second row) Frequently known as Vice Presidents, Chancellors, etc., each senior-level leader then oversees one or more of the institution's administrative "buckets" at an institution. Examples of these administrative buckets include Academics, Student Life/Affairs, Enrollment, Advancement, Marketing, Human Resources, and Athletics. Senior-level leaders have a collection of direct reports (third row) who manage sub-buckets and in some instances teams (row 4).

Figure 5

Sample Organizational Chart



Theoretically, if this org chart functions as expected, the process of obtaining new resources should be relatively straightforward as it makes its way up an institution's org chart with relative speed and clarity. There is an argument to be made for the grounded theory being too much in keeping with the structure of a hierarchical organizational chart to represent the change in dynamics necessary to create improvement in current deficits of trust and resource access.

However, to use this theory to create a model for applied implementation, it is imperative to consider the realities of the space the theory and model will impact. An organizational chart is not, in itself, at the root of the problem or trust breakdown in higher education; rather, it is the presence of a barrier within the infrastructure. According to the data, the org chart has become a reliably occurring blockage in the flow of resources and information. It is therefore necessary, first, to establish what changes can be made, if any, to the current structures, as this model is designed to be applied in a real-world setting. It is highly unlikely that these structures would exist outside of the organizational dynamic represented; reporting structures will still exist as presented in organizational charts, so a model that hopes to engage with those structures must also reflect them.

For the purposes of describing the theoretical resource request process for higher education administrators, I will use a director-level administrator along one arm of an institution's org chart, hence the visual orientation will be horizontal and not vertical.

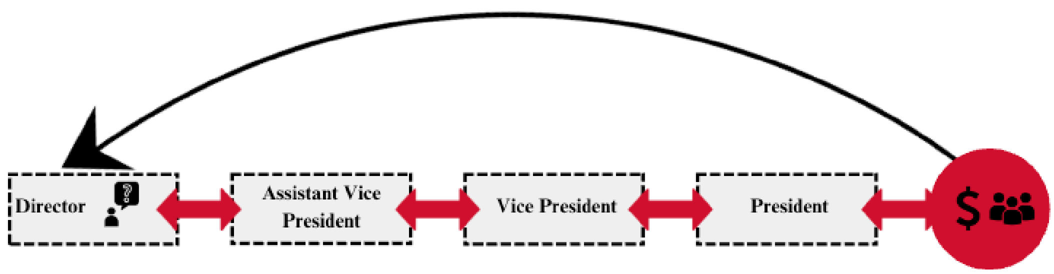
In this scenario, a Director has identified the need for an additional resource to support her work. She has compiled information about why she is making this request, has researched the financial implications of the request, and has illustrated why granting the request will enable her and her team to further optimize their performance.

As illustrated by Figure 3, a director reports to an Assistant Vice President, who reports to a Vice President, who reports to the President. If the Director identifies a need for new resources in the form of money or people, she should theoretically be able to follow the process outlined in Figure 3. Leveraging the two-way communications across each stage of the org chart, the Director would communicate about the need and resource request with her Assistant Vice President, who in turn would communicate with her Vice

President, who would communicate with the President, and the resource(s) would be allocated back to the Director.

Figure 6

Theoretical Resource Request Process for Higher Education Administrators



However, higher education administrators are not able to utilize such a straightforward framework to onboard new resources, and most often, do not have access to enough information to understand why or any recourse to alter the outcome once it is determined.

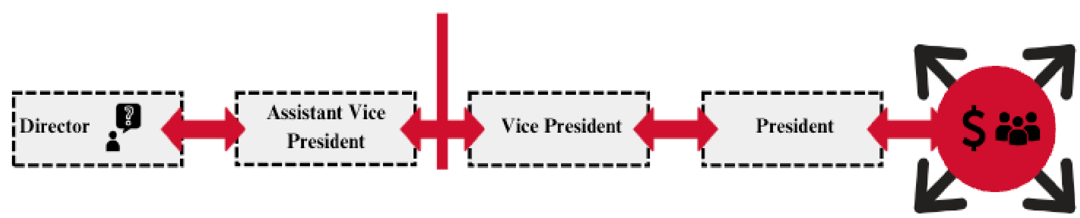
Figure 4 outlines a process that is much more aligned with how resource requests play out for higher education administrators. This same Director, having done all the pre-work she can think of to do using whatever information she happens to be told or collect, asks for a resource. She may not have collected everything that is needed, but because there is not a clear process around onboarding new resources, the Director does her best to compile a data-informed request that she advances to her Assistant Vice President, who advances it to her Vice President, who then blocks or denies the request.

The Assistant Vice President may or may not be given sufficient information to understand why the request was denied, and in turn must decide how to communicate the rationale for the denial to the Director who made the original request. In some cases, it may simply be communicating that the request was not made; in others, it may be a more robust communication that would help the Director understand the rationale and perhaps identify opportunities to refine the ask in a way that is more palatable to senior leadership.

In this scenario, the resource that is not allocated back to the Director is allocated to any number of places. It might not be allocated anywhere, it might be allocated to another administrative area where there are stronger connections between various levels of the org chart, or it may never become incorporated into the system at all.

Figure 7

Lived Experience of Resource Request Process for Higher Education Administrators



It is important to note that Figure 4 provides only one example of where the Director's resource request may be blocked. If the connection between the Director and her Assistant Vice President is not strong, the Assistant Vice President may never advance it to the Vice President. Similarly, even if the Vice President does advance the Director's resource request, the President can still block the request.

Whatever the nature of the blockage, the Director will always suffer due to the inherent lack of transparency in the system, and the inability for her to leverage a formal framework to advance her request. If the Director does not have enough contextual and operational information about her job and her institution, she may not have formulated the request in a way that was sufficiently compelling to her boss and senior leaders. She will also not receive adequate context about why her request was denied and will have no recourse to change the ultimate decision.

In a typical resource request scenario, senior-level leaders are never accountable to people on the Director level. In all cases, this process deteriorates the Director's trust in her institution and fosters disconnect among different levels of the org chart. It also has the potential to perpetuate the lack of professionalism facing higher education. If the Director cannot get the resources she needs, her work and the work of her team will suffer, and she may lose staff or be motivated to leave the institution herself. Given the lengthy nature of acquiring more resources, her institution may not be able to backfill the role, placing further pressure on other people who remain in the system. As per systems theory, it will take years for her institution to understand the long-term effects of this disruption, placing them further at risk to internal and external threats.

A Model for Cultivating Resilience Among Higher Education Administrators

By practically applying The Higher Education Administration Trust Theory, we can create a model for higher education administrators that provides a framework for sharing information, establishes clear policies, and codifies procedures to cultivate systemic resilience. By providing a means to mitigate the issues caused by a lack of transparency and a lack of a framework, this model can also increase the system's level of professionalism, thus potentially helping to alleviate the external threat to maintaining a sustainable talent pipeline.

Figure 5 illustrates a Foundational Pipeline Model to cultivate systemic resilience in higher education. To illustrate the nature of this model, I will again explore the example of a Director asking for a resource and illustrate how the foundational pipeline alleviates the issues higher education administrators typically face.

In this model, there are no changes to the org chart or how administrative departments are organized. The Director would still need to advance a resource request up increasing levels of the org chart. However, this model seeks to minimize the impact of disconnect along the org chart by introducing a foundational pipeline that every member of an org chart can both contribute to and access. Rather than relying on the strengths of one-to-one connections that vary across the institution, all requests would flow through this pipeline aided by its key elements: policies that align with the institution's mission, information that provides sufficient context and actionable data to help each member of the organization to fulfill their professional purposes, and evidence-based procedures for obtaining resources such as a new staff member, financial performance incentives, or additional money to support core operational activities.

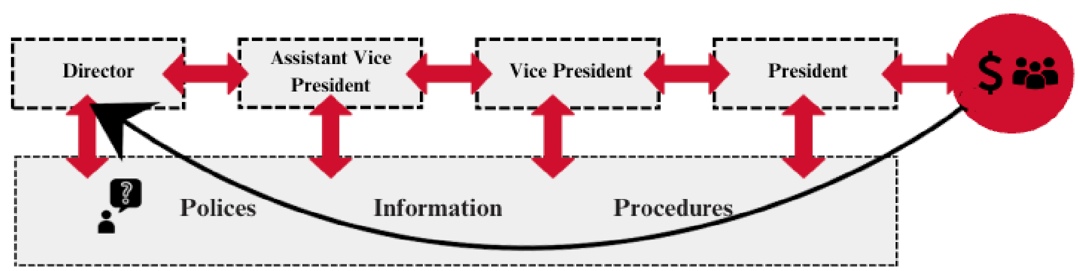
In the same way that the pipeline becomes the origin point for the request, it also becomes the means through which accountability occurs and the place where recourse is introduced.. In this model, the decision about whether or not the requested resource is allocated to the Director passes through the pipeline, which essentially creates a new level of accountability and connection between senior leadership and those further down on the org chart. In passing their decisions through a pipeline, senior-most leaders must hold their decisions up against the policies, information, and procedures within the pipeline and provide more context than just a verdict about the request.

This pipeline also attaches something of a "tracking device" to a resource request, which in turn provides the Director with resource after a decision is rendered. If her request is denied, the Director now has the ability to understand if the denial was due to an incorrect application of policies, the wrong procedure, or because she did not have all of the information she needed to successfully advocate for what she needs to fulfill her professional purpose. She will then understand her options and have a better sense of how much effort it would take to ask again and can plan her time accordingly. All around, this will contribute to a greater sense of professionalism because the Director will feel as if she belongs to a system that functions with

As I will discuss in the Implications for Practice, this model may not be able to safeguard against gatekeeping information nor does it control for speed, but it introduces other elements that may engender increasing both of those qualities in higher education administration.

Figure 8

Foundational Pipeline Model (Cultivating Systemic Resilience for Higher Education Administrators)



Trustworthiness of the Study

Charmaz (2006, 2014), the architect of Constructivist Grounded Theory, offers four benchmarks for establishing the trustworthiness of a grounded theory: "credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p. 315). The amount and contextual richness of the data collected provides clear and obvious credibility to this study. Each time I immersed myself in the data, new questions emerged to facilitate constant comparison. When I thought I landed somewhere in regard to a facet of the grounded theory or framework, I went back to compare and refine. I also was exceptionally intentional in my reflection, ensuring that my own sense of professionalism and ways in which I moved through my own institution did not overly influence the theory and model that were constructed.

Originality is satisfied by the fact that there is no such theory or model that specifically addresses the functional experience of higher education administrators. There are leadership pipeline models tailored around moving administrators into increasing positions of hierarchal importance, but there is no such pipeline model that addresses how to leverage the full scope of the org chart to increase transparency, introduce a framework, and increase professionalism into the sector.

In addition, while there are trust theories that exist, notably Hurley's (2006) Decision to Trust model, that model is not specific to the context of higher education administrators, and thus it may not fully cover the spectrum of dynamics being managed within that system.

While I did not engage in member checking with this research, I used the rich data I had to iterate moving each one of my participants through the resource request process that I used to illustrate the pipeline model. Because I had so much information from my participants, I was able to actualize what their resource request process was like with and without the pipeline to ensure its resonance. This also then assists in ensuring the usefulness of the theory and framework. One area I would like to re-visit for future research is in collecting additional data from participants. I can genuinely say that the need for additional data collection did not emerge from this particular study, but I believe if I were to engage in research that addressed the demographic limitations explained in the following section that I would likely discover instances where member-checking could inform refinement of the theory and model.

Limitations of the Study

Participant Demographics

While every effort was made to recruit a diverse sample, the participants were overwhelmingly female and white. It is important to note that the larger higher education administrative sector is similarly distributed. In addition, the sample was not as geographically diverse as originally intended, which is a limitation, as demographic shifts are not affecting all regions in the same way. In addition, I did not interview and participants who were classified as staff, as the few staff who did complete the demographic screener belonged to a union. These demographic and geographical limitations were likely due to the insular nature of the networks I used to recruit participants.

Since this is a grounded theory study, a way to mitigate this limitation for administrative participants would be to test this new model with purposeful samples that are less homogenous than my sample. This would allow for additional perspectives that could help either refine or reinforce the theory and model presented.

Researcher Positionality

I am a higher education administrator at a tuition-dependent institution who sits just under a senior-level leader on my institution's org chart. In the middle of my project, I was promoted into a position that I could feel was actively creating disconnect between employees with whom I had previously been more closely connected and whose functions in some ways overlapped with my own. While these facts in and of itself are not limitations, my position, and the perspective I have cultivated as a result, inevitably affect my research. However, I took several steps to minimize the impact of my own positionality.

When I first developed this study, I set the parameter that participants had to have at least one manager between themselves and the president, meaning I would essentially be interviewing peers. After engaging in reflection and memo writing following my proposal defense, I realized I needed to make a fundamental shift in my orientation to this research. Where I originally believed I should solicit data *from* professionals like me, I came to realize that my position on the org chart was too close to senior leadership and speaking to participants on that level would not provide me with enough information about how different levels of the org chart experience working as higher education administrators.

This perspective shift and change in participant parameters demanded a different, more intellectually demanding kind of reflection from me. In immersing myself with data, I had to keep myself focused on the systemic implications of what my participants were telling me, and move away from a focus on one actor in a system. One strong relationship on an org chart cannot sustainably address a widespread systemic issue, just as one weak relationship is not reason for the system's malfunction. As such, the purpose of my research was not to compile a collection of screeds or accolades about ineffective bosses and senior leadership teams. The purpose of this research was to synthesize the perspectives and scale them in a way that would facilitate the development of a systems-wide model that can be iterated into higher education institutions by the senior-level leaders who currently have the most power over the information and resources that get distributed to higher education administrators below them on the org chart.

Implications for Future Research

This research provides several avenues for future scholarly inquiry. As discussed in the limitation section, to measure the impact of implementing this model could involve similar research methods to what have been conducted for this project, either by comparatively analyzing findings from the same participants via longitudinal follow-up interviews, or conducting the same research with different participants in the same systems to determine whether the same issues are impacting the system's culture as prior to model implementation.

In addition, while this model does not include staff, their perspectives are essential to understanding the entirety of higher education operations. The pipeline model as developed does not sufficiently consider the unique challenges that staff experience within higher education and likely needs to be expanded or amended to address the realities of their everyday jobs. Centering staff is especially important as institutions introduce increased hybrid and online asynchronous learning options for students, which will fundamentally shift the kind of workforce needed to successfully maintain a level of student support.

Senior leadership is overrepresented in current scholarly inquiry about higher education administration, but their participation and thus perspectives are needed for this model to succeed and to ultimately cultivate holistic resilience. However, rather than soliciting more information about how senior-level leaders assess their own skills or how they handle acute crises from where they sit, this research presents a new thread of inquiry. These research questions can and should be asked of senior leaders to determine their orientation to their professional purposes, their understanding of challenges, and their capacity to name resources at their disposals. Doing so can enrich the elements within the foundational pipeline and has the potential to foster more senior-level buy-in about the need for it.

Furthermore, while small, private, tuition-dependent institutions are often cited as those at most risk of closing, the threats articulated by my participants and in my literature review also apply to public institutions. There are notable differences in how public institutions are funded, the ways in which they are staffed (e.g., public administrators may be more likely to belong to a union), and the stakeholders who must be folded into the decision-making process. It would be useful to undertake this same research with administrators at public institutions to test both the trust theory and foundational pipeline model.

Implications for Practice

This theory, being grounded in this particular data set, does not aspire to reach into other areas of higher education, in keeping with the parameters of CGT. Nevertheless, implications of these findings could very well impact areas adjacent to this research. If the proposed model, which is based on the research presented, were to be implemented and result in positive change, systems theory indicates that other systems that encounter this one would likewise benefit. At the least, the system would be more efficient and more imbued with a sense of trust in its functions.

If they are ready and willing to take it, this research provides a clear and urgent call-to-action for senior-level leaders who work in private, tuition-dependent colleges and universities. While the theory and foundational pipeline emerged from the perspectives of entry- and mid-level administrators, professionals at this level cannot create the pipeline on their own because of the issues that are driving its need. Participants like Janet and Zoey, who can't even get operating budgets to perform their basic job functions, are simply not empowered to create foundational change at their institutions. A participant like Natalie, who has access to real-time data about how small shifts in budgeting can help her institution in the long run, plus the ears of senior leadership, cannot facilitate this change. Even participants like Charlotte and Holly cannot clear the system of its morass, despite having the cushion of an endowment earmarked specifically for them and supportive direct bosses behind them.

It is highly likely that senior leaders experience similar feelings of being under-resourced to perform the work they are being asked to do. They experience a host of challenges and may also feel disconnected from their own senior leader and from the Board of Trustees to whom they are most directly accountable. However, senior-level leaders have the power, positionality, and potential to create this pipeline. They must be willing to interrogate the reasons the pipeline does not already exist and the ways in which its existence would fundamentally shift what is required of senior-level higher education leaders, including presidents and those who serve on Boards.

What would this pipeline mean for the constellation of people who sit around the leadership table? What new skills would they need? What new relationships would they need to prioritize? What new approach to information sharing would they need to adopt for the pipeline to truly be helpful?

These are not abstract questions; these are actual questions that senior leaders can choose to ask of themselves and their colleagues. The very process of asking and answering these questions, would mean that senior leaders would have to re-orient themselves to each other and to each of the people on their branch of the org chart. This re-orientation has the potential to foster a greater sense of professionalism among administrators while reducing confusion around the purpose of the system.

While the model presented does offer a way to mitigate threats to higher education administrators in tuition-dependent institutions, it does not necessarily ensure that the system will become more transparent or quicker. The theory that emerged is a trust theory and the onus of taking those first steps to build trust is on senior-level administrators. If they theoretically agree that some version of a foundational pipeline would be helpful but neglect to operationalize a shift in how they share information and how quickly they own responsiveness to needs identified by administrators at their institution, trust will degrade even further. In the absence of this work by senior leadership, more and more administrators will leave the system. Natalie alluded to this more generally during her discussion about challenges the field faces: "if you want to keep all of us [mid career administrators] in the car for a while, we have to be seeing change come into the industry." What Natalie is essentially saying is that senior leadership needs to show an awareness that their work, in part, involves creating enough trust within the system so that people at her level and below her are still working in higher education when it is their time to serve as senior leaders.

Zoey presents a more urgent and troubling example of what will become a larger trend if senior leadership continues to champion the status quo. Zoey intentionally sought out a career in higher education; she studied the field, she understands her profession, she values the larger mission of higher education, and she chose to devote her time and talent to an institution. Now, she is actively considering leaving not just her institution but the field as a whole. Her departure does not just present an immediate functional problem for her institution; it permanently shuts down a viable branch of higher education's leadership pipeline.

Conclusion

While there is current public doubt about the value of higher education, compounded by demographic realities that threaten tuition-dependent institutions, the north star of higher education has always been its commitment to transforming lives. Even as confidence in higher education wanes, those actually enrolled in institutions overwhelmingly believe in the mission of higher education: 72% of those enrolled in a private college or university strongly agree or agree that their education is worth the cost (Hrynoswki, 2023). The number of faculty at degree-granting institutions increased by 15% between 2009 and 2021, indicating that those with scholarly and academic expertise similarly value the mission of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

This raises an essential question that higher education must grapple with: why is a sector so committed to transforming the lives of its students and faculty so unwilling to provide access to that same transformation for its own administrators?

By working to re-establish trust among higher education administrators at all levels off an institution's org chart and providing a framework that empowers administrators to increase their sense of professionalism and value, the grounded theory and pipeline model presented offer a way to cultivate systemic resilience and ensure that higher education has the administrative workforce it needs not only to survive but thrive.

APPENDIX A
Demographic Screener

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation research study on cultivating systemic resilience in private, tuition-dependent colleges and universities and the professional experience of higher education administrators and staff members. Please complete the following questionnaire to determine your eligibility to participate.

1. Email
2. Institution Type (Public/Private)
3. 4-year/2-year
4. Institution Location
5. Job Title

a. Years in Role

6. Job Modality

a. Fully remote
b. Hybrid (on a set schedule)
c. Hybrid (on a self-determined schedule)
d. Fully on-campus

7. Job Status

a. Full-time, or part-time unionized staff or administrator
b. Full-time, nonunionized staff
c. Part-time (20 hours or less per week), nonunionized staff
d. Full-time, nonunionized administrator
e. Part-time (20 hours or less per week), nonunionized administrator

8. To which gender identify do you most identify?

a. Female
b. Male
c. Transgender Female
d. Transgender Male
e. Gender non-conforming
f. Not Listed
g. Prefer not to answer

9. Age

a. 18-24

b. 25-34

c. 35-44

d. 45-54

e. 55-64

f. 65-74

g. 75 or older

10. Which race or ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)

a. American Indian or Alaskan Native

b. Asian / Pacific Islander

c. Black or African American

d. Hispanic

e. White / Caucasian

f. Multiple ethnicity/ Other (please specify)

11. Are you of Hispanic or Latino/a origin?

a. Yes

b. No

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

St. John's University School of Education

Sullivan Hall

8000 Utopia Pkwy

Queens, NY 11439

CONSENT FORM – HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE RESEARCH STUDY

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about your experience working in a staff or administrative position in higher education. This study will be conducted by Linda Romano, Department of Instructional Leadership, School of Education, St. John's University, as part of her dissertation research towards her Ed.D. in Instructional Leadership. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Katherine Aquino, Assistant Professor in the Department of Education Specialties.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of non-academic higher educational professionals to explore how they feel about their job, the industry they work in, and their professional growth opportunities in higher education.

STUDY PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Take part in one interview concerning working in higher education.
2. Answer any potential follow-up questions after the interview is over, via email or a follow up interview.

Your interviews will be audio recorded if conducted in person and audio and video-recorded if conducted via WebEx. Interviews will be transcribed by both the researcher and a professional transcription service and analyzed using Delve, a third-party coding software. You may review these files and request that all or any portion of the files be destroyed. No names will be used in any materials related to the transcription, coding, or reporting on this interview.

Participation in this study will involve approximately 60-75 minutes of your time.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the nature of the experience non-academic professionals working in higher education.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

No monetary compensation will be provided to you for participation in the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by keeping consent forms and video interview files on a personal laptop and password protecting them.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, questionnaires or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You may choose to be in this study or decline participation without any consequences.

INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Linda Romano at 516.314.1913, romanol@stjohns.edu, 33 Davies Ave, Dumont, NJ, or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Katherine Aquino, czadoaqk@stjohns.edu, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Pkwy, Sullivan Hall, Queens, NY 11439

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair, and irb@stjohns.edu.

Agreement to Participate

I have read the information provided above. I have been given a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to have my child participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

____

Participant's Name Date

____

Participant's Signature Date

Signature of Investigator

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all their questions. I believe that the participant understands the information described in this document and freely consents to participate.

____

Name of Person Obtaining Consent Date

____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

I will introduce myself, walk them through the informed consent form to see if there are any questions, thank them for participating, and begin.

Research Question	Interview Questions
RQ1: How do higher education staff and administrators understand their professional purpose within the institution?	1. What is your role at [institution name]? PROMPT: What does that involve? PROMPT 2: How did you arrive at this job? 2. Why did you decide to work at a college or university specifically? PROMPT: Did you come from a different sector before this job? 3. How would you describe your job to someone who doesn't know anything about what it's like to work at a college/university? 4. Tell me about how your department is organized. PROMPT: How does the organization affect your job? 5. How do you know if you're doing your job successfully? PROMPT: What kind of feedback do you receive about your job? 6. How much involvement do you have in budgeting in your role? PROMPT: Do you want to have more/less involvement? 7. What is your interpretation of [institution name's] mission? PROMPT: How did you form this understanding of the mission? 8. In what ways does your work connect to [institution name]'s mission? PROMPT IF

	STRONG CONNECTION: How does that make you feel? PROMPT IF WEAK/NO CONNECTION: Why do you think that is?
RQ2: What do higher education staff and administrators perceive as internal and external threats to the institution?	1. What are some internal obstacles you face in your position? PROMPT: Where do you think they come from? 2. When you find yourself confronting these obstacles, what do you do to try and address them? PROMPT: How much time do you spend trying to address an obstacle? PROMPT 2: Why do you spend that much time on it? 3. How unique do you think your internal obstacles are compared to people who also work at [institution name]? PROMPT IF UNIQUE: Why do you think this is? PROMPT IF NOT UNIQUE: How do you feel knowing that your colleagues at [institution name] are facing this? 4. When you think about working in higher education as a field, what are some challenges you think the field is facing? PROMPT: Where do you get that impression from/how is your understanding of these challenges formed? 5. What discussions do you have with your colleagues at [institution name] about these challenges? PROMPT IF DISCUSSING: Do you and your colleagues share similar views? PROMPT IF NOT DISCUSSING: Why do you think you don’t discuss these challenges?

RQ3: How do higher education staff and administrators understand the resources they can access to address the identified professional obstacles?	1. Earlier you identified [internal obstacles named in prior section]. What steps do you tend to take address/alleviate the obstacle? PROMPT: Why? PROMPT 2: How did you know to seek out help there? 2. If you find that what you're trying isn't working, what do you do? 3. How much support do your colleagues provide you when you're working through an obstacle or challenge? PROMPT IF SUPPORT: How does that help? PROMPT IF NO SUPPORT: How does that feel? 4. How well do you think your boss understands the obstacles you face? PROMPT: How do you know that? PROMPT IF LOW UNDERSTANDING: What would understanding look like? 5. Earlier you mentioned that you have [response to RQ1 budget question] involvement in budgeting. In what ways does that help or hurt your ability to solve problems you face? 6. Earlier you mentioned that higher education is facing [external challenge they named]. What do you think [institution name] is doing to address this challenge? PROMPT: How do you find out what they're doing? 7. If you could instantly change one aspect of your job, what would it be? PROMPT: Why? 8. Where would you work if you didn't work at [institution name] and why?

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