

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

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This exploratory, narrative study investigated two research questions. One, how do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of a crisis that their organization faced. Two, how do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 retired community college presidents and chancellors from across the United States. Data were coded using in vivo coding for the first cycle and focused coding for the second. The study found that community college presidents drew heavily from past work experience in order to make sense of crisis situations. Those who rose through the ranks through specific channels such as public relations, human resources, business, and counseling drew heavily from their professional backgrounds to understand how to respond to crises. Participants also differentiated crises levels based on how immediate the response needed to be, how much attention the situation was receiving from the public, and whether the event threatened organization's mission. Findings indicate that during times of normalcy, participants favored interpersonal or transformational

leadership approaches. However, once the term challenge or crisis was introduced, they began to emphasize more dominant behaviors such as taking a front and center role. The communication competency also increased in importance when reflecting on leadership during times of crisis. Based on the findings, this study introduces the rudimentary beginnings of crises salience theory, a construct to explain how a leader's behaviors change based on their perceptions about the urgency of a crisis. This construct could either evolve into an extension of terror management theory or grow with research into a similar framework that explains organizational leadership behaviors during crisis events.

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Executive Leadership and Crisis Management at Community Colleges:  
An Exploratory, Narrative Study

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Daniel A. Tarker

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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Daniel A. Tarker, Author

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## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Questions about what competencies, values, and knowledge community college presidents need to lead their organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have been extensively discussed and studied over the past two decades by advocacy organizations and researchers (Eddy, Sydbow, Alfred, & Garza-Mitchell, 2015; Ellis & Garcia, 2017). Several community college leadership frameworks have emerged from this work including the American Association of Community College's (AACC) (2005, 2013) *Competencies for Community College Leaders*. This leadership construct recommends important competencies that community college presidents need to develop in order to effectively lead their organizations during a period of unprecedented change (Eddy & Mitchell, 2017). Some of these changes include declining enrollment, reductions in state funding, and increased scrutiny over completion rates (Eddy, 2012; Phelan, 2016). However, there is one important competency area not fully addressed within AACC's (2005, 2013) community college leadership framework: crisis management.

Based on an investigation of the literature, a crisis can be defined as a relatively unexpected occurrence that creates ambiguity about both the cause and consequences of the event which requires critical decisions to be made under time pressure to ensure the continued viability of the organization (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Pearson & Clair, 2008; Wooten & James, 2008). Higher education institutions such as community colleges are susceptible to the emergence of a wide range of crisis situations (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In 2015, a student shot and killed eight classmates and an instructor at Umpqua Community College in southern Oregon (Freeman, 2016). That same year, a tragic tour bus accident in Seattle, Washington killed four international students and injured a number of others from North Seattle College (Seattle Times staff, 2015). In 2016, the president and the lead attorney for Essex

County Community College in New Jersey were both fired by the board of directors, which set off a series of scandals over the course of the following two years that eventually threatened the college's eligibility for federal funding and its accreditation (Mazzola, 2017). In 2017, the president of Niagara County Community College was caught on tape disparaging a student sexual assault victim (Specht, 2017). In 2018, a member of the board of trustees at Huston Community College in Texas was sentenced to six years in jail for accepting bribes from companies wishing to do business with the college (Ellis, 2018).

These are just some of the types of crises that community colleges have found themselves embroiled in during the past three years. There are a number of unique characteristics about these traditionally two-year higher education institutions that contribute to their susceptibility to the emergence of crisis events (Genshaft, 2014; Hincker, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008). In the United States, community colleges are typically located on easily accessible campuses that are integrated into the larger community (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). They have open access policies that welcome an eclectic range of students (Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008). They have dispersed organizational structures with faculty and staff located throughout the campus (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The confluence of all these variables and others contributes to making community colleges prone to the emergence of crisis events (Genshaft, 2014; Hincker, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Whether it is a financial catastrophe or a personnel scandal, people look to their leaders for guidance during times of uncertainty and crisis (Merolla, Ramos, & Zechmeister, 2007). Yet, many new and incoming community college presidents report that they do not feel prepared to manage crisis situations at their institutions (Eddy, 2012; Murray & Kishur Jr., 2008). This is

concerning since a poorly managed crisis can negatively impact the culture and personal narrative of a college or university long after the crisis itself has subsided (Genshaft, 2014; Ross, 2014). In addition, there is currently little research on how community college presidents lead their organizations through crisis events (Murray & Kishur Jr., 2008).

### **Problem Statement**

In reviewing the literature on executive leadership and crisis management, three important, interrelated themes emerged that have not been fully explored within the community college setting. These three themes are cognitive schemas, sensemaking strategies, and leadership (Eddy, 2012; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Phipps, 2012). The findings of this study address these gaps by providing insight into how the cognitive schemas and sensemaking approach of community college presidents inform their crisis management approach.

### **Cognitive Schemas**

The cognitive schemas of community college presidents inform how they make sense of situations (Eddy, 2005; 2012). Also called mental maps or paradigm frames (Phipps, 2012), cognitive schemas are shaped by a person's past experiences, spiritual beliefs, core values, and accumulated knowledge (Eddy, 2012; Phipps, 2012). Leaders use their cognitive schemas to filter the overwhelming amount of information they receive in order to prioritize what is most useful in a given situation (Calori, Johnson, & Sarnin, 1994; Phipps, 2012). They also use their cognitive schemas to interpret and make meaning of information based on their past experiences (Phipps, 2012). In terms of crisis situations, Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argued that all executive leaders of complex organizations draw on their cognitive schemas to make sense of the ambiguity crises can produce. However, little research has been conducted examining how the

cognitive schemas of community college presidents inform the way they make sense of crisis situations at their institutions.

### **Sensemaking**

There is also limited research studying what sensemaking strategies community college presidents use to understand crisis situations. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) define sensemaking as a process used to understand unique, ambiguous, and uncertain situations. It involves extracting information from the environment in order to develop a reasonable explanation for what is occurring. They identify two epistemological camps within the sensemaking scholarship. One emphasizes the connection between sensemaking and cognitive schemas. The other focuses on sensemaking as a social construction process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Stieglitz, Mirbabaie, Schwenner, Marx, Lehr, & Brünker, 2017). Eddy (2005), for instance, takes an epistemological position that emphasizes how the cognitive schemas of community college presidents – their past experiences, mentors, and education - inform their sensemaking process. In contrast, the social constructive epistemological perspective on sensemaking emphasizes how shared meaning and understanding is developed through social exchanges like team meetings (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Currently, there is limited research investigating the sensemaking approach of community college presidents during crises and how their cognitive schemas may influence their interpretation of the situation.

### **Leadership**

Finally, although a considerable body of research exists concerning community college presidential leadership, little explores how people in these positions lead during times of crisis (Murray & Kishur Jr., 2008). Specifically, it would be useful to understand how the leadership

approaches that community college presidents use during times of crisis are informed by their cognitive schemas and sensemaking strategies.

### **Design of the Study**

To address the gaps in the literature on leadership and crisis management at community colleges, I conducted an exploratory, narrative study focusing on the experiences of 12 retired community college presidents from throughout the United States. Qualitative research methods like narrative studies allow the researcher to explore a phenomenon that cannot easily be studied quantitatively (Yin, 2014). Since the focus of this study was on the inner, psychological experiences of the participants, a qualitative study seemed appropriate to investigate their subjective realities (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected through hour-long semi-structured interviews with each participant using an Oregon State University IRB approved protocol. Questions in the protocol were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences with leadership and crisis management as community college presidents.

As described below, this study builds off previous research and helps extend the literature around leadership and crisis management at community colleges. It also provides practical guidance for boards of trustees and executive leaders that can inform leadership training and executive recruitment at community colleges. It also has the potential to further inform the American Association of Community College's (2005, 2013) core competencies for community college leader's framework.

### **Research Application**

From a research perspective, the purpose of this study has three dimensions. First, it extends research on how community college presidents perceive crisis situations and define them. Second, it provides knowledge about how community college presidents draw on their



cognitive schemas and sensemaking strategies to understand crises. Finally, it provides insight into how their perceptions about the crises that they faced informed their leadership approach.

### **Practical Application**

In addition to the theoretical implications, the results of this study offer suggestions for practice. Boards of trustees for higher education organizations can use the findings of this study to evaluate potential executive leaders during the recruitment process, especially if they are in search of senior administrators who may be entering an organization during a crisis situation. In addition, executive leaders at community colleges can use the findings to educate themselves and their crisis management teams about how their cognitive schemas and sensemaking strategies inform their perceptions of crisis events and their leadership response. This study can also provide guidance for developing both crisis management training and crisis preparation activities on community college campuses.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purposes of this narrative study is to develop theory on executive leadership and crisis management at community colleges. The research questions were crafted in order to draw out information from participants about how they made sense of the crisis they faced and what personality traits, behaviors, and competencies they used to lead their organizations as a result of their sensemaking process.

1. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of the crisis?

*Question Rationale:* Research indicates that community college presidents draw on their cognitive schemas and engage in an extensive sensemaking process to make sense of crisis situations (Eddy, 2012; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Murray & Kishnur,

2008) By allowing executive leaders of community colleges to describe their sensemaking process and their perceptions about the crisis they faced, I was able to extend this research by identifying how community college presidents perceive and make sense of crisis situations at their institutions based on their cognitive schemas and sensemaking approach.

2. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process?

*Question Rationale:* Allowing leaders to reflect on and describe their perceptions of what personality traits, behaviors, and competencies they drew on to address crises allowed me to determine which of these they felt were most useful to them as leaders during these stressful, high stakes situations.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

In qualitative research, theoretical frameworks are used to shape research designs (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Theory can help researchers make decisions about problem statements, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). Researchers can also use theory to increase the perceived validity of findings when methods such as theoretical triangulation and pattern matching are used as analytic tools to make sense of the findings (Yin, 2014). For this study, I utilized several crisis management and leadership theories to inform this study of executive leadership and crisis management at community colleges. I also used a social psychological construct called terror management theory to deepen the analysis. These constructs aided me in making decisions about how to investigate leadership and crisis management in the community college context and interpret the findings of the study.

## **Crisis Management Models**

After investigating the literature on crisis management, I decided to use two contrasting crisis management frameworks based on their differing ontological perspectives. The first is the rational, scientific approach, which is concerned with establishing clear, step-by-step protocols and procedures to address crisis situations (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). To capture this ontological orientation to crisis management, I used Mitroff's six-phase model. Mitroff delineates the six phases of a crisis as signal detection, probing/preparation, containment/damage limitation, recovery, no fault learning, and redesign (Wang & Hutchins, 2010; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). To capture the complexity based ontology on crisis management, I used Gilpin and Murphy's (2008) complexity based model to represent a more adaptive and improvisational approach to crisis management.

## **Leadership Theories**

Since a major dimension of this study focuses on community college leadership, my investigation of the literature led me to utilize two established general leadership theories and one community college specific leadership framework. The first theory that I chose to use was transformational leadership – a dimension of the full range leadership theory – because of the robust amount of research in the literature supporting this construct in educational contexts like community colleges (Bass, 1999; Grove-Heuser, 2016; Judge & Bono, 2000). The second theory that I chose was the five-factor model (FFM), a construct that examines the connection between personality traits and leadership (Judge & Bono, 2000). I made this choice due to recent research examining whether specific personality traits described by the five-factor model may predict the potential emergence of particular transformational leadership behaviors (Judge & Bono, 2000; Lim & Ployhart, 2004). I included the five-factor model as a way to broaden the transformational

leadership lens in order to consider the phenomenon of leadership more complexly. Next, I chose to use the American Association of Community College's (2005, 2013) core competencies for community college leaders as a framework. I selected this framework because it provides five clearly defined competency areas that community college presidents need to develop in order to lead their institutions (Eddy, 2012; Nevarez, Wood, & Penrose, 2013). In addition, research has also been conducted examining the relationship between the competencies described in the AACC framework and transformational leadership (Duree & Ebbers, 2012), so incorporating this framework provided another opportunity to further extend the theoretical lens on leadership in order to examine this phenomenon in more depth.

### **Terror Management Theory**

The final construct that informed this study was terror management theory (TMT). A social psychological theory, TMT is a useful framework for understanding how people's awareness of their own mortality influences their behaviors (Pyszczynski, 2004). Research using this theory indicates that people's leadership preferences change when they are exposed to reminders of their own mortality – a measurement referred to in the theory as mortality salience. (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004). For instance, when mortality salience is raised, people's preference for relational, egalitarian leadership decreases while their preference for charismatic, authoritarian leadership increases (Lewis, 2014; Merolla, Ramos, & Zechmeister, 2007). Therefore, research on leadership using this theory can shed light on how high stakes situations like crises can change people's perceptions about leaders and leadership.

### **Audience**

The audience for this study includes leadership and crisis management scholars, community college board members, executive leaders at community colleges, and community

college crisis management teams. This study may also be useful to government organizations like the U.S. Department of Education, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and Homeland Security in their efforts to provide guidance to higher education organizations to strengthen their crisis management response. Finally, advocacy organizations like the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) may be able to use this study to inform their community college leadership frameworks and recommendations.

### **Chapter Summary**

Given that community colleges are susceptible to the emergence of a wide range of crises due to being complex, open systems, community college presidents need to possess the knowledge and skills to lead their organizations through a crisis event (Department of Education, 2009). Failing to lead the organization back to a place of normalcy or a place of change and improvement after a crisis can have long-term damaging consequences for both the continued viability of the organization and the professional reputation of the leader (Genshaft, 2014).

Many new, incoming community college presidents say that crisis management is not an area they feel confident in (Eddy, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this narrative study of retired community college presidents in the United States was to explore how their cognitive schemas and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of the challenges and crises they faced. In addition, the study explored what personality traits, behaviors, and competencies they drew on to lead their organizations through the challenge or crisis. The research questions posed were (a) how do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of a crisis, and (b) how do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used

during the crisis management process? This study adds to our understanding of how the cognitive schema and sensemaking approach of community college presidents inform their understanding of a crisis situation. It also provides knowledge about how their perceptions and understanding of a crisis influenced what personality traits, behaviors, and competencies they drew on to address the situation. In regards to practice, the findings may be used to inform executive hiring, crisis management training, and crisis preparation at community colleges.

## CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

The root of the word crisis can be traced back to the Greek κρίση, a medical term describing a critical turning point in the progression of a disease that will either lead to recovery or death (Dictionary O.E., 2017). As an area of scholarly inquiry, research on crisis management can be traced back to the Tylenol tragedy of 1982 (Pangarkar, 2016). At the time, the medication was not contained in protective packaging, but rather in plastic bottles with only a childproof lid and a cotton ball. This allowed a domestic terrorist to go into stores around the Chicago area and insert potassium cyanide into the popular pain medication, resulting in approximately 250 illnesses and a total of seven deaths (Markel, 2014).

This crisis could have been catastrophic for Johnson & Johnson, the manufacturer of the medication. However, the company's response continues to be considered the gold standard in crisis management (Gilpin & Murphey, 2008; Pangarkar, 2016). A great deal of Johnson & Johnson's success in navigating the crisis is attributed to the company's CEO James Burke, who engaged in an aggressive communication campaign that helped salvage the company's public reputation by emphasizing that the cause of the crisis was not the result of the company's negligence, but rather an act of domestic terrorism (Pangarkar, 2016). They clearly communicated that the medication was contaminated in the stores, not in their factories (Markel, 2014). The company quickly recalled their products, signaling that they were putting the welfare of the public before company profits (Wang & Hutchison, 2011). Not only did this save the company from a situation that could have ruined its reputation and destroyed its business, but it also led to the emergence of crisis management studies in an effort to understand what Johnson & Johnson did right so that other executive leaders could effectively lead their organizations through a crisis (Pangarkar, 2016).

Similar to corporations, higher education institutions like community colleges can be adversely affected by the sudden eruption of crisis events (U. S. Department of Education, 2007, 2009). As recent headlines demonstrate, executive leaders of higher education organizations like community colleges may have to face environmental disasters, campus shootings, financial scandals, sexual assault incidents, and any number of unexpected events that may escalate into a crisis situation where the future of the organization becomes uncertain (Mitroff, Diamond, Alpaslan, 2006); Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative that community college presidents and other executive leaders possess competencies in crisis management.

### **Problem Statement and Purpose**

Although higher education institutions are often perceived as sanctuaries shielded from the pressures of the larger society, they can easily be impacted by a crisis event due to the complexity of their organizational structure, the number of students and faculty present on campuses, and the openness of the organization (Hincker, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). These challenges are important to consider since a crisis and the subsequent response can have a profound impact on both the future vitality of an organization and on the reputation of the executive leaders of the institution (Boin & Hart, 2003; Genshaft, 2014; Gilman & Murphy, 2008).

Numerous practical and theoretical gaps exist in our understanding of executive leadership and crisis management in the context of community colleges (U.S. Department of Higher Education, 2007). As Eddy (2005, 2012) found, community college presidents, like all leaders, draw on their cognitive schema and sensemaking process to make meaning of situations in order to take action. However, there is little research examining the ways community college presidents draw on their cognitive schemas and sensemaking skills to understand a crisis.



Similarly, there is little research exploring what personality traits, behaviors, and competencies presidents draw on to address the crisis as a result of their sensemaking process.

### **Purpose of Literature Review**

This literature review describes the frameworks and theories on leadership and crisis management that have informed this study. After reviewing the methods used to review the literature, I will share my findings in two parts. The first will review the salient topics and frameworks on crisis management that informed this study including the definitions of a crisis, types of crises, leader cognitive schemas, sensemaking, and the stages of the crisis management process. The second half of the literature review reports findings on three leadership theories and frameworks: the five-factor model, full range leadership theory, and AACC's core competencies for community college leaders. The final section reviews terror management theory and how it can be applied to a study on leadership and crisis management.

### **Methods**

This review of the literature on executive leadership and crisis management within the community college context took place over two phases. The first phase occurred before the data collection began and was used to inform the design of the study. The second phase was conducted after data collection was completed and was used to help analyze the study findings. The second stage approach to revising the literature review is drawn from the grounded theory research design process in which the researcher conducts a literature review after the research is completed and synthesizes the findings with themes from the literature in order to develop theory (Dunne, 2011). Although the research design for this study cannot be categorized as grounded theory, revisiting the literature review after the research findings were distilled proved beneficial

when engaging in pattern matching and theoretical triangulation to analyze the data collected for this study.

**Search Methods.** My search of the literature focused primarily on research published in leading journals from a broad spectrum of academic disciplines (Webster and Watson, 2002). To accomplish this, I utilized Google Scholar and other search engines housed at Oregon State University's library such as Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, and ProQuest. I also utilized the snowball method, following citations from one source to backtrack to other sources (Ridley, 2012). As my investigation progressed, I refined the specificity of my search terms. I began with broad terms like "leadership" and "leadership theory" and incrementally began to narrow my searches with a Boolean approach by joining terms such as "transformational leadership AND community colleges".

For the second stage of my investigation into the literature, I focused on gaps that I perceived existed in my initial literature review based on my research findings. Therefore, my search terms consisted of Boolean searches such as "cognitive schema AND crisis management" and "cognitive schema AND sensemaking".

As available, books like Gilpin and Murphy's (2008) *Crisis Management in a Complex World*, Bataille and Cordova's (2014) *Managing the Unthinkable: Crisis Preparation and Response for Campus Leaders*, and Eddy's (2012) *Community College Leadership: A Multidimensional Model for Leading Change* were also used among others. In addition, I reviewed crisis management guides developed by the U.S. Department of Education (2007, 2009).

## **Findings**

### **Crisis Management at Community Colleges**

Crisis management is a competency community college presidents are expected to possess (Ellis & Garcia, 2017). It is part of their duty to ensure a safe learning environment for students and staff (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Yet, many incoming community college presidents report that crisis management is one of the competency areas that they feel least confident about when assuming their positions (Eddy, 2010; Murray and Kishur Jr., 2008).

This makes sense given the unique challenges community college leaders face when trying to manage crisis situations. Typical United States community colleges and universities operate on open campuses with people coming and going all throughout the day and night (Jenkins & Goodman, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In addition, leaders in higher education organizations must attend to a unique blend of constituents, stakeholders, and partners including students, parents, faculty, staff, board members, politicians, community members, law enforcement, public agencies, and alumni (Genshaft, 2014). They also tend to operate under a shared governance structure that creates a slow decision-making process which could impede the timely response a crisis necessitates (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Similar to the situation with executives in public sector organizations, higher education leaders may not attend to the development of a crisis management plan due to the many other issues demanding their attention. Despite a section of the Clery Act (The Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990, 1991) requiring executive leaders to conduct a tabletop re-enactment of their emergency response plan once per calendar year, most do not do this (Stafford, 2014). A tabletop exercise brings together college staff and emergency responders together to discuss different crisis scenarios and evaluate the outcome of drills to identify changes in their emergency response/crisis management protocol (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Lawson (2014) stated that one of the predominant complaints she hears from

colleagues about crisis management at their institutions is the absence of some executive leaders during exercises and drills. She asserted that the executive leaders' lack of understanding about their role during a crisis could actually create another crisis.

### **Definition of a Crisis and Types of Crises**

Due to the lack of integration and absence of a unified theory around crisis management, a standardized definition of a crisis does not exist (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Simola, 2005). However, several characteristics related to the concept of crisis are repeatedly described in the literature which may help develop a working definition for this literature review. These characteristics include ambiguity (Pearson & Clair, 2008; Wooten & James, 2008), low-probability of occurring (Pearson & Clair, 2008; Wooten & James, 2008), threat to the viability of the organization (Pearson & Clair, 2008), time pressure, uncertainty (Boin, 2004; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008), unexpected (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008) and change (Pearson & Clair, 2008). Therefore, a working definition for a crisis could be summarized as a relatively unexpected occurrence that creates ambiguity about both the cause and consequences of the event which requires critical decisions to be made under time pressure to ensure the continued viability of the organization. The adverb "relatively" is used to signal the fact that the potential for a crisis may be perceived by some people within the organization but not others. There may be cultural and systemic issues within the organization that prevent leadership and the overall institution from perceiving the potential for a crisis until it is too late. (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008)

**Crisis defined by levels.** Gilpin and Murphy (2008) identified four types of crisis described in the literature that could be categorized based on the amount of time the leadership of an organization has to respond. The most urgent is *the exploding crisis* such as an active shooter situation or weather-related disaster which requires a quick response. The second is *the*

*immediate crisis* such as an unfavorable news story in which the leadership has more time to prepare their response. The third is *the building crisis* such as budget cuts and layoffs in which leaders have time to anticipate how they are going to respond before the news breaks. Finally, there is *the continuing crisis* such as long-term budget challenges in which the crisis builds over time and is not easily resolved.

In the higher education context, Akers (2008) likewise found that student affairs leaders at colleges and universities defined crises in terms of levels. A level 1 crisis involved an emergency with a single student. It was defined by the person experiencing the challenge or the department providing the individualized response required of this level of crisis. A level 5 crisis involved a campus-wide disaster. This level of a crisis was defined by executives at the institution or an external agency and required a broader, more systemic response.

These observations have important implications for executive leaders at community colleges. As the U.S. Department of Education (2009) highlighted, not every school will define a crisis in the same way. The issue of positionality also comes into question. Some crises are small and localized within departments and divisions. Other crises have a broader scope impacting the entire institution (Akers, 2008).

**Types of crises.** The literature also offers a long list of the types of events that can cause a crisis for organizations such as accidents, scandals, health incidents, product safety issues (Marcus and Goodman, 1991), natural disasters, terrorist attacks (Pearson & Clair, 2008), personnel issues (Wooten & James, 2008), cyberterrorism, human error (Boin, 2004), executive kidnappings, corporate takeovers, and hijackings (Mitroff, Shrivastara, & Udwadia, 1987). In terms of organizations like community colleges, Murray and Kishur Jr. (2008) reported that the

13 presidents in their study identified four common types of challenges or crises their institutions faced: financial, personnel, political, and public relations.

### **Cognitive Schema, Sensemaking, and Crisis**

Research and theory support the assertion that leaders draw on their cognitive schemas to make sense of situations in order to understand how to respond (Eddy, 2012; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). Piaget described cognitive schemas as unique and individual mental structures formed based on experience in order to understand how to interact with the world (Campbell, 2001; Widmayer, 2004). Therefore, cognitive schemas are a type of knowledge because they inform people about how to interact with the environment under specific conditions and contexts (Campbell, 2001; Widmayer, 2004).

Piaget argued that cognitive schemas are used to *assimilate* and *accommodate* information (Campbell, 2001). *Assimilation* involves integrating new information into the cognitive schema in order to interact with the environment (Campbell, 2001). *Accommodating* describes the process of changing the cognitive schema based on new information in order to better engage with some aspect of the environment (Campbell, 2001). There is also a concept known as *restructuring* which involves creating a new cognitive schema when inconsistencies between old and new schemas arise (Widmayer, 2004).

Leaders develop cognitive schemas over the course of their careers to aid them in understanding the complex environments in which they work (Eddy, 2012). Their schemas allow them to filter what information is useful and what information is not in a given situation (Combe & Carrington, 2015). As Gilpin and Murphy (2008) asserted, a leader's cognitive schema can impact the process and outcome of the crisis management process. Therefore, leaders should

develop mental models for how to respond to address crisis situations, based on their cognitive schemas (Combe & Carrington, 2015).

Gilpin and Murphy (2008) identified and critiqued two different approaches to crisis management, the rational, scientific approach versus the complexity based approach. They argued that the rational, scientific approach is characterized by those who recommend a rigid, systemic process to crisis management. They claimed this approach can exacerbate the situation or lead to scenarios where a crisis emerges again because the root problem within the culture of the organization that caused the crisis was never addressed (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008). They advocated that leaders should adopt a worldview that embraces complexity theory to avoid drawing overly simplistic conclusions about the crisis. Their assertion was that this will lead to more successful outcomes because leaders will be willing to take an improvisational and adaptive approach to the unique variables manifested in each crisis situation (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008).

**Sensemaking.** Sensemaking is connected to the concept of cognitive schemas. It is a process in which a person simplifies vast amounts of complex information by filtering and prioritizing the data that they are receiving from the environment through his or her cognitive schema (Combe & Carrington, 2015). It is an action-oriented process in that the purpose is to come to an understanding of the environment or situation in order to interact with it (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Weick (1999) identified several sensemaking properties. Sensemaking is related to how a person has constructed his or her identity and operating model (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2014; Dixon, Weeks, Boland Jr., & Pereli, 2016). It involves being retrospective by relating new information to the past in order to understand the present. It is also an ongoing process in that

people are continuously connecting their present situation to past experiences. Finally, it is a social process since sensemaking is rooted in connectivity and developing shared understandings, co-constructing an interpretation of reality (Dixon, Weeks, Boland Jr., & Pereli, 2016).

In relation to the aspect of constructing shared understandings through social exchanges, another aspect of sensemaking is the *sensegiving* process. *Sensegiving* involves influencing the sensemaking process of others to help them perceive a preferred interpretation of a situation or organizational reality (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

**Collective or social sensemaking.** Since a foundational aspect of the theory is that sensemaking is a social process that is rooted in identity construction, meetings are considered sensemaking events (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2014). Even mundane exchanges during meetings involve constructing identities because the social activity that takes place is influenced by how a person sees themselves as part of the team and in return how they are perceived by the team (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2014; Dixon, Weeks, Boland Jr., & Pereli, 2016). Like individual sensemaking, the purpose of collective or social sensemaking is action-oriented (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2014).

**Sensemaking during a crisis.** During times of crisis, organizational leaders play a critical role in making sense of the ambiguity that crisis situations produce (Combe & Carrington, 2015). Dixon, Weeks, Boland Jr., and Pereli, (2016) drew parallels between the perception of physical danger among military leaders with the perception of organizational dangers among executives since the emotional response can be similar even if the consequences posed by the threat are not equivalent. They stated that followers who perceive heightened levels



of danger or even impending death look toward leaders as people who can influence the outcome of the situation they are facing.

Dixon, Weeks, Boland Jr., and Pereli, (2016) found five effective sensemaking activities in their study of military leaders in crisis or *in extremis* situations. *Synchronicity* involves the ongoing nature of sensemaking and sensegiving during crisis situations in which the leader must continually refine and update his or her thinking based on incoming information. *Hyper-focus* describes a state of elevated mindfulness in which the leader has to make quick decisions under time pressure. *Sense of duty* characterizes how leaders overcome their own sense of fear in order to meet socially constructed standards of duty. *Reciprocity* occurs when a subordinate takes on a sensemaking role either by choice or because he or she has been delegated to do so. *Instinctive reaction training* describes the added amount of cognitive capacity a leader possesses during a crisis due to prior training and preparation.

### **Crisis Management Models**

In addition to research on how the cognitive schema and sensemaking process of leaders inform their responses to crisis situations, the literature also offers a plethora of models outlining the stages of the crisis management process. These crisis management models are dispersed across multiple disciplines including business communication, sociology, political science, international relations, public administration, organizational psychology, public relations, and information technology (Boin, 2004; Pearson & Clair, 1998).

One recurring framework to describe the stages of managing a crisis is the 4Cs: cause, consequences, cautious response, and coping mechanisms (Pearson & Clair, 2008; Wooten & James, 2008). Mitroff (2005) additionally proposed a six-phase model for crisis management that consists of signal detection, probing/preparation, containment/damage limitation, business

recovery, no fault learning, and redesign (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Government agencies like the U.S. Department of Education (2007, 2009) and FEMA have also advocated for a systemic approach within organizations, recommending a model that featured a four-stage cycle: prevention and mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

This only addresses a small sampling of the crisis management models. Although subtle differences exist between how each framework outlines the stages of a crisis management process, the models share common characteristics. The following sections will focus on some of the common stages these constructs propose for the crisis management process.

**Crisis preparation stage.** Preparation is a predominant theme throughout the literature. The levels of preparation an organization engages in will determine whether it takes a *proactive* versus *reactive* approach to crisis management (Mitroff, Shrivastara, & Udwadia, 1987). Organizations that invest the time and money on preparation efforts are seen as faring better and even thriving after a crisis (Schoenberg, 2004). Organizations deemed *crisis-prone* do not engage in crisis preparation. They are characterized by several dysfunctional tendencies including confusion in regards to boundaries, tendencies to blame others, and playing the role of the victim. *Crisis prepared* organizations, on the other hand, recognize the potential of a crisis to be a catalyst for change and demonstrate a more positive self-regard (Simola, 2005).

Simola (2005) outlined several activities that organizations should engage in to prepare for crises and even prevent them. He recommended creating a crisis management team, conducting risk assessments, drafting crisis plans, developing communication procedures, and practicing for the event. The U.S. Department of Education (2007, 2009) concurs with these recommendations, encouraging leaders of educational institutions to create Incident Command Systems (ICS) to respond to incidents in an organized fashion, establish communication

protocols, develop evacuation plans, and engage with community partners such as local emergency responders to plan and practice for crisis events.

**Communication during a crisis.** The importance of communication in crisis management can be ascertained by examining the results of a Schoenberg's (2004) survey on leadership and crisis management. While 60% of respondents reported that they perceived no distinct difference between ordinary leadership and leadership during a crisis, 70% of communications professionals perceived there was a distinct difference. This should come as no surprise since research emphasizes one of the primary jobs of a crisis leader is to communicate to all the affected parties – employees, policymakers, the media, regulators, and the community (Schoenberg, 2004). Of equal importance, Schoenberg (2004) also found that behaving and communicating based on personal core values as well as the core mission and values of the organization is important for leaders to master.

Communication also stands out as a highly important aspect of the crisis management process for higher education organizations. Murray and Kushur Jr. (2008) found that communication with the board of trustees, senior administrators, and faculty and staff played a key role in how college presidents kept incidents from escalating. This is supported by Mason (2014), the president of University of Iowa, who emphasized that communication with both the public and her own campus community became the most vital part of her daily activities after the devastating flooding that occurred on her campus in 2008).

**Learning and recovery.** Although all crisis management models recommend a learning stage to the crisis management process to ensure organizations respond more effectively once the next crisis arises, not all scholars agree that crises can be averted, no matter how much preparation and learning has taken place within an organization (Mitroff, Shrivastara, &

Udwadia, 1987). Boin (2004) described two camps of scholars. One believed that crises are inevitable due to ineffectual management, human error, and the nature of the modern bureaucracy. The other “high-reliability” theoretical camp argued that crises can be prevented with well-structured organizations capable of absorbing human error and external pressures. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) contended that much of the literature on crisis management in fact advocates for preparing for a crisis in a highly scientific way, outlining specific techniques to address different issues. However, in some respects, too much focus on creating crisis resistant systems may actually be self-defeating as evidenced by the vulnerability paradox, which argues that well-maintained and efficient systems are actually more highly susceptible to minor disturbances (Boin, 2004).

A similar divergence around learning from a crisis concerns the outcomes of the crisis management process. While Pearson and Clair (2008) argued that effective crisis management involves restoring an organization to normal operations and making sure losses are minimized, Gilpin and Murphy (2008) asserted that returning to a place of normalcy is not the best outcome of a crisis management process since the state of normalcy may have actually created the mix of variables that caused the crisis in the first place. Instead, they claim a crisis is an opportunity to engage in organizational change. If leaders engage in clear and transparent communication, an organization can actually improve its reputation. In fact, they asserted that returning to a place of normalcy should not be the goal of the crisis management process. The goal should be to use the crisis as an opportunity to change the organization.

Despite these conundrums, the stakes are high in regards to leadership and organizational viability during a crisis situation, making learning from the experience a necessity. Leaders who restore the organizations back to positions of normalcy are often praised for their leadership

while those unable to restore normalcy may be blamed for the crisis (Boin & Hart, 2003; Gilman & Murphy, 2008). Even if preparation based on what has been learned from the past may not entirely remove all the risk of a crisis, it does enable the organization to cope and recover more effectively after one occurs (Mitroff, Shrivastara, & Udwadia, 1987). Research shows that organizations that are prepared for a crisis are not only better equipped to manage the situation, but they are also better equipped to transform the event into a strategic opportunity (Appelbaum, Keller, Alvarez, & Bedard, 2011).

**Crisis management as a leadership competency.** Wootan and James (2008) claimed that most management teams are not trained or prepared to address a crisis and the consequences can have long-lasting, negative impacts on the future of the organization. They pointed out that one of the Cs absent from the 4Cs of crisis management is competencies, meaning those skills leaders need to effectively manage a crisis. In addition to competencies that have already been touched upon like signal detection, preparation, containment, recovery, and learning, Wootan and James (2008) found that crisis leaders also need competencies like “decision making, communication, creating organizational capabilities, sustaining an effective organizational culture, managing multiple constituencies, and developing human capital” (p. 4) as well as knowledge acquisition and the ability to formulate strategies to address a crisis.

To assist in alleviating the pressure of drawing on all these competencies in the midst of a high-stress crisis situation, Boin and Hart (2003) argued that leaders should develop a philosophy of crisis management to prevent from going into typical crisis modes that may further destabilize the organization including making ad hoc decisions, improvising solutions, and falling into stress-induced rigidity. As stated at the beginning of this section, many incoming community college leaders claim that they do not feel confident about the crisis management process when

they accept their positions (Murray & Kishnur, 2008). Given Wooten and James's (2008) work on leadership and crisis management, there is evidence that crisis management is a competency that needs to be developed in executive leaders at community colleges.

### **Community College Leadership**

This section of the literature review will highlight the leadership theories and frameworks that I used to inform this study on executive leadership and crisis management at community colleges. The first is the five-factor model (FFM), which examines the personality traits of leaders. The second is the full range leadership theory, which explores a continuum of leadership behaviors from transactional to transformational leadership. The third framework is AACCC's core competencies for community college leaders, which identifies the skills and knowledge areas community college leaders need to possess in order to lead their organizations.

#### **The Five-Factor Personality Traits Model**

One of the most prominent contemporary frameworks for studying personality traits is the five-factor model (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987). The five-factor model consists of five personality trait categories: *neuroticism*, *extravertism*, *openness to experience*, *conscientiousness*, and *agreeableness* (De Hoogh, Hartog, & Koopman, 2005). Sometimes referred to as the Big Five, it should be noted that the term "Big" does not indicate any grandiosity, but is rather meant to signal that these five traits are actually broad categories with more discrete personality traits underneath each umbrella term (John & Srivastava, 1999). O'Boyle, Forsythe, Banks, Story, and White (2015) describe each of the five categories using the following characteristics

Table 1

*Five-Factor Model Personality Traits*

Personality Trait	Characteristics
Neuroticism or Emotional Stability	Confidence, anxiety
Extroversion	Sociability, dominance, excitement
Openness to experience	Creative, broad minded
Conscientiousness	Dutiful, dependable, achievement striving
Agreeableness	Cooperative, trusting

Quantitative research on the five-factor model has demonstrated the validity of the framework in different contexts and methodological constructs (McCrae & Costa, 1987). It has also been shown to be a useful theory to examine personality traits as predictors for leadership behaviors (Judge & Bono, 2000). Studies have found predictive correlations between personality traits like extravertism and agreeableness with the emergence of transformational leadership behaviors (Judge & Bono, 2000; Linn & Ployhart, 2004). Therefore, it is complementary to the full range leadership theory, which was also used as a theoretical lens for this study.

### **Full Range Leadership Theory**

Full range leadership theory is a continuum of behaviors that describe transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire approaches to leadership (Bass, 1999). Of the leadership behaviors described in this model, those that fall within the transformational end of the spectrum are seen as more effective for 21<sup>st</sup> Century leaders (Bass, 1999). The rationale for this assertion was that transformational leaders are better equipped to manage the continual organizational change and minor crises that scholars predicted would become the norm for 21<sup>st</sup>-century

organizations (Bass, 1999; Boga & Ensari, 2009). The reason transformational leaders are perceived as being more effective during times of change or during crisis situations is that they are attentive to the fears of change among followers and are able to provide psychological sustenance (Boga & Ensari, 2009). Given that the general state of community colleges is currently one of seemingly continuous upheaval and change, Eddy et al. (2015) also argued that the transformational leadership approach is needed to help these organizations navigate the turbulence that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is expected to bring.

However, before a leader can develop a transformational relationship with followers, he or she must first establish a transactional one (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). Transactional leadership behaviors involve engaging the self-interests of followers in an exchange of benefits for services (Bass, 1999). The leader promises the follower benefits such as wages, employment stability, and promotions in exchange for work performance (Boga & Ensari, 2009). Primarily task-oriented, transactional leadership consists of three primary behaviors: *contingent reward*, *management by exception – passive*, and *management by exception – active* (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). Table 2 provides a description of these behaviors.

Table 2

*Transactional Leadership Behaviors*

Transactional Leadership Behavior	Description
Contingent reward	The leader establishes rewards for performance.
Management by exception - passive	The leader waits for the follower to make an error before intervening.
Management by exception - active	The leader monitors the performance of followers, taking action before errors occur



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Transformational leadership, in contrast, is more relationship oriented (DeRue et al, 2011). It is characterized by the following behaviors known as the four I's: *idealized influence*, *intellectual stimulation*, *inspirational motivation*, and *individual consideration* (Bass, 1999). Table 3 provides descriptions of these behaviors.

Table 3

*Transformational Leadership Behaviors*

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Transformational Leadership Behaviors	Description
Idealized influence	The leader acts as a role model and articulates a sense of vision and mission for their followers.
Inspirational motivation	The leader aligns the values of the followers with those of the organization.
Intellectual stimulation	The leader motivates followers to solve problems in new and creative ways.
Individual consideration	The leader treats each follower like an individual and gives him or her personal attention.

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The combination of idealized influence and inspirational motivation, being a good role model who speaks to higher order values, is sometimes described as charisma (Abbas, Waheed, & Riaz, 2012).

Studies over the past four decades have produced compelling evidence that transformational leadership behaviors are strongly correlated to organizational effectiveness, change, and innovation in educational institutions (Abbas, Iqbal, Waheed, & Raiz, 2012; Bateh

and Heyliger, (2014); Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). It has been found to be especially effective when organizations are undergoing considerable change or are facing an ambiguous situation like a crisis (Boga & Ensari, 2009). Therefore, transformational leadership is an empirically grounded theory to use when studying the role of leadership in crisis situations within educational settings like community colleges.

### **Leadership Competencies**

In response to the transition of community college presidential leadership over the past two decades, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) developed a framework of competencies that community college leaders should possess to effectively lead their organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Eddy, 2010; McNair, 2009). The competencies they identified include *organizational strategy; institutional finance, research, fundraising, and resource management; communication; collaboration; and community college advocacy* (AACCC, 2013). Table 4 provides a description of the five competencies.

Table 4

#### *AACCC's Leadership Competencies*

Leadership Competency	Description
Organizational strategy	Understanding the mission, core values, goals, culture, organizational structure, student demographics, employees and trustees of the institution in order to take strategic risks to promote student success.
Institutional finance, research, fundraising, and resource management	Develop knowledge of the institution's budget, create dashboards to identify areas where the college is underperforming based on data, engage in fundraising, build teams to execute plans, and manage change and conflict.

Table 4 Continued

Leadership Competency	Description
Communication	Use strong communication and presentation skills to communicate with internal and external stakeholders including the media, foster an environment that values shared responsibility and problem solving, and understand how to operate in a globalized world.
Collaboration	Recognize all employees have a role to play to advance the institution, eliminate silos, and leverage internal and external stakeholders to move the college's mission forward.
Community college advocacy	Build awareness of local, state, and federal agencies and their role in developing policy in order to engage them to shape programs to advance the college's mission.

Note: American Association of Community Colleges (2005, 2013)

The usefulness of AACC's (2005, 2013) competencies framework is supported by a number of studies that found community college presidents perceived these skill and knowledge areas to be beneficial to their work (Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Eddy, 2015; McNair, 2009). Duree and Ebbers (2012) additionally examined specific competencies in the context of transformational leadership. In their study of community college presidents' perceived confidence with each competency when they assumed their executive roles, they found that respondents did not rate themselves highly in terms of promoting collaboration. Connecting this to transformational leadership, they observed "we know that transformational leaders in the community college setting must be able to understand the various roles that are played in resolving issues and to empower others to take an active part in making decisions, managing

conflict, and working effectively with constituents” (p. 45). Their study additionally found that 80% of respondents identified themselves as transformational leaders, which the researchers in this context associated with the professionalism competency, but they also found that “only slightly more than two-thirds rated themselves prepared to competently demonstrate transformational leadership when they assumed their first presidency” (p. 45).

In addition, a study of the decision-making skills of Chief Academic Officers at public rural-serving community colleges in Texas during times of financial crisis found that competencies in budget analysis, resource management, people skills, and the community college mission aided them in managing their respective financial crises (Altieri, 2013). This finding supports three of AACC’s competencies as well as a transformational leadership approach.

Though still relatively new within the literature on leadership, AACC’s leadership competencies provides another useful model to use in a study on leadership and crisis management within the context of community colleges. It adds the dimension of skills and knowledge to the leadership lens. Moreover, researchers like Eddy (2015) and Duree and Ebbers (2012) have laid groundwork connecting these competencies to transformational leadership.

### **Terror Management Theory**

Terror management theory is widely researched social psychological framework that speaks both to the phenomenon of leadership and crisis management (Lewis, 2014; Merolla, Ramos, & Zechmeister, 2007). Based on the work of Becker (1971, 1973), this theory was developed to understand how human behaviors are affected when a person’s awareness of their own mortality is elevated. There are several foundational principles to this theory. First, it is predicated on the idea that human beings as a species are uniquely aware of their own mortality

due to their ability to engage in abstract thinking (Hoyt, Simon, & Reid, 2009; Pyszczynski, 2004). This awareness of mortality can produce a sense of paralyzing terror in people when they recognize that their existence is finite (Pyszczynski, 2004). As a result, humans have developed an artifice called a cultural worldview to serve as an anxiety-buffering mechanism (Pyszczynski, 2004). Cultural worldviews bolster self-esteem in people by creating a system of values, traditions, stories, customs, and beliefs that give their lives a sense of meaning and orderliness (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004; Hoyt, Simon, & Reid, 2009). When a person's awareness of their own mortality is raised, measured through a construct called mortality salience, their behaviors change (Hoyt, Simon, & Reid, 2009). They engage in activities that heighten their self-esteem such as embracing shared cultural values more closely, reaching out to loved-ones to form closer connections, drawing clearer boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, and engaging in activities that they perceive will gain them symbolic immortality within their culture (Lewis, 2004). The theory, therefore, adds insight into phenomena such as tribalism, discrimination, and leadership.

Studies on leadership using this theory as a lens have found that people tend to prefer charismatic, task-oriented, authoritarian leaders over relational, egalitarian leaders when their mortality salience is raised (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004). Research has also found that raising the mortality salience of men and women using subtle death reminders will influence their bias for masculine and assertive leaders (Hoyt, Simon, & Innella, 2011). Additionally, studies have found that during times of crisis, followers are more likely to perceive leaders to be charismatic and forgive mistakes because they are projecting more power and competence onto the leader than he or she might actually possess (Merolla, Ramos, & Zechmeister, 2007). Based on these findings, terror management theory provides another useful

lens to examine executive leadership and crisis management in the community college context. In addition to providing a framework to explore the existential dimensions of leadership, it also provides an explanation for why people's perceptions about leaders and preferences for certain leadership styles can be influenced by raising their mortality salience.

### **Chapter Summary**

This literature review surveyed the research on crisis management, leadership, and terror management theory. The theories investigated in this chapter were used to inform the research design of this study and make sense of the findings. In the crisis management field, concepts such as cognitive schemas, sensemaking, and crisis management models were explored including Mitroff's (2005) six-stage crisis management framework and Gilpin and Murphy's (2008) complexity approach. To understand leadership in the community college context, the five-factor model, the full range leadership theory, and AACCC's competencies for community college leaders were investigated. Finally, terror management theory was reviewed to highlight how this social psychological theory could be used to understand leadership and crisis management. These theories and constructs were used to engage in theoretical triangulation and pattern matching during the analysis of the findings. The results will be shared in chapter five of this dissertation.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Methods**

### **Restatement of the Problem**

As complex, open systems, community colleges and other higher education organizations are prone to the emergence of crisis events (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). A crisis event can permanently damage the reputation and organizational narrative of the institution, perhaps even putting its own viability at risk (Genshaft, 2014; Ross, 2014). Therefore, it is important for executive leaders to possess the competencies to effectively manage a crisis situation (Eddy, 2010; Murray & Kishur Jr., 2008). However, there is still little research on the topic of leadership and crisis management within the community college context. This is concerning since there is evidence that incoming community college leaders feel crisis management is a competency that they lack when entering their positions (Eddy, 2010). Therefore, this exploratory, narrative study on executive leadership and crisis management at community colleges contributes to filling this gap in the literature on community college leadership and crisis management. It also provides practical knowledge on this crucial topic of inquiry that should be useful for community college presidents and boards of trustees.

### **Organization of Methods Section**

The purpose of this section is to describe the methods that I used to conduct this narrative study. It includes the following sections: the role of the researcher, research design, research questions, population sample, case criteria, data collection, analysis of data, confidentiality, and limitations.

### **Role and Philosophical Approach of the Researcher**

As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers should establish the ontological and epistemological position from which they are conducting their research.

Ontology refers to theories about the fundamental nature of reality and humanity (Holloway, 2018; Rawnsley, 1998; Tuli, 2010). Epistemology refers to how we make meaning and generate knowledge about reality and humanity (Holloway, 2018; Tuli, 2010). These two metaphysical concepts relate to the practice of research in that the investigator's ontological and epistemological positions should inform his or her research methods, i.e. how the researcher generates new knowledge about reality or the human condition (Holloway, 2018; Tuli, 2010). As a researcher, educator, artist, and administrator, I come from a postmodern and social constructivist vantage point, two complementary positions that have influenced my decision to conduct a qualitative study.

Some of these philosophical predispositions come from my background as a theatre artist and English teacher. My previous graduate degree is a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing with an emphasis in playwriting, a hybrid degree which blended studies of English literature, creative writing, and theatre. All three disciplines lend themselves to looking at the world through multiple, subjective lenses in order to make meaning of the world and achieve some level of understanding about that elusive concept called the truth.

In order to understand the postmodern worldview that informs my artistic and research practice, one must understand the modernist ontological perspective that dominated Western thought from the Renaissance through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Raskin, 2002). Modernist thought perceived an objective reality that could be understood through "empiricism, logical positivism, scientific methodology, the identification of objective truths, and validity" (Raskin, 2002, p. 2). In contrast, the postmodern ontological worldview embraces the idea that there are multiple realities based on people's different, subjective experiences and the narratives that they create to make sense of their world (Chia, 1995; Esin, 2011). Instead of looking at the world as a set of



fixed objects to be analyzed (Whitehead 1925, 1953), postmodernism views reality through the lenses of movement, change, relationships, patterns and emergence (Chia, 1995). It focuses on the inter-relationships between people, organizations, and society and how they define their reality as “thought collectives” (Chia, 1995, p. 582). Postmodernism, therefore, endeavors to identify and represent multiple voices within their environmental contexts, focusing on language, power, and history (Parry, Mumford, Bower, & Watts, 2013).

The postmodern ontological position is deeply linked with the social constructivist epistemological stance (Raskin, 2002). Some have even labeled the present era of human knowledge development as the postmodern/constructivist period (Raskin, 2002). Influenced by Dewey and Vygotsky, social constructivism argues that “knowledge, mind, and meaning” are intrinsically tied to the social exchange of language (Garrison, 1995, p. 718). Social constructivism is based on the following three assumptions. One, consciousness manifests through one’s dynamic interaction with the environment rather than emerging from a static seed. Two, meaning is developed through the culturally contextual social interactions between people. Three, language is the primary conduit for transmitting historical and cultural knowledge from one generation to the next (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 1997; Tuli, 2010). Researchers possessing a social constructivist epistemological position embrace qualitative knowledge-generating activities such as collecting first-hand accounts, reporting verbatim quotations, considering the social context of the data that they are gathering, and developing thick descriptions of their observations and findings (Tuli, 2010).

Thus, my postmodern ontological worldview and social constructivist epistemological orientation informed my methodological choice to conduct a qualitative study. Both emphasize the emergence of meaning through social interaction, the subjectivity of experience, the

examination of the world as processes of emergence, the interrelationship between the observer and the observed, and the elusive nature of reality (Raskin, 2002).

### **Research Design**

In addition to my ontological and epistemological predispositions, my rationale for conducting an exploratory, narrative study was informed by my investigation of literature. Qualitative methods are appropriate when the researcher wants to investigate questions for the following postmodern reasons (Parry, Mumford, Bower, & Watts, 2013). One, they want to understand and explain a social phenomenon from the internal perspective of those involved within their environmental contexts. Second, they want to understand a phenomenon that cannot be fully explained quantitatively (Parry et al., 2013). Since I wanted to study the cognitive schema of community college presidents and discover how their mental maps informed their perceptions of crisis situations and their resulting leadership approaches, a qualitative method aligned best with the psychologically internal focus of this research project. Another benefit of using a qualitative approach is that it is an emergent process in which the investigator allows the research questions to evolve and change as more information comes to light in order to create a thick or rich description of the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2013).

There are multiple qualitative research methods including phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory (Creswell, 2013), but I determined that the narrative approach would be the most appropriate for this study. Researchers using the narrative method investigate first-person stories about the lived experience of participants in a study and how they construct meaning out of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It utilizes Hermeneutics, a process that involves interpreting the personal narratives of participants based on the context of the story they are sharing and their intended meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are several types

of narrative research including biographical, which focuses on the overall lived experience of an individual, and the linguistic, which analyzes the language used by participants and how their stories are constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study uses a psychological approach, which analyzes how the cognitive and motivational dimensions of a participant's personality informs how they make meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Rather than focus on a single narrative, I chose to conduct multiple interviews much as one would do in a collective case study. Collective case studies allow investigators to explore similar cases in more than one setting (Yin, 2014). By comparing and contrasting findings from multiple narratives or cases, the researcher can identify generalizable themes in order to develop new theory (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014).

Finally, I've chosen to use an exploratory approach to this study since the research on community college leadership and crisis management is still limited. An exploratory case study method is useful when the investigator wants to develop knowledge, propositions, or hypotheses that can then be studied in more detail by other researchers (Yin, 2014). Therefore, based on this inquiry into the literature on qualitative research methods, I identified the exploratory, narrative study as the most useful strategy to answer my research questions.

### **Research Questions**

Eisenhardt (1989) suggested that drafting specific research questions can help the researcher narrow the scope of his or her investigation and guide the researcher in selecting appropriate cases to investigate for the study. Therefore, both of the research questions used in this study were drafted with the aim of narrowing the scope of this research project and focusing the study on the types of participants that I was interested in investigating.

In addition, I also followed the guidance of Yin (2014), who suggested that research questions for qualitative studies should begin with words “how” or “why” because responses to these type of questions lend themselves to revealing processes and linkages within the social context over time. Questions constructed like this provide a researcher with the opportunity to determine how and why a particular incident unfolded the way it did (Yin, 2014).

Research questions:

1. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of the crisis?
2. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process?

### **Participant Selection**

As with the aforementioned dimensions of this study, I drew on the literature on qualitative research methods to inform my method for participant selection. Although this was a narrative study, I utilized methods typically used within the case study approach since the I intended to interview multiple participants. A case is a bounded unit of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Some conditions researchers can use to bound cases include geographic region, social group, or time period (Yin, 2014). This allows the researcher to define clear and intentional boundaries for the study. Eistenhardt (1989) further pointed out that the selection of participants through bounding is important because it controls for “extraneous variation” and defines “the limits for generalizing the findings” (p. 537). While single case study investigations examine a phenomenon in one specified context, collective case studies examine several cases possessing similar features in order compare and contrast findings around the topic being studied (Yin, 2014). Therefore, this could be more properly identified as a collective, narrative study.

For this exploratory, narrative study, I bounded the cases based on the social group of participants. Guided by the focus provided by the research questions, I chose to invite retired community college presidents to participate in this study. The assumption underlying the rationale for this choice was that retired community college presidents would feel free to talk more openly about their experiences. A sitting community college president may feel too inhibited by the politics impacting their position to speak as candidly as a retired president.

### **Inclusion Criterion**

When recruiting participants, I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a method in which the researcher selects a person or situation of interest because they are reflective of the phenomena being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants in this study needed to meet three criteria. First, as stated above, they needed to be retired community college presidents. Second, they needed to have served as president of their institutions for at least three years to ensure that they possessed enough experience to fully discuss the issue of crisis management at community colleges. They also could not have been retired from their presidential position for more than three years to ensure that their memories were still relatively fresh and accurate. The geographic region of the community college they served at as president did not factor into the selection criteria since I wanted the study to have a national focus. Finally, I did not screen participants based on whether there was documented evidence that they had managed a crisis. The rationale for this was that I wanted to leave room to explore how community college presidents defined and categorized crises at their institutions in their own words.

### **Sample Size**

Since the number of cases used in an exploratory collective study is discretionary and not subject to the same sampling criteria of a quantitative study (Yin, 2014), I chose to interview 12 participants. The literature indicates that conducting between 5 – 12 interviews can provide enough data to achieve saturation and make generalizable findings with some confidence (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). In addition, this number of participants helped me to ensure external validity, i.e. being able to define the context in which generalizations can be made. It also helped me engage in a cross-case synthesis in order to make analytic generalizations, extending the findings from the individual cases that were investigated in order to make broader theoretical generalizations about the phenomena under investigation (Yin, 2014).

### **Accessing Sites and Subjects**

When designing this research project, my assumption was that I would be able to identify and recruit participants using three methods. One was contacting national advocacy organizations like the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) and the League of Innovation. Two was enlisting the help of state agencies like the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) in Washington State. Finally, I planned on using my professional network as a community college employee in Washington State and as a student enrolled in Oregon State University's Community College Leadership program to identify participants. However, these recruitment approaches proved limited. I discovered that the national advocacy organizations and state agencies that I contacted did not maintain databases of retired community college presidents. Moreover, using my professional network only produced one participant.

As a result, I turned to the professional networking website LinkedIn to identify and recruit participants. LinkedIn is an online platform used for professional networking across multiple industries. Using this website's search engine, which allows people to conduct searches

based on the job titles listed on user profiles, I discovered that a number of retired community college presidents maintained a presence on the website to advance their post-presidency careers.

I used the following method to identify and recruit participants for this study using LinkedIn. First, I searched the website's database for users who identified themselves as retired community college presidents. Next, I screened potential participants to make sure they had been community college presidents at their institutions for at least three years and that they had been retired for no more than three years. If a user fit this criterion, I sent him or her a request to connect on the platform with a brief note explaining that I was interested in extending an invitation to participate in a research study. To supplement this method, I also conducted searches on Google and Google News using terms like "community college president retires" to identify other potential participants and then used LinkedIn to connect with them if they possessed an account on the website.

After a potential participant responded to my request to connect, I sent them the Oregon State University IRB approved email letter inviting them to participate in the study. If the retired community college president responded that they were interested in participating in the study, I asked for his or her email address in order to forward the consent form detailing the specific parameters of the study. Finally, once a participant responded to the consent form email agreeing to participate in the study, we scheduled a time and date to conduct an interview. I gave participants the option of conducting the interview over the phone, using an internet application like Skype or Facetime, or meeting in person, if feasible.

## **Data Collection**

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

I collected data for this study by conducting semi-structured interviews with participants using an interview protocol approved by Oregon State University's IRB department. The interview protocol consisted of seven questions that were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experience leading what they perceived to be challenges or crises. As outlined in the protocol, I used the term challenge at the beginning of the interview in order to allow the term crisis to emerge during the interview, ideally introduced by the participant.

With the permission of participants, I recorded the interviews using two applications in case one failed to adequately capture our conversations. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them using online aids such as Simon Says, a transcription website that utilizes Google speech to text technology. I then reviewed and edited the transcripts for accuracy before sending them to participants to conduct a member check to ensure that the transcript matched their memory of our conversation. I also conducted a second round of member checking by providing participants with the opportunity to review the findings chapter.

When conducting the semi-structured interviews, I followed Yin's (2014) recommendation to treat the interview protocol as a framework for the conversation and allowed myself to be adaptable based on the information that emerged. This enabled me to inquire more deeply when participants brought up topics of interest. It also aided me in re-directing participants back to the question we were discussing if they deviated from a topic of inquiry.

I also followed Yin's (2014) suggestion to approach the semi-structured interview process like a clinician, differentiating between level one questions and level two questions. Level one questions consisted of the scripted protocol questions as well as those that I improvised based on the direction of the conversation. Level two questions consisted of the



research questions that I had formulated for the study and those that were emerging in my thinking as the research process progressed.

Finally, I also adhered to Yin's (2014) advice to pose questions with the word "how" rather than "why" because the latter can increase defensiveness in the respondent. Therefore, instead of asking a participant why he or she chose to make a certain decision during a crisis, I asked how he or she came to that decision. This also has the added benefit of eliciting richer descriptions of the respondents' thought processes and how they have constructed meaning out of the events being explored.

### **Field Notes**

During the course of this investigation, I followed Eisenhardt's (1989) recommendation to write-up field notes throughout the research process. As he suggested, I documented my observations about how the research was progressing and my thoughts on what the participants shared during our interviews. I also added to the field notes during the coding process to archive insights about themes that were beginning to emerge. This aided me in asking questions about the data that I was collecting. It also helped me reflect on the insights that I was making as I compared and contrasted the findings between cases.

### **Study Database**

In order to further increase the reliability of the study, I also constructed a study database. The study database housed the raw data from the study including interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes. I also preserved the data generated through the coding process in the database. Finally, I maintained information tracking interactions with participants including the dates and times of interviews and whether they had completed first and second round member checks. These were archived in password protected files.

## **Chain of Evidence**

To enhance the construct validity of the study, and thus the overall quality of the final report, I maintained *a chain of evidence* in the case study database. As Yin (2014) said, this will allow the reader to clearly follow how each piece of evidence collected is derived from the initial research questions of the study and how it contributes to the researcher's conclusions.

## **Data Analysis**

For the analysis of the narratives in this study, I developed an analytic strategy. I followed Saldaña's (2016) recommendation to conduct two cycles of coding. For first coding cycle, I used in vivo coding. Saldaña (2016) defined in vivo coding as a method in which the researcher uses the natural language of the participants to generate codes. For second cycle coding, I used focused coding to synthesize codes into themes and categories. Saldaña (2016) recommended focused coding following in vivo coding because it involves synthesizing the most frequent and important codes to generate findings.

In addition, I juxtaposed the data, arranging information into different arrays, placing evidence into a matrix of categories, and tabulating frequencies of codes (Yin, 2014). This allowed me to analyze the data in different forms in order to make insights and identify promising patterns or concepts (Yin, 2014). As Eisenhardt (1989) pointed out, this process helps researchers break out of looking at their data within simplistic frames by examining it through different lenses.

I also utilized several other analytic strategies to help me dig deeper into the data. One involved using theoretical triangulation. Rennie, Venville, and Wallace (2011) describe theoretical triangulation as a method used by researchers to broaden their understanding of their findings by examining their data through multiple theoretical lenses. The purpose of theoretical

triangulation is not to increase the validity of the findings, but to provide a fuller picture and a greater range of explanations for the phenomenon being studied (Rennie, Venville, & Wallace, 2011).

Finally, I used pattern matching as an analytic technique. Yin (2014) described pattern matching logic as one of the strongest tools a researcher can use. Using this technique, the researcher compares the empirical findings of their study to previous theoretically grounded propositions from previous research (Almutairi, Gardner, & McCarthy, 2013). The purpose is to build explanations based on how well the findings of the study match or deviate from previous studies (Almutairi, Gardner, & McCarthy, 2013). Yin (2014) claimed that if the empirical findings from the study are similar to predicted patterns found by other research, it can strengthen the internal validity of the study.

### **Validity and Trustworthiness**

There are four methods to increase validity and trustworthiness in a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility, also referred to as internal validity, was increased through the use of member checks of the transcripts, member checks of chapter four, the reflexivity produced by creating analytic notes, and the maintenance of a study database. Transferability, also referred to as external validity, was increased by providing thorough demographic information of participants, thick descriptions of the experiences they reported, and recruiting participants from a wide range of geographic locations who worked in community colleges of different sizes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Dependability speaks to the ability of other researchers to produce similar findings if they replicate a study (Shenton, 2004). To address this aspect of trustworthiness, I documented my research methods in detail and maintained a study database so other researchers could see how I

drew my conclusions from the data. Finally, confirmability questions the objectivity of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Several of the methods I have described above such as writing analytic notes to reflect on my potential for bias and engaging in member checking strengthen the confirmability of this study.

### **Confidentiality**

Since some of the issues covered during these interviews involved sensitive material, I provided each of their participants a pseudonym and did not disclose the name of their institutions. I have also stored the data sheets tracking the participants' real names in a password protected file separate from the case study database.

### **Chapter Summary**

Given my ontological and epistemological orientation toward postmodernism and social constructivism, I chose to conduct a qualitative, exploratory, narrative study investigating executive leadership and crisis management at community colleges. I used purposeful sampling to recruit subjects by using the professional networking website LinkedIn. The retired community college presidents that I recruited needed to have served at their institutions for at least three years and could not have been retired more than three. To collect data, I primarily used semi-structured interviews that were conducted over the phone, on an online platform like Skype, or in person. Interviews followed a protocol approved by Oregon State Universities IRB department. In addition, I maintained a case study database, developed analytic notes, and engaged in two rounds of member checking to validate data. The first round of member checking involved the transcripts of interviews and the second round involved the findings chapter. To analyze the data, I used in vivo coding for the first cycle and focused coding for the second. I

also played with the data, calculating frequencies of codes and placing data into charts. Finally, I used theoretical triangulation and pattern matching as analytic tools to develop the findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Findings**

This study explored how community college presidents draw on their cognitive schemas to make sense of challenges and crisis situations at their colleges, and then explored what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they use to address the challenge or crisis. To investigate these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 retired community college presidents and district chancellors from around the United States in order to answer the following research questions:

1. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their mental schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of the crisis?
2. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process?

### **Participant Demographics**

This section provides demographic information on the participants and the last institutions where they served as president or chancellor. Table 5 provides demographic information on the participants in the study: pseudonym, ethnicity, age, gender, and years as president or chancellor at the last institution in which they served. It is important to note several participants served as president at multiple institutions and two served as chancellors of multi-campus, urban districts, but this table only shows data from the last institution in which they served in order to establish their credibility as a participant. I determined the number of years that participants had served as president or chancellor at their final institution from their LinkedIn accounts. I collected demographic information about the participants during the interview process.

Table 5

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Years as Chancellor or President
Passionate Leader	Caucasian	66	Female	8 years
Collaborative Leader	Caucasian	66	Female	7 years
Capacity Leader	Caucasian	68	Male	13 years, 10 months
Business Leader	Caucasian	63	Male	12 years, 1 month
Servant Leader	Caucasian	60	Male	8 years, 10 months
Crisis Leader	Caucasian	66	Male	4 years, 3 months
Relational Leader	Caucasian	57	Male	10 years
Learning from Experience Leader	Caucasian	68	Male	10 years
Pragmatic Leader	Caucasian	64	Female	9 years
Transformational Leader	Caucasian	64	Male	5 years, 11 months
Participatory Leader	Caucasian	62	Female	17 years

Table 5 Continued

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Years as Chancellor or President
Adaptive Leader	Hispanic	71	Male	23 years, 1 month

In addition to the demographic data provided in the table above, all 12 of the participants hold a doctoral degree. Except for one, the majority hold a Ph.D. in higher education administration.

Table 6

*Highest Degree Earned by Participants*

Degree	Number
Ed.D. in Education	3
Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration or Leadership	8
Ph.D. in Counseling	1

All but one of the participants rose to their positions through the community college system in traditional ways, moving through the ranks from instructional, student services, or administrative services. Only Business Leader took a more non-traditional path that included experience as a business owner and a mayor of a small town, but he also possessed experience working in administrative services as a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of a community college,



so he is placed under the administrative services pathway in Table 7. Crisis Leader began his career as an English instructor, but he moved to administrative services, eventually becoming a CFO of a community college. For the purposes of this table, I have placed him under the instruction pathway.

Table 7

*Participant Academic Pathway to the Presidency*

Academic Pathway	Number
Instruction	4
Student Services	4
Administrative Services	4

Table 8 provides demographic information about the institution in which the participant last served including the region of the country in which their institution was located, the latest enrollment data, and the campus setting. Most of the data for table 8 were drawn from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2018). One participant during member checking provided alternate enrollment numbers that were not in NCES. In addition, the data for two districts, one led by Passionate Leader and the other by Crisis Leader, are an estimate based on enrollment at multiple campuses.

Table 8

*Demographics of Last Institution Participant Served as President or Chancellor*

Pseudonym	CC Region of U.S.	CC or District Size	Campus Setting
Unique Urbanite	Pacific Northwest	50,0000	City, large
Collaborative Change Agent	Southeast	3,021	City, small
Capacity Builder	South	4,201	Suburban, large
Not Just the Money Guy	Pacific Northwest	4,610	Rural, fringe
Servant Leader	Pacific Northwest	6,708	Suburb, Midsize
Crisis Leader	West	30,000	City, large
Relational Leader	South	3,075	Rural, Distant
Learning from Experience Leader	Midwest	3,794	Town, Remote
Pragmatic Leader	Midwest	3,416	Town, Remote; Suburbs, small
Transformational Leader	East	2,600	Rural, fringe
Participatory Leader	Midwest	2,527	Rural, fringe
Adaptive Leader	East	25,932	City, large

**Participant Descriptions**

This section provides a brief description of each participant in this study. The purpose of this section is to provide some color and texture to the participants that the qualitative research process affords and to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the study by providing evidence for maximum variation, which Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define as “purposefully seeking

variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research” (p. 258).

**Passionate Leader.** Passionate Leader served at an urban community college district in the Pacific Northwest, beginning her career working within administration as a Public Information Officer. She served as a president of one of the colleges in the district before being appointed as chancellor, a position she served in for longer than any previous chancellor in that district. “I think that I was a leader who was really passionate about what I was doing,” she said. “I really cared about people. I really cared about results. And I like the idea of getting every student through.”

**Collaborative Leader.** Collaborative Leader grew up in the southern United States, but she served the majority of her career moving up within the student services ranks on the east coast. She served as president for seven years at a community college in the southeast. “You can’t remove the human aspect of what you do,” she said. “And so it's about making good decisions based on data, based on good information, based on all the right things.”

**Capacity Leader.** After working as president at a community college within his state’s system for 16 years, Capacity Leader became a founding president of a new, urban community college where he served for 13 years. “I was always about building capacity within the institution to sustain itself by really trying to coach up people.”

**Business Leader.** While he worked at community colleges and universities in the CFO capacity throughout his career, Business Leader also worked outside of academia as a business owner and a mayor of a small town. “It's important to get the right people in the right positions and then once they're there, do everything you can to support them and to encourage them and to allow them to use their expertise.”

**Servant Leader.** A former faculty member, Servant Leader worked at a rural college in the Pacific Northwest. “I always try to demonstrate the core principles of servant leadership - listening, building community, healing, using foresight in a generative way, all those kind of things that servant leaders need to do in order to truly serve people.”

**Crisis Leader.** Crisis Leader served as president at multiple community colleges throughout the United States before concluding his career as a chancellor of a large, multi-college district on the west coast. “I like systems thinkers who don't attack the symptom of the problem but really take the time to peel the onion and try to solve the problem for good rather than just fix the problem in front of them.”

**Relational Leader.** Relational Leader was president of a multi-campus community college near the state capitol in the deep south. “My nature tended to be...more of a one-on-one personal relationship with employees really at all levels. And I found it effective.”

**Learning from Experience Leader.** Learning from Experience Leader served as president in a small, Midwestern community college. While he completed a doctorate in Technical Education and Adult Education, he said most of his knowledge of community college leadership came from experience. “You can talk about it, read it, role play it in a class...But until you're actually sitting behind the desk making the decisions...”

**Pragmatic Leader.** Pragmatic Leader worked in Human Resources at multiple community colleges before becoming president of a multi-campus community college in the Midwest. “I think that my strengths are really on that task axis,” she said, referring to the Gallup's Four Leadership Traits Domains, “both looking out strategically as to a given set of circumstances and what opportunities can be seized.”

**Transformational Leader.** A president at a small, rural community college on the east coast, Transformational Leader identified situational and transformational leadership as theoretical frameworks that informed his leadership approach. He also encouraged reflecting on personal experience. “When I teach leadership, I begin by saying, to be a successful leader, you have to remember what it was like to be a follower.”

**Participatory Leader.** Participatory Leader served in student services as a counselor and as a Dean of Student Services before becoming president of a mid-sized community college in the Midwest. “I’m a relational leader in that I value establishing relationships so that you can form partnerships.”

**Adaptive Leader:** Adaptive Leader spent the majority of his career serving as president at two east coast colleges, one in a midsized city and the second in a major, large city. “I’m what I would refer to myself as an adaptive leader, a leader that senses the environment and is flexible.”

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with the transcription process. I chose to transcribe interviews myself with the aid of online tools like Simon Says, which uses Google voice to text technology to generate transcripts of interviews. Then, I used the tools in the application to listen to the audio recording of the interview and correct as many errors as I could find in the transcript. A benefit of this approach is that it allowed me to listen to the interviews closely multiple times. Through this procedure, I began my analytic process, observing and noting trends and thinking about potential codes that I might use during the formal data analysis process.

After transcribing, I invited participants to member check their transcripts to increase the validity of the data. Table 9 summarizes the response rate for the member check of the transcripts and for the member check of the findings chapter.

Table 9

*Member Check Participation*

Member Checks	Number
Member Check of Interview Transcripts	9
Member Check of Findings Chapter	5

I began first cycle coding using the in vivo method. In vivo coding involves using the natural language used by the participant to create codes (Saldaña, 2016). To track codes and the data, I created an Excel workbook for each participant. In the workbook, I created a sheet for each question in my protocol and entered the codes horizontally along the top of the sheet and pasted the text that supported the code vertically underneath the code. Once I coded each section of the interview based on the question in the protocol, I created two additional sheets to collect codes and supporting data that spoke directly to each of my research questions.

After I organized codes and supporting quotes based on each of the research questions, I synthesized them in another sheet, collecting the codes in rows under each research question, borrowing from grounded theory methods and converting the codes into gerunds to help identify “actions and processes” within the data, and then writing a brief definition of the code (Cunningham & Carmichael, 2017, p. 62). I also cataloged codes generated from the first protocol question which asked participants about their general leadership style and also included

a separate section for other salient codes that did not fall within the scope of the research questions. I tracked the frequency of the codes used, documenting how many passages of the transcript that the code was used in. This aided me with the synthesis process during second cycle focused coding by helping me identify the most dominant codes in order to make decisions about how to synthesize them into categories or themes (Saldaña, 2016).

As an analytic method, I used explanation building to help synthesize the collected data. Yin (2014) describes explanation building as a process in which the researcher develops a framework that can explain all the cases in a multiple case study even though details of each case may be quite different. He describes this as an iterative process in which the researcher begins to develop a general theoretical statement based on the data and begins to compare the data collected from each additional case to the emerging theoretical statement in order to refine it. Although there are dangers in using this analytic method since the researcher can drift from the topic or become influenced by bias, I placed my research questions front and center of my data analysis process and reflected on my own potential for bias throughout the analysis to mitigate the limitations of this method.

I also returned to the transcripts after second cycle coding and did a close analysis of the responses to two of my protocol questions: “How did your past training, and/or life experience inform how you made sense of this challenge?” and “How did your understanding of the challenge inform your leadership approach when managing the challenge?” I used the codes generated from a close reading of the responses to these two questions to create diagrams highlighting the connections between specific aspects of the participants’ cognitive schema and their leadership response to the challenge or crisis that they faced. After each coding session, I

created analytic notes to document my thoughts and observations of each participant. These notes allowed me to archive and track my thoughts on the study as it evolved.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness of the data and findings is determined by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following section describes how these criteria for trustworthiness were established in this study.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility establishes the internal validity of the study findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One way to increase credibility in a study is through the use of member checks. Participants involved in this study conducted member checks of interview transcripts, confirming the data in the transcript matched their memory of our conversation. Participants also made edits and provided clarifications as needed. I also shared my initial findings with participants by sending them a copy of chapter four of this dissertation and inviting feedback. In addition, I was intentionally reflexive throughout the process, writing analytic notes to document my thinking in order to be more aware of my potential biases and assumptions. This along with the study database also provided an audit trail so that other researchers could retrace the process of the study

#### **Transferability**

Transferability or external validity is focused on how the results of a study can be transferred to other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One way to accomplish this is to provide thick descriptions of the study participants and settings in order for others to assess their applicability to their setting. For this study, I have provided extensive demographic information



and descriptions of the participants and the institutions in which they served. I have also used direct quotes from participants throughout the findings to create a rich description of the phenomena we are exploring. Finally, I have strived to achieve maximum variation in my study sample. Participants came from a wide range of institutions, academic backgrounds, college sizes, and geographic locations. This diversity of participants adds to the transferability of the study findings.

### **Dependability**

Dependability involves replication. It ensures that if another researcher were to repeat this study, they would generate similar results (Shenton, 2004). In order to increase the dependability of this study, I have documented the research methods in detail. In addition, I maintained a study database, which also increases dependability since it allows others to verify how I came to my findings through the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the data has been collected and analyzed objectively (Shenton, 2004). As a researcher, I made sure to be reflective throughout the process about my own potential for bias. In addition, I engaged in member checking throughout the process, which also increases confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Study Findings**

### **RQ 1 Findings**

Research question one (RQ1) asked: How do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of a crisis? This section will examine the themes that emerged during interviews about the strategies participants in this study used to make sense of the challenges or crises they faced and

how their cognitive schema informed their understanding of the situation and their role as a leader.

### **A Definition of Crisis**

Based on the natural language used by participants, a consistent definition of a crisis at community colleges emerged: a situation that threatens the viability of the mission and permanently damages the image of the institution. Yet, what constituted a crisis and who had experienced one ran the gambit from Servant Leader defining a computer lab going offline as a mini-crisis since it interfered with the college mission to Participatory Leader saying that she had never experienced a crisis because it was her perception that dealing with challenges came with the job of being an organizational leader. Others like Passionate Leader, Crisis Leader, and Adaptive Leader had faced a number of episodes that would traditionally be classified as crises including campus murders, embezzlement by employees, extreme protests on campus, and terrorist attacks. The majority of participants, however, focused on the financial and enrollment struggles that have impacted community colleges in the United States since the Great Recession.

### **Two Levels of Crisis**

A perception that emerged during the interview process was that there are two levels of crisis that are defined by how immediate the response to the situation needed to be and the scope of the event. On one level, participants described the fast-moving events that need an immediate response such as a school shooting, an employee breaking the law, or an overdose in a campus residence hall. On the opposite end are slow-moving crises that do not necessitate an immediate response such as a long-term organizational cultural issue, the ongoing budgetary challenges in higher education, or changes to the local environment in which the institution exists. The following sections provides more detailed descriptions of these two broad crisis types. The first

will focus on immediate crises and provide mini-case studies to illustrate how the participant drew on their cognitive schema to make sense of the crisis that they led their institutions through. This will be followed by a description of perceptions of long-term crises with a synthesis of perceptions about the challenges created by the Great Recession and its aftermath. Table 10 provides data on the language used to describe crises by participants.

Table 10

*Language Used to Describe Crises*

Language Used	Number of Participants
Immediate crisis	6
Long-term crisis	5
Financial crisis	7
Great Recession and aftermath as crisis	5
No use of the term crisis	3

**The Immediate Crisis**

Participants described an immediate crisis for a community college president as an immediate, fast-moving episode that captures people's attention and could cause permanent and irreparable damage to the image and reputation of the organization necessitating a response before all the facts are understood. Episodes that participants said fall within this crisis level are shootings, hostage situations, bomb threats, sexual assault cases, racial incidents, employee scandals, and active shooter warnings. The following mini-case studies illustrate examples of this type of crisis and how the presidents involved drew on their cognitive schemas to understand them.

**Crisis Leader.** Crisis Leader worked as a president at multiple community colleges around the United States before ending his career as a chancellor of a community college district in a large city on the west coast. While he was a Chief Financial Officer of a community college in an urban setting in the south, two people were killed on his campus within two months of each other. One was the Director of Food Services who was murdered in his office. The other involved a married couple who were attacked while running one evening on the college track. The husband was killed and the wife was raped and left for dead. She was found the next day and survived the attack. Afterward, the president of the college placed Crisis Leader in charge of the campus police to explore how these incidents could have been prevented.

It was determined that one of the factors which created the environment that made the victims vulnerable was the “1970’s era mood lighting” on the campus. The Food Service Director was uncomfortable carrying the receipts to his car after work to make a drop at the bank due to the poor lighting on campus, so he installed a safe in his office. He did not tell the administration about this, but apparently someone found out and decided to rob him.

Crisis Leader determined that poor lighting also played a role in the attack that occurred on the campus track. During the summer in the south, it is often too hot to jog during the day, so people get their exercise during the evening when it is cooler outside. “We built the jogging trail,” said Crisis Leader. “We didn’t light it. Because we never imagined what was about to happen.”

This event shaped Crisis Leader’s cognitive schema around crisis management. “Personally, those murders, I think, permanently scarred me as a leader,” he said. “And everywhere I went, I made sure it would never ever happen again. And I communicated that. And frankly, I get upset talking about it.”

**Passionate Leader.** Coming up through the administrative ranks in a community college district within a large city on the west coast, Passionate Leader experienced a number of different crisis events. She had to address student murders, embezzlement scandals, racial incidents, and more during her forty-year career, but nothing prepared her for having a large group of protestors begin camping in the courtyard of her most urban campus as part of a national protest movement calling attention to economic inequality in the United States.

Since she had an extensive public relations background and had even taught classes in crisis communications, she knew the importance of crafting a message for the media and maintaining a positive image of the college in the public's mind. As she stated when reflecting on her experiences with crises, "I'm trying to think of some of the crises that we've had over the years - and there have been a lot - and I worked in Public Information, so my job was to help manage it." Repeatedly throughout the interview, Passionate Leader connected her leadership choices back to her background in public relations. "What I learned there, because I did PR, was when you're in a crisis, hire somebody who's an expert - even your PR people are not experts."

She also made sense of the situation by examining the environment created by this impromptu campground – which was filled with a mix of protestors, anarchists, and homeless people, creating an unsafe educational space for students. Compounding the issue, some faculty joined the movement. "And then our faculty were part, encamping with them," she said, "showing the students how to protest. The faculty were working against us. And it just wasn't safe in there." While she felt that she had the public on her side, she knew it was a potentially dangerous situation and feared the worst. "If something had gone wrong, it would have been my job. And I know it. But I also thought, this is why I was hired."

**Relational Leader.** Coming up through the system in a small state in the deep south, Relational Leader's most significant immediate crisis emerged two years into his presidency when six or seven male students and one male non-student were accused of gang-raping a female student in the men's residence hall. Over the course of the following two weeks, people were arrested on what seemed like a daily basis. "It was being investigated. And instead of arresting six or seven of them at once, it was like every three days they would come to my office and say they had arrested another one. God, when is this going to end? I mean, eventually, we got to find out who all was in that room." This slow trickle of arrests kept the story in the media and kept people asking questions. Relational Leader drew on his past work experience in how he addressed the situation, mainly the conditioning he had received over the years to respond in a measured manner. He also knew that it was imperative to communicate as much as he could as soon as he could to preserve the image of the college. "It's really important as a leader how you deal with it at the time. That's probably more important than being able to come back and fix that public image later."

**Adaptive Leader.** When Adaptive Leader was driving into work at a community college in a major, large city on the east coast, he was not prepared for what awaited him that morning. Soon he began receiving phone calls from his wife and sons, crying over the phone, encouraging him to return home. A major terrorist attack was underway at a site next to the community college that he led. However, his sense of responsibility for his college prevented him from turning back. When he arrived at the campus, staff were in the halls screaming, "What are you going to do?" Recalling this memory, Adaptable Leader said, "My gosh, what do you mean, what am I going to do?" As the day unfolded, the adjacent building targeted by the terrorist

attack collapsed and parts of it fell on top of a major, historical classroom building on campus, threatening the long-term operations of the college for the foreseeable future.

After the attack, the state university system in charge of the community college and the mayor of the city did not want the campus to re-open for at least a year. However, even in the immediate aftermath of the attack, Adaptive Leader was already thinking about how to get the college operational again. “I mean, it was like a war zone,” he said. “And I’m saying to myself. So when, when are we going to reopen?” It was the beginning of the semester and he did not want students to lose a term.

In reflecting on how he made sense of the situation and what he needed to do to address the disaster that his organization was facing, Adaptive Leader drew on the setbacks and obstacles that he had faced throughout his life. His experience, as he described, of constantly hustling for a buck growing up in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood of a large city. The inability of his immigrant mother to understand what he meant when he said that he wanted to attend college. A guidance counselor in high school who told him that he was not college material, and made him a deal to pass him on his English graduation exam only if he promised to enlist in the Marines instead of applying for college. The City College in his city rejecting his application even as a non-matriculated student. His journey to a rural college in the Midwest, which only gave him a scholarship to attend because they “needed a warm body.” A graduate school advisor who said that he was not doctorate material. Throughout his life, Adaptive Leader perceived that he had faced setback after setback and this was just another one that he needed to overcome. He perceived that he was able to overcome these many setbacks because he made plans and set goals for himself. “You need to set a goal for yourself,” he said. “And have you believe in a positive sense that things can get better.”

### **Training for Immediate Level Crises Informs the Cognitive Schema**

It is also important to note that participants reported drawing on specific crisis and emergency response training when facing an immediate crisis or the threat of one. In the case of Passionate Leader, she drew on her experience learning about and teaching crisis communication as well as the National Incident Management System (NIMS) training offered through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). “I knew any day that anything could happen. And you need to be ready. And you need to be ready to pull your team together. So we did a lot of NIMS practicing and crisis practicing,” she said.

Business Leader drew on the FEMA training he received while a mayor of a small city to make sense of the situation when returning to his community college campus after it was locked down due to a gun threat.

I just knew the incident command system would be set up, so when I arrived on campus, you know, they had the campus blocked off and first of all I had to prove to the people at the gates, which were Sheriff's officers, that I was who I said I was. I immediately said, who's the incident commander and where's the incident command set up, and then went right to there and identified myself and then became part of the incident command system.

This is one example of how NIMS training can influence the cognitive schema of community college presidents and prepare them for making sense of immediate crisis situations. When entering the crisis situation, Business Leader knew how to assimilate into the crisis response team and what role he needed to play at different stages of the crisis.

Several participants emphasized the importance of participating in crisis management and emergency response training through FEMA. “You know, Abraham Lincoln said, if I had six



hours to chop down a tree, I'd spend the first hour sharpening the axe," said Servant Leader emphasizing the importance of preparation, especially developing a crisis management protocol through conducting NIMS informed tabletop exercises and "having input from emergency response, some police departments, communities, on and on and on."

"Get the training," Crisis Leader said, sharing the benefits of going through crisis communication training and an emergency management training that was mandated for all community college presidents in the west coast state in which he worked. "There was nothing in my doctoral program - nothing - that trained me to deal with the types of crises that I had to deal with throughout my career."

Not having the training for some of the unique types of crises that emerge was another recurring theme among participants. "We weren't really sure what to do," said Passionate Leader about the protesters camping on her campus. "There was nothing written on what you do." Adaptive Leader echoed the same sentiment about the terrorist attack impacting his campus. "I never prepared for something like this. I don't think one can." This indicates that while prior training can inform a community college president about how to make sense of more common types of immediate crises like gun threats or natural disasters, other unique crises can emerge for which prior training is of limited use.

### **Cognitive Schema Shapes Understanding of Immediate Crises**

This section described immediate crisis events that four different participants experienced with a focus on how their cognitive schema informed their sensemaking process. Evidence shows that specific and unique past experiences shaped how these presidents made sense of the immediate crises they faced. Crisis Leader's cognitive schema around crises was shaped by the traumatic experience of having two murders on his campus within two months of each other.

Passionate Leader drew heavily from her experience as a Public Information Officer to understand the crisis she faced. Relational Leader drew on his past work experience. Adaptive Leader drew on the tenacity and grit he had developed over a lifetime of setbacks. Training in crisis and emergency response management through organizations like FEMA also informed the cognitive schema of participants, helping them to make sense of how to respond to crisis situations and their role during these events. Descriptions of how these leaders responded to their individual immediate crises will be shared in the RQ 2 findings section.

### **The Long-Term, Slow Moving Crisis**

Based on the natural language used by participants, a definition of the long-term crisis is a larger, slow-moving situation that does not immediately grab people's attention, but still poses a threat to the long-term viability of the organization's mission. Passionate Leader likened this level of crisis to global warming because it is a threat that is unfolding so slowly that it does not immediately capture people's attention.

This level of crisis could be divided into two categories: internal environmental and cultural issues and external environmental and cultural issues. Examples of internal environmental or cultural issues impacting a community college include a toxic employee who creates negative working conditions at the school or a lack of awareness among employees about how they can better support students. Examples of external environmental or cultural issues impacting community colleges include decreasing state funding, enrollment fluctuations, and changing demographics in the service area.

Among the participants, there was not a universal consensus about which of these long-term challenges constituted a crisis. At this level, perceptions of what is impactful enough to hinder the organization from pursuing its mission are nuanced. For instance, while

Transformational Leader viewed many of the financial issues his college faced as challenges rather than crises, he did view “the cost of education per student” as a crisis. Due to reductions in state funding for higher education within the state in which he served as president, the community college he led was “75% tuition-dependent.” He said, “I think the crisis is the cost of the product to the students and they face the same problem, you know, getting financial aid or grants or even, unfortunately, loans to pay for education.”

Organizational culture could be viewed as a challenge or a potential crisis for community college presidents. For Collaborative Change Agent, the “incestuous” and “good ole boys” culture of the community college she worked at in the southeastern United States posed a challenge when trying to “bring in new blood.” In a similar effort to change organizational culture, Capacity Builder devoted much of his time as president at two community colleges in the Appalachian region of the United States to changing the culture to become more adaptable to the equity issues among students coming from generational poverty in that region. Although neither of these retired presidents used the term crisis to describe these challenges, they demonstrate long-term cultural issues that could potentially impact the viability of the organization’s mission.

Both of the aforementioned organizational cultural challenges were also shaped by the local environment in which the institution was situated. Collaborative Change Agent stated that the nepotism that had historically taken place at her community college before she took on her leadership role was an extension of the “incestuous” culture that permeated the state community college system. Other presidents also reported how the local environment created or compounded challenges. For Pragmatic Leader, it was the insular culture of the rural, Midwest community college she led, which never fully embraced outsiders. For Adaptive Leader, it was

the political challenges of big city politics. For Learning from Experience Leader, it was the state funding model.

In regards to the environment contributing to challenges or crises, one situation emerged as a dominant theme among several participants. The Great Recession and its aftermath were the most prevalent long-term crisis community college presidents in this study faced. To understand how community college presidents made sense of long-term crisis situations, I will provide a synthesis of their perceptions about the Great Recession and its aftermath with a focus on how their cognitive schema informed their understanding of this long-term crisis.

### **The Great Recession and the Ongoing Community College Financial Crisis**

The dominant long-term type of crisis described by participants centered around the Great Recession and its aftermath. “My first all college meeting as the permanent president was on September 15th, 2008,” said Servant Leader. “Unbeknownst to me, Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers and everybody else was failing. And so within a couple of months, we knew that the economy had crashed.” As a result of the economic crash, many unemployed workers returned to school creating an enrollment spike. “Even rural places like our college where, you know, we were up 16 to 18 percent in a two-year period,” said Relational Leader in reference to the challenges created by spikes in enrollment, noting how it created burdens “in terms of facilities, financial aid, parking” and hiring faculty to meet increasing demand.

As the Great Recession ended, students returned to work. “We had those folks coming in, but the tuition dollars they brought with them were fleeting,” said Business Leader. “And as soon as, you know, the economy started coming back, the students went off, which was a good thing because they were able to become employed or moved on to other educational opportunities.” So the crisis continued because revenues from enrollment began to decline while state support

remained stagnant or even declined further in some states. “When I first started in 2001, our budget was like 33% tuition and fees, 33% percent operating taxes, and 33% percent state appropriations,” said Participatory Leader. “And now our state appropriations is down to like 20%.”

Another contributing factor impacting both ends of this long-term crisis was the cost of tuition. In some states, community colleges were allowed to raise tuition to address budget gaps, which creates financial barriers and burdens for students. As Transformational Leader said about the state in which his college was located, “we rank 50th in state support and we are 75 percent tuition dependent, the only way that we can close our operating gap if we are not funded well is to raise tuition.” In other states, community colleges were not allowed to increase tuition and some even had to decrease tuition. “In fact, the year I left, they decided for community colleges, we had to reduce tuition by 1 percent,” said Pragmatic Leader. While the first instance puts the burden on students, the other puts it on an already underfunded community college.

Although there was not a universal consensus among participants as to whether this ongoing financial situation community college find themselves in is best described as a challenge or crisis, the trend was to describe it in terms of the latter. However, there was consensus on the factors contributing to this situation: fluctuating enrollment, declining state funding, and increasing overhead. Tuition also played a role in terms of whether colleges could raise it to shift the burden to the student or whether states forced community colleges to reduce tuition and take the burden on themselves.

### **Organizational Cultural Factors Compounding the Financial Crises**

Participants reported that some of the ongoing internal and external cultural and environmental challenges their organizations faced compounded the financial challenges they

had to address during the Great Recession. When trying to manage the financial challenges brought about by the Great Recession in the community college that she led, Collaborative Leader said that the lack of organizational infrastructure like transparent budget development processes made the work she and her team had to do even harder. She perceived that this lack of organizational infrastructure was due to the institution's "good ole boy" nepotistic culture.

I understand why we were exhausted by the time that it was done because – that's what I used to say to my executive team. I said what we're doing is basically we're building infrastructure and putting systems in place at the very same time that we're dealing with all of these personnel matters and budget matters. I mean, it was a two-track. If you were doing one of those alone, it would have been tremendously demanding. But doing both of those at the same time was horrendous.

In this case, Collaborative Leader and her team had to address two long-term challenges at once, each issue potentially exacerbating the other situation and exhausting the leadership team.

Relational Leader also perceived that the organizational and local culture at the community college he worked at in the deep south created challenges when dealing with the impact of the Great Recession. In a tight budget period in which he was trying to expand professional and technical programs, he faced additional challenges because of the athletics-focused culture of his organization and the state in which it resided. "So because of that culture, you know, you're over here trying to do one thing to buy equipment for career and technical and your football coach wants turf on the field. You know, wants to improve the locker rooms."

These examples demonstrate that community college presidents in certain situational contexts perceived that internal and external cultural and environmental factors compounded the challenges or crises they faced when addressing the impacts of the Great Recession on their

institutions.

### **Sensemaking Strategies to Address Challenges and Crises**

Table 11 describes the sensemaking activities participants reported using to understand situations that they perceived to be a challenge or crisis. The sensemaking activity is a category of behaviors participants reported using to make sense of challenges and crisis situations. The description provides an outline of the sensemaking activities based on in vivo codes generated through first cycle coding. Finally, the code frequency identifies the number of codes used to create the category.

Table 11

#### *Sensemaking Strategies*

Sensemaking Activity	Description	Code Frequency
Drawing from previous work experience	Reflecting on mentors as role models, systems at previous institutions, work experience, and the experience of being a follower.	18
Consulting with people	Collecting information by holding open forums with stakeholders and consulting with external experts as well as peers and mentors. Asking questions and listening.	14
Working with a team	Making sense of the situation by working collaboratively and using task forces to collect data.	12

Table 11 Continued

Sensemaking Activity	Description	Code Frequency
Reflecting on past educational/training experience	Reflecting on study of higher education, training experiences, research methods, and theoretical leadership models.	10
Learning on your own	Understanding the issue by gathering information through reading and self-study, taking time to think about the issue, and identifying themes to connect the dots and make sense of the situation.	10

Out of the seven sensemaking activities in the table above, four involve the president actively drawing on their cognitive schema to make sense of the situation. Drawing from previous work experience, reflecting on past educational/training experience, utilizing understanding of the environment, and considering the college's mission and one's own personal core values are all activities in which the presidents apply their past knowledge and experience to the present situation in order to make sense of what is happening in order to choose how to respond. The other three activities – consulting with people, learning on your own, and working with a team – are all either social or active sensemaking techniques that involve seeking out information from the environment to add to one's own understanding. As would be expected, the primary areas of the cognitive schema community college presidents draw on to understand challenges and crisis situations are past work experience and education/training, their knowledge



of the environment in which the organization exists, and guiding values such as the college's mission and their own ethical core.

### **Cognitive Schema Informing Sensemaking**

Findings also reveal that specific aspects of a president's cognitive schema related to prior work and educational experience inform how they make sense of a challenge or crisis situation and how it informs their choice of leadership response. Table 12 describes the specific ways the participants' cognitive schemas informed how they made sense of the challenge or crisis situation their community college faced.

Table 12

#### *Dominant Dimensions of Cognitive Schema*

President/Chancellor	Dominant Dimensions of the Cognitive Schema During Challenges or Crises
Passionate Leader	Emphasized drawing on her experience as a Public Relations professional, especially crafting a message and maintaining a positive image in the media.
Collaborative Leader	Emphasized what she perceived as female interpersonal traits and behaviors such as collaboration and asking questions, reflecting on mentors, and using core values to guide decision making.
Capacity Leader	Emphasized creating environments based on his graduate studies in experimental psychology and reflecting on past mentors.
Business Leader	Emphasized business practices based on his MBA degree and entrepreneurial experience such as understanding customer base and looking for future trends.

Table 12 Continued

President/Chancellor	Dominant Dimensions of the Cognitive Schema During Challenges or Crises
Servant Leader	Emphasized reflecting on life experience as a first-generation college student, work experience coming up through the system, and theoretical frameworks such as servant leadership and adaptive leadership.
Crisis Leader	Emphasized past trauma as a community college leader, recognizing his own strengths and weaknesses in crisis management, and drawing on his awareness of how environmental factors such as poor lighting can create safety issues.
Relational Leader	Emphasized drawing upon his knowledge coming up through the system and collaborating with colleagues statewide
Learning from Experience Leader	Emphasized his work experience leading budget reduction processes throughout his career.
Pragmatic Leader	Emphasized drawing on human resources experience, budget reduction process experience at different institutions, and research background.
Transformational Leader	Emphasized reflecting on mentors, drawing on transformational leadership theory, and understanding the college system
Participatory Leader	Emphasized drawing on her graduate degree in counseling, the knowledge she gained coming up through the system, and the mentorship she received.
Adaptive Leader	Emphasized using the goal setting techniques that he utilized to overcome personal setbacks throughout his life.

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This shows that not only do community college presidents draw on their past work experiences and education to address challenges and crises, but the specific types of positions they held, degrees they earned, and life experiences they have had may shape how they perceive the challenge or crisis and how they choose to address it. Passionate Leader, Capacity Leader, Business Leader, Pragmatic Leader, and Participatory Leader all reported drawing on their work and educational experience in highly specific areas such as public relations, experimental psychology, business, human resources, and counseling to inform their understanding of the challenge or crisis their institutions faced.

Mentorship is another recurring theme that shapes how community college presidents make sense of situations and consider their own leadership response. As Collaborative Leader stated, it is important to look “at your mentors, learning the lessons from seeing their actions, decisions, how they approach things.” Out of the 12 respondents, 4 reported reflecting on or contacting their mentors when making sense of how to respond to the crisis or challenge they were facing.

### **Leadership Theory-Informed Sensemaking**

Some participants also reported drawing on various leadership theories to help them understand how they should make sense of a situation and what leadership approach they should use. The dominant theories were servant leadership, transformational leadership, situational leadership, and adaptive leadership. Often, these theories would overlap. As Transformational Leader said:

I would say my style is close to a cross between situational and transformational.

Situational. Certainly, I believe I have to tailor my leadership style to meet the style that

will get the best response from my staff. That maybe a little more laissez-faire, a little bit more hands-on. And the like. But certainly, I know that I need to set a vision. I know that I need to be able to inspire people. I need to help them develop. So that's where I think the transformational side goes.

From this quote, one can see how situational leadership theory informs choices to be laissez-faire with one person and more hands-on with another. Transformational leadership informs actions taken to inspire employees, talk about the vision of the organization, and help staff develop their competencies.

### **Summary of RQ 1 Findings**

Research question one asked: how do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of a crisis? Presidents in this study define a crisis as a situation that threatens the viability of the mission and permanently damages the image of the institution. They tended to perceive crises on two levels, the immediate crisis and the long-term crisis. From their perspective, immediate crises are fast-moving episodes that capture people's attention and could cause permanent and irreparable damage to the image and reputation of the organization necessitating a response before all the facts are understood. These could be shootings, terrorist attacks, sexual assaults, bomb threats, personnel issues, or other episodes that necessitate a quick response. Long-term crises are larger, slow-moving threats that do not immediately grab people's attention, but it still poses a threat to the long-term viability of the organization's mission. These could be internal cultural challenges within the organization or external environmental issues like the financial challenges community colleges faced during and after the Great Recession. There is evidence that presidents draw on specific and unique dimensions of their cognitive schema to make sense of crises, reflecting

primarily on their past work experience, especially their experience with mentors whose behaviors they want to emulate. The departments and areas they worked in while coming up through the ranks such as public relations, counseling, and human resources also heavily influenced how they made sense of crises. Educational experience played a role as well in terms of providing some presidents with theoretical leadership models to utilize to make sense of how they should respond. Sensemaking approaches that involved actively seeking out information included consulting with people, learning on your own, and working with a team. Finally, training in crisis management and emergency response also was shown to inform how community college presidents understand how they need to respond in crisis situations.

### **Research Question Two Findings**

Research question two (RQ2) asked: how do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process? This section will examine the themes that emerged during interviews with participants in the study relating to this question.

#### **Leadership Descriptions Before the Concept of Crisis Was Introduced Emphasized**

##### **Interpersonal Relationships**

When asked to reflect on their general leadership approach before introducing concepts such as challenge or crisis, participants predominantly gravitated toward the aspects of leadership involving interpersonal relationships more than technical dimensions like creating systems, developing budget planning processes, and establishing policy. Table 13 provides a summary of the responses synthesized from over a hundred codes identified during first cycle in vivo coding and synthesized into categories using second cycle focused coding. Descriptions are drawn from the natural language used by the participants to characterize these leadership

behaviors. The number of codes used to develop each dimension of leadership is provided to indicate the most dominant behaviors and competencies that emerged from this sample.

Table 13

*Leadership Behaviors Before the Concept of Challenge or Crisis Introduced*

Leadership Dimension	Description	Code Frequencies
Building relationships	Treating people with care and compassion. Adapting leadership approach to each individual's needs. Building trust and community by treating people the way we all want to be treated. Recognizing that the power of leadership resides in the follower.	16
Working collaboratively	Encouraging others to get involved and participate. Flattening out hierarchy to be inclusive despite job title. Bringing people together to share ideas.	11
Communicating	Encouraging people to share and listening to them before acting. Being transparent and direct in communications.	11
Knowing yourself	Maintaining a moral and ethical center. Knowing your strengths and weaknesses. Seeing yourself in the role of president.	10

Table 13 Continued

Leadership Dimension	Description	Code Frequencies
Developing people	Developing people to take on leadership positions through coaching, encouraging participatory leadership, and empowering them. Helping people to be successful.	10
Creating teams	Hiring people who can lead into the appropriate positions and then giving them the freedom to lead. Inspiring people to work as a team.	9
Articulating a vision	Considering the mission and values of the organization and the impact on students when creating environments and encouraging innovation.	9
Pursuing results	Pursuing results to improve the organization by using foresight to connect the institution with external communities and raise money to create and revitalize program offerings.	8
Creating structures	Understanding systems and examining processes to address problems	4

These findings demonstrate that building relationships, working collaboratively, communicating, creating teams, and developing people for leadership positions are important general leadership dimensions for community college presidents. Participants in this study perceived that working with people is at the core of community college leadership.

One of the most dominant themes was the importance of building teams. Participants emphasized that the work they did for their colleges was the result of teamwork. Both Crisis Leader and Adaptive Leader spoke about how important it was to hire the right people, place them in the appropriate positions, and understand the strengths and weaknesses of each of their team members in order to place them in the appropriate leadership positions.

Developing future leaders in order to build organizational capacity was also a dominant theme, especially in terms of using it as a measure of one's own leadership success. As Capacity Leader stated using a baseball metaphor:

I was always about creating a team. Maximizing the players on the team. For the team concept. And really trying to coach them up. Coach people up. So that when the game played - if I can continue the baseball analogy - when the game played, when the college opened, you could have people who sustained the game even if the manager got thrown out of the game.

Adaptive leader also used the term coach when speaking to the importance of developing staff for future leadership responsibilities. "And again, the job is like a coach. You look at the team and you say you'll do this and you'll do that."

### **Leadership Descriptions After the Concept of Challenge or Crisis Was Introduced**

#### **Emphasized Communication and Projecting the Image of a Leader**

After the terms challenge or crisis were introduced into our conversation, the dominant themes about how to respond as a leader changed. Table 14 describes participant responses when reflecting on their leadership during times of crisis or facing a significant challenge.



Table 14

*Leadership Behaviors Described After Concept of Challenge or Crisis Introduced*

Leadership Dimension	Description	Code Frequencies
Communicating	Communicating honestly, straightforwardly, and transparently with internal and external stakeholders to help people understand the situation and create buy-in to the response. Preparing for the media by strategizing PR response, using crisis communication strategy, and maintaining positive image of organization. Listening to people and giving them opportunities to make recommendations. Preparing for difficult conversations and decisions. Making sure people feel reassured. Inspiring people.	31
Projecting image of leader	Maintaining a calm, detached demeanor. Getting out front as a leader and projecting the image of a president as the spokesperson for the college. Recognizing when you can assign a point person to take the lead. Taking ownership of decisions.	13
Collaborating	Convening people by hosting social events or creating task forces, etc. Working with team to address crisis and implement plans. Asking staff for solutions.	12
Addressing financial considerations	Fundraising to acquire equipment, revitalize programs, build new facilities, and keep people hired. Carefully developing budget plans guided by shared principles.	11

Table 14 Continued

Leadership Dimension	Description	Code Frequencies
Maintaining human relations	Using traits such as kindness, thoughtfulness, vulnerability, and empathy.	5
Developing systems	Developing infrastructure by putting policies, systems, and processes in place.	5

At this point, communication emerged as the most dominant leadership dimension leaders focused on to address crisis situations. The language used to describe communication also changed in some specific ways. During the conversation on general leadership approaches, which will henceforth be referred to as leadership in times of normalcy, the emphasis was on behaviors like being transparent and direct when communicating. However, when the conversation turned toward challenges and crisis events, the leadership emphasis shifted to focus on public relations, preparing for difficult conversations, and reassuring people.

In addition, there was an increased awareness of the role of the leader as a front-and-center figure when addressing a crisis or major challenge. This stands in contrast to the focus on teamwork when participants reflected on leadership during times of normalcy. During a crisis or challenge, there is more of an emphasis on being out front, playing the role of the leader, and taking responsibility for decisions.

Despite this increased emphasis on the role of the leader as someone out in front of the situation, the dimension of teamwork still pervades the categories above. Participants still described relying on their teams to make sense of situations, make decisions, and execute plans.

This includes recognizing when they do not have the expertise about a topic and asking a team member with the expertise to take the lead in a given situation.

In both general situations and challenge/crisis situations, participants also emphasized the importance of fostering an environment of pervasive leadership in which everybody in the organization needs to feel like they can take on a leadership role no matter their position or title (Strange & Banning, 2001). As Adaptive Leader said:

I'll walk around and talk to people. And I'll talk to the people the food services because they may not have perceived titles as leaders, but they may be leaders within their own community. They may be a pastor in their own church. Recognizing that leadership comes at all levels, and just because a person doesn't get a chance within their current work situation, it doesn't mean that they can't do it.

Adaptive Leader's sentiment was pervasive throughout this sample of participants. Flattening our hierarchy so everybody in the organization could feel free to participate in solving the problems the institution was facing was seen as important during times of normalcy and crisis.

### **Leadership when Addressing Immediate Crises**

When reporting the findings for RQ1 about how community college presidents drew on their cognitive schemas to make sense of immediate crisis situations, I provided four mini-case studies. These mini-case studies described immediate crisis events that four of the retired presidents in this study faced. Each focused on how the participant made sense of the immediate crisis situation based on his or her cognitive schema. This section will extend these mini-case studies by focusing on how the cognitive schemas of each president informed their leadership approach.

**Crisis Leader.** Crisis Leader's cognitive schema around crisis management was shaped by the horrific murders of two people on his campus within the span of two months while he was vice-president of a community college in a southern state. Afterward, his leadership approach focused on taking preventative measures to ensure the safety of students and staff at the colleges he led. He would use the maxim: "Nobody gets hurt on my watch." However, despite this focus, he acknowledged that people would sometimes still get hurt on campus despite the work he and his teams did to promote safety.

Because of his experience investigating the two murders, Crisis Leader made sure to address environmental issues like poor lighting on each of the campuses in which he worked. After becoming a president at a rural college in the Pacific Northwest, he immediately became aware of how dark the campus was during the winter months when the sun began to set as early as 4 pm in the afternoon. "The campus was filled with hundred-foot tall pine trees and shadows everywhere and the place was dark," he said. "And I don't know if I would have noticed that initially had I not had the experience of [community college in southern state]." So he proceeded to "light the place up". As he described it, "I asked a number of the female faculty and administrators to tell me where you don't feel safe. To the students - where don't you feel safe walking to your car? And everywhere they identified as dark, we put in lighting." He engaged in the same preventative actions at another community college he served at on the west coast. "Same situation. Urban environment. Poor lighting. Pole lighting that was 15-foot tall. Well, the trees over the course of 20 or 30 years grew up and completely encapsulated the lighting. So all you had was shade at night. We brought in people to trim the trees. We did a take back the night kind of thing. And we walked the campus at night. And tell me where you don't feel comfortable." Due to the traumatic experience that helped shape his cognitive schema,

examining the environment and addressing lighting conditions became a leadership focus for Crisis Leader.

Another preventative measure he took while president at multiple institutions was examining and updating policies and procedures around crisis management and emergency response. An example involved working with his team to address campus safety issues based on a document developed by Homeland security providing recommendations to colleges and universities about things they could do to harden themselves against attack. “And I distributed that to my leadership team. And the kind of initial reaction was - well, this is really hard and expensive. I'm not sure we can really do this. And my response was, I circled 16 things on that list saying these are neither hard nor expensive. Why don't we start with these? Let's do the first six. This week.” As a systems thinker, Crisis Leader led teams at multiple colleges throughout his career to address procedural issues around fire safety as well as communication protocols with outside agencies such as Homeland Security.

One of the last potential crisis events Crisis Leader faced involved two former students committing a domestic terrorist attack with weapons they had purchased from a current student at the college. Homeland Security informed Crisis Leader that the original target for the attack was originally a cafeteria at one of the campuses in his district, but the target changed to one of the domestic terrorists' workplaces instead at the last minute. After this incident, Crisis Leader began working with his team to improve communications between the college and outside agencies. “We set about completely overhauling, and, when I left, we had been one year into a - 18 months into a process - to get the Police Department of [the college district in a west coast city] connected through the county to the Department of Homeland Security. You can only imagine what that takes.” Recognizing that lack of information complicated his decision making

process and limited his staff's ability to address issues, Crisis Leader worked to improve the communication pipeline between his college and other government organizations.

He also promoted campus safety through the use of technology such as blue phones and apps students and staff could download onto their phones. "I purchased an app called RAVE. It's got an unfortunate name. R- A - V - E. But it's an app that all my students have access to for free on their phones," he said. With this app, students can be alerted about crises or emergencies on campus, get updates about when the campus was safe again, and could even use a feature that contacted the police department if they did not arrive at their car after leaving class within a set amount of time.

Finally, Crisis Leader's past experience with the two murders on his campus early in his career made him aware of his own limitations as a leader. He was highly effective at addressing the crisis itself, going down the check-list and getting the college operating again, but he was not as good at addressing the emotional impact incidents had on employees and helping with the healing process. As a result, he would enlist the aid of staff to help him address this limitation during times of crisis. "I talked to the Public Information Officer and told her - I said, 'You're going to have to remind me to follow all the way through on this thing because it's not who I am.'"

**Passionate Leader.** Passionate Leader came up through the ranks at a multi-campus system on the west coast in public relations before becoming a president and then eventually a chancellor of the district. So when a group of protesters began camping on the most urban campus in her district to protest the issue of economic disparity in the United States, she naturally drew on her public relations background to inform her leadership approach.

A key way her cognitive schema around public relations informed her leadership decisions had to do with hiring external crisis communications experts to help her craft a message. “What I learned there, because I did PR, was when you're in a crisis, hire somebody who's an expert - even your PR people are not experts. And so I had a friend who guided me through the media on that and the message was: We're a college, not a campground.” Crisis Leader also recommended the hiring of external PR professionals for this reason. For Passionate Leader, it helped her to craft a succinct message to the public because keeping them on her side was important to her. In her evaluation, crafting a clear message and staying on it was an effective strategy. “I had a sense of how the media works and I also knew that there needed to be a sense of urgency, compassion, and my message worked.”

In addition to communication, Passionate Leader focused on presenting a presidential image to the public, which was also informed by her past PR experience. “I knew I needed to appear - even though I was scared to death - I needed to appear calm, professional,” she said. In addition, it was important for Passionate Leader to project an image of professionalism. “When you're the president, you need to have a suit close by and you need to have your hair done and you need to look like you're a professional college president.”

In addition to maintaining a calm demeanor and projecting a professional image, Passionate Leader knew that she needed to take her time to respond to this case despite the police and other administrators asking when authorities were going to go in and clear the campground. “I think I was firm, but I wouldn't commit that I was going in. And I don't know why I - maybe because I was a PR person for so long, but I knew I couldn't commit to that, and I also knew that I needed to know as much as possible.” Again, Passionate Leader's PR background informed her measured response and impulse to collect more information about what was happening by

convening members of city agencies and her own staff to make sense of the situations and discuss what the college's response should be.

However, what ultimately resolved the issue had less to do with public relations and more to do with policy. In order to force the protesters to remove their campsite from the campus, the college district had to get the legislature to pass a policy banning camping on college campuses "otherwise there was no reason to ask them to leave. And we needed them to leave." The crisis was ultimately averted without a major incident and Passionate Leader was named one of the most influential leaders in her city by a local publication at the end of the year.

**Relational Leader.** Shortly into his tenure as a president of a small, rural community college in the deep south, Relational Leader was informed that a female student had accused six or seven male students and one male non-student of gang-raping her in the dorm room. Drawing on his work experience and crisis management training, he knew that he had to be measured in his response much like Passionate Leader reported. "I think through my years that I was kind of conditioned not to overreact to any situation. And that's really important in a time like that. I think people feed off of you. How you're going to respond." Also, like Passionate Leader, he knew that he had to be careful with what he said until he had all the facts. "Even though we were in a rural area, we were within an hour [nearby city], which is the state capitol with three television stations and even at that point social media wasn't where it is now. But that was a crisis in my mind. How do you respond to that? What everybody needs? When frankly you don't even have all the facts at that initial stage." Responding in a measured manner proved to be an effective decision. Eventually, all of the accused were cleared of the charges. As Relational Leader stated, "You don't have a chance to go back two years later and say all those people were found innocent." Another lesson he learned from this experience is that "in this world that we



live in, news doesn't last long. It is painful. It is difficult. But two weeks later, it is somebody else's issue and somebody else's crisis.”

**Adaptive Leader.** Early in his presidency at a community college in a major, large city, the classroom building of Adaptive Leader’s campus was severely damaged as a result of a terrorist attack that took place at a site adjacent to his college. Drawing upon his own personal history of using goal setting to overcome setbacks, Adaptive Leader began making plans to re-open his college. He did this despite the fact that the system chancellor and the mayor of the city had decided that it would be at least a year before the college could re-open. “I said, no, we’re going to do it sooner than that.” Adaptive Leader did what he always did to overcome setbacks. He set goals and made plans. As he described it:

The university said to me, no, you have to be closed for at least a year. And I began to figure out what we needed to do to reopen the college. So what I did was, the next day I sent my staff to another location up in [neighborhood in the large city], and I said I want you to call every student and tell them we're going to reopen. Dan, I didn't know if we were going to re-open. But I told them, we're going to reopen.

Almost immediately after the disaster that destroyed his classroom building took place, Adaptive Leader set a goal for his institution to re-open despite the opposition of other government leaders.

Drawing on his inclination to “hustle” and “market”, Adaptive Leader not only reached out to students through phone calls to let them know that the college was going to re-open, but he also used the media to get his message out to the community. Seeing from his office window that television news reporters were trying to capture images of the aftermath of the terrorist attack, Adaptive Leader went down onto the street and offered to let them take pictures from his office

window, which would give them a better vantage point. “So one of them says, what's it gonna cost. I said, it’s not gonna cost you anything. I said, if you come upstairs and I let you shoot from there, you have to promise that you'll have a subtitle when you do the news and your report on what's happening that [Name of College] is going to reopen.”

In addition to communicating with students and the public, Adaptive Leader also used his relationships and partnerships to achieve his goals. He worked with the Board of Education to purchase portable classrooms from a university in Canada for \$17-million dollars. When the portable classrooms were blocked from coming into his state due to a paperwork issue, he drew on the relationships that he was developing with law enforcement, who were using his campus as a command center. “They sent a caravan of motorcycle patrol and they escorted those trailers across the [Name] Bridge for us,” he said. The portable classrooms were then installed around the perimeter of the campus and his staff began preparing the portables and converting other parts of the campus like the cafeteria into instructional areas. “Three weeks later, guess what? We reopened.”

Yet, the fight was not over once the college re-opened. The chancellor of the state university system that oversaw the community colleges wanted to trade the damaged, historical classroom building for another location. “And they were negotiating this without my involvement,” said Adaptive Leader. Feeling that the damaged classroom building was a symbolic educational icon in the community since it had once housed a famous university, he decided to defy the university system chancellor and use the media to announce to the public that his college would not be leaving that building. “Then I called the chancellor and he said to me, you fucked up, you fucked up, you fucked up.” For Adaptive Leader, it was about taking a risk

for something that he believed in. “If you believe in something, you need to take a chance. You gamble. I could have lost my job.”

As with Crisis Leader, the traumatic situation Adaptive Leader witnessed changed him personally. He became a more spiritual person and a more flexible leader. Before this crisis, he would tell employees who requested two-weeks off that he didn’t need them. After the crisis, his response changed. “I realized that tomorrow is promised to no one and we can't predict the future and that I became more of a person that encourages staff to spend more time with their families.”

### **Crisis Preparation Informed Leadership**

Although most participants did not report experiencing crisis situations as dramatic as those described above, they did describe situations that were potential immediate crises and emphasized how training and preparation informed their leadership approach. As Servant Leader stated, “When we had a couple of incidents, I called the command center. We opened up that book. Each of us had a folder and we went through what we had planned. And it worked in each case. And hard decisions had to be made. I mean, we vacated the entire campus one day in 15 minutes. It was unbelievable. But it's because we had prepared for it, right?” In this case, the protocol that was developed informed the leadership procedure to address the incident.

Likewise, Business Leader reported that his past crisis training informed him about what role he needed to play when an incident command center was established on his campus to address a gun threat. “Well, you're in a kind of a co-command role or in a supporting command role. You're almost part of an executive team. You might have law enforcement people if there have been, let's say, people injured. There may be hospital and emergency services people. A co-supporting role. You're there to support the need at the specific moment.” In this case, the past

training informed him about the support role he needed to play in the potential crisis situation he faced.

### **Summary of Leadership Behaviors During Immediate Crises**

The narratives in the mini-case studies above demonstrate that specific dimensions of the cognitive schema of each individual president informs his or her leadership approach. The trauma that Crisis Leader experienced early in his career informed his focus on taking preventative measures to ensure the safety of students and staff at his colleges. He did this by addressing environmental issues like lighting, examining response protocols and procedures, and making safety a core value. Passionate Leader drew on her experience as a Public Information Officer to inform decisions to hire an external public relations consultant specializing in crisis communication, crafting a clear message, maintaining a measured response, and gathering as much information as she could before she took action. Relational Leader relied more on his years of conditioning as an administrator to inform his reserved response to the crisis situation he faced. He knew not to say something that could not later be retracted. Adaptive Leader drew on a lifetime of overcoming setbacks by setting goals and making plans to re-open his campus three weeks after a terrorist attack destroyed his college's classroom building. These cases demonstrate that the cognitive schema of presidents – their past work experience, personal traumas, life stories, and training – all inform their leadership responses, sometimes in specific ways, during crisis situations. In addition, the findings show that during crises and challenges, respondents found communication and projecting an image of leadership became more important behaviors than during times of normalcy.

### **Leadership During Long-Term Crises**

“I would say though, when we talk about the bigger crises, those are the ones that needs

transformational change,” said Passionate Leader. As stated under findings for RQ 1, presidents perceived long-term crises or challenges to be cultural issues within the organization, the changing environment in which the institution exists, and other external issues such as declining state funding or economic upheavals like the Great Recession and its aftermath. Examining the responses of those who described confronting these types of challenges reveals that there is evidence to support passionate Leader’s claim.

In order to understand this type of crisis or challenge more fully, I will provide descriptions of some of the situations these community college presidents faced which fall within the long-term crisis category and focus on how they drew on their cognitive schemas to understand and address the situation. Afterwards, I will provide a synthesis of some of the ways community college presidents in this study addressed issues around the Great Recession and its aftermath.

### **The Long-Term, Slow-Moving Crisis Requires Transformational Change**

As Passionate Leader stated while reflecting on the local economic and demographic changes impacting the urban, west coast community college district that she led, long-term types of crises require transformational change. Participant descriptions of how they addressed long-term challenges and crises support this observation.

For Capacity Leader, who led two different community colleges in the Appalachian region of the United States, said that he needed to address two significant cultural challenges at each institution he led. One was helping the faculty and staff develop an awareness of equity issues in regards to the challenges that many students in that region face coming into higher education from a family setting steeped in generational poverty. The second was helping faculty and staff take more risks and feel like they could be more autonomous in their decision making

despite working in a community college system in which the state exerted tight control over operations. His answer to these challenges was to work with the faculty and staff to re-shape the culture of the institutions. “I don't like to say, I changed the culture,” Capacity Leader said. “I'd rather say we created it together. We created a culture of shared trust. And that's really important.” Drawing on his background in experimental psychology, he worked to re-shape the culture through leading by example and hosting in-service activities that increased faculty and staff awareness of equity issues.

When trying to address issues around lack of infrastructure such as a transparent, inclusive budget planning process while simultaneously trying to manage the financial challenges created by the Great Recession, Collaborative Leader relied on working with people to come up with solutions and focusing on core values. “I used to talk to the staff – it's about shared sacrifice. We're all going to have to sacrifice here. We have to go back to the basics and say what's essential to what we do – not nice to do – but what are the have-to-dos? And that's what kind of guided us.”

These two brief cases add support to Passionate Leader's perception that long-term challenges and crises require more transformational change behaviors. The leadership behaviors focus on working collaboratively to change the organizational culture and speaking to shared values.

### **Leadership when addressing the Great Recession and its Aftermath**

When addressing RQ1 and the concept of long-term crises, I provided a synthesis of how participants drew on their cognitive schema to make sense of the dominant example of this type of crisis – The Great Recession and its aftermath. In this section, I will provide a synthesis of

some of the leadership responses presidents engaged in to address the challenges created by the Great Recession.

Servant Leader focused on making strategic cuts that involved eliminating programs that were underperforming. In addition to engaging in active sensemaking of the situation by researching the financial crisis and analyzing enrollment trends, he also drew heavily from leadership theories such as servant leadership and adaptive leadership to inform the process and how to deal with the people impacted by reductions.

In terms of adaptive leadership theory, he said, “One of the things I said to myself and others at the time was, basically, you know, thinking in terms of adaptive leadership, my role is to assemble the forces that can deal with the challenge. It's not me that's going to find the solution. This is an environmental challenge. And we need to learn.” So by drawing on adaptive leadership theory, Servant Leader decided to bring people in the community together to educate themselves about the situation and help find solutions to the challenge the college was facing.

In regards to servant leadership, Servant Leader emphasized the importance of showing care to those whose employment was impacted by the budget reductions. “I talked, you know, all the time about being willing to suffer or having courage and being committed to doing the right thing. And if you have to do something that's going on harm someone, you know, in employment terms, be aware of that. I mean, all those kinds of things. It was a difficult time for everybody.” He made a point of meeting personally with every employee whose job was being eliminated during budget cuts.

Business Leader drew on his business and entrepreneurial background to address the financial challenges his college faced. He examined his college's “abilities to meet the needs of your customers in the future and trying to look into the future and determine - all right, how will

customer needs change - or in this case, students needs change 5 years from now, 3 years from now, whatever.” In response, he led his college in developing more career and technical programs because “that's what both the students were looking at, and both the business and community members were looking at also.”

Learning from Experience Leader drew from his years of experience conducting budget reductions to address the financial challenges. “You just kind of get. You develop a skill, I guess. Not the the kind of skill you'd like to tell people you have, but, you know, cutting budgets, and how you go about doing that.” Some leadership behaviors that he demonstrated during budget cuts was engaging in clear communication, showing empathy to those impacted by reductions, making sure stakeholders are prepared for the difficult decisions coming down the pike, and preparing for questions from the media. “If a group of folks get laid off, you can probably anticipate that the newspapers are going to give you a call. What's going on? So you need to be prepared for that. And you just have to be thoughtful. You can't say a lot, but you have to say enough and be clear in your communications.”

Pragmatic Leader drew on her experience developing budgets at other institutions. “As far as the financial, that really kind of fit my wheelhouse a little bit better because, in other situations, I had been at the budget table the whole time the budget was being put together.” Not only did she invite others to the table to examine the budget, but she encouraged an analytic approach to studying it. “And when we really started looking and saw our highly technical programs, one program would have a per-student equipment and supply budget that was maybe six times as much as another highly technical program. It's like how did that happen?”

Again, these examples demonstrate how past work experience informs how these community college presidents made sense of the financial crises and challenges created by the



Great Recession and its aftermath. Leadership behaviors expressed by these participants include working with their teams to make sense of the situation, closely analyzing the budget and the institution, engaging in strategic budget reductions, collaborating with the community, investigating opportunities for investment, and treating the people impacted by budget reeducations with respect and kindness.

### **Summary of Long-Term Crisis Leadership Behaviors**

The leadership behaviors and competencies that respondents emphasized when addressing long-term crises were different than for immediate crises. Long-term crises and challenges at community colleges tend to involve reshaping the institution either at the organizational or cultural level. Although external factors like the Great Recession and its aftermath may create pressures necessitating organizational change, the focus when dealing with long-term crises or challenges tends to be more internally focused.

The Great Recession provides an outlier example of this type of challenge or crisis. Since this situation involved financial challenges created by fluctuations in enrollment, decreasing state funding models, and rising tuition costs, addressing these issues predominantly involved budget management. How each leader addressed the challenges that emerged at their community college as a result of the Great Recession varied based on their cognitive schema and the particular internal and external environmental and cultural factors influencing their institutions.

### **Summary of RQ 2 Findings**

The study found that participants' leadership approach changed based on their perception of the level of crisis their organization was facing. When asked about their general leadership approach, inter-relational behaviors and competencies such as building relationships, working collaboratively, communicating, creating teams, and developing people for leadership positions

were emphasized. After the term challenge or crisis was introduced into the conversation, the leadership emphasis shifted. Communication became the most emphasized competency, especially in terms of managing public relations and the media. In addition, taking a more front-and-center role was emphasized more than collaborative leadership approaches such as working with teams. Extending the findings of RQ1, the cognitive schemas of the participants informed their leadership approach as well as how they made sense of the crisis or challenge itself. Their past work experiences and training informed them about how to approach the crisis and what aspects to focus on. Training with FEMA and NIMS also was found to inform leadership practice during challenges and crises. For long-term crises and challenges, the leadership emphasis was more internal, focusing on creating cultural and organizational change through. Those who spoke of the Great Recession and its aftermath drew on their past work experience and education to strategically reduce budgets, invest in new programs with growth potential, and treat those impacted by budget reductions with empathy and compassion.

### **Chapter Summary**

Research question one asked: how do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of a crisis? Findings show that presidents define a crisis as a situation that threatens the viability of the mission and permanently damages the image of the institution. They tend to perceive crises on two levels, the immediate crisis and the long-term crisis. Immediate crises are fast-moving episodes that capture people's attention and could cause permanent and irreparable damage to the image and reputation of the organization necessitating a response before all the facts are understood. These could be shootings, terrorist attacks, sexual assaults, bomb threats, personnel issues, or other episodes that necessitate a quick response. Long-term crises are larger, slow-

moving threats that do not immediately grab people's attention, but they still pose a threat to the long-term viability of the organization's mission. These could be internal cultural challenges within the organization or external environmental issues like the financial challenges community colleges faced during and after the Great Recession. There is evidence that presidents draw on their cognitive schema to make sense of crises, reflecting primarily on their past work experience, especially their experience with mentors whose behaviors they want to emulate. The specific areas they worked in while coming up through the ranks such as public relations, business, counseling, and human resources also heavily influenced how they made sense of crises. Education played a role as well in terms of providing some presidents with theoretical leadership models to utilize to make sense of how they should respond. Sensemaking approaches that involved actively seeking out information included consulting with people, learning on your own, and working with a team. Finally, training in crisis management and emergency response also was shown to inform how community college presidents understand how they are to respond in crisis situations.

Research question two asked: how do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process? The study found that participants' leadership approach changed based on their perception of the degree or type of crisis or challenge they were facing. When asked about their general leadership approach, inter-relational behaviors and competencies such as building relationships, working collaboratively, communicating, creating teams, and developing people for leadership positions were emphasized. After the term challenge or crisis was introduced into the conversation, the leadership emphasis changed to focus more on communication, especially in terms of public relations, and the president taking a more front and center role, especially

when facing an immediate crisis. Extending the findings of RQ1, the cognitive schemas of the participants informed their leadership approach as well as how they made sense of the crisis or challenge itself. Their past work experiences and training informed how to approach the crisis and what aspects to focus on. Training with FEMA also was found to inform leadership practice during challenges and crises. For long-term crises and challenges, the leadership emphasis was more internal, focusing on creating cultural and organizational change in response to external pressures like those caused by the Great Recession.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion**

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of this research project and synthesize them with the theories and frameworks presented in the literature review. After reviewing the research questions that guided this study, I will discuss the findings based on each research question, culminating in a proposal for crisis salience theory. This chapter will conclude with implications for future practice, suggestions for future research, limitations to the study, and my final reflections and conclusion after completing this study.

### **Research Questions**

As complex, open systems, community colleges are susceptible to the emergence of crisis events (Genshaft, 2014; Hincker, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Since a poorly managed crisis can have long-lasting impacts on the reputation of the organization and its leadership, community college presidents need to be prepared to address crises when they arise (Genshaft, 2014; Ross, 2014). However, research has found that incoming community college presidents report that they do not feel prepared to manage crisis situations at their institutions (Eddy, 2012; Murray & Kishur Jr., 2008). To contribute to both the practical and theoretical conversation about community college leadership and crisis management, the following two research questions guided this study:

1. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of the crisis?
2. How do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process?

## **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I am going to discuss the research findings within the context of the literature on leadership and crisis management. The discussion will be organized around the two research questions that guided this study.

### **RQ1 Findings Discussion**

Research question one asked: how do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their cognitive schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of the crisis. Five primary findings emerged relating to research question one.

1. Community college presidents' definition of crisis focuses on threats to organizational mission and the image of the institution.
2. Community college presidents perceive different levels of crisis based on immediacy and the amount of attention the event is receiving from the public.
3. Past work experience predominantly shapes the cognitive schema of community college presidents and informs their sensemaking of crisis events.
4. Community college presidents engage in social sensemaking activities during a crisis.
5. Crisis management training helps inform community college presidents' sensemaking process during crisis events.

### **Community College Presidents' Definition of Crisis Focuses on Threats to Organizational Mission and the Image of the Institution**

As stated in the literature review, not every school will define a crisis the same way (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The literature on crisis management offers several frameworks and metrics for defining a crisis including the uncertainty it creates, its business impacts, its effect on employees, and how much time management must devote to addressing the problem

(Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). Based on the multiple definitions found in the literature, I proposed the following definition of a crisis in chapter three of this dissertation. A crisis is a relatively unexpected occurrence that creates ambiguity about both the cause and consequences of the event which requires critical decisions to be made under time pressure to ensure the continued viability of the organization. There are multiple characteristics embedded in this definition of crisis including “unexpected”, “ambiguity”, and “critical decisions.”

For the retired community college presidents in this study, I synthesized the natural language they used to define a crisis in chapter four of this dissertation. In their words, a crisis is a situation that threatens the viability of the mission and permanently damages the image of the institution. Therefore, the dominant characteristics community college presidents tended to focus on had to do with the threat that the crisis posed to the continued viability of the organization in terms of its impact on the institution’s public image and its ability to achieve its mission.

In terms of characteristics such as the need to make critical decisions under time pressure or the ambiguity of the situation, participants tended to use these characteristics to differentiate between different crisis levels. As will be discussed below, this also corroborates previous research findings on crisis management.

### **Community College Presidents Perceive Different Levels of Crises Based on Immediacy and the Amount of Attention the Event is Receiving from the Public.**

Participants’ perceptions that there are multiple levels of crises is corroborated by the literature. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) describe four levels of crisis: the exploding crisis, the immediate crisis, the building crisis, and the continuing crisis. Likewise, Akers (2008) research on student affairs leaders found a tendency to describe crises in terms of levels based on the scope of the impact with a level 1 crisis being an emergency with a single student and a level 5

being a disaster impacting the entire campus. Participants in this study described the levels of crisis based on how urgent the response to the situation needed to be and how much attention it was receiving from the public. They primarily differentiated between two levels of crisis: the immediate and the long-term.

**Participant definition of an immediate crisis.** Based on the natural language used by this sample of community college presidents, I found that an immediate crisis is defined by three variables. One, it is a fast-moving episode. Two, it captures people's attention. Three, it could cause permanent and irreparable damage to the image and reputation of the organization. This level of crisis often requires a response before all the facts are understood. Reflecting on the definition of a crisis proposed above based on a synthesis of the language used in the literature, this definition incorporates the characteristics of ambiguity, time pressure, and necessity to respond quickly. Types of events that fall within this category according to participants include active shooters, bomb threats, sexual assaults, personnel scandals, and racial incidents.

**Participant definition of long-term crisis.** In contrast, I found that a definition of a long-term crisis based on the natural language used by participants is a larger, slow-moving situation that does not immediately grab people's attention, but still poses a threat to the long-term viability of the organization's mission. Based on this definition, a long-term crisis is characterized by four variables. One, it is a threat to the mission of the college. Two, it does not require an immediate response. Three, it is not receiving much attention from the community or public. Four, it is perceived as being larger or systemic in scope like a cultural issue pervasive throughout the organization or a financial challenge created by environmental factors such as state funding models.



Table 15

*Characteristics of Crisis Levels*

Crisis Level	Characteristics/Variables
General Crisis Definition	Threat to mission of organization Receiving attention from public
Immediate Crisis	Fast moving Ambiguity/uncertainty Damage to organizational image Necessitates immediate response Threat to mission of organization Receiving attention from public
Long-Term Crisis	Slow moving Larger in scope/systemic Threat to mission of organization Not receiving as much attention from public

**Past Work Experience Predominantly Shapes the Cognitive Schema of Community College Presidents and Informs Their Sensemaking of Crisis Events.**

Findings indicate that specific dimensions of community college presidents' cognitive schemas inform how they make sense of crisis situations. They draw on knowledge from past work experience, memories of significant mentors, prior education and training, and their own core values as well as their understanding of the mission of the college in order to make sense of the challenges and crises they faced in order to decide how to respond.

These findings corroborate Gilpin and Murphy (2008) and Eddy's (2012) work which argues that community college leaders develop cognitive schemas based on past experiences which aid them in making quick decisions. Eddy (2012) also asserted that community college

leaders draw heavily from their past work experiences, the influence of mentors, core values, and individual learning styles in order to decide how to respond to challenges.

The literature on cognitive schemas asserted that leaders use these mental maps to filter vast amounts of information to determine what is most useful for their sensemaking process. The literature also asserts that they use their cognitive schemas to interpret events based on their past experiences. The findings in this study support these aspects of the literature on cognitive schemas and leadership. Examining the language used by participants as they described how they made sense of the challenges or crises they faced, evidence emerged that they did draw heavily from past work experience. Participants who rose to their leadership position through specific organizational pathways such as public relations, business, human resources, and counseling drew heavily from their previous work experience to make sense of the situations they faced.

Corroborating research by McNair (2009), past work experience was also reported to be more influential and useful than graduate school training in higher education leadership. However, leadership frameworks usually learned in graduate school like servant leadership, transformational leadership, situational leadership, and adaptive leadership were reported to be useful frameworks for some participants. They reported using these leadership theories – or combinations of them – to make sense of how they should respond to challenges or crises.

According to Eddy (2012), one limitation of these mental maps is that they can serve as blinders to reality since community college presidents may not be able to see beyond the confines of their cognitive schemas. There is some evidence to support her assertion based on the findings in this study. From this sample, highly specific areas of past work experience informed participant perceptions. Participants who rose through the higher education ranks from specific areas such as public relations, human resources, counseling, or business used language and the

reference points that were primarily rooted within their past disciplines. Therefore, these deeply ingrained mind maps may prevent community college presidents from exploring other ways of knowing, which could blind them to certain dimensions of a crisis.

I also found evidence that successful past work experience in one setting may give community college presidents a false sense of confidence when facing a similar challenge in a different setting. As an example, Participatory Leader reported that when she was hired to lead a multi-campus district in the Midwest, the board of trustees asked her to unify the two campuses in the district. This would require her to help the two colleges overcome a contentious relationship rooted in deep cultural and geographic differences. She entered the situation confident that she could help the two colleges overcome this contentious relationship based on her human resources background and experience working in another multi-campus system. However, she reported that the particulars of the regional culture and organizational history of the colleges proved more problematic to overcome than her past experience had led her to believe.

This finding highlights how important it is for community college presidents to engage in social sensemaking techniques in order to fully understand the challenges and crises that they are facing. By listening to the perspectives of team members who possess different cognitive schemas and come from different vantage points within the organization, leaders can make sure to develop a more complete picture of the situations they are trying to address. Not doing so could create blind spots in their understanding of a situation because they are not able to perceive the nuanced differences between a past situation they have faced and the present one they are addressing.

**Community College Presidents Engage in Social Sensemaking Activities During a Crisis**

Results of this study corroborate Murray and Kishur Jr.'s (2008) findings that community college presidents do utilize the social sensemaking processes they identified in their study: consulting with the college's administrative team and seeking advice from peers. In addition to drawing from their cognitive schema to make sense of crisis situations, participants in this study likewise reported using social sensemaking activities such as consulting with people and working with their team. As stated in the previous section, social sensemaking is a vital activity during times of crisis since it expands the leader's understanding of a situation beyond the meaning they are able to make of it using only their cognitive schema.

### **Crisis Management Training Informs Community College Presidents' Sensemaking Process During Crisis Events**

Participants who shared thoughts on crisis preparation corroborated Schoenberg's (2004) assertion that organizations that engage in crisis preparation activities would fare better during and after a crisis. Findings from this study indicate that community colleges presidents perceive that they do benefit from crisis management and emergency response training. Connecting this to theory on how cognitive schemas inform the sensemaking process of leaders, participating in crisis management training is a way for leaders to construct a mental map or crisis management philosophy for how to address these situations (Boin & Hart, 2003). This will allow them to make decisions more quickly and understand the role they are supposed to play as part of the crisis response team throughout the different stages of the crisis management process.

As the U.S. Department of Education (2007) said, an emergency responder is more often likely to lead the Incident Command System (ICM) than an executive administrator when a crisis emerges. Participants in this study who had received NIMS training reported that it informed

their understanding of the procedures for addressing crisis situations and the role they needed to play once an Incident Command Center was established.

In terms of possessing a framework for understanding the stages of a crisis, there was little evidence that participants drew on a specific crisis management model to make sense of each discrete stage of the process. Mitroff's six stage-model, for instance, delineates six stages including signal detection, probing/preparation, containment/damage limitation, recovery, no fault learning, and redesign (Wang & Hutchins, 2010; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Participants primarily addressed the preparation and the containment/damage limitation stages. Other stages such as signal detection, recovery, no fault learning, and redesign were not explicitly addressed by the majority of participants. Only Crisis Leader reflected on the recovery stage in depth, acknowledging that addressing the healing that needed to take place after a crisis took place was not among his strengths as a crisis management leader. This indicates that community college presidents could benefit from more training in each of the discrete stages of the crisis management process.

The findings on the usefulness of crisis management training also supports the research on sensemaking by Dixon, Weeks, Boland Jr., and Pereli (2016). They used the term instinctive reaction training to describe how previous training can reduce a leader's cognitive load during crisis situations by establishing a mental map for how they are supposed to respond. Several of the other sensemaking activities that they identified in their study of military leaders in extreme situations were also supported by findings in this study. There is evidence that participants engaged in synchronicity or ongoing sensemaking as new information emerged. Several also reported feeling a sense of duty, which they describe as a sensemaking approach where the

leader perceives that he or she needs to overcome his or her own fears to meet a socially constructed standard of duty.

Finally, although participants felt that crisis management training helped them when addressing typical crisis events, this study demonstrates that not every type of crisis can be anticipated. By their nature, many crises are sudden and unexpected. This also supports Gilpin and Murphy's (2008) contention that leaders need to be adaptable so that they can improvise a response based on the unique circumstances of the crisis event. Therefore, the findings suggest that leaders need to do both. They need to be engaged in ongoing crisis management training and planning at their institutions, but should not treat their plans as rigid processes. They also need to leave room to alter their response based on the unique variables of the situation.

### **RQ2 Findings Discussion**

Research question two asked: how do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process. In the literature review, I defined leadership based on a synthesis of the language used in the research. Leadership for the purposes of this study was defined as the traits, behaviors, and competencies used to influence followers to take action and achieve goals, resulting in increased follower satisfaction and perceptions of organizational success. In this section, I will draw on the literature to discuss the five primary findings in regards to research question two.

1. Transformational leadership explains the dominant leadership approach during times of normalcy.
2. Communication and collaboration were the most dominant of AACC's core competencies when reflecting on leadership during times of normalcy.

3. Communication and projecting the image of a leader rise in priority as leadership behaviors during times of immediate crisis.
4. Transformational leadership behaviors are utilized to address long-term crises
5. In response to long-term financial crises like the Great Recession, AACC's core leadership competencies in organizational strategy; community college advocacy; and institutional finance, research, fundraising, and resource management increased in importance.

### **Transformational Leadership Explains the Dominant Leadership Approach During Times of Normalcy**

Transformational leadership is one of the dominant leadership theories within the literature on leadership (Bass, 1999). It is especially pervasive throughout the literature on community college leadership. Relational in nature, it focuses on building interpersonal relationships, leading by example, speaking to shared values, and inspiring people to think differently about problems using intellectual stimulation (Abbas, Iqbal, Waheed, & Raiz, 2012; DeRue et al, 2011).

The findings from this sample provide evidence that community college presidents focus on the interpersonal dimensions of leadership when reflecting on their general leadership approach. These behaviors included building relationships, working collaboratively, communicating, developing people, creating teams, and articulating a vision. These behaviors all fall within the transformational leadership framework, so the findings from this study indicate a predisposition toward this framework of leadership among community college presidents during times of normalcy. References to transactional behaviors such as terminating employees due to

failure to meet performance standards emerged at times, but the dominant approaches participants gravitated toward were building relationships and developing teams.

### **Communication and Collaboration Were the Most Dominant of AACC's Core Competencies When Reflecting on General Leadership Behaviors**

In reflecting on the American Association of Community College's core leadership competencies (2005, 2013), the findings support the importance of communication and collaboration as major competencies community college leaders should possess. Findings from this study support that communication and collaboration are highly valued competencies among community college presidents during both times of normalcy and times of crisis. Other competencies such as organizational strategy; community college advocacy; and institutional finance, research, fundraising, and resource management were not as strongly emphasized when reflecting on leadership approaches during times of normalcy. However, they did emerge when discussing specific types of challenges such as addressing financial issues, creating cultural change within the organization, and examining systems and procedures in order to prepare the institution for future crisis events. This will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

### **Communication and Projecting the Image of a Leader Rise in Priority as Leadership Behaviors During Times of Immediate Crisis**

When the concept of a challenge or crisis was introduced into conversations, the priority of leadership behaviors changed with communication and projecting the image of a leader becoming the leadership behaviors participants perceived as being most important. This also supports previous findings within the crisis management and leadership literature. Schoenberg's (2004) study of leadership and crisis management found that 70% of communications professionals perceived that there was a distinction between ordinary leadership behaviors and



those used during a crisis especially in terms of communicating based on personal core values and the core mission and values of the organization. In regards to community college presidential leadership during times of crisis, Berry's (2013) study also found that communication was one of the dominant themes to emerge alongside consulting with people, motivating others, and developing shared values.

It is important to note, I found that descriptions of the communication competency among participants in this study changed when discussing it within the context of normalcy versus within the context of a challenge or crisis. During times of normalcy, the communication competency was described in terms of being transparent and direct in communications and encouraging people to share their ideas. Within the context of addressing a challenge or crisis, participants described communication in terms of managing the media, sharing information with internal and external stakeholders, maintaining a positive image of the organization, making sure people feel reassured, and inspiring people to address the problem at hand.

Projecting the image of a leader was described in terms of maintaining a calm and measured demeanor, getting out in front of the situation, acting as the college spokesperson, and taking ownership of decisions. This indicates that community college presidents perceive that they need to be more visible and dominant during times of crisis than they would during times of normalcy. As will be discussed later in the section on crisis salience theory, this finding may be informed by terror management theory. Studies using this theory have found that when people are reminded of their own mortality during situations like crisis events, their preference for authoritarian and task-oriented leaders increases (Hoyt, Simon, & Reid, 2009; Pyszczynski, 2004). While little research has been done examining if leaders change to a more dominant and

authoritarian approach during times of crisis based on their perceived expectations of followers, this finding indicates that this could be a promising area of future research.

### **Transformational Leadership Used in the Context of Immediate Crisis**

Research on leadership behaviors when facing high stress and ambiguous situations that may threaten the survival of an organization have found that transformational leadership was perceived by followers to be more effective than transactional leadership behaviors (Boga & Ensari, 2009; Linn & Ployhart, 2004). Although communication and projecting the role of a leader when facing a challenge or crisis rose in importance among participants in this study, transformational leadership behaviors were still perceived as important in crisis contexts. In addition to collaborating with teams and other stakeholders, participants reported emphasizing maintaining human relations by using traits such as kindness, thoughtfulness, vulnerability, and empathy. These traits would fall within the individualized consideration dimension of transformational leadership. In addition, participants reported reflecting on their core values as well as the core values of their organizations when making sense of a crisis situation. This behavior would correlate to the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership.

### **Transformational Leadership Behaviors Utilized to Address Long-Term Crises**

Using the natural language of participants, a long-term crisis can be defined as a larger, slow-moving situation that does not immediately grab people's attention, but still poses a threat to the long-term viability of the organization's mission. Types of crises that fit this category include cultural problems within the organization, changing demographics within the college's service area that are adversely affecting the institution, or financial challenges created by events like the Great Recession and its aftermath.

Passionate Leader remarked that these long-term crises or challenges are the ones that require transformational leadership. Based on the cases in this study in which the presidents needed to address cultural issues within the organization, there is evidence to support this observation. Participants like Collaborative Leader and Capacity Leader who spoke to addressing cultural problems within their organizations reported using leadership behaviors such as collaboration, speaking to core values, and engaging in intellectual stimulation to change how people perceived the situation the organization was facing. These behaviors fall concretely within the transformational leadership framework.

**In Response to Long-Term Financial Crises like the Great Recession, AACC's Core Leadership Competencies in Organizational Strategy; Community College Advocacy; and Institutional Finance, Research, Fundraising, and Resource Management Increased in Importance**

While there was no universal consensus as to whether the problems produced by the Great Recession and its aftermath should be described as a crisis or a challenge, the trend among participants in this study was to describe either the entirety of this situation or aspects of it in terms of crisis. The factors that contributed to the crisis or challenge produced by the Great Recession and its aftermath were fluctuating enrollments, decreased state funding, and increasing overhead. Tuition frameworks in various states also played a role as some institutions have been forced by legislative action to decrease tuition while institutions in other states have been forced to increase tuition to address shortfalls in the budget.

In regards to the financial challenges produced by the Great Recession and its aftermath, participants who described this situation as the primary challenge or crisis they faced drew on a mix of transformational leadership behaviors and AACC competencies. The AACC (2005; 2013)

competencies participants reported using were organizational strategy; community college advocacy; and institutional finance, research, fundraising, and resource management. This finding supports Altieri's (2013) study of the decision-making skills of Chief Academic Officers at public rural-serving community colleges in Texas during times of financial crisis. His study found that the same competencies aided CFO's in managing their respective financial crises.

Participants reported using leadership approaches that involved both transformational leadership behaviors and AACC's core competencies. Within the framework of AACC's core competencies, participants reported analyzing the budget, examining the organizational structure, advocating for their colleges to legislative leaders, identifying programs that could be grown or revitalized based on the economic needs of the service area, and fundraising to maintain or establish needed programs. Within the transformational leadership dimension, respondents reported creating collaborative processes in which the community could educate themselves about the financial challenges and make recommendations about how to address different challenges (intellectual stimulation) and showing consideration and care for employees impacted by budget reeducations (individual consideration).

These findings indicate that focusing on competencies like budget management alone is limiting when addressing financial challenges. Community college leaders can benefit from learning how to synthesize the practical knowledge described by AACC's leadership competencies with transformational leadership behaviors.

### **Tenacity Described as a Useful Personality Trait by Community College Presidents During Times of Immediate Crisis**

Using a semi-structured interview approach at a long distance, it was difficult to assess the personality traits of the individual participants. However, in reflecting on the five-factor

model described in the literature review and research conducted examining certain personality traits as predictors of transformational leadership behaviors, one personality trait did emerge multiple times when participants facing immediate crises described their leadership approach. Several participants characterized themselves as tenacious. Within the construct of the five-factor model, tenacity is a personality trait that falls under the conscientiousness category, which is described as dutiful, goal oriented, and achievement striving (Denissen & Penke, 2008; O'Boyle, Forsythe, Banks, Story, & White, 2015). For those participants who described facing extreme, immediate crises such as terrorist attacks or murders on campus, the conscientiousness trait emerged most frequently. For instance, when Adaptive Leader was encouraged by his family to return home when a site near his college was impacted by a terrorist attack, he reported that it was his sense of duty that motivated him to go to work and help his faculty and staff address the situation. This also connects to the sense of duty dimension of sensemaking described earlier in this chapter (Dixon, Weeks, Boland Jr., and Pereli, 2016).

### **Crisis Salience Theory**

Based on the findings of this study, I propose to introduce a new theoretical construct called crisis salience theory. Salience is defined as the “the quality of being particularly noticeable or important; prominence” (Dictionary O.E., 2018). The primary assertion of crisis salience theory is that an organizational leader’s behaviors will have a tendency to move from a more collaborative and interpersonal leadership approach during times of normalcy to a more dominant, front-and-center approach during times of immediate crisis. As their perceptions about the urgency and potential damage a situation is causing increases, the leader will feel the need to take on a more visible role in terms of making decisions and communicating to the public.

In addition to the results of the research identified in this dissertation, I am also drawing

from a social psychological area of inquiry called terror management theory to inform this construct. Founded on the work of Ernest Becker (1971, 1973), researchers developed terror management theory to explain behavioral changes in people when their awareness of their own mortality is raised (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Rosenblatt, Veeder, Kirkland & Lyon, 1990). The variable researchers used to measure a person's awareness of their own mortality is called mortality salience (Hoyt, Simon, & Innella, 2011). Studies show that when the mortality salience rises in people due to exposure to information that reminds them of their mortality including symbolic events like the loss of a job, their perceptions and behaviors change (Hoyt, Somon, & Reid, 2009; Lewis, 2014). People will embrace the values and beliefs of their cultural worldview more forcefully. According to TMT, culture is the construct of symbols, traditions, values, stories, and customs that give people a sense of meaning and self-esteem in their lives (Lewis, 2014). Therefore, people align themselves more strongly with their cultural in-group when their mortality salience is raised in order to give their lives meaning, increase their self-esteem, and achieve a degree of symbolic immortality (Pyszczynski, 2004). Behaviors that emerge from this include reaching out to loved ones, protecting the belief system of the in-group, enforcing socially constructed values, and even creating works of art (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011; Routledge & Arndt, 2009).

Due to its social psychological focus, terror management theory provides a framework to explain the phenomenon of leadership (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004). Researchers have found that increasing people's mortality salience tends to shift their leadership preference from egalitarian leaders to more authoritarian, task-oriented, and charismatic leaders (Lewis, 2014; Merolla, Ramos, & Zechmeister, 2007). Although the literature exploring terror management theory within the context of organizational management

is still limited, some work has been conducted demonstrating that heightened mortality salience can make employees more aggressive and punitive to other employees who violate perceived organizational norms (Stein & Cropanzano, 2011). This does not speak to the role of leadership in organizations, but it does demonstrate that mortality salience has been shown to play a role in workplace behaviors.

In terms of the results of this study, evidence emerged indicating that community college presidents perceive the need to take a more dominant and visible leadership role during times of crisis. As Passionate Leader said when reflecting on the crisis she faced, “This was one of those things, you know, in a crisis, it's up to you. It's like when there's a fire, you don't get around to asking what they think. This is the kind of leadership you're expected to do - to take charge.” Likewise, when Adaptive Leader arrived at his college after a terrorist attack devastated a building near his campus, he reported that his staff looked to him to provide guidance, screaming, “What are you going to do?”

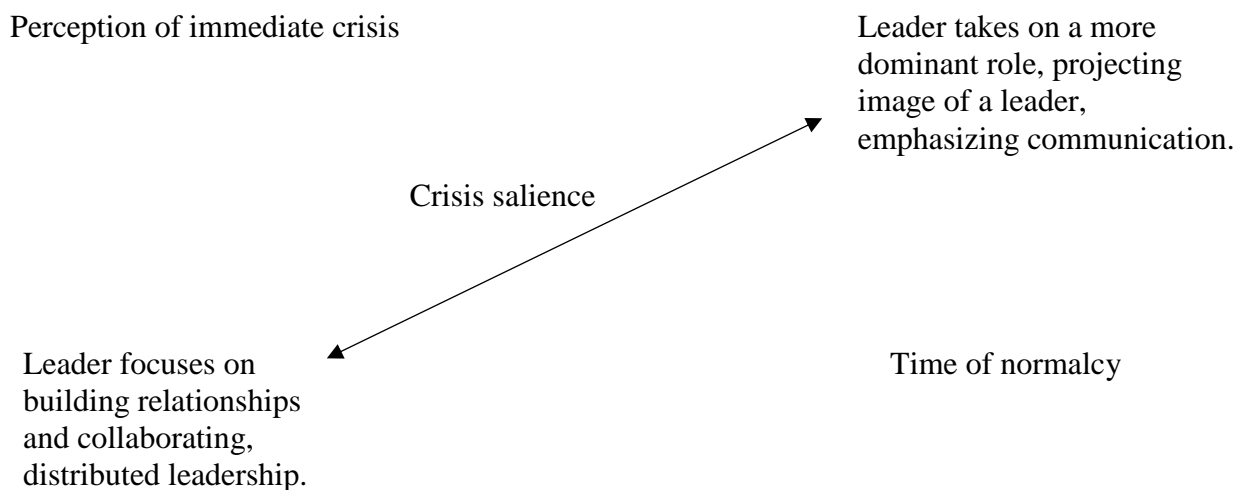
When reflecting on the findings of this study through the lens of terror management theory, the evidence suggests that a construct like crisis salience theory may be useful to describe how leaders behave depending on their perception of the crisis level. Crisis salience is different than mortality salience since the latter is focused on the individual's awareness of their own mortality and their interactions with others in response. Crisis salience is raised by perceived threats to the viability of an organization and is concerned with how organizational leaders change their behaviors based on their assessment of the urgency of a crisis and how much attention it is receiving from the public.

Table 18 provides a visual to conceptualize the crisis salience framework. The crisis level indicates how the leader categorizes the crisis. Crisis characteristics describe the defining

features of that level of crisis. Leadership behaviors illustrate the continuum of competencies and behaviors that are prioritized by leaders based on their perception of the crisis level.

Figure 1

*Crisis Saliency Theory*



The proposed theory constitutes the rudimentary beginnings of a conceptual framework. As will be discussed in the suggestions for future research section later in this chapter, a considerable amount of research would need to be conducted to fully develop this theory. There is potential for this construct to be an extension of terror management theory, examining similar themes within the context of organizations undergoing crisis. It may be useful in examining changes in leadership behavior based on perceived threats to the viability of an organization. The construct offered here should be viewed as a seed that may or may not grow into something more substantial with further research.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Drawing on past work experience proved to be one of the dominant ways in which community college presidents in this study made sense of challenges and crisis events they faced in order to decide how to respond. One aspect of this area of their cognitive schema many



reported drawing from was past mentors. Some participants had worked with what they considered role models over the course of their careers and reflected on these individuals when making decisions about how to respond to situations. This indicates that mentors can play an important role in shaping community college leaders. In regards to practice, mentorship has been used by community colleges in lieu of in-house leadership academies due to the cost savings associated with this approach (McNair, 2009, 2015). More research should be conducted on informal community college leadership development as institutions seek to develop a new generation of leaders.

In relation to this, findings indicate that past work experience shapes the cognitive schemas of community college presidents and influence how they make sense of crises. Therefore, government agencies and boards of trustees tasked with hiring community college presidents should continue considering how the job candidate's past work experience will shape their leadership approach. Different organizations may require different types of leaders at different times. Therefore, they should consider how a job candidate's past work experience will shape his or her leadership approach to determine if the applicant is a right fit for the challenges the organization is currently facing.

In addition, the cognitive schemas or mental maps that inform how community college presidents make sense of crises or challenges may blind them to certain aspects of the situation they are addressing. The past experiences they are drawing on to make sense of a situation may either prevent them from using other ways of knowing or it may give them a false sense of confidence because they may fail to see the nuances of the current situation in comparison to the former situation they are reflecting on to make sense of the present situation. Therefore, community college presidents should be trained and encouraged to use social sensemaking

techniques such as consulting with others, collaborating with administrative teams, and conducting their own research in order to develop a full picture of the situation that they are facing.

In considering leadership development curriculum for graduate programs and in-house training, transformational leadership theory should be incorporated into the lessons. Not only is this supported by the findings of this study which found that participants gravitated toward transformational leadership behaviors within both normal and crisis contexts, but it is also supported by the literature.

In regard to professional development, crisis management training through programs like NIMS was reported as being beneficial to community college presidents. Participants reported that it helped them understand how different outside agencies become partners when certain types of immediate crises emerge, how command centers are established and operated, and what role the college president plays as part of the crisis response team during the different stages of the crisis management process. Therefore, community college boards of trustees and government agencies need to ensure that current and incoming community college presidents are receiving adequate training in crisis management. Given that crisis communication techniques were shown to be the most dominant leadership competency required during crises, current and incoming presidents need to be specifically trained in this competency. It should be noted that most participants in the study did not express knowledge about all the different stages of the crisis process like signal detection and no-fault learning, and some spoke to their limitations in regards to the recovery stage. These are important parts of the crisis management process; therefore, community college presidents must be trained to have an understanding of all the stages of the crisis management process.

Finally, the crisis salience theory proposed in this dissertation can be a useful construct in understanding how community college presidents respond to crises based on their perceptions of the situation. This can also inform what types of leadership training community college presidents need in order to adequately address crises that emerge.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

There are several potential areas of future research based on this study. More research can be done exploring the specific dimensions of the cognitive schemas that community college presidents draw on to inform their leadership in both normal and crisis contexts. This study found that community college presidents drew heavily from past work experiences, especially knowledge acquired coming up through specific areas of the academic system. More research should be done to examine how coming up the ranks through different avenues informs the sensemaking and leadership approach of community college presidents. In a similar vein, many participants reported drawing on their memories of past mentors to help them understand situations and make leadership decisions. More research can be conducted on the phenomenon of mentorship and how it shapes community college presidents. In addition, research should be conducted on how community college presidents with knowledge of specific leadership theories such as transformational leadership, adaptive leadership, situational leadership, and servant leadership use these to inform their leadership approach.

In terms of findings related to leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies, research can be continued examining the relationship between the five-factor model and transformational leadership both in normal and crisis situations. Due to the design of this study, it was difficult to identify many of the specific traits described in this model with confidence. However, conscientiousness did emerge as a personality trait participants involved in extreme, immediate

crises reported drawing on. They described this trait in terms of tenacity and a sense of duty. Therefore, more research could be conducted examining how conscientiousness influences leadership behaviors in situational contexts like crisis events.

Research examining whether some of the competencies prescribed by AACCC may be more useful in certain contexts than in others may also be beneficial to further developing this framework. Findings in this study indicate that communication and collaboration competencies are emphasized in all situational contexts, but competencies in budget analysis, resource management, people skills, and the community college mission were more emphasized when addressing financial challenges or crises.

Finally, the crisis salience theory proposed in this dissertation should be developed with further research. More research could be conducted to investigate whether leaders perceive additional crisis levels and if they adopt different leadership approaches based on those perceptions. In addition, studies could explore if leaders change their leadership approach based on assumptions they possess about follower expectations of leaders during times of crisis. This construct should also be examined within the framework of terror management theory to see if it can be used as an extension of that construct to examine changes in leadership behavior based on perceived threats to the viability of their organization.

Among some female participants, there was a perception that gender difference existed between male and female community college presidents. Since this was not the focus of my study and there was not enough equivalency in my sample in regards to gender, I set this question aside in my analysis. However, exploring if gender informs perceptions around crises and leadership response among community college presidents could be fruitful.

Finally, an exploration of how traumatic crisis events impact and change community college presidents could be beneficial. Two of the participants who experienced the most traumatic crisis episodes reported being changed as leaders as a result. Crisis Leader became focused on campus safety and more aware of his own limitations with the healing process after experiencing two murders on his campus. Adaptive Leader said that he became a more spiritual person and open to encouraging his staff to take time to be with their families after his campus was impacted by a terrorist attack. Examining how traumatic crisis events impact and change community college presidents may provide guidance for boards of trustees and government agencies to support them after these events.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this study that future researchers could address if extending this research. First, since this was an exploratory, collective case study that utilized semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection instrument, the findings are limited due to a lack of triangulation. Future studies could be strengthened by interviewing or surveying colleagues and followers to see if the perceptions of the community college presidents corresponded with the perceptions of followers. As Colbert et al. (2012) said, relying on leader's perceptions of events alone is problematic due to the *fish in water effect*. They may not be able to perceive or assess all the dimensions of a situation they are facing because they are too immersed in it.

In addition, although there is quite a bit of diversity in the sample in regards to geographic location in which participants served as president and the size of their institutions, there is a significant lack of diversity in regards to ethnicity. Although I tried to increase the number of participants who are people of color, I found this to be a challenge. Part of this may

have to do with the lack of ethnic diversity among community college presidents among the generation of retired community college presidents I was recruiting. Hopefully, this challenge will be addressed for future researchers as the ethnic and gender diversity increases among community college presidents.

### **Closing**

For this study, I set out to explore and develop theory about how the cognitive schema and sensemaking approach of community college presidents informed what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they drew on to address crisis situations. To answer these questions and contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge on these topics, I conducted an exploratory, collective case study, conducting semi-structured interviews with 12 retired community college presidents.

The findings support themes in the literature which assert that the cognitive schemas and sensemaking approach of community college presidents inform how they make sense of crisis events. I found that the community college presidents in this study drew heavily from their past work experience including the influence of mentors. Participants who came up through the ranks through very specific channels such as public, relations, human resources, and business predominantly framed their understanding of the crisis event they faced based on using the language and frameworks of their past disciplines. While this has the benefit of lightening the cognitive load of leaders during crisis situations, providing them with a mental map to make quicker decisions, there is also the danger that it may produce blind spots by preventing them from exploring other ways of knowing or giving them a false sense of confidence about their understanding of a situation. Although community college presidents in this study reported using social sensemaking strategies such as consulting with administrative teams to help them develop

a more complete picture of situations, this finding emphasizes how important it is for community college presidents to augment the sensemaking that they engage in using their cognitive schemas with social sensemaking activities.

In addition, findings indicate that community college presidents may change their leadership approach based on their perceptions about the urgency of the crisis. During times of normalcy or even when facing long-term crises like ongoing budget challenges, community college presidents seem to favor a more interpersonal and team focus approach. However, when they perceive the crisis to be more immediate, they emphasized taking a more front-and-center approach and using the communications competency to manage public perceptions of the organization. This finding led me to introduce the construct of crisis salience theory, which argues that the leadership behaviors of organizational leaders will shift from being more interpretational and team oriented during times of normalcy to being more hands-on and dominant as their crisis salience rises. Although findings in this study and some theory support the crisis salience construct, more research needs to be done to develop this theory in more detail and examine if it can serve as an extension to terror management theory.

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## Appendix A: Email to Participants

### Email to Potential Study Participants

Dear (Potential Participant Name,

I'm reaching out to retired community college presidents to recruit participants in a study entitled *Executive Leadership and Crisis Management at Community Colleges: An Exploratory Case Study* which I am conducting for my dissertation for the doctorate in higher education in community college leadership at Oregon State University. My dissertation chair and principal investigator is Dr. Earl "Joe" Johnson, whom I've included in this email.

This is a qualitative, exploratory case study focusing on two research questions:

- How do executive leaders at community colleges describe how their mental schema and sensemaking approach informed their understanding of the crisis?
- How do executive leaders at community colleges describe what leadership traits, behaviors, and competencies they used during the crisis management process?

This research has both theoretical and practical applications. In terms of research, it will address gaps in the literature about how presidents make sense of crisis situations based on their cognitive schema and how this informs what personality traits, behaviors, and competencies they draw on to address crises. It will also utilize a multidimensional leadership framework utilized the five factor personality traits theory, full range leadership theory, and the American Association of Community College's six competencies for community college leaders in order propose a new framework for analyzing community college leadership. In terms of practice, the study will provide recommendations regarding community college executive leadership during times of crisis that can be applied to training and hiring community college executives.

Participants in the study will need to agree to engage in two interviews which will be approximately an hour long in duration each. Interviews may be conducted in person if feasible, but most will probably need to be conducted via Skype, Facetime, or some similar app. Phone interviews are also an option. The interviews will be recorded to ensure accuracy in the transcription and coding process. To ensure the protection of the participants, I will offer participants the option to use pseudonyms for both themselves and the name of the community colleges in which they served. Finally, as part of the validation process, participants will be given the opportunity to read transcripts of their interviews and the drafts of the research findings in order to give feedback and clarify points. You have the right to decline to answer one or more of the interview questions and you have the right to request that the interview end at any point.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email. Afterwards, I will contact you to schedule dates for your first and second interviews. I will also send you a confidentiality agreement.

Thank you for considering to agree to participate in this research project. Surveys of incoming community college presidents show that many believe that crisis management is one competency

they are unsure of when they come into their positions. Your participation will not only help fill theoretical gaps, but provide practical knowledge to current and future community college leaders.

Sincerely,

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## Appendix B: Explanation of Research

**EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH**

<b>Project Title:</b>	Executive Leadership and Crisis Management at Community Colleges: An Exploratory Case Study
<b>Principal Investigator:</b>	Earl “Joe” Johnson, PhD.
<b>Student Researcher:</b>	Daniel Tarker
<b>Version Date:</b>	March 25, 2018

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**Purpose:** You are being asked to take part in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to conduct a qualitative, exploratory case study on how community college presidents draw on their cognitive schema to make sense of crisis situations at their institutions and how this informs what personality traits, leadership behaviors, and competencies they draw on to lead their organizations through the crisis. The results of this study will be used for the student researcher’s dissertation.

**Activities:** The study activities include participation in two semi-structured interviews which can be conducted in person if feasible or via a digital application like Skype or Facetime. Phone interviews are also possible.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be destroyed once transcribed and validated by the participant. If participants do not wish to be recorded, they should not participate in this study.

At least two weeks before the second interview, you will be provided copies of the transcripts of your first interview to screen for accuracy and clarity. You will be able to address minor issues by providing written feedback, but if more major points emerge that you would like to clarify or extend, these can be addressed during the second round interviews. If you decline to participate in the second interview, you will have two weeks to provide written feedback otherwise the data will be used as collected.

The second interview will be scheduled within two months after the first round of data is collected.

All participants will be presented with a copy of the final research findings.

**Time:** Your participation in this study will last about an hour for each interview. Additional time will also be required to review transcripts of your interviews for accuracy and clarity.

**Risks:** There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation.

**Benefit:** We do not know if you will benefit from being in this study. However, the study will add to the theoretical research on leadership and crisis management at community colleges. It



will also provide practical knowledge that can contribute to the training and recruitment of community college executives.

**Payment:** You will not be paid for being in this research study.

**Confidentiality:** Other people may learn that you participated in this study but the information you provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You and the institution in which you served will be referred to through the use of pseudonyms to ensure your confidentiality. The security and confidentiality of information collected online cannot be guaranteed. Confidentiality will be kept to the extent permitted by the technology being used. Information collected online can be intercepted, corrupted, lost, destroyed, arrive late or incomplete, or contain viruses.

The information obtained from this study may be used for future research studies involving community college leadership and leadership training. If you agree now to future use of your data, but decide in the future that you would like to have your data removed from the research database, please contact Earl “Joe” Johnson, PhD at [Joe.Johnson@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Joe.Johnson@oregonstate.edu).

**Voluntary:** Participation in this study is voluntary. If questions are posed by the researcher that you would prefer not to answer, you may decline to respond. Participants can withdraw their participation from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from this research before it ends, data collected may be used by the researchers.

**Study contacts:** If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Earl “Joe” Johnson, PhD at [Joe.Johnson@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Joe.Johnson@oregonstate.edu). If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at [IRB@oregonstate.edu](mailto:IRB@oregonstate.edu)

## Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

### **Executive Leadership and Crisis Management at Community Colleges: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

Whiting (2008) recommends being attentive to the following stages when designing semi-structured interviews. The process should begin with prompt questions, described as open ended questions designed to both put the respondent at ease and begin to stimulate their memory about the subject being investigated. This is followed by an exploratory phrase, in which more direct open ended questions are used to probe more deeply about the topic, a co-operative phrase, described as a period where a strong comfort level has been established enabling a more free-form discussion to take place, the participation phrase, characterized by the respondent guiding and teaching the interviewer; and finally the conclusion phrase, where the interviewer thanks the respondent and ends the interview on a positive note.

#### **Level 1 – Verbal Interview Questions**

Since this is a semi-structured interview process, the following questions will serve as a basic guide for the researcher during the interview process. The researcher is free to deviate from this script to ask for clarification on points, probe different responses more deeply, and put the respondent at ease with more general, conversational questions.

The questions for this protocol are designed to be broad and open ended at first to give participants the space to define and categorize aspects of their leadership approach and the challenges or crisis situations they faced. I'm intentionally not using the term crisis in order to let the participant identify what challenges they perceived rose to the magnitude of a crisis and describe how and why they made sense of it that way. The questions narrow throughout the protocol to have participants focus on what they perceived to be their biggest challenge. If the participants adopt the term crisis and define it, I will proceed with the interview using the terms

they have suggested, replacing the term “challenge” in the question with the term “crisis”.

Likewise, I will avoid using technical leadership terms like personality traits, behaviors, and competencies unless the participant incorporates them into the conversation.

*Prompt Questions – Breaking the Ice*

- Reflecting on your presidency, how would you describe yourself as a leader?

*Exploratory Questions – Digging Deeper*

- What were some of the biggest challenges your college faced during your tenure as president?
- Reflecting on the biggest challenge, how would you categorize it and why?

*Cooperative Phase – Free Form Discussion*

- How did your past training, and/or life experience inform how you made sense of this challenge?
- How did your understanding of the challenge inform your leadership approach when managing the challenge?

*Participation Phrase – Respondent as Guide and Teacher*

- How could executive leaders at community colleges be better prepared to manage similar challenges?

*Conclusion – Wrapping Up on a Positive Note/Respondent as Informant*

- How would you describe what you learned about leadership through the challenges you faced as a community college leader?

Demographic question

Next interview

**Level 2 – Mental Questions for the Researcher During the Interview**

As Yin (2014) described, level two questions are mental questions that the researcher keeps in mind during the interview process that inform the pre-scripted questions as well as impromptu lines of inquiry that emerge based on information that is revealed during the interview.

- How did the cognitive schema of the respondent inform their sensemaking approach to understanding the crisis?
- How did the respondent's sensemaking approach inform their leadership response?
- How do the personality traits, behaviors, and competencies the executive leader describes fall within the multi-dimensional framework proposed for this study?
- Does the respondent's description of the crisis management process match a theoretical model for crisis management?
- How often do environmental variables such as organizational culture and administrative structures emerge as factors influencing the respondent's sensemaking and leadership approach?

### References

- Whiting, L. S. (2008). Semi-structured interviews: guidance for novice researchers. *Nursing Standard (through 2013)*, 22(23), 35. doi: 10.7748/ns2008.02.22.23.35.c6420
- Yin, R. K. (2013). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.