

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF
COLLEGE MERGERS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2022

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APPROVED BY:

Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. The theory guiding this study was Lewin's (1997) change theory. Lewin (1997) suggested that the critical factor of an organization's tone lies in leadership before, during, and after a change. Therefore, the success of any significant organizational transition, such as a merger, relies on the skills of leaders. A central research question and three sub-questions were used to understand the lived experiences that impact administrators during a college merger. A qualitative methodology was used to understand participants' personal experiences in a natural setting. Two-year technical colleges merged within one college system located in the Southern United States served as the setting for this research. The study included 10 participants from current two-year college administrators and former administrators who were administrators during the merger of one of the merged colleges within Merged Technical College Systems (MTCS). Data were collected from interviews, focus groups, and reflection documents simultaneously. Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology were used to analyze the data. After reading and rereading the transcripts of the interviews, reflection documents, and transcripts of focus groups, data were clustered into common themes. Five themes emerged: Uncertainty, Benefits, Change, Communication, and Culture. Throughout the study, I bracketed myself out by memoing.

Keywords: merging colleges, college mergers, acquiring colleges, higher education leadership

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the loving memory of my sweet mom, Emily J. Hall. You were there when I started this journey, but you had to go to Heaven before I ended it. You always believed in my ability to earn a doctorate. I miss you so much.

Acknowledgments

I give special thanks to God, who provided me with the persistence, perseverance, and serenity to endure this venture. I am grateful for my siblings, Wilma, Jerome, and Lamar, who supported me during this long inspiring process, especially Dr. Veta Robinson. To my husband and both of my daughters, LaKesha and Jasmine, for supporting me with their love. Many thanks to Dr. Barry Dotson and Dr. James Eller.

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List of Abbreviations

Central Research Question (CQ)

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)

Merged Technical College Systems (MTCS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

As merging colleges continue to be an option that educational leaders use for the survival of higher educational institutions, researchers must continue to study mergers (Romanenko & Lisyutkin, 2018). Even when there is a solid motivation to merge, one cannot predict desirable outcomes (Williams et al., 2019). Leaders must understand that a significant transformation will occur during a merger (Leon, 2018; Namubiru et al., 2017). College mergers are challenging and require solid, well-developed leaders (Evans, 2017). There are still important ideas for future research on organizational and system-level education mergers (Ribando et al., 2017).

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. Chapter One provides a background of the study, including the historical, social, and theoretical background. There were research studies from 1970 to as recent as 2019 identified in the historical background section. In addition, research studies used to develop a better knowledge of the social phenomenon of mergers were examined in the social background section. The theoretical background section contains a discussion of the theoretical support for merging colleges. The problem statement and purpose statement sections in Chapter One established the foundation for the study. In addition, research questions, definitions relevant to the study, and the summary of Chapter One further explained the participants' perceptions.

Background

Although there are benefits to merging colleges, there are also negative consequences (Bor & Ketko, 2019). Although educational leaders chose to merge colleges for many reasons, the main driving force appeared to be the maximization of economies of scale (Puusa & Kekäle,

2015). Even though cost saving is a suggestion for mergers, there have not been adequate studies that confirm the cost-saving (Hidalgo & Valera, 2016; Quinton, 2017). Even if mergers and acquisitions help create a profitable organization, as leaders notice the cultural theories, it becomes evident that many problems occur because of cultural differences within the newly formed organization (Bor & Ketko, 2019; Puusa & Kekäle, 2015). It is time for college leaders to look beyond profit to the needs of a wider community (Evans, 2017; Leon, 2018). Many mergers have failed to get employees on board during the early stage of the change process of a merger (Leon, 2018; Senior et al., 2017). Faculty have indicated that mergers bring about a loss of power and status (Persson & Frostenson, 2021).

Historical Context

The phenomenon of merging colleges began attracting attention worldwide in 1970 as a means for governments to systematically restructure higher education, but the phenomenon of merging slowed down in the 1990s (Ahmadvand et al., 2012). In the 1970s, mergers in Australia included merging small specialist colleges into stronger larger colleges, whereas mergers in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s were used to restructure the higher education system (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). In 1994, the merger of colleges to create Norwegian Telemark College faced significant challenges because of the considerable geographical distance between the five campuses (Ahmadvand et al., 2012). In 1994, 98 vocational colleges were merged into 26 new state colleges in Norway (Kyvik, 2002). Over the last three decades, mergers have again become a common phenomenon across higher educational systems (Russell, 2019). Mergers are now becoming a way for boards of trustees and governmental agencies to solve institutional problems such as a decline in enrollment and efficiency, although there continues to be an increase in cost (William et al., 2019). In the last decade, there has been an increase in college mergers in the

United States, England, Australia, and Finland (Ursin & Aittola, 2019). Since 2007, Denmark has seen a reduction from 25 universities and institutions to eight, and in 2009 in France, the University of Strasbourg became France's largest university after three universities were merged (Labi, 2011). In 2010, Iran merged three medical universities into one of the largest medical universities in that country (Ahmadvand et al., 2012).

In 2007 and 2008, the governor and commissioner of a Southern state in the United States began studying the option of merging colleges in the two-year college system. At that time, the system consisted of 35 two-year colleges (Hodges, 2013). Between 2008 and 2018, a total of 13 mergers and acquisitions were to take place (MTCS Strategic Plan, 2009). Greater operational efficiencies were stated as a major justification for the mergers (MTCS Strategic Plan, 2009). In addition, the governor and the state board had mandated a budget reduction of 8% and 10% for the fiscal years 2010 and 2011, respectively (MTCS Strategic Plan, 2009). In addition, since 2013, the four-year university system consolidation has reduced the number of institutions from 35 to 30 (Hodges, 2013). Because of mergers, many small communities in this state have lost many jobs (Russell, 2019).

There have been several different elements that researchers have studied about mergers, although using various research designs and methods. For instance, several studies have addressed stress on faculty caused by mergers. Hiatt and Richardson (2017) were the first to study the influence of mergers on students' stress levels. The findings indicated that students from both colleges experience significant stress levels, and often the stress can be devastating (Capuccinello & Bradley, 2020; Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). Stensaker et al.'s 2016 study was one of the first studies to investigate the perceptions of external stakeholders, and one of the first studies to include a merger that failed. Both Senior et al.'s 2017 and Russell's 2019 studies were

among the few quantitative studies of college mergers. Namubiru et al. (2017) used a mixed-method study consisting of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to examine leadership styles during college mergers.

Social Context

Many researchers attempt to understand higher educational mergers as a social phenomenon (Cai, 2017). When organizations merge, the organizations often differ in status, size, and performance (Hassan, 2018). Even when the missions and visions of merging colleges were similar, there were often cultural differences (Goastellec & Välimaa, 2019). Cultural differences were often the cause of organizational problems (Ahmad, 2018). Dissimilar cultures could negatively influence the merging process. Although cultural differences are not understood, they should never be ignored (Goastellec & Välimaa, 2019). Changes in organizational culture after a merger influence employees' stress levels, sense of fit, and turnover intention (Evans, 2017). It is therefore crucial for leaders to understand what must also take place after a merger. Post-merger integration includes the ability of the two colleges to become one culture (Bereksin et al., 2018). Furthermore, the change in behavior and attitude can be successfully maintained using professional development programs (Sułkowski et al., 2019).

In addition, merging colleges could negatively affect families and communities (Young et al., 2018). Many communities often change group identities once a merger occurs (Young et al., 2018). Evidence of the weaker college identity is often erased (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). For Christian college's higher educational leaders, the decision to merge required the leaders to be true to Christian values while creating options to cut costs and produce funding (Russell, 2019). Researchers recommended creating standards for merging educational institutions that could help bring order to the merging process while assisting organizations to avoid making costly errors

(Safavi & Håkanson, 2018).

Theoretical Context

Theories of change explore the factors that contribute to success and failure during and after a transcendental phenomenology such as a college merger. Lewin (1997) insisted that change is vital for organizations in growing, highly competitive business environments. Lewin (1997) suggested that leadership is critical to an organization's tone. Therefore, any significant organizational changes success relies on the leadership's ability. Leadership theories have been the framework for several research studies on merging colleges (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017; Safavi & Håkanson, 2018). For example, Namubiru et al.'s (2017) merger study is modeled on the contingency theory of leadership. Likewise, Safavi and Hakanson (2018) provided a greater understanding of the theory of knowledge governance in universities. Up to now, there were many studies that focused on college mergers and leadership (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017), although there was a lack of studies investigating administrators' leadership and management skills. The impact of changes on employees and their attitudes and behaviors has an essential effect on successfully implementing change (Williams et al., 2019). At this point, there have been few studies that gave a voice to administrators involved in mergers.

Problem Statement

The problem identified is that mergers have often negatively affected instructors, staff, students, leadership, and the community (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Preston, 2019; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020). Many research studies have indicated that leadership plays a vital role in the success of a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017). Few research studies examine administrators' concerns during a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al.,

2017). This identified gap in the literature has been supported by the recommendations for research to evaluate the influences of a higher education merger on administrators (Evans, 2017; Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). Leadership plays a significant role in merging as it is essential in ensuring success in any industry (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). An effective leader must create trust, manage uncertainty, ensure staff stability, and bridge cultural difference (Bor & Shargel, 2020). Higher education leaders have chosen mergers to maintain a presence in many of their educational service areas (Hodges 2013; Liu, Patton, & Kenney, 2018). Unfortunately, this decision comes with many challenges for middle managers involved in managing the faculty and staff (Min, 2017). Leadership styles have not been researched as in-depth for merging colleges as in other industries that have experienced mergers (Boling et al., 2017). Few mergers consider administrators' management skills or leadership skills (Evans, 2017). This present study investigated the perception and experiences of administrators involved in college mergers and the influence that the merger had on the administrators' ability to lead.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. At this stage in the research, the merger will be generally defined as a combination of two companies into a single larger company (Williams et al., 2019). The collaboration of leadership during a college merger is essential, and it is often difficult to achieve (Williams et al., 2019). The theory guiding this study was Lewin's (1997) change theory. Lewin (1997) suggested that the critical factor of an organization's tone, before, during, and after a change, lies in leadership. Leaders involved in mergers must understand the differences and individuality of each employee while also promoting the common or shared personalities and

beliefs. Therefore, the success of any significant organizational change, such as a merger, relies on the skills of leaders.

Significance of the Study

This study was significant for educational leaders in college systems considering merging colleges as a solution for increasing access to education while decreasing the cost. The current research has empirical significance in that administrators' perceptions during and after college mergers were previously unknown. What was known was that mergers are a radical institutional reorganization that should not be made without understanding the advantages and disadvantages (Bolbanabad et al., 2017).

Theoretically, this research study explored theories of change. Although economic strategies support mergers, the importance of accessing and managing organizational dynamics should never be ignored (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). Even when there is an initial economic gain, the long-range success of the organization can be hindered by the resistance to change (Ursin & Aittola, 2019). While theories of change were present in the literature, there was a lack of studies that looked specifically at administrators' perceptions of a college merger. Lewin (1997) insisted that change is vital for organizations in growing, highly competitive business environments. When an organizational change occurs, leaders must be able to help employees overcome resistance to change (Lewin, 1997). Administrators' ability to lead during the drastic changes of a merger set the organization's tone (Lewin, 1997). It is important for administrators to understand the behavior modification of people (Lewin, 1997).

Practically, studying the perceptions of administrators helped develop an understanding of the opportunity that administrators were given to help employees manage change during a merger. In addition, studying the perceptions of administrators added to the literature to help

understand how administrators identify the newly formed organization that was created after a college merger. This study provided valuable feedback about the challenges of being an administrator during and after a merger. This study can help political and educational leaders understand the skills that administrators need to be able to effectively manage during and after a merger occurs.

Research Questions

A central research question with three sub-questions were used to explore the factors surrounding the central phenomenon (Creswell 2018). These research questions are important because as educational systems continue to study the options for merging, it is vital that the process continuously improve. The central research question guided this qualitative phenomenological research study to understand administrators' perceptions of the effects of college mergers. Sub-question one focused on the experiences that administrators underwent during the merging process. The question was useful to understand if administrators see the merger as the force that will drive change (Lewin, 1997). Overlooking change details could lead to unplanned results (Gearin, 2017). Sub-question two was designed to obtain an understanding of the communication and work relationship of the administrators and their faculty and staff. The question was useful to understand how communication can be used as the organism which moves the equilibrium position to change (Lewin, 1997). Sub-question three was used to identify each administrator's ability to manage once the new college had been formed and to identify new norms. Lewin (1997) suggested that the critical factor of an organization's tone lies in leadership. The following central question and sub-questions were examined:

Central Research Question

What are the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States? This study used Lewin's change theory (1997) to understand how administrators integrate the newly formed college during and after a merger. The merger caused the employees to go through the phases of Lewin's change model, although the administrators attempted to establish and maintain social power.

Sub-Question One

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the merging process? This question was used to develop an understanding of the administrators' perceptions of how the merger process changes the present habits, thus unfreezing the current stage of complacency (Lewins, 1997). The greater the severity of the change, the more impact on the merger, and the less the change will be accepted (Lewins, 1997). Different organizational changes could cause the phenomenon of resistance to change (Leslie et al., 2018). Interviews, reflection documents, and focus groups were used to single out the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Potential participant bias was considered in the collection of data using interviews (Bor & Ketko, 2019).

Sub-Question Two

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on communication challenges? High-quality change communication can reduce uncertainty and help to establish a commitment to change (Lewin, 1997). The objective of this question was to seek an understanding of administrators' perceptions of communication during the second phase of a change process, the moving phase. For example, when one of the major change forms of communication is gossip and rumors, the change efforts will be destroyed (Thornton et al., 2019).

Interviews, reflection documents, and focus groups were used to learn the meaning that the participants held about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018).

Sub-Question Three

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the newly formed college? The critical factor of the refreezing or new equilibrium becoming the new organization was for new habits to be formed (Lewin, 1997). Interviews, reflection documents, and focus groups were used to document the new norms that had been created.

Definitions

1. *Auxiliary Enterprises* - Departments that support the colleges such as bookstores and internship and externship companies (Bonaime et al., 2018).
2. *Consolidation* - Two or more academic organizations of similar sizes converge to form a new arrangement (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017).
3. *Distinctive* - The way interviewees perceive their college is different from another college (Puusa & Kekale, 2015).
4. *Horizontal merger* - A merger that involves organizations within the same market (Senior et al., 2017).
5. *Interest* - The combination of emotion and personal valuation of a task resulting in a desire for various levels of enjoyment (Ainley & Ainley, 2011).
6. *Leadership* - The attributes of individuals and the process through which the individual influences decisions and guides people working in an organization (Namubiru, Onen & Oonyu, 2017).
7. *Post-merger integration* – The ease with which two organizations become one (Bereskin et al., 2018).

8. *Production Function* – The relationship between outputs(graduates) of the university and the inputs (students) (Papdimitriou & Johnes, 2019).
9. *Soft issues* - Issues that are difficult to quantitatively verify, such as culture and morality (Bonaime et al., 2018).
10. *Take-over* - When a larger institution takes over a smaller one (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017).
11. *Vertical merger* - A merger that involves two organizations operating in the same supply chain (Senior et al., 2017).

Summary

Chapter One included an introduction and background to this investigation of the perceptions of administrators involved in college mergers. The problem and significance of this study were identified, as there was little prior research giving a voice to administrators involved in college mergers. The study findings could inform educational and political leaders about favorable college mergers. This study is significant for educational leaders in college systems that are considering merging colleges as a solution for increasing access to education and decreasing the cost. Mergers have become an option chosen by educational and political leaders for the survival of higher education institutions because of current funding reductions and increasing competition. Mergers have again become a worldwide phenomenon as a response to changes in operating situations (Puusa & Kekäle, 2015). Mergers in higher education seem to be more common as academic institutions work to control costs and avoid program duplications (Boling et al., 2017). Many college leaders agree that there is a need for merging colleges, but there are still many mergers that are unproductive, which often require years of adjusting to recover from the merger (Stensaker et al., 2016). Unfortunately, mergers often negatively affect

instructors, staff, students, leadership, and the community. There have been few research studies examining the problems or concerns that administrators face during a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. Using qualitative evidence can be informative for understanding system decisions by representing the views and experiences of stakeholders (Lewin & Glenton, 2018). The experiences and perceptions served as a guide for understanding and addressing the concerns associated with college mergers. Leaders are merging colleges and universities for both survival and growth. Both the University System and the Technical College System of the state in this study are depending on the success of mergers to grow and remain competitive (Russell, 2019). Mergers generally take place in the business domain (Ursin & Aittola, 2019). The objective for most mergers is for educational survival and economic benefits (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Ribando et al., 2017). Furthermore, merging universities have grown because of the idea of creating world-class universities and the associated phenomenon of academic rankings (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). In addition, mergers are among a range of options that the government is using to reform teacher education (Bileviciute et al., 2019). Current globalization requires changes to be made in every educational system with merging taking place in all countries (Bileviciute et al., 2019).

Mergers have become an option chosen by educational and political leaders for the survival of higher education institutions because of current funding reductions and increasing competition (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Khan et al., 2020; Ribando et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). As merging colleges continues to be an option that educational leaders are using for the survival and accountability of higher educational institutions, it is vital

that researchers continue to study mergers to provide information to leaders who are considering merging. Higher education mergers are an ongoing occurrence in many countries (Khan et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2019).

Although mergers are designed to strengthen the college, they often lead to low morale and a struggle to overcome problems (Bor & Ketko, 2019; Khan et al., 2020). Faculty report that even academic program mergers of just departments and divisions cause low morale and problems (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). Employee's fears and stress from the initial announcement of a merger is the beginning of the struggle of a merger (Khan et al., 2020; Ribando et al., 2017; Senior et al., 2017). Mergers are labor-intensive, stressful, challenging, and should involve all staff (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020). Furthermore, mergers cause an organizational change that relates to impersonal sources and has an impact on workforce and employment relationships (Khan et al., 2020). Mergers also create problems with the newly formed governing board and foundation members (Bor & Ketko, 2019; Khan et al., 2020). The members often lack trust in and loyalty for each other (Bor & Ketko, 2019; Khan et al., 2020).

Although there has been a degree of progress in studying university mergers, new findings suggest that there are still important ideas for future research on both organizational and system levels (Ribando et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). Previous studies used senior managers and members of the president's leadership team as participants (Bor & Ketko, 2019). This chapter present an overview of the existing literature about college mergers. The review of the literature was used as a foundation for guiding the research design (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas 1994). The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and EBSCO host databases were used for locating research of current and historical bodies of literature that were used to develop this literature review. The search included a review of current literature of

2- year technical and community colleges and 4-year universities that have merged, both in the United States and internationally. A thorough review of available research related to college mergers within higher education was conducted. A review of the literature was ongoing throughout the data collection and data analysis steps of the study.

This chapter also provides a theoretical framework section which includes a review of literature on college mergers and a review of Lewin's (1997) change theory. Several theories provided a foundation for investigating college mergers, but only Lewin's (1997) change theory was used as a theoretical framework for this qualitative study. In addition, this chapter includes an in-depth review of the literature to synthesize studies that explored college mergers. The review of the literature identified research focused on cultural differences, stakeholders, leadership, job satisfaction, and outcome assessments of the mergers, all of which provided the basis for the current research study. The literature review indicated that there was a gap in the understanding of administrators' experiences and perceptions during and after technical college mergers. The last section of Chapter Two is a summary of the chapter that includes a review of the gap in the literature and provides a concentrated area of the need for this study.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework for this qualitative study provided an in-depth understanding of each study that could influence the research process. Using a theoretical framework, this qualitative study described the experience and perception of administrators at two-year colleges that have merged within one college system located in the southern United States. Administrators were identified as assistant vice presidents, deans, associate deans, assistant deans, and coordinators, both academic and nonacademic. Qualitative research begins with "assumptions and the use of theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the

meaning individual or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 8). A review of the literature revealed several research studies of college mergers that were developed based on many different theoretical frameworks. Studying research that used different theories helped establish an understanding of the events of merging colleges. This study of college mergers used Lewin’s (1997) change theory as a theoretical framework to understand the perceptions of administrators. Lewin has been identified as the father of planned change (Bakari et al., 2017). Lewin’s work on change offers an expounded and vigorous methodology to understanding and solving conflicts caused by change (Gill, 2020).

Lewin’s Change Theory

Kurt Lewin is considered the founding father of planned organizational change literature (Lewin, 1997). For a better understanding of the perceptions of administrators during and after a merger, Lewin’s (1997) change theory was analyzed. Although Lewin’s change theory was created many decades ago, conclusions drawn based on his research are still valid in today’s different working environments (Endrejat et al, 2017). Lewin’s change theory defines three stages of change: unfreezing, movement, and refreezing (Endrejat et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997). In addition, Lewin’s change theory approaches change with an ethical basis and stresses democratic participation (Burnes, 2020). Lewin’s (1997) change theory was applied as a framework to identify if the administrators recognized that there was a problem with the old way, why change was needed, and when the new way became routine.

Change is vital for organizations in any growing and highly competitive business environment (Bose, 2020; Endrej et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997). Bose (2020) insisted that change is now a routine for most organizations. It is inevitable for any organization to persist without change; thus managing the change becomes crucial (Bose, 2020). For any organization to

maintain equilibrium and survive change, the organization must be able to respond to the changing environment both internal and external to the organization (Bose, 2020; Martin & Colville, 2017; Tran & Gandolfi, 2020). When there are changes in an organization, an individual will either identify a need for the expected change or accept the change through direct force, perhaps due to having no desire to change at all (Bakari et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997). When change demoralizes feelings of worth and a sense of belonging, confrontation to change will occur (Farmer & Van Dyne, 2017; Smollan & Pio, 2018). Bose (2020) suggested that such confrontation, whether tangible or intangible, will become an obstacle to change. In Lewin's (1997) change theory, individuals will go through a change of cognitive structure in which changes will occur with each repeated experience. A phenomenon that drives change is often met with resistance to change and the organization must move back to an equilibrium position toward the place of change (Bakari et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997). The process of change entails creating the perception that a change is needed, then moving toward the new, desired level of behavior and finally, solidifying that new behavior as the norm (Bakari et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997). In the unfreezing stage, it is necessary to break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness and the freezing stage represents where the new habit or norm is adopted and institutionalized (Burnes, 2020; Lewin, 1997). Human behavior is recognized by former observational learning and cultural influences (Bakari et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997). To successfully move through the unfreezing stage, employees must be motivated to change, which requires overcoming disconfirmation, survival anxiety, and learning anxiety (Burnes, 2020). Change creates uncertainty which often creates resistance to change (Ahmad & Zhichao-Cheng, 2018; Lewin, 1997).

Communicating with employees early during a change process will provide information that will increase understanding the change (Ahmad & Zhichao-Cheng, 2018). It is also important at this stage to change only what needs to be changed (Burnes, 2020). Leaders must realize that understanding where faculty are in the transition process is more important than having faculty reach an agreement with change (Pawl & Anderson, 2017). Furthermore, it is during the refreezing stage, which takes place during the post-merger meeting, that the loop is closed for a successful change (Burnes, 2020; Lewin, 1997).

Although Lewin's (1997) change theory offers foundational significance as a conceptual framework in many research studies, it still faces many criticisms for oversimplifying the importance and the steps for change (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020; Zhitlukhina, 2018). Others criticize Lewin's change theory because change occurs more quickly than Lewin's change theory accommodates (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020). In addition, some researchers have suggested that Lewin's change theory is only suitable for small-scale change projects (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020; Zhitlukhina, 2018). Some researchers have used Lewin's (1997) change theory with other theories to address the simplicity issues (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). In addition, Lewin's change theory faces criticism because change is often unpredictable, and it is not possible to frame the change from unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020).

Developing a deeper understanding of the development of Lewin's change theory will help researchers understand why Lewin's (1997) change theory could be a theoretical framework for studying college mergers. Lewin's (1997) change theory was developed from Lewin's (1946) field theory which stresses the possibility of understanding, predicting, and providing the basis for changing behavior of individuals and groups (Tran & Gandolfi, 2020). At the time of Lewin's death, the most developed area of his work was field theory, and his primary focus was

not organizational change, but the broader aim of resolving social conflict (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). Lewin's (1946) field theory focused more on the importance of the group values and standards in the organization. Real change will occur when administrators or managers are able to change the group perceptions (Lewin, 1946). Characteristics of a group such as its standards for a behavior will act as a driving force to show that behavior (Endrejat et al., 2017).

The simplicity of Lewin's (1997) change theory should not be criticized because this simplicity can be used to promote democratic values and resolve social conflict through action research (Burnes, 2020; Burnes & Bargal, 2017). Lewin's (1997) change theory will be a useful tool to reveal deeper critical structures to changes that occurred during and after the college merger. The attitude about the college merger applies to the way the change process has been managed (Lehmann, 2017). Only when a college is on the verge of closing, and staff realizes that this is the only financial alternative then staff will not resist the change (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). In some instances, the reason for the merger will be irrelevant; the change is the only relevant issue (Lehmann, 2017).

Even with criticism, Lewin's (1997) change theory model has been extensively used as the foundation model for numerous change models and several research studies. Lewin's (1997) change theory is a well-thought-out approach to change based on the development of his field theory and is far from being simple (Burnes, 2020). Applying Lewin's (1997) change theory will present an opportunity for leaders to first identify a problem that the college had before the merger occurred. Thus, identifying a need for the desired change, the unfreezing stage (Burnes, 2020). The next step involves leadership communicating why change is needed (Burnes, 2020). The final step involves developing a routine by incorporating the new procedure (Burnes, 2020). Each step should be done ethically although facing day-to-day pressures to meet deadlines and

performance targets (Burnes, 2020). Ethics are not just about financial propriety but include addressing the environment and public concerns (Burnes, 2020).

Lewin's (1997) change theory model was used as a theoretical framework for this study to investigate administrators' experience against the phases of change that occur during merging colleges. Using Lewin's (1997) change theory offered leaders a better understanding of the possible justifications for the phenomenon of resistance to change during a college merger (Burnes, 2020; Lehmann, 2017). Lewin's (1997) theoretical constructs can be helpful to reveal deeper-lying critical structures to change (Lehmann, 2017). The transformation that occurs during a college merger will cause the organization to go through several phases.

Lewin's (1997) change theory model was used to investigate administrators' experience against the phases of change that occur during and after merging colleges. College mergers could be a practice of an institute transformation; thus Lewin's change theory concept of unfreezing was used as a theoretical initial argument for the study. It is important to identify if those involved in the college merger note the unfreezing point as being a voluntary approach or a forced unfreezing and if the merger was initiated by internal or external stakeholders (Lehmann, 2017; Martin & Colville, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). These aspects impact the implementation of forming a merged college and was considered all through the qualitative analysis of this study. The way a transformation such as a merger is presented has a vital consequence for the execution of the merger (Lehmann, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). Lewin's (1997) change theory categorizes the organization as being in rest or a static equilibrium state, and it categorizes the unfreezing as breaking this state which alters established routines (Lehmann, 2017; Martin & Colville, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). It is important for an organization to preserve equilibrium and endure while reacting to an ever-changing environment

(Martin & Colville, 2017). During this study, a sub-question was used to identify the perceptions of the unfreezing process for the change. The central objective was to detect if there was an awareness of the necessity or urgency for a change (Nolan & Walsh, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). The perceptions of the change were noted not only at the individual level but also at the group level (Lehmann, 2017). Kirkpatrick (2021) suggested that a higher education system is a structural system of social relations that determines and reproduces social activity thus giving everything and everyone a position (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Rajwan, 2018). Therefore, the present study noted what administrators identify as the primary motivation for the college merger. Lewin (1997) submitted that the establishment of awareness is a significant element to unfreeze an organization. Identifying and understanding key themes of tension construct occasions to create resilient and systemic change (Lehmann, 2017).

The second stage in the change theory is identified as the movement stage (Lewin, 1997). The moving phase should demonstrate the benefits of change by brainstorming, coaching, and training (Lehmann, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). Mid-level leaders play an important and difficult part in organizing and executing changes (Kohtamäki, 2019). For this study, the change was the merger, thus moving toward the creation of the new institution. This study also included a sub-question that was used to identify the perceptions of the moving process for the change. The essential objective was to seek an understanding of administrators' perceptions of communication and implementation of the change. Throughout the qualitative analysis of this study of how administrators perceive communicating and implementing changes was noted to address themes that are presented. It is important that training in resistance to change is provided to administrators during times of substantial transformation even for experienced leaders (Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). In addition, poor communication is noted by the faculty

(Persson & Frostenson, 2021), but there has been a lack of studies that note the perceptions of administrators. High-quality change communication will reduce uncertainty and help establish a commitment to change (Lewins, 1997). Thus, Lewin's change theory enabled the present study to seek the perceptions of administrators.

The final stage in Lewin's (1977) change theory is identified as the refreezing stage. It is at this stage that a new equilibrium is established with new norms formed and the beginning of retraining (Lehmann, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). This study included a sub-question that was used to identify the perceptions of the newly formed college. Using reflection letters, the administrators identified their process for monitoring the success or failures of the new college. Similar studies have only used a technical college that was created from merging two technical colleges to draw participants. Using the technical college system to draw participants from several technical colleges offered more participants, thus overcoming Norton and Wilson's (2015) limitation of a small sample size when using only two technical colleges. Although there is not a completely linear way to achieve a successful change using Lewin's change theory can help present change issues that occurred.

A theoretical framework for this qualitative study provided an in-depth understanding of each study that could influence the research process. Using a theoretical framework, this qualitative study described the experience and perception of administrators at two-year colleges that have merged within one college system located in the Southern United States.

Administrators were identified as assistant vice presidents, deans, associate deans, assistant deans, and coordinators, both academic and nonacademic. Qualitative research begins with "assumptions and the use of theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individual or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell &

Poth, 2018, p. 8). A review of the literature revealed several research studies of college mergers that had been developed using many different theoretical frameworks. Studying research that uses different theories helped establish an understanding of the events of merging colleges. This study of college mergers used Lewin's (1997) change theory as a theoretical framework to understand the perceptions of administrators. Lewin has been identified as the father of planned change (Bakari et al., 2017). Lewin's work on change offers an expounded and vigorous methodology for understanding and solving conflicts caused by change (Gill, 2020).

Related Literature

The objective of college mergers is for educational survival and economic benefit (Burnes, 2020). College leaders often choose to merge because the college must improve student access while reaching a broader and more diverse population (Bor & Ketko, 2019). A clear theme in the review of the literature suggested that many institutions have to change and adapt to a shifting higher education landscape (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Tarrant, Bray, & Katsinas, 2018). Mergers occur more commonly in two-year institutions (Russell, 2019). Although college mergers and acquisitions have enabled many colleges to remain open, mergers and acquisitions do come with challenges (Williams et al., 2019). Many of the challenges caused by merger are often from the resistance to change itself (Williams et al., 2019). Being able to overcome such challenges in a timely manner will be a great indicator of the success of the newly formed college.

An analysis of studies indicated that there are both negative and positive consequences of merging colleges (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Ribando et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Even when divisions or schools within the same university merge, workers' performance and morale are affected (Hou et al., 2020; Yoshinaga, 2018). College mergers' influence on workers'

performance and morale should not be underestimated (Sajwani, 2021). Because many educators are not familiar with laws that regulate higher educational mergers, employees often believe they are disempowered after a merger, which requires that administrators provide employees with ways to feel empowered (Irving et al., 2018; Petit, 2019). Human resources should play a major role in assuring that policies and procedures for merging higher education institutions are followed (Irving et al., 2018).

It is important that there is an open dialogue among internal and external stakeholders, pre-merger, during the merger, and post-merger (Harkin et al., 2020). Unfortunately, in many cases of mergers, the decision to merge institutions is a top-down directive with very little thought of cultural differences, stakeholders, or leadership (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Ribando et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). Studying the perceptions of administrators will develop an understanding of whether or not they were given the opportunity to help employees meet these and other needs during a merger. Review of the literature for this study identified research focusing on cultural differences, stakeholders, leadership, and outcome assessment of the mergers which provided the basis for this research.

Cultural Difference

Cultural similarities of colleges that merge play a major role in the merger being a success (Bereskin, 2018; Supriyanto, 2020). Higher education mergers are different from a typical consolidation (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). Merging different size colleges often includes putting together colleges with different programs and different needs. The culture of all the stakeholders, both internal and external, must be addressed. If not addressed, the merger is perceived as a take-over (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). Mergers cause a creation of a new identity for an organization and its members, although requiring the organization and members to

abandon their pre-merger identity and culture (Chipunza, 2017; Hassan, 2018). There is an increase in the knowledge of organizational culture as an important concept in the business and educational environments (Bereskin, 2018; Chipunza, 2017; Supriyanto, 2020), but few studies of higher educational mergers address this aspect.

Although, mergers take place as a result of government top-down approaches, leaders pay very little attention to cultural differences. Organizational culture is a vital element in defining how well individuals will fit into the organization (Bereskin, 2018; Bor & Shargel, 2020; Ursin & Aittola, 2019). Whether there is a horizontal merger or a vertical merger, there will still be cultural differences (Senior et al., 2017). For example, both Hou et al. (2020) and Yoshinaga (2018) studied horizontal mergers of divisions or schools within the same university that still affected workers' performance and morale. Likewise, in Persson and Frostenson's study (2021), the attrition rate of faculty was affected by college or division mergers within the same university. On the other hand, Bor and Shargel's (2020) study identified many struggles that take place when a small private school merges with a large university. In either case, identity formation is a critical issue in light of social and technological changes (Chipunza, 2017; Topolewska & Ciecuch, 2017). The relative success or failure of an academic merger can be greatly affected by the attempt to combine two or more separate cultures (Bereskin, 2018; Ribando et al., 2017; Williams, Feldman, & Connors, 2017).

Even though the missions and visions of most colleges are similar, there are often cultural differences between each college (Tarrant, Bray, & Katsinas, 2018; Williams et al., 2017). There are often both visible cultural differences such as observable behavior and invisible cultural differences such as value assumptions (Chipunza, 2017; Supriyanto, 2020). An analysis of multiple research studies indicates that culture plays a major role in the success or failure of a

merger (Bereskin, 2018; Leon, 2018; Williams et al., 2017). Even if mergers help create a profitable organization, many problems occur because of cultural differences within the newly formed organization (Bor & Ketko, 2019). It is time for college leaders to look beyond their profitability to the needs of a wider community (Bereskin, 2018; Leon, 2018; Supriyanto, 2020). Even when colleges are similar in size and culture, there is still one merger partner more dominant, and that college's culture will often be preserved (Bonaime et al., 2018). It is important that organizational routines are placed in a broader context and that managers are able to identify the origins of conflicts and address them (Foroutan et al., 2021; Rowlands, 2018). Safavi and Håkanson's (2018) study contributed to the existing body of knowledge for understanding power dynamics routines during a college merger.

Often, human resources play a role in training to develop an understanding and overcome cultural differences within the organization of the newly formed college (Ribando et al., 2017). Cultural differences can cause low performance and morale, which can lead to the failure of an academic merger (Williams et al., 2017). Using surveys, Williams et al. (2017) captured pre-merger and post-merger data to study stakeholders' cultural differences. Supriyanto (2020) also used surveys to capture relevant cultural differences pre and post-merger in a mixed-method study.

Colleges that have several campuses that are geographically miles away from each other also influence the culture (Williams et al., 2017). These cultural differences are often the result of external stakeholders (Williams et al., 2017). It is important to address cultural differences for both students and faculty early in the merger stage (Romanenko & Froumin, 2020; Young et al., 2018). The culture of the merged college must be a combination of all former colleges (Erjansola et al., 2021). Williams et al. (2017) and Erjansola et al. (2021) used Lewin's change theory to

understand the importance of college mergers working to help develop group culture, which is essential for managing change. When a merger is carried out, the interaction between cultural differences cannot be denied (Supriyanto, 2020). When cultural differences are taken in consideration, they can be overcome, which will contribute to a successful merger (Ribando et al., 2017).

Culture establishes the college identity (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Ribando et al., 2017; Topolewska & Ciecuch, 2017). For a merger to be successful, leaders must work with consultants to understand how to develop cross-cultural perspectives (Preston, 2019). Maintaining college identity seems to be a major concern for most colleges involved in a merger (Coetzee & Mbanze, 2014; Topolewska & Ciecuch, 2017). Branding is part of a college identity; it plays a major part of the newly created college's competitive edge (Zinkovsky & Derkachev, 2018). Even when two successful colleges merge strategically for mutual benefits, there are still college identities to overcome (Senior et al., 2017). Retaining college identity contributes to the success of a college merger (Erjansola et al., 2021). Employees at the smaller college are often more concerned with losing identity (Platt et al., 2017). Small colleges that are known as invisible colleges often lose their identity during a merger (Tarrant et al., 2018). Whether this is true, the perception of losing their identity has a dramatic influence on cultural struggles. Social identity plays an important role in any merger, especially for mergers that involve organizations with unequal status and economic strength (Rosa, 2017). The psychological experience of social change influences an individual's social identity which can influence the implications of possible identities under certain conditions (Masinga & Dumont, 2018). Puusa and Kekäle's (2015) study of colleges that merged used Albert and Whetten's

(1985) organizational identity framework to help understand how a substantial change, such as a merger, makes an organizational identity become more significant.

Studies have indicated that college identity is not only important to faculty and staff, but it is also important to external stakeholders in the college community (Ri et al., 2017). Puusa & Kekäle's (2015) findings indicated that although most colleges have more similarity than differences, each organization is identified differently by its stakeholders. Merging requires the colleges to bring together their differences and create new branding for education (Dawood, 2017). In higher educational institutions, there seems to be little thought of the individual or organizational pre-merger identity. A merger brings employees' formerly held identifications with the old environment to the forefront (Bommaraju et al., 2018; Farmer & Van Dyne, 2017; Smollan & Pio, 2018). Felix and Bento's (2018) study was the first study to examine the interface of the boundaries between individual and organizational identities in mergers. Attempting to merge based on strict equality is counterproductive in establishing the new identity of a college or any business (Bommaraju et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, in some mergers, the person that is chosen to be the president or chief executive of the new college will use the identity of their former college to wipe out the identity, culture, and traditions of the other college, even when the other college is better (Tarrant et al, 2018). Such action of in-group favoritism is directly related to negative attitudes toward mergers (Hassan, 2018). Leaders should understand the importance of moving from comfort zones and detecting similar organizational identity. Therefore, studying the perceptions of administrators added to the literature to help understand how administrators identify the newly formed organization.

College identity is a strength with the branding of the college, which is used for establishing a competitive edge for the newly formed college in a merger (Zinkovsky & Derkachev, 2018). Understanding the perceived distinction leads to developing a better college identity (Puusa & Kekale, 2015). There is really no known way to test a hypothesis that change versus keeping the branding name would have been better for the newly formed college (Zinkovsky & Derkachev, 2018). Changing the name of the institution could be significant for marketing because it reflects a major institutional development (Tarrant et al, 2018). On the other hand, name change could have limited impact on staff and students that perceive themselves as working or studying at the local college (Romanenko & Froumin, 2020).

In higher educational institutions, there seems to be little thought of the individual or organizational pre-merger identity. A merger brings employees' formerly held identifications with the old environment to the forefront (Bommaraju et al., 2018; Farmer & Van Dyne, 2017; Smollan & Pio, 2018). Felix and Bento's (2018) study was the first study to examine the interface of the boundaries between individual and organizational identities in mergers. Attempting to merge based on strict equality is counterproductive in establishing the new identity of any college or business (Bommaraju et al., 2018). During the review of literature for this current project, several studies were identified that examined the cultural differences of faculty, students, and external stakeholders; but there was a lack sufficient research that focused on the cultural differences of administrators.

Stakeholders

Kirkpatrick (2021) suggested that a higher education system is a structural system of social relations that determines and reproduces social activity thus giving everything and everyone a position (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Rajwan, 2018). The focus on merging

colleges is now taking place for public nonprofit and private for-profit colleges (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Russell, 2019). There are both internal and external stakeholders involved in college mergers. Internal stakeholders include all levels of management, faculty, staff, and students. External stakeholders include the community, parents, local industries, and many political entities. Auxiliary enterprises as a whole play a major role in the success of a merger (Bonaime et al., 2018). Processes that hinder mergers often overlook the impact that mergers have on faculty, staff, and students (Preston, 2019; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020). Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice indicates that organizational routines could be established from outside the organization. In many, when little attention is given to external stakeholders, the outcome of the merger is not what was expected (Foroutan et al., 2021). An unbiased transitional team must be developed to work with all stakeholders (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020).

Higher education mergers are usually divided into two groups, mergers that have been initiated externally and mergers that are initiated by the institutions (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). All stakeholders from each college involved in the merger must understand the need for merging colleges (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Ribando et al., 2017). The view of employees in several studies has documented a discontent with the consequences of the mergers (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020). An alliance between college leaders and external stakeholders is a strong driver for the success of a merger (Harkin, D. G., & Goedegebuure, (2020).

Unsuccessful mergers are often the result of poor relationships with college leaders and external stakeholders (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Ribando et al., 2017). Unhappy college foundation board members play a role in a merger being unsuccessful (Ribando et al., 2017). In addition, college mergers could have a negative effect on a community from a loss of income, employment, and psychological wellness (Young et al., 2018). Communication for any merger

should flow from both the stakeholders to the administration and from the administration to the stakeholders (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Ribando et al., 2017).

An analysis of multiple quantitative and qualitative research studies indicated that faculty and staff perceptions were often investigated to understand mergers (Evans, 2017; Persson & Frostenson, 2021). A psychological contract theory could be used to understand the faculty and staff perceptions of the employee and employer relationship (Senior et al., 2017). Harkin and Goedegebuure's (2020) study examined mergers at the organizational level addressing post-merger processes from the perspective of key stakeholders such as employees and university management.

Mergers cause fear for some faculty because there can be a transition in roles from a sole teaching role to a combined teaching and research role (Sułkowski et al., 2019). Understanding the new responsibility of faculty can contribute to stress, but few professional development opportunities are offered to prepare faculty for the new responsibilities (Sułkowski et al., 2019). Using face-to-face and telephone interviews, Evans (2017) collected information from faculty teaching at colleges that were formed from merging colleges. A lack of communication was often perceived by the faculty (Evans, 2017). Findings indicated that faculty who were hired after the completion of the merger were more satisfied than faculty that were involved in the merger, but the new faculty were often not accepted as part of the team with the former faculty (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). These findings suggest that post-merger communication is just as important as premerger communication (Evans, 2017; Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Persson & Frostenson, 2021). Another important finding that emerged was that the faculty's perceptions indicated that there seemed to be a lack of qualified leadership (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). For this reason, it is important to understand the perceptions of

the administrators. Studying the administrators' perceptions helped to understand if they had the appropriate leadership skills.

Only a few research studies have investigated the perceptions of students (Bolbanabad et al., 2017; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020). Hiatt and Richardson (2017) used a survey based on the Impact of Events Scale to measure student stress levels associated with mergers. Students from both colleges involved in the mergers experienced significant levels of stress, and often the stress was perceived as devastating (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020). The abrupt changes caused by merging colleges for students that are engaged in college life are sources of stress (Bolbanabad et al., 2017; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020). Russell's (2019) study, which produced the first quantitative evidence on the quality effects of consolidations in the retention and graduation of students, indicated that a merger increased retention of first-time undergraduate students, especially part-time students. The role of student services is important during pre- and post-merger to address the needs of students during college mergers (Bolbanabad et al., 2017; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020).

More research in the area of student perception is justified so that education leaders will understand the importance of defining resources to help alleviate student stress (Bolbanabad et al., 2017; Hassan, 2018). Unfortunately, collecting information from students will need to be done within a few semesters after a merger because the students will no longer be easily accessible (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). Although there needs to be more research on students' perceptions, student data was not be collected in this study since it has been over three years since the last merger in the college system that was used in this project and since this current study aimed to specifically address perspectives of administrators.

Safavi and Håkanson (2018) used the theory of knowledge governance to study the perception of leadership in both academic and nonacademic departments. Findings indicated that the merger was perceived very differently by administrators of academic departments and administrators of non-academic departments (Safavi & Håkanson, 2018). This grounded theory case study examined how governance structures in universities affect and are affected by the creation and passing of knowledge during a merger (Safavi & Håkanson, 2018). Similar, to Safavi and Håkanson's (2018) study, the present research explored perceptions of administrators, but a phenomenological approach was used for the investigation. This study also used Lewin's (1997) change theory instead of the theory of knowledge governance, and it focused on 2-year technical colleges instead of 4-year universities to fill a gap in the literature.

Leadership

The most demanding duty that a leader must carry out is to implement planned organizational change (Bakari et al., 2017; Bor & Shargel, 2020). The leader must be able to make the team work in a collective mind where everyone functions as intelligently as an organization instead of individually (Preston, 2019). Leadership is important in ensuring the success of any industry (Boling, Mayo, & Helms, 2017). Leaders in an organization play the important role of change agents when there is any major change (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Bose, 2020). Leadership attributes and process changes as the organization change (Namubiru et al., 2017). During a merger academic leaders, must react to changes that could create insecurity (Kohtamäki, 2019). Therefore, merging requires not only transformational leaders but also servant leaders (Bor & Shargel, 2020). Unfortunately, leaders in mergers continue to lack a shared vision (Namubiru et al., 2017; Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). Mid-level leaders play an important and difficult role in organizing and executing changes (Kohtamäki, 2019). A merger

constitutes a radical change where all entities of the organization should be involved (Sułkowski, Fijałkowska, & Dzimińska, 2019). An emerging theme in research studies is that there seems to be a lack of qualified leadership (Persson & Frostenson, 2021). Leadership has the responsibility to set the cultural tone as the common shared norms (Namubiru et al., 2017). Therefore, the success of any major organizational change such as a merger, relies on the skills of leaders. Leaders involved in mergers must understand the differences and individuality of each employee while also promoting the common shared personalities and beliefs (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Hou et al., 2020). Even when the transformation process has been declared a success, followers could still be dissatisfied with the merging and transformation (Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021).

The significance of leadership in ensuring success when a substantial transformation is taking place suggests that offering leadership training to higher education leaders during times of substantial transformation is important even for experienced leaders (Namubiru et al., 2017). Little has been reported on leadership programs initiated to meet the challenging needs of a university consolidation (Evans, 2017). An effective leader must be able to create trust, manage uncertainty, ensure staff stability, and bridge cultural difference (Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). An effective transformational leader must be able to use teams for capacity development (Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). A successful procedure suggests it is important that staff and community leaders openly discuss merger plans before rumors become a means of communication (Ribando et al., 2017).

Lewin's (1997) change theory suggested that leaders' ability to lead during the drastic changes that occur during a merger will set the organization's tone. It is difficult to introduce major change, especially if the change is considered to be managed from the top-down (Puusa & Kekale, 2015). Many research studies indicated that leadership plays an important role in the

success of a merger (Brett, 2018; Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017; Senior et al., 2017). Data is often collected from executive management when studying college mergers (Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). The concern is that merging higher educational institutions affect all administrators (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017). Administrators play an important role in developing trust between upper managers and the instructors and staff. Mistrust leads to administrators having to overcome suspicious management practices (Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). There is a need to build a leadership team for understanding of both executive leaders and middle managers (Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). Leadership style has not been researched as in-depth for merging colleges as it has been in other industries that merge (Boling et al., 2017). When leaders can identify threats that lead to merging and help employees understand threats, they can more easily create a need for unfreezing and a change (Endrejat et al., 2017).

Several leadership theories have been identified and used as a theoretical framework for college merger studies and will be noted while reviewing the literature here. The right leader is crucial for the success of a merger in higher education (Bor & Shargel, 2020). Although various leadership theories have been used to study merged colleges, (e.g., Nolan and Walsh, 2017), this study did not use a leadership theory, but used instead Lewin's (1997) change theory as a framework to develop an understanding of administrators' leadership skills. The human side of any major organizational change must be incorporated. Faculty that participated in a case study at a Historical Black College and University (HBCU) implied that HBCUs use an Afrocentric model that recognizes that people at all levels have leadership skills and qualities, and that model focuses on self-awareness, co-responsibility, and cultural awareness (Beach & Lindahl 2017). Workplace structure has been found to determine many employees' behaviors (Ahmad &

Zhichao, 2018). Studying the perceptions of administrators could help understand if administrators believe that the technical college system uses such a model.

Job Satisfaction

All types of higher education institutions are facing concerns that involve adjusting programs, delivery, and missions with many different ways to make these changes (Bor & Shargel, 2020). For many institutions merging has been an answer to their concerns (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020; Tarrant et al., 2018). However, mergers could affect employees' obligations to the college (Ribando, 2017). The threat of job loss is a phenomenon for many employees (Brett, 2018; Cheng, Mauno, & Lee, 2015). Unfortunately, little time and effort is spent on job satisfaction issues due to the complexity of mergers. There is a substantial connection between an organizational culture created by mergers and job satisfaction (Chipunza, 2017). The dissatisfaction with mergers is often noted in relation to the experience of the merger process, the assessment of the job situation, and job satisfaction (Evans, 2017; Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020).

A college merger will cause an environment to change. The environment plays a vital role in encouraging the motivation of academicians (Khan et al., 2020). Senior et al. (2017) indicated that, whether the merger is a horizontal merger or a vertical merger, there are still many obstacles to overcome. Structural empowerment after a college merger has a direct and positive effect on psychological empowerment, structural empowerment, and job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2020). Even when there is evidence of overall staff commitment to organizational change caused by merging, research indicates that there is still low job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2020). Evans (2017) suggested that, until recently, few research studies have noted the human sides of a merger, such as personal, emotional, and career experiences. Such literature on college mergers

consists of facts such as what happens and when the studies were not used to capture impressions, viewpoints, and emotions (Evans, 2017). Using Albert and Whetten's (1985) organizational identity, Puusa and Kekäle (2015) were able to develop an understanding of the role that job satisfaction has in the success of mergers. In recent studies, the theoretical link between change and job satisfaction has been identified. Although Love's (2015) study used Lewin's (1997) change theory as a theoretical framework, it also suggested that job satisfaction after the merger was as a major concern for faculty. Using Lewin's change theory, researchers have identified the importance of engaging employees to help them maintain job satisfaction

Assessing Merger Outcome

Bor and Ketko (2019) define a merger as a process in which two or more companies unite to form a new company resulting in increasing the overall strength of the company. Measuring the success of a merger includes measuring variables such as financial measurements, although there are also other measurements such as brand strength and customer satisfaction (Bor & Ketko, 2019). Goastellec and Välimaa (2019) suggested that soft issues should also be used when measuring the success or failure of a merger. There have been a limited number of studies that offer validation on the price, cost, and quality effects of college mergers (Russell, 2019). Russell's (2019) study indicated that merging often increases tuition and fees, on average by five-to-seven percent. Managing and measuring a merger is challenging because stakeholders often resist mergers. Goastellec and Välimaa (2019) indicated that, during the discussion for reasons to merge, little attention is placed on educational issues; instead, more attention is placed on administrative issues such as cost and profit. Assessing the merger's success should not only include individuals that decided to merge, but also those involved in the merger, even if they were not involved in the decision to merge (Bor & Ketko, 2019). The merging motive must be

defined before assessing the outcome of any merger (Hassan et al., 2018). The assessment should include both premerger and post-merger outcomes (Hassan et al., 2018).

The merger of different attitudes and different ways of carrying out tasks makes it hard to identify what each stakeholder considers to be a positive outcome (Foroutan et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2018; Tarrant et al., 2018). Merging higher education institutions into one entity is complex and difficult to achieve with any degree of success (Tarrant et al., 2018; Williams, Roberts, & Shires, 2019). Colleges in a system participate in the merger because they perceive there to be increases in efficiency (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). Organizations often struggle to measure if a merger contributes to efficiency and effectiveness (Bereskin et al., 2018; Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020). There are limited studies that measure the effect of a merger by measuring efficiency (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019).

Mergers are difficult to lead to a positive outcome (Russell, 2019). Often studies indicate the positive outcomes of mergers are marginal (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020). One main weakness of deciding to merge is a lack of attention to educational issues (Ursin & Aittola, 2019). Poor financial returns and high failure rates of mergers have been documented in many college mergers (Brett, 2018). A college merger will be successful once the college establishes post-merger integration (Bereskin et al., 2018). Merging of colleges in the same neighborhood is only effective if both institutions can visualize a future together (Brett, 2018).

Extreme changes are occurring all through higher education. As merging colleges continue to become the norm for seeking a way to decrease operating costs, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the true assessment or outcome of a merger (Beach & Lindahl 2017; Brett, 2018). Few studies have been able to judge the success of the merger from the viewpoints of stakeholders who are closely affected by the merger (Harkin & Goedegebuure,

2020). To truly understand the success of mergers requires a lengthy study over several years (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). When assessing the outcome of a merger using the Efficiency theory, it is suggested that a merger will lower resource requirements by increasing efficiency (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). There have been very few studies suggesting that the efficiency is established by changing the number of unique degrees that are now being offered by the newly formed merged college (Russell, 2019). There are complications with assessing the effect on the efficiency of merging (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). Although there is ample research and agreement on the need for mergers, there are still many mergers that have been unsuccessful or have taken several years to recover from the stigma of a poorly designed merger (Beach & Lindahl 2017; Brett, 2018). For some studies of mergers, how politics, right or wrong decisions, and the merge process are combined to touch the working lives and job satisfaction of employees has played a major role in assessing the outcome of the mergers (Evans, 2017). Very few studies have focused on the failure of mergers (Stensaker, Persson, & Pinheiro, 2016).

Although cost saving is a suggestion for mergers, there have not been sufficient studies that validate the outcome of merger-created cost savings (Brett, 2018). Mergers create an increased access to higher education, increased quality of teaching and research, and increased productivity of higher education institutions (Bolbanabad et al., 2017). The lost rivalry once colleges are merged could impede advancement due to reducing competition (Petit, 2019). Colleges could enter a merger to support position and ranking (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). Even when a merger is measured as a success because the university is still in existence, participants in previous studies have agreed that not all features of the merger were a success (Leslie et al., 2018). Sajwani (2021) investigated the morale of staff after a merger of three colleges into one

and found that, not only did the merger cause more negative than positive morale, it failed to produce the benefits that were expected.

The literature indicates that although higher institutional mergers are to help the financial stability of colleges, there are other reasons why management choose to merge colleges (Sułkowski et al., 2019). Some mergers are initiated to lead greater excellence by competing colleges (Hidalgo & Valera 2016). Merging can lead to greater efficiency, and this is the motivation for encouraging a merger in the English higher education system (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019). The outcome of mergers is assessed in different ways (Johnes & Tsionas, 2019; Papdimitriou & Johnes, 2019). Cai's (2017) finding implied that there is a demand to develop an analytical framework to understand the outcomes of mergers. Using production function, Papdimitriou and Johnes (2019) insisted that the effectiveness of the merger does not last long after the merger.

Completion of a merger does not suggest the end of the merging process. Bereskinet et al., (2018) insisted that steps should be taken to ensure that post-merger integration takes place seamlessly. Many merged colleges have created transitional teams that stay in place for years to monitor post-merger problems (Harkin & Goedegebuure, 2020). A literature review indicated that mergers take up to 10 years to heal wounds that are caused during the merger (Evans, 2017). Although mergers are often perceived as a solution, there are still many who question the ability to assess a merger that addresses all the expected outcomes (Stensaker et al., 2016). Assessing if a merger is favorable for students is a vital policy question (Romanenko & Froumin, 2020; Russell, 2019). There are a few research attempts to examine the active role of stakeholders when evaluating the outcome of a merger (Cai, 2017). This qualitative study examined the

perceptions of administrators to further understand their understanding of the outcome of a college merger.

Summary

Chapter Two consisted of an overview section, a theoretical frame section, and a related literature section. It provided a critical review of the literature and explored research related to college mergers which include both 2-year and 4-year colleges. The theoretical framework section examined Lewin's (1997) change theory. The review of literature of college mergers included grouping the studies by cultural differences, stakeholders, leadership, job satisfaction, and accessing merger outcomes. Research has identified both numerous benefits and shortcoming of merging colleges (Young et al., 2018). Merging in higher education reflects a belief that the merged organization will be stronger and better performing than the individual organizations (Hou et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020).

The merging process is difficult, and the consequences argumentative (Hou et al., 2020). Mergers represent a very difficult organizational change process that requires managers to be skilled in leading and helping employees surrender past values that are different than the newly formed organizational culture. The planning stage is the most important stage in the merging process for merging colleges (Bor & Ketko, 2019). Mergers in higher education seem to be more common as academic institutions work to control costs and avoid program duplications (Boling et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2020). Many college leaders agree that there is a need for merging colleges, but there are still many mergers that are unproductive, which often require years of adjusting to recover from a poorly designed merger (Khan et al., 2020; Stensaker et al., 2016). Even when colleges are similar in culture, there is still one merger partner more dominant, which often causes low morale and a lack of leadership skills to handle the great transformation that is

taking place during a merger (Williams et al., 2017). A well-planned and implemented merger offers cutting-edge opportunities for a competitive college (Bolbanabad et al., 2017).

One major measurement of a successful merger results in lowering costs while increasing revenue. Unfortunately, this concept is often hard to measure (Williams et al., 2017). Although leadership and communication are noted as major factors for a successful merger, few studies have indicated that there is any premerger preparation of developing better leaders or communication (Bor & Ketk, 2019). The literature lacks a broad perception of how change affects employee attitudes toward change (Ahmad & Zhichao Cheng, 2018). As merging continues to be an option that education leaders are using for the survival and accountability of higher education institutions, it is vital that education researchers continue to study mergers and the influence mergers have on stakeholders.

To move beyond the existing literature, this qualitative study identified the perception of administrators that lead and manage during a merger which created a change in the organization. The study furthered existing research and brought awareness to the gap of knowledge of understanding various practices that will make merging colleges less stressful while reducing cost and addressing social issues. This study used Lewin's (1997) change theory as a theoretical framework to understand the perceptions of administrators. Although Lewin's change theory has been criticized for implying that change is discontinuous, taking a deeper look into understanding Lewin's field concept can help researchers understand the use of Lewin's change theory (Lawrence, 2015). Lewin's (1997) change theory was used to examine if the administrators could recognize that there was a problem with the old way, why the change was needed, and when the new way became routine. Although a leadership theory was not used in the study, using Lewin's (1997) change theory allowed an investigation of the leadership and

management skills of administrators. Lewin's (1997) change theory can also be used to study the resilience of an organization after a merger.

A review of the literature indicated a lack of studies that have used Lewin's (1997) change theory while studying administrators involved in a technical college merger. Literature that provided the basis for this study categorized research centering on cultural differences, stakeholders, leadership, job satisfaction, and assessing the outcome of mergers. Although there are several studies that researched the cultural differences of faculty, students, and external stakeholders, there has been a lack sufficient research focusing on administrators' perception of the cultural difference. Investigation of mid-level leadership, such as administrators in higher education has been unexplored (Kohtamaki, 2019). Few studies haven given priority to the perceptions held by the people involved in the merger (Rosa, 2019). The literature review indicated that there is a gap in the research for understanding administrators' experiences and perceptions during and after technical college mergers. There is little research that discusses how administrators in a technical college experience and perceive the merge process. The consequences of the current research study could help brighten future mergers of technical colleges. It is expected that this study will establish an understanding and a better foundation for future research on perceptions of administrators involved in college mergers. The experiences and perceptions may serve as a guide for understanding and addressing the concerns associated with college mergers.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. Chapter Three presents an overview of the nature and purpose of this transcendental phenomenology qualitative study. It consists of the research design, research questions, setting and participants, researcher positionality, data collection process, and trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design

Qualitative methodology was used to gain an understanding of the personal experiences of participants in a natural setting as the researcher capture the meaning of themes that emerge (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative methods involve an in-depth study while conveying both the researcher's perspectives and the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2018; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). I defined the phenomenon of this study as the experiences of administrators who manage and lead during a college merger. Thus, in this study, a qualitative methodology allowed an in-depth investigation of administrators' perceptions of a merger.

The phenomenological research design was used to gather insights from participants involved in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology was defined as the descriptive science of an experience (Moran & Cohen, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of a phenomenological study was to describe the shared meaning for the participants in their experiences and determine the meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Using a

phenomenological research design allowed the researcher to capture participants' description of their experience of the college merger (Moustakas, 1994).

Using a transcendental approach involved using intuition, intentionality, and intersubjectivity in a research study (Moustakas, 1994). Intuition is identified as the beginning place in the deriving of knowledge of experience (Moustakas, 1994). The participants in this study used intuition to begin developing the knowledge of their experiences during and after the college merger. Intentionality is composed of noema ("perceive as such") and noesis ("perfect self-evidence") (Moustakas, 1994, p. 68). Noesis is perceptions, feelings, and rememberings that are concealed from consciousness; and it is directly related to noema (Moustakas, 1994). The noesis of the participants of the study included the feelings and memories that are concealed and that are directly related to the college merger. Intersubjectivity was used to identify knowledge and experience by coming to know the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). It was used to identify the administrators' knowledge and experience by learning and knowing the phenomenon.

Furthermore, epoche', transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation were used to facilitate the derivation of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche' is the first step in knowing things while judgments are put aside (Moustakas, 1994). It is a new way of looking at something (Moustakas, 1994). I bracket myself out of the study by discussing and memoing my personal experiences of the merger of colleges, therefore understanding my biases while capturing the administrators' perceptions (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing is intended to help researchers recognize their perceptions and to study their perceptions which will then enable them to take a fresh insight toward the phenomenon (Leavy, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). The bracketing process consisted of setting aside predispositions and preconceived ideas that affected both data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In

transcendental-phenomenological reduction, a textural description of the meaning of the phenomenon was established (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, the imaginative variations, which is a structure essence of the experience, was also established (Moustakas, 1994). I sought to discover themes in studying the perceptions of participants to produce further knowledge on their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The first step in developing a phenomenological study was to identify a research question that had a personal and social significance (Moustakas, 1994). A research question with three sub-questions was used to reveal the meaning of the administrators' experience in this study. The researcher then reviewed the literature relating to the research question or topic (Moustakas, 1994). The review of the literature was used as a foundation for guiding the research design (Creswell, 2018). The literature review indicated that there was a gap in the understanding of administrators' experiences and perceptions during and after technical college mergers. The next step involved the researcher identifying participants for the study (Moustakas, 1994). Participants of the study included two-year college administrators employed with one of the merged colleges within MTCS. The researcher then collected data from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Evidence was derived from first-person reports of life experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The study included several sources for collecting data to establish data triangulation. Data were collected using interviews, document analysis, and focus groups. Long interviews with informal, interactive, and open-ended questions were the method through which data were collected (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews continued until there was thematic saturation (Creswell 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The analysis of the data began during the interviews and continued until a pattern, theme, and content analysis had been recognized. Ethical standards were maintained in all steps of the research process (Moustakas, 1994).

Relevant ethical issues and questions were considered at each step in the research process (Baker, McQuilling, & King, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

A central research question with three sub-questions led this transcendental phenomenological study to describe the experience of administrators who participate in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. These research questions were important because, as educational systems continue to study the options for merging, it is necessary that the process continuously improve. The central research question guided this qualitative phenomenological research study to understand administrators' perceptions of the effects of college mergers. The following central question and sub-questions were examined:

Central Research Question

What are the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States?

Sub-Question One

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the merging process?

Sub-Question Two

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on communication challenges?

Sub-Question Three

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the newly formed college?

Setting and Participants

Two-year colleges that have merged into one college system located in the Southern United States served as the setting for this research. To ensure confidentiality, the two-year college system was referred to as the Merging Technical College System (MTCS). MTCS serves as a vocational/technical and career-oriented two-year college system for the state. MTCS oversight of the state's regionally accredited 22 colleges includes 88 campuses (MTCS Strategic Plan, 2018). This site was used for the study because the current 22 colleges consist of 13 colleges that were formed as a result of a merger (Gardner, 2016). Selecting administrators from only merged colleges potentially limited the sample size selected from each college, but using multiple colleges allowed for data triangulation (Creswell, 2018). Evaluating data from different data collection sources and allowing participants to review those findings and offer concurrence or rejection helped validate findings.

Site (or Setting)

The system has a state board that is responsible for creating system policies, and each college has a local board that is responsible for working with the president's leadership team to ensure procedures are established to carry out each system policy. The president's leadership team consists of the president and various vice presidents. Each vice president has four to seven administrators that report to them. Each non-academic administrator has two to four direct reports, although each academic administrator has five to 50 full and part-time direct reports. The administrators must prepare and manage division annual budgets and supervise and evaluate their direct reports (United States Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2016). Because I am a current employee of a local college within the system, developing trust is vital. The selection of the sites for interviews and focus groups played a role

in building trust (Creswell, 2018). Semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups were conducted at locations familiar and convenient to both the interviewer and participants including interviews by phone and via email based on chat formats. The researcher's gatekeeper role also contributed to developing trust by collecting data in a natural setting sensitive to the participant involved in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Participants of the study included two-year college administrators and former administrators employed with one of the 13 merged colleges within MTCS. An administrator was defined as academic deans, academic assist deans, campus deans, nonacademic deans, nonacademic assist deans. After securing approval from MTCS and securing IRB approval the potential participants received a consent form notifying them of the study. The potential participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary before they agreed to participate in the study. The participants were not named in the study but were identified with a pseudonym. The participants were purposively selected because they had experienced the phenomenon of a college merger. A purposeful sampling will deliberately provide a group of participants that will inform the researcher about the phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 2018). The 15 participants were contacted through email, asking them to participate in an open-ended semi-structured audio-recorded interview and audio-recorded focus group. The sampling size consisted of those willing to participate from the criterion sampling pool. Creswell (2018) suggested that 10 to 15 participants are needed to meet saturation. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (2018) suggested that there should be five to 25 participants in the study to sufficiently describe the phenomenon. Eleven participants agreed to participate in the study. After interviewing the 11 participants, one participant asked to be removed from the study. The 10

remaining participants' demographics consisted of 8 current and 2 former administrators, with 9 females and only 1 male. I assigned these 10 participants pseudonyms. Participants in this study were administrators and former administrators with more than seven years of experience as an administrator.

Researcher Positionality

Learning the experiences of administrators in a merger is important to me. I am a dean of a merged and acquired technical division. I have worked in a higher education system for 22 years and have been a dean for the last 10 years. My background holds the potential to shape my interpretations of the study (Creswell, 2018). I have been involved in both merging and acquiring colleges. Although it is implied by many researchers, that leadership skills are important when colleges are merged, very few mergers consider the leadership or management skills of administrators such as academic deans, academic associate/assistant deans, campus deans, campus associate deans, student services deans. As the researcher, I considered myself a necessary part of the situation being studied.

Interpretive Framework

Social constructivism shaped this study in which I relied on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Their social situations developed their worldview of the phenomenon, and their understanding was developed through interactions with others (Peltonen, 2017). Thus, social constructivism offered a participant a chance to be critical of conventional understanding (Wilson & Tagg, 2010). My bracketing methods included writing memos throughout data collection and analysis to examine and reflect upon my engagement with the data to ensure my axiological assumptions adhered to an ethical research study while collecting and analyzing data from participants who had experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

My axiological assumptions included fairness to everyone and moral responsibility to care for those that work for me. Some administrators struggle to manage many direct reports during and after mergers each year. This study captured the reality of each administrator's experience while preserving an ethical and unbiased research method. I desire to help administrators understand how to manage and communicate during and after a merger.

Philosophical Assumptions

As a researcher, I am aware of my philosophical assumptions. My ontological assumption involves believing in a singular reality. My epistemological assumption involves seeking knowledge from other administrators. My axiological assumption involves values of high ethics and morals.

Ontological Assumption

As a researcher, I must state that my ontological assumption involves my belief in the nature of reality. As a devoted Christian, I insist that there is a singular reality.

Epistemological Assumption

As a researcher, my epistemological assumption is limited to the knowledge I have as an administrator having participated in two mergers. Although my knowledge is limited to my experience, as I collected and analyzed the data, I remained open-minded, thus not rendering my own opinion but seeking knowledge from other administrators and former administrators who had been involved in a merger.

Axiological Assumption

As a researcher, I admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I admit my axiological assumptions of ethics and value could have created a positive bias regarding the

value of administrators who work in a technical college system. Furthermore, my assumptions included a belief that administrators work hard to satisfy the needs of upper managers and those directly reporting to them, which is extremely hard when a change occurs. I am aware of the need to be attentive and not to allow my biases to influence the data collection, data analysis, or findings of this study.

Researcher's Role

The researcher is the human instrument in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I have worked in the MTCS for 22 years and have been an academic dean for the last 10 years. I have been involved in merging colleges. Although several research studies have indicated the importance of leadership skills, very few mergers take into account the leadership or management skills of middle managers such as administrators. This study thus captured the reality of each administrator's experience while preserving an ethical and unbiased research method. The researcher conducted all data collection and analyses (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I consider myself a necessary part of the situation being studied, and my bracketing methods included writing memos throughout data collection and analysis as a means of examining and reflecting upon my engagement with the data to insure my assumptions adhered to an ethical research study. The researcher's personal background holds potential for shaping their interpretations, but the researcher has no authority over the participants (Creswell, 2018). I had no authority over the participants in this study.

The researcher's bias is that I consider mergers to be harmful. Furthermore, although upper managers meet often, there were very few pre- or post-merger meetings with administrators to establish open communication between upper management, administrators, faculty, and staff. Because of my background in education and working experience, I have had

opportunities to develop management and leadership skills. I believe that I have the type of skills needed to manage during a transformational change such as merging, but I am not confident that many other administrators have the appropriate leadership skills. To minimize bias, I bracketed my assumptions and experiences by memoing and notetaking as I was gathering and analyzing participants' responses. In memoing, I made notes regarding emerging ideas as the data were analyzed and the meaning of the data merged (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Memoing was conducted during data collection and reviewed during all data sources from all participants. My desire has been that this study will help education leaders who make the decision to merge understand the skills that administrators need to be able to effectively manage during and after a merger takes place. In addition, I am confident that this study can help administrators understand the importance of adapting and managing change, while effectively communicating during a college merger.

Procedures

After I secured approval from MTCS (see Appendix A), I secured IRB approval (see Appendix B). The potential participants received a consent form (see Appendix C) by email. The consent form explained that participating in the study was voluntary and participants could discontinue their participation at any time. Once I received a signed consent form from a participant, they received an email with an attachment of the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). The five demographic related questions on the questionnaire included gender, age range, number of years the participant had served as an administrator in the system, and the approximate number of full-time faculty and staff who reported to them. After receiving the participant's demographic questionnaire, interviews were scheduled and conducted within two weeks. Each interview was allotted 45 minutes to be conducted. The interviews were audio-

record and afterward transcribed by the researcher. The researcher began to memo and track the evolution of codes and themes (Creswell, 2018). The semi-structured interviews and retrieving of documents were completed simultaneously. The researcher worked with each participant to collect reflection notes. The themes developed from the interviews and documents were noted and discussed during the focus groups. Multiple focus group discussions were scheduled so that all participants were close to a group without driving a long distance. An online chat focus group was also held. The group discussion was allotted one hour. The simultaneous collection and analysis of interview data followed by a focus group could be used for validation and refinement of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The findings are discussed in chapter four.

Permissions

After I secured approval from MTCS (see Appendix A), I secured IRB approval (see Appendix B). The potential participants received a consent form (see Appendix C) by email. The consent form explained that participating in the study was voluntary and participants could discontinue their participation at any time.

Recruitment Plan

After securing approval from MTCS (see Appendix A) and securing IRB approval (see Appendix C), the potential participants received a consent (see Appendix C) form notifying them of the study. The potential participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary before they agreed to participate in the study. The participants were not named in the study but were identified with a pseudonym. The participants were purposively selected because they had experienced the phenomenon of a college merger. A purposeful sampling will deliberately provide a group of participants that will inform the researcher about the phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 2018). Fifteen participants were contacted through email, asking them to

participate in an open-ended semi-structured audio-recorded interview and audio-recorded focus group. The sampling size consisted of those willing to participate from the criterion sampling pool. Creswell (2018) suggested 10 to 15 participants are needed to meet saturation. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (2018) suggested that there be five to 25 participants in the study to sufficiently describe the phenomenon.

Data Collection Plan

The study included several sources for collecting data to establish data triangulation. Performing qualitative research requires accessing participants and eliciting their ideas (Pratt & Yeziarski, 2018). Establishing data triangulation in a qualitative study will help establish credible findings (Creswell, 2018). Data collection began only after MTCS approval (see Appendix A), IRB approval (see Appendix B), and participants signed consent forms (see Appendix C). For each method of data collection, the identity of participants was made anonymous in the study by assigning pseudonyms in the findings. The participants were also made aware that, during focus groups, confidentiality was important. Although the researcher strived to maintain confidentiality, I could not guarantee that all participants would maintain confidentiality during the focus groups (Creswell, 2018). The researcher reminded participants before each focus group that participation in the study was voluntary, and the participants could leave the study at any time. Demographic information was collected through a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) that was emailed to the participants. Data were collected from the interviews and documents simultaneously. The interviews continued until there was thematic saturation (Creswell 2018; Moustakas, 1994). After the data from interviews and documents were analyzed and a theme noted, data were then collected from focus group discussions, thus allowing the participants to validate the current themes that had been formed.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

A pilot interview was used to test the suitability of the questions used in the interviews. Each interview was allotted 30 to 45 minutes. Open-ended, semi-structured, face to face audio-recorded interviews took place within weeks after the completion of the demographic questionnaire. For participants who could not meet face-to-face, they were allowed to participate in a telephone interview that was audio-record. The interview audio-recordings were transcribed by the researcher. For consistency, a standard set of questions (see Appendix E) was used. Each interview question focused on understanding how each participant experienced the process and identified the steps in the process (Check & Schutt, 2012). During each interview, the researcher continued to engage in the epoche process (Moustakas, 1994). Open-ended interview questions were used.

Individual Interview Questions

Each interview question focused on understanding how each participant experiences the process and identified the steps in the process (Creswell, 2018).

1. Tell me a few things about yourself. CRQ
2. Describe the pre-merger process. CRQ
3. Describe the merger process. CRQ
4. What do you see as a benefit of merging? SQ1
5. What do you see as a detriment to merging? SQ1
6. Describe your relationship with those that directly reported to you before the merger.
SQ2
7. What has been the impact on your relationship with those that directly report(ed) to you since the merger? SQ2

8. Describe your relationship with those that you directly reported to before the merger.
SQ2
9. What has been the impact on your relationship with those that you directly report(ed) to since the merger? SQ2
10. Describe your relationship with other administrators before the merger. SQ2
11. What has been the impact on your relationship with other administrators since the merger? SQ2
12. Describe the advantages and disadvantages of the newly formed college. SQ3
13. How has the merger impacted your current position? SQ3

The first question was used to put the interviewee at ease and help develop a rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Questions two and three were directly related to the central research question (CQ): What are the lived experiences of administrators during a college merger? These questions were broad, open-ended questions that invited the interviewee to reflect on his/her experience with the phenomenon. Broad, open-ended questions lead to a textual and structural description of the experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018).

Questions four and five were directly related to sub-question one: What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the merging process? These questions invited the participant to reflect on his/her opinion as compared to what leaders had noted as benefits and detriments of merging. Even when there is a strong motivation to merge, one cannot predict desirable outcomes (Williams et al., 2019). In addition, questions four and five could be used to seek an understanding of the administrators' perception of change. The process of change entails creating the perception that a change is needed, then moving toward the new, desired

level of behavior, and finally, solidifying that new behavior as the norm (Bakari et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997).

Question six through 11 referred indirectly to sub-question two: What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on communication challenges? The questions invited the interviewee to reflect on the new position or role they had as a result of the phenomenon. The difficulty of mergers could be found in the synchronization of merging organizational routines (Foroutan et al., 2021). Change is vital for organizations in any growing and highly competitive business environments (Endrej et al., 2017; Lewin, 1997). When there are changes in an organization, an individual will either identify a need for the expected change or only accept the change through direct force, perhaps due to having not desire to change at all (Bakari, Bakari, Hunjra, & Niazi, 2017; Lewin, 1997).

Questions 12 and 13 referred indirectly to sub-question three: What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the newly formed college? The question of describing advantages and disadvantages of the newly formed college invited the interviewee to reflect on the identity or branding of the new college. Merging requires the colleges to bring together their differences and create new branding for educating (Dawood, 2017). Likewise, the question of how the merger had impacted their current position could be used to understand information about the newly formed college, especially the perceived outcome, measuring the success of a merger.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis methods were used to interpret the data for this phenomenological qualitative study in various times during the study. Data analysis is an attempt to make sense out of the data (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental

phenomenology were used to analyze the data. Each statement was treated with equal value and all predispositions were set aside (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction will occur as the researcher reads through the transcripts, memoing, coding, reflecting, and identifying significant statements from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher was able to identify potential areas of review while typing the transcripts instead of using a contracting transcription service. Data analysis included verbatim transcripts of each interview and focus group, as well as inclusion of all documents collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collected from the interviews, documents, and focus groups were organized by themes to support the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The documents were reviewed at the same time that the researcher was interviewing. Themes noted after the interviews and after receiving all documents helped create questions developed for focus group interviews. The focus groups allowed participants an additional opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher.

The steps in data analysis included obtaining a full description using the researcher experience and each participant experience to create significance for description, record statements, invariant horizons, cluster into themes, synthesize description of textures, construct a description of the structures, and construct a textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout the data analysis stage, I continued adhering to the *epoche* process by memoing to bracket any biases (Moustakas, 1994). The first step of data analysis began after reading and transcribing the data from the interviews and documents. I clustered the data from the interviews and document analysis into common themes (Moustakas, 1994). During this stage, I began horizontalizing the data, and phenomenological reduction occurred. I began clustering by combining themes and deleting repetitive statements (Moustakas, 1994). Participant responses were coded based on commonalities, thus identifying patterns, themes, and content (Creswell,

2018; Moustakas, 1994). Using the clustered themes, I developed a textual description of the experience of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Using the textual description, I constructed meaning and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). At this stage, I understood that because of imaginative variation, the principles of the phenomenon were symbolic of the participant's view currently (Moustakas, 1994). During the focus group interviews, participants reviewed the meaning and essences of the phenomenon that had been constructed, thus giving participant's imaginative variation to change. Reviews by participants were used to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2018). After obtaining and transcribing data from the focus groups, I again performed the data analysis steps to ensure the focus group data were included in the final synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus groups are valuable when interviewees are similar (Check & Schutt, 2012). The focus group discussions included three questions (see Appendix G). I used focus group questions as a final attempt to ensure data triangulation and to verify the accuracy of data transcribing. To make it easy for participants to participate, there were multiple focus group discussions. Care was taken to encourage all participants to talk and monitor individuals who tended to dominate the discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed. I explained to participants that although I will hold all shared information confidentially, I could not guarantee that other participants would keep information confidential. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

Focus Group Questions

Focus group questions included:

1. Looking at the themes that have been noted during data collection and data analysis, which themes do you see that address the overall merging process? Explain your answer. What are other themes that you would like to add?
2. Looking at the themes that have been noted during data collection and data analysis, which themes do you see that address communication challenges? Explain your answer. What are other themes that you would like to add?
3. Looking at the themes that have been noted during data collection and data analysis, which themes do you see that address the new college? Explain your answer. What are other themes that you would like to add?

Each question was used to establish an understanding of the themes that had been created and to provide an opportunity for the participants to add any information that they may have recalled but had not been previously addressed. Participants reviewed the meaning and essences of the phenomenon that had been constructed, thus giving them imaginative variation to change. Reviews by participants were used to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2018).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The focus groups allowed participants an additional opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher. Data analysis methods were used to interpret the data for this phenomenological qualitative study in various times during the study. Each statement was treated with equal value and all predispositions were set aside (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis included verbatim transcripts of each focus group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collected from focus groups were organized by themes to support the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). During the focus group interviews, participants reviewed the meaning and essences of the phenomenon that had been constructed, thus giving participant's imaginative variation to change.

Reviews by participants were used to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2018). After obtaining and transcribing data from the focus groups, I again performed the data analysis steps to ensure the focus group data were included in the final synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon.

Letter-Writing Data Collection Approach

Letter-writing was useful for painting a broad overall picture (Bowen, 2009). Each participant wrote a reflection letter. The reflection letters were useful to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Participants' reflections (see Appendix F) were obtained as a means of data collection. Each participant was asked to develop a reflection of their experience of merging. The information was be organized and directly related to each of the sub-questions, thus triangulating the data. A statement had been developed that was used to guide and frame participants' responses: Write a reflection letter based on your perception please include your thoughts of the merging process, communication challenges, and the new formed college? Using multiple data collecting sources allowed for data triangulation (Creswell, 2018).

Letter-Writing Data Analysis Plan

Letter-writing and interviews were collected simultaneously. Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology were used to analyze the data. Each statement was treated with equal value and all predispositions were set aside (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction occurred as the researcher read through the transcripts, memoing, coding, reflecting, and identifying significant statements from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). There was no need to transcribe the documents. The documents were reviewed at the same time that the researcher was interviewing. Themes noted after receiving all documents helped create questions for the focus group interviews. I clustered the data from the letter-writing data analysis into

common themes (Moustakas, 1994). During this stage, I began horizontalizing the data, and phenomenological reduction occurred. I began clustering by combining themes and deleting repetitive statements (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Synthesis

Data analysis methods were used to interpret the data for this phenomenological qualitative study in various times during the study. The data were analyzed manually, and the findings synthesized across all three set of data. The researcher maintained notes on how patterns were to determine frequency of specific themes. The semi-structured interviews and retrieving of documents was completed simultaneously. The researcher worked with each participant to collect reflection notes. The themes developed from the interviews and documents were noted and discussed during the focus groups.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to assure the trustworthiness of this research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model was used to ensure trustworthiness. Ensuring trustworthiness was met by employing credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The validity of the study depends on the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2018). Research integrity was defined in terms of honesty, transparency, objectivity, and stressing the importance of sticking to the research questions while avoiding bias (Shaw & Satakar, 2018). I ensured trustworthiness in this study by making the research transparent to other researchers.

Credibility

Establishing data triangulation in a qualitative study helps establish credible findings (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, triangulation was achieved through multiple

data sources. The study included interviews, documents, and focus groups to collect data to establish data triangulation. Identifying researcher bias and developing trust with each participant helped build credibility. Memoing was used to help clarify any bias the researcher brought to the study (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). My bracketing methods included writing memos throughout data collection and analysis as a means of examining and reflecting upon my engagement with the data to ensure my assumptions adhere to an ethical research study. Memoing weekly and recording it enabled me to note new insights gathered from coding. Member checking was used to increase validity in the study by allowing participants to review statements for accuracy of transcription and themes that developed during data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Using face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I was able to build trust. Seeking participant feedback is critical for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The focus groups gave participants a final opportunity to provide feedback.

Transferability

Transferability is showing that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is largely achieved through the use of thick descriptions when describing research findings (Geertz, 2008). Transferability refers to the ability for findings from the context of your study to be applied to another context or within the same context at another time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to acknowledge that the researcher can only create the conditions for transferability but cannot assure transferability: this judgment can only be made by the reader of the research.

Dependability

Dependability indicates that the study's findings could be repeated by another researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My dissertation committee reviewed my study, and the Qualitative Research Director thoroughly reviewed my dissertation to ensure dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the neutrality of the conclusions of a study in which the conclusions are not preconceptions, but rather match the participants' views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using rich detail about the context and setting of the study enabled the findings to be consistent and applicable with similar studies (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I used multiple data collection methods such as interviews, documents, and focus groups to strengthen the fidelity of the study (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). I provided an in-depth methodological description that allowed the study to be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). In addition, I established confirmability by taking steps to demonstrate that the study findings emerged from the data rather than my own predispositions (Bickman, & Rog, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Participants had multiple opportunities to offer feedback regarding the themes noted and the conclusions reached

Ethical Considerations

The study was used to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of administrators' perceptions of the effects of merging colleges. Relevant ethical issues and questions were considered at each step in the research process (Baker, McQuilling, & King, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). For instance, I did not have any supervisory or authority position over any participant. Before any data were collected, MTCS approval, IRB approval, and consent to participate forms were obtained. Participants in the study did not include those from the vulnerable population of children and minors (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Participants were informed of the voluntary

nature of the study and of the ability to discontinue participation at any time. In the study, credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability were met to ensure trustworthiness. Focus groups were used to probe further and debrief the participants of themes that had developed. The study guaranteed privacy of the participants by using pseudonyms for participants' names and the college at which they had been employed (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Up-to-date security software and password protection were used to safeguard all data files. All documents and data will be destroyed three years after I complete the doctoral program

Summary

Chapter Three consisted of an explanation of the methodology used in this transcendental phenomenological qualitative design. A qualitative design was used to gain an understanding of personal experiences of administrators. A research question with three sub-questions were used to investigate the perceptions of administrators' during their lived experience with the phenomenon of a college merger. The setting included two-year colleges that had merged in a specific college system. The participants were obtained through purposive sampling. Data collection consisted of interviews, documentation analysis, and focus groups, thus creating data triangulations. Data analysis consisted of organizing and coding responses to develop themes and construct a meaning of the phenomenon. Trustworthiness was established during the study by maintaining credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability. The researcher conducted each step of the study in an ethical manner. The study findings will hopefully inform educational and political leaders about the perceptions of administrators during and after a merger. The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study was to provide insight into college

mergers that will be helpful to higher education and political leaders to consider and have a better understanding of the issues that administrators experience during a merger.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. The problem that shaped the foundation for this study was that mergers often negatively affect instructors, staff, students, leadership, and the community (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Preston, 2019; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020). Although many research studies have indicated that leadership plays an essential role in the success of a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017), few research studies have examined the concerns that administrators face during a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017). This chapter includes a description of each participant, results, themes with sub-themes identified, and research questions responses. The chapter is concluded with a summary.

Participants

After interviewing the 11 participants who were originally consented for the study, one participant asked to be removed. I assigned the remaining 10 participants pseudonyms. Table 1 lists the descriptor for each participant.

Table 1

Administrator Participants

Administrator Participant	Gender	Current/Former Administrator
Barbara	Female	Former
Bonita	Female	Current
Mary	Female	Current

Rebecca	Female	Current
Sadie	Female	Current
Sally	Femle	Current
Samantha	Female	Former
Stella	Female	Current
Walter	Male	`Current

Results

After receiving permission from MTC, I received IRB approval from Liberty University. I began by emailing all of the presidents of merged technical colleges to ask permission to contact administrators. I used catalogs, websites, and organizational charts to identify current and former administrators. Although I received approval from all 12 merged college presidents, I could only identify and locate administrators from seven technical colleges. I emailed these administrators and provided them with a copy of the consent form and recruitment email. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher audio-recorded and transcribed each interview and focus group. The transcripts were emailed to participants to check for accuracy. The data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) method for transcendental phenomenology. I immersed myself in the data, looking for significant statements to form clusters and establish themes. Then, I developed a composite description that represented the essence of the phenomenon. The evolving themes for the study were reached after an inclusive review of the individual interviews, individual reflection documentation, and focus groups. After reading and rereading

the transcripts, I identified shared words and phrases the participants stated about the phenomenon. After grouping common elements, I developed overall common themes across multiple research and sub-questions.

Uncertainty

All stages of a merger are challenging and can cause uncertainty. During the data analysis, the first theme to emerge was that participants were uncertain about mergers. All participants were apprehensive about the uncertainty of a merger because they did not know what to expect. The most significant uncertainty was continuing employment. Sally insisted “that uncertainty arises when there is speculation caused by concerns when little information is passed down from leadership to employees.” Samantha submitted that “productivity, job satisfaction, and enthusiasm were very low because of the uncertainty.”

Rumors

Often, stories of a merger take place before any official announcement of the merger. Such reports caused administrators to become frightened and wonder about their job security and the community. Rumors were one of the primary reasons administrators had a negative experience with the merger. Samantha insisted “there had been rumored that the college would be merging for a couple of years due to their declining enrollment and limited resources.”

Facts

Addressing the facts about any transition is essential. All participants admitted that the premerger meeting became significant to addressing the facts. Hearing the facts from leadership helped eliminate the uncertainty of the merger. Being transparent with faculty and letting them know the reason behind each decision was a great way to address the facts. Walter admitted that

“addressing the facts about the merger was essential at least hearing the bad news is better than wondering.”

Benefit

Exposing the benefits of a merger during the premerger phase helped the administrators recognize the need to merge, thus creating a reason to unfreeze and move. Administrators could lead and manage better when benefits were identified early. Wilma recognized that “they could provide more opportunities for more people because of the merger.” Samantha acknowledged that “the benefits of merging included expanded program offerings, job security, more available resources, and good working relationships.”

Benefits for Students and Community

One advantage of merging is combining resources while giving students more options and opportunities. The newly formed college can provide more for students through combined resources. Each participant acknowledged that the merger had been rewarding in many ways for the students and community. A merger should overhaul programs. The overhauling of the programs gave students access to some programs to which they would not usually have access. Bonita suggested, “it is vital to focus on what is best for the students and the community from the beginning.”

Benefits for Staff and Instructors

Some benefits can be identified for both instructors and staff. Many participants acknowledged that the merger was an overhaul of instructors’ skills. Stella admitted, “the merge generated new ideas that were shared among instructors and staff.” Walter stated, “the merger was a way of overhauling the whole college, thus eliminating policy and procedures that were not working.”

Change

A merger is a fundamental change that can follow Lewin's change model of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Many changes had to occur for both colleges to merge into one institution. As soon as the merging colleges can identify the need to change, the sooner will the moving and creation of new norms begin. It then becomes essential how leaders manage change resistance. Sadie acknowledged that "when change is seen as not needed, the merger becomes more like a takeover." Wilma insisted that "change can be managed when instructors understand why the change is being made."

Resistance to Change

Changes were often hard for all employees, from administration to faculty to staff. Several participants admitted that the change contributed to stress and concern about losing their job; therefore, they were resistant to change because they believed the merger was a takeover. Wilma indicated that "nobody wants to change when they believe things are working just fine." Wilma insisted that "people with negative attitudes resisted change and created a hostile or toxic atmosphere."

Managing Change

One of the most demanding duties for any leader is leading during a transformation. It is a leader's responsibility to manage all resistance to change. When those involved in the change can identify the needs to be a change, it will create the need for the moving stage. Sadie insisted that "change can be managed when instructors understand why the change is being made."

Communication

Those making the decisions to merge must maintain secrets while sharing enough information during the planning stages to be trustworthy. Communication can be either

productive or unproductive. Samantha insisted, “although managers understand a merger is a significant process and must be kept confidential until the details are worked out, more information could have been shared during the planning stages.”

Poor Communication

Even when there are premerger meetings and some critical decisions are discussed, those not part of the premerger meetings often may not get specific information. Communication often breaks down as the campus becomes more spread out. Barbara suggested, “it would have eased so many concerns if more information could have been passed down to others and not just the top level.” Barbara admitted that “they might be talking about something on one campus when everybody is spread out, and the information never makes it to another campus.”

Open Communication

The success of the merger was often identified by the leaders' ability to communicate openly. Premerger meetings are essential for merging colleges to meet and have open communication. Walter insisted, “regardless of initial fears and heartaches, the time and chaos it took to make the merger happen because leadership took time to have an open dialogue between the merging institutional, staff and faculty members of both colleges, their merger was a success.” Stella contended that “overall, the process went well mainly because adequate communication was shared with faculty and staff during the planning stages of the merger and throughout the process until the merger was completed.”

Culture

Merging the atmosphere and the environment is one of the biggest obstacles in the merging process. Often colleges in boundary service areas have cultural differences and are community rivals, especially in high school sports. Unfortunately, mergers often occur with top-

down government approaches with little attention to cultural differences. Bonita explained, “even though the two colleges were very close, they had two very different cultures built on years of trying to be different.” Walter insisted that “a critical part of communication during premerger includes the development of an understanding of the culture of both sides.”

Identity

Although each college in the technical system has the same goals and mission, the operating procedures were developed from different cultures. Mergers cause the creation of a new identity for an organization and its members, although each college and community have established identities. Leaders have to help cultivate a new identity while preserving history. Mary explained, “each college involved in the merger had its own identity within its community before merging.” Rebecca explained that “neither college wants to lose its identity, so continuing with important traditions at both campuses and their communities is essential.”

Us verses Them

The merger process is often challenging because some view a merger as a takeover. Each college is proud of its accomplishments and wants to be respected. Each participant advised that their merger began with an “us versus them” attitude. This feeling was often solidified when colleges of different sizes were merged. Rebecca stated, “the feeling of ‘us versus them’ seemed more evident at the smaller college in their merger.” Bonita suggested that “eliminating the ‘us versus them’ does not happen overnight, and it will only be destroyed as each participant develop respect for their counter partner.”

Research Question Responses

The following section offers responses to the central research question and the three sub-questions. The responses include the themes that were developed during data analysis.

Central Research Question

What is the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States? The participants' perspective was that although mergers cause uncertainty and are often met with resistance, there are benefits to merging colleges. All participants perceived the merger as being a significant change. Walter submitted, "getting the employees and community to buy into the need to merge was crucial in managing change resistance." Although the change was hard for all the participants, Rebecca stated, "the changes made were beneficial and something the college needed." Bonita stated, "the students' benefits include combined resources and more program offerings." The participants admitted that communication is still a struggle even years after a merger, and cultural differences cause significant issues and continue to be a problem. Bonita stated, "even though she thought things were going well, she experienced some communication issues because of managing employees on many different campuses that were geographically spread out over several miles due to the new large service delivery area." Stella insisted, "changing the culture of once rivals' communities have been almost impossible."

Sub-Question One

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the merging process? Participants that were involved in premerger meetings perceived the merging process as transparent. Bonita stated, "the premerger meetings relieved my uncertainty and put me in a better position to be as transparent as possible with those I supervised." Rebecca acknowledged that "having good executive leaders help the merger process be successful."

Sub-Question Two

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on communication challenges? Participants perceived that communication plays a significant role in combating uncertainty, and communication was the most significant opportunity for improvement. Rebecca admitted, "open communication with my division helped ease the worry of the unknown that was present with the merger." Stella insisted that "I did not hear about the merger until after someone had posted it on Facebook. Therefore, social media often became the driving factor in communication, whether the information was correct or false." Sadie insisted that "respectful, open communication must occur from the organization's top and must continue to flow to everyone."

Sub-Question Three

What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the newly formed college? Participants perceived the newly formed college as an overhaul of both colleges once they overcame the "us versus them" attitude. Rebecca insisted, "although times were stressful, if an instructor understood that what has been done is best for the student, the merger was worth doing." Mary admitted, "the takeover feeling was the most difficult obstacle she had to face during the beginning of the merger." Samantha stated, "there is always the stigma of being the stepchild during a merger." The participants also perceived that each college had lost its identity and culture. Rebecca explained, "neither college wants to lose its identity, so continuing with important traditions at both campuses and their communities is essential."

Summary

This chapter exhibits the findings from data obtained from 10 participants who shared their experiences as administrators during the merger of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. A description of all 10 participants who contributed to the study is provided. I

then provided descriptions of the five themes and various subthemes that emerged from the data. The emerged themes included uncertainty, benefits, change, communication, and culture. Participants' experiences were shared through textural and structural descriptions, which allowed for the stories of each of the individuals to be presented, thus providing a composite description of the participants and the phenomenon. Following the description of the themes, I used the themes and participant quotes to provide narrative answers to the central research question and each of the sub-questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. This chapter uses interpretations and ideas to refine the findings of the study and interpret them for readers. The chapter includes interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, and limitations and delimitations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and a summary.

Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. The problem that shapes the foundation for this study is that mergers often negatively affect instructors, staff, students, leadership, and the community (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Preston, 2019; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020). Although many research studies indicate that leadership plays an essential role in the success of a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017), few research studies examine the concerns that administrators face during a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017). The purpose of this section is to present the results of this study in relation to the two broad categories of empirical and theoretical literature reviewed with evidence from the study. The discussion includes interpretation of the findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

This transcendental study formed findings that have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. The following section addresses these implications.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. Data analysis was theoretically grounded in Lewin's (1997) change theory. Through a continuous immersion in data coding, five themes with additional subthemes emerged from participants' responses in interviews, written reflection documents, and focus groups. The themes were identified as uncertainty, benefits, change, communication, and culture.

Identifying the need for a change. According to the change theory, once the administrators identified a need for change, thus recognizing that there was a problem with the old way *benefit*, a *change* was needed. The change was the merger, thus moving toward creating a new institution. Using Lewin's change theory as a framework for this study, the central objective was to detect an awareness of the necessity or urgency of a change (Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). It is essential to identify if those involved in the college merger note the unfreezing point as a voluntary approach or a forced unfreezing and if the merger was initiated by internal or external stakeholders (Lehmann, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018).

According to this study, identifying the benefits of the merger as early as possible helps establish the need for unfreezing and accepting the change. At this stage, the study identified the need for unfreezing and the movement of the change theory. All participants recognized that the merger created (uncertainty). Like Lewin's change theory (1997), the study also indicated that the process of (change) entails creating the perception that a (change) is needed, then moving toward the new, desired level of behavior, and finally, solidifying that new behavior as the norm.

Addressing the facts about any transition is essential. One participant admitted at least hearing the bad news is better than wondering. The participants also indicated that to move through the unfreezing stage successfully, employees must be motivated to change, which requires overcoming disconfirmation, survival anxiety, and learning anxiety (Burnes, 2020; Burnes & Bargal, 2017).

Acknowledging the benefits. The second stage in the change theory is identified as the movement stage (Lewin, 1997). The moving phase should demonstrate the benefits of change by brainstorming, coaching, and training (Lehmann, 2017; Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). The study finding was similar to the literature in that all participants acknowledged that the merger has been rewarding in many ways for the students and community. Although mid-level leaders play an essential and challenging part in organizing and executing changes (Kohtamäki, 2019), similar to other studies, this study indicated little time was spent with mid-level managers to ensure that they understood the value of their role. Participants stated that there was significant speculation because employees below the level of executive cabinet members were not informed about what was happening. One participant suggested, “it would have eased so many concerns if more information could have been passed down to others and not just the top level.” Like other studies, uncertainty strongly indicated how much effort it took for administrators to help their faculty and staff go through the movement stage. Many participants suggested that the fear of the unknown caused by the rumors was one of the primary reasons they had a negative experience with the merger.

Creating a new identity. During the last stage of Lewin’s change theory, refreezing stage, closing the loop occurs (Burnes, 2020; Lewin, 1997). For this study, it is essential to look at removing the “us vs. them” and creating procedures as a new college, thus creating a new

culture. All administrators indicated that neither college wanted to lose its identity. Like other studies, some administrators believed there was a stigma of being the “stepchild” with even the most minor details, such as choosing textbooks, which became a significant obstacle.

Administrators had to make many decisions. Similar to other research, merging the atmosphere and the environment was an obstacle that took many years to overcome. One participant indicated that, even nine years later, they were still not aligned with each other and still harbored resentment. One participant maintained that “this is something that has to evolve.”

Implications for Policy or Practice

The study indicated that administrators were instrumental in relieving uncertainty when communicating with those who directly reported to them. Thus, in practice, administrators must be included in the initial merging meeting to play a more critical part in the organizational change. In addition, the importance of culture was completely overlooked in the merger. Thus, in practical understanding, each college culture is essential for developing the newly formed college culture.

Implications for Practice

Although studies have indicated that one of the most demanding duties a leader must carry out is to implement planned organizational change (Bakari et al., 2017; Bor & Shargel, 2020), participants all agreed that they were not equipped to implement organizational change. Unfortunately, each administrator indicated that their supervisor did not recognize them as a change agent. Administrators are often overlooked as essential players in the success of the merger. In practice, administrators must be included in the initial merging meeting to play a more critical part in the organizational change.

In addition, even if mergers help create a profitable organization, many problems occur because of cultural differences within the newly formed organization (Bor & Ketko, 2019). All participants indicated that no communication included an understanding of each college's premerger culture. The culture was completely overlooked as being important in the merger. Thus, in practical understanding, each college culture is essential for developing the newly formed college culture. For a merger to be successful, leaders must work with consulting to develop cross-cultural perspectives (Preston, 2019).

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This study added to the existing body of research on Lewin's (1997) change theory. This study examined the administrators who are involved in college mergers and addressed a gap in the literature. Lewin's (1997) change theory classifies the organization as being in rest or a static equilibrium state, and the unfreezing as breaking this states and changing well-known practices. Exposing the benefits of a merger during the premerger phase helped the administrators recognize the need to merge, thus creating a reason to unfreeze and move. Administrators could lead and manage better when benefits were identified early. Administrators indicated that identifying the benefits of the merger as early as possible helped establish the need to unfreeze and accept the change. In addition, administrators were able to identify the primary motivation for the college merger. Lewin (1997) submitted that the establishment of awareness is a significant element to unfreeze an organization.

Like similar studies, uncertainty was a strong indication of how much effort it took for administrators to help their faculty and staff progress through the movement stage. Participants insisted that there was insufficient information given at the beginning of the mergers, thus indicating that information should have been shared with more administrators during the

planning stages of a merger. For this study, the change was the creation of the new institution. Poor communication was noted by administrators. High-quality change communication will reduce uncertainty and help establish a commitment to change (Lewins, 1997). A critical part of communication during premerger includes the development of an understanding of the culture of both sides, thus helping to establish a new culture during the post-merger with which all colleges can.

In the refreezing stage, the final stage in Lewin's (1977) change theory, a new equilibrium is met with new norms formed, and retraining begins. All administrators in the study indicated that neither college wanted to lose its identity. Each participant identified that their merger began with an "us versus them" attitude. This study revealed similar findings with other college mergers, as even colleges in boundary service areas have cultural differences. The cultures have been established over several years. Post-merger meetings require merging colleges to become one culture. The key to overcoming or collaborating to create a new culture is to carry on both schools histories while establishing a new identity.

This study added empirical significance for administrators' perceptions during and after college mergers, as available information on this topic was previously limited. This transcendental phenomenological study has empirical implications for executives and administrators of merged colleges. The results indicated that participants described their experiences during and after the merger as uncertain regarding the loss of cultural identity. This is consistent with other studies showing that mergers often negatively affect instructors, staff, students, leadership, and the community (Bor, & Shargel, 2020; Preston, 2019). Even when there is a solid motivation to merge, mergers still create uncertainty and the loss of cultural identity.

Overcoming uncertainty can be addressed with communication and the change process. Communicating with employees early during a change will provide information that will increase understanding of change (Ahmad & Zhichao-Cheng, 2018). This study was consistent with other studies that have indicated rumors add to the uncertainty. Participants indicated that even bad news was better than not knowing. In addition, the attitude about the college merger applies to how the change process has been managed (Lehmann, 2017). The participants indicated that knowing the benefits at the beginning of the change process is significant. Participants acknowledged that the benefits of merging included expanded program offerings, job security, more available resources, and good working relationships. All participants acknowledged that the merger had been rewarding in many ways for the students and community. The participants all insisted that the resources and talents gained from the merger created a healthier institution that aids all stakeholders, especially the students.

Like other studies, finding from this study have emphasized the importance of culture. Although cultural similarities of colleges that merge play a significant role in the merger's success (Bereskin, 2018; Supriyanto, 2020), the study indicated very little attention during the merger focused on understanding each college's culture. During the first stage of the merger, similar to other studies, 9 out of 10 participants perceived the merger as a take-over. Consistent with other studies, even though the mission and vision of the colleges were identical, the participants indicated many cultural differences.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has delimitations that provide boundaries to this transcendental phenomenological study of administrators during the merger of colleges. The delimitation for participants included current and former administrators that were administrators during the

merger of a two-year college. This study was limited to administrators and former administrators of two-year merged colleges in a state in the Southern part of the United States. Administrators are academic deans, academic assist deans, campus deans, non-academic deans, and non-academic assist deans.

There were several limitations in this study. Qualitative methodology is used to understand participants' personal experiences in a natural setting as the researcher captures the meaning of themes that emerge (Creswell, 2018). The nature of using a qualitative study provides limitations. In addition, another limitation is that purposively selecting participants that had been involved in a college merger in one state limited the number of participants. In addition, the timing of the study created limitations. Only two of the mergers had taken place within five years, the other had taken place over seven to 10 years, with most administrators no longer with the college, and I could not locate them.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study involved the examination of the experiences of administrators and former administrators in two-year colleges that were administrators during the college merger. The study addressed the insufficient understanding of the experiences of administrators who take part in college mergers. The study was limited to two-year colleges within one state college system in the Southern United States. Researchers in the future could replicate this study in two-year and four-year colleges within the state. Researchers could also replicate this study in two-year colleges in other states.

Little has been reported on administrators' leadership programs before a merger occurs. Further studies could also examine the interface in the training of administrators on the perception of administrators involved in a merger. In addition, although government entities state

economic benefits as a significant reason for merging colleges, there have been limited studies offering validation on the price and cost effects of college mergers. Further studies should examine administrators' perceptions that could identify the price and cost effects of the merger. Researchers could consider studying the perception of financial leaders such as chief financial officers and presidents that could speak to identifying price and cost effects of the merger.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experience of administrators who participated in mergers of technical colleges in a Southern state in the United States. This study addressed a gap in the literature regarding the understanding of the experience of administrators who are part of a college that merges. To address this gap, a central research question with three sub-questions guided the study: What are the experiences of administrators who participate in mergers of technical colleges in a southern state in the United States? What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on the merging process? What are the administrators' perceptions of college mergers based on communication challenges? What are the administrators' perception of college mergers based on the new formed college?

I used three data collection methods for this study, interviews, participant's reflection documents, and focus groups. Data were gathered from 10 participants, and I used Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology to analyze the data. Five themes were identified through a continuous immersion in data coding: uncertainty, benefits, change, communication, and culture. The themes were then examined in relation to existing theoretical and empirical literature and then used to formulate theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. This research has provided a basis for technical colleges and leaders to implement

best practices for initiating college mergers, training administrators, and establishing communication channels premerger and post-merger.

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Appendix A

MTCS APPROVAL FORM

Technical College
[REDACTED][REDACTED]
Governor[REDACTED]
Commissioner

July 14, 2021

[REDACTED]
Dear [REDACTED]

The Technical College System [REDACTED] has received the forms and documentation related to your intended dissertation research study entitled "A Phenomenological Study of Administrators' Perceptions of College Mergers." We have reviewed the summary of your research along with the IRB document issued to you by Liberty University.

In accordance with the IRB process, as well as the documents you submitted to [REDACTED] with regard to the parameters and intent of your study, we authorize you to contact the colleges of your choice within the System for permission to continue with the research project with the following stipulations: Your research should be conducted at times that do not directly coincide with your [REDACTED] work schedule or the schedules of any participants from the respective colleges. No [REDACTED] personnel or resources may aid you in your research. Lastly, please utilize your Liberty University email for all communication related to your research and not your [REDACTED] email.

Please make it clear to participants that the study is a personal venture associated with your doctoral studies independent of [REDACTED] and that participation in the study is strictly voluntary.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I may be reached at [REDACTED]. Best wishes on your doctoral pursuit!

Warmest regards,

[Redacted]

Executive Director, Accountability / Institutional Effectiveness

cc:

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

Appendix B**IRB APPROVAL FORM****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 6, 2021

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-759 A Phenomenological Study of Administrators' Perceptions of College Mergers

Dear [REDACTED]:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of Administrators' Perceptions of College Mergers

Principal Investigator: [REDACTED]

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be 18 years of age or older and either current or former administrators of technical colleges that have merged in a technical college system. An administrator is defined as an academic dean, academic assistant dean, campus dean, nonacademic dean, or nonacademic assistant dean. Administrators must have been administrators during the merger of a technical college and must still be administrators. Former administrators either must have been administrators during the merger of a technical college but now hold different positions or must have been administrators during the merger of a technical college but are now retired from the technical system. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand administrators' perceptions of the effects of merging colleges and to provide insight for educational leaders.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an audio-recorded interview that should take 30-45 minutes to complete. The interview will be held either in person or through Webex.
2. Review your interview transcript for accuracy.
3. Complete a reflection note about your experience that should take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete and will be submitted by email.
4. Participate in an audio-recorded focus group that should take 45-60 minutes to complete via telephone conferencing or Webex.
5. Review your focus group transcript for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society could include increasing the body of knowledge regarding technical college mergers.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential with pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked cabinet. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all physical records will be shredded.
- Interviews and focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Technical College System of Georgia. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

[REDACTED]

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact [REDACTED]

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations.

The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Are you a current or former administrator of a technical college that has merged into a technical college system? (An administrator is defined as an academic dean, academic assistant dean, campus dean, non-academic dean, or non-academic assistant dean. Administrators must have been administrators during the merger of a technical college and must still be administrators. Former administrators either must have been administrators during the merger of a technical college but now hold different positions or must have been administrators during the merger of a technical college but are now retired from the technical college system): Yes No
2. Gender: Male Female Prefer to not disclose
3. Please select your current age range:
 <18 18-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70>
4. How many years have you served as an administrator in this system?
 0-4 5-9 10-14 15-19 20-24 25-29 30-34 35>
5. The approximate number of full-time faculty and staff that report to you: _____
 0-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26 - 30 31>
6. The approximate number of part-time faculty and staff that report to you. _____
 0-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26 - 30 31>

Appendix E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Each interview question will focus on understanding how each participant experience the process and identify the steps in the process (Creswell, 2018).

1. Tell me a few things about yourself.
2. Describe the pre-merger process
3. Describe the merger process.
4. What do you see as a benefit of merging?
5. What do you see as a detriment to merging?
6. Describe your relationship with those that directly reported to you before the merger.
7. What has been the impact on your relationship with those that directly report(ed) to you since the merger?
8. Describe your relationship with those that you directly reported to before the merger.
9. What has been the impact on your relationship with those that you directly report(ed) to since the merger?
10. Describe your relationship with other administrators before the merger.
11. What has been the impact on your relationship with other administrators since the merger?
12. Describe the advantages and disadvantages of the newly formed college.
13. How has the merger impacted your current position?

Appendix F
REFLECTION LETTER

In your reflection, please include your thoughts on the merging process, communication challenges, and the newly formed college. Please limit your reflection letter to a page or less.

Your reflection letter should be emailed to me.

Appendix G

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Looking at the themes that have been noted during data collection and data analysis, which themes do you see that address the overall merging process? Explain your answer. What are other themes that you would like to add?
2. Looking at the themes that have been noted during data collection and data analysis, which themes do you see that address communication challenges? Explain your answer. What are other themes that you would like to add?
3. Looking at the themes that have been noted during data collection and data analysis, which themes do you see that address the new college? Explain your answer. What are other themes that you would like to add?