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# Passing On The Legacy: How Rural Community College Senior Officers Prepare The Next Generation Of Leaders

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PASSING ON THE LEGACY: HOW RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE SENIOR  
OFFICERS PREPARE THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

by

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Bachelor of Science, University of Minnesota, 2000  
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Dissertation Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy


Grand Forks, North Dakota

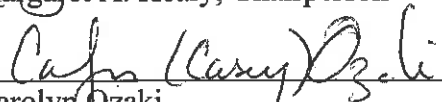
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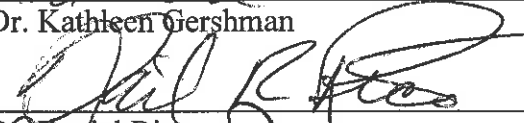
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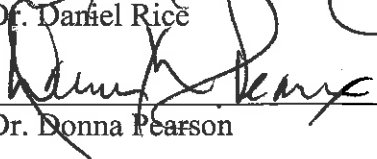
This dissertation, submitted by Linda Lee Thompson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

  
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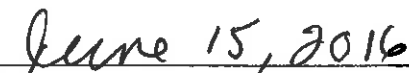
  
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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

  
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Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

  
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## PERMISSION

Title            Passing On the Legacy: How Rural Community College Senior  
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Department    Educational Leadership

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Linda Lee Thompson  
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## ABSTRACT

Given the significant projected percentages of retirements of community college senior officers, forecasted workforce shortages, and the difficulty of attracting employees to rural community colleges, a qualitative study was undertaken to understand the learning experiences of seven senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college. Through the interviews, the senior officers redirected the conversations to describe how they develop the next generation of rural community college leaders. Findings included the descriptive concepts of (a) rural legacies, (b) developing pragmatic competence, and (c) reciprocal development. A grounded theory model provided guidance on preparing the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges.



## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

By 2020, five million jobs in the United States may remain vacant due to economic growth and significant demographic shifts (Toossi, 2012). A growing economy is expected to produce 24 million new jobs just as 31 million baby boomers (those born 1946-1964) reach retirement age (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Repnikov, 2014). The retirements may significantly impact community colleges as projections indicate by 2022, 64% of community college senior officers will reach retirement age (J. E. King & Gomez, 2007) while 75% of presidents plan to retire (Tekel, 2012). Faculty are the most likely successors to fill the vacant positions. However, 80% of faculty intend to retire in the same timeframe, leaving few qualified successors (Rifkin, 2015). A persistent challenge for rural community colleges is attracting qualified employees. Rural colleges comprise 64% of all community colleges, affect over three million students, and provide vital programs and services that foster economic growth (Rural Community College Alliance, 2012). With few prepared successors, high projected retirements, a shrinking workforce, and the difficulty of attracting qualified employees to rural areas; we need to understand how to develop qualified successors.

In 2013, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) published the *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders*. The AACC competency model reflects the philosophy of community colleges through a conceptual map of senior officer's responsibilities. Competencies describe the overarching knowledge, skills, and

values commonly practiced within a profession (Rothwell, 2010). The literature reports the competency development strategies of presidents, but few studies focus on how other senior officers (e.g., vice-presidents, deans, provosts) at rural community colleges develop competencies for the position. Therefore, it is vital to understand the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead a rural community college and learn how to develop meaningful learning practices in preparing internal successors.

Senior officers develop conceptual knowledge through professional learning programs. Formal learning opportunities occur through graduate programs, courses, short programs, or seminars offered through universities, or professional organizations such as AACC, the American Council on Education, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and state or local leadership programs (Shults, 2001). To translate the conceptual knowledge and skills to the work context and build professional mastery, a senior officer may use a mixture of formal and informal learning activities (Merriam, 2001). In the work context, examples of informal learning are mentors, task force membership, committees, boards, or special work assignments (Marsick, 2009). Professional mastery develops for educational leaders similarly to law or medical professionals who build mental maps and perceptions through a unique set of knowledge and experiences (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

Understanding the range of learning opportunities to direct one's learning is essential in developing professional mastery. Some senior officers report that knowledge gained through formal learning was useful but found difficulty in applying the information in the work context (Williams, Pennington, Couch, & Dougherty, 2007). In

considering informal learning in the work context, Marsick and Volpe (1999) discovers that a well-defined plan of learning activities help employees direct their learning. The authors suggest that formal and informal learning work together as a portfolio of options. Understanding how senior officers translate knowledge into practice informs plans to develop meaningful learning practices as we seek to develop qualified internal successors.

In preparing internal successors, organizations often use the processes of succession planning. The process begins by identifying key positions, selecting high potential individuals, and creating personal development plans (Rothwell, 2010). The author describes the disadvantages of internal successors in terms of the continuance of cultural issues as obstacles to productivity. Another concern is the narrow breadth of recent work experiences. The advantages of internal successors are the awareness and understanding of organizational systems, stakeholder and peer networks, and work philosophies that fit the environment (Rothwell, 2010). Understanding cultural expectations, having established relationships, and time-honored credibility is essential for the operational continuity of a rural community college.

The time has come to develop internal candidates to succeed retiring senior officers given the projected retirements, a shrinking workforce, and the challenges of attracting employees to rural areas. However, little information exists regarding how senior officers at rural community colleges learn the position competencies. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college.

## **Statement of the Problem**

By 2022, projections indicate that 64% of community college senior officers will reach retirement age (J. E. King & Gomez, 2007) while 75% of presidents expect to retire (Tekel, 2012). Faculty are the most likely successors to fill the vacant positions, however, 80% of faculty intend to retire in the same timeframe, leaving few prepared successors (Rifkin, 2015). According to Shults (2001), many administrators and faculty are part of the baby boom generation, working at community colleges since the 1960s and 1970s, and retiring at a high rate. In light of the employment forecasts, the author suggests developing successors internally.

The potential retirements may present challenges to rural community colleges given the long-term issue of attracting qualified employees to rural areas (Williams, Pennington, Couch, & Dougherty, 2007). Rural America constitutes 72% of the nation's land mass and is home to 15% (46.2 million) of the population (United States Department of Agriculture, 2013). Influences that shape rural community culture include high poverty, low wages, and low education levels (Rural Community College Alliance, 2012). However, Kelsohn (2002) reports shifts in the rural economy that include global trade, telecommunications, and banking, which may contribute to a positive economic climate.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The original purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college. However, during the interviews with senior officers, the historical perspective of the research shifted to a future perspective when the participants

repeatedly discussed the development of others. Reframing a research design is an integral element of the qualitative research process. According to Maxwell (2005) the qualitative method is flexible as the research design changes in response to the circumstances of the topic of study. Therefore, the reframed research purpose is to understand how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges.

The prevailing cultural belief of rural residents is self-reliance, resulting in guarded relationships with newcomers (Smith, 2003). In addition, the author reports the majority of community members have close relationships, leading to a lack of privacy. Other cultural norms include deeply held religious and patriotic beliefs, the values of hard work, close families, and community centeredness (Heffernan, Hendrickson, & Gronski, 1999).

The rural community has a strong sense of ownership of the college and regularly asks about its business (P. L. Eddy, 2007). Likewise, colleges play a critical role in the quality of rural life by sponsoring cultural and social activities (AACC, 1992). The community embraces the community college by relying on the services of education, workforce development, and facilitating local economic development initiatives (P. L. Eddy, 2007; RCCA, 2012). However, Killacky and Valadez (1995) offer that while rural colleges provide vital services, they increasingly lack financial and human resources. Leading in a rural community college requires senior officers to address and navigate distinctive challenges, community expectations, and unfilled position vacancies. A senior officer must be prepared to address these challenges. Therefore, the purpose of

this study is to understand how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges.

### **Succession Planning**

Succession planning is the process of identifying, selecting, and developing internal successors and an element of the Human Resource Development (HRD) field (Rothwell, 1994). Development is "...any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults' work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction..." (McLean & McLean, 2001, p. 322). The learning process, as defined by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), is the "...cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values, and worldviews" (p. 277).

Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and values commonly practiced within a profession. A competency model helps guide learning outcomes and development plans (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). The authors describe knowledge as the common practices, concepts, or principles of a position. Skills develop by applying knowledge to experiences in the work context. Personal values describe one's characteristics and perspectives.

The purpose of succession planning is to ensure a steady supply of prepared successors to fill key positions when a vacancy occurs (Rothwell, 1994). Key positions ensure the continuity of organizational operations (Rothwell, 2010). Executive leadership is a term used in private and nonprofit companies that describe top-level positions, such as chief executive officers and senior-level managers, responsible for the

performance of all departments (Jones & George, 2003). Key positions include executive leadership positions.

In community colleges, key positions are presidents and their direct reports, referred to as senior officers (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 2003). While position titles vary among community colleges, the authors provide examples of titles such as vice-presidents, financial officers, provosts, and deans. The president serves as the chief executive officer (CEO) with responsibility for all internal functions and external relations of the college (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006). Senior officers oversee and direct strategies, manage operations and resources, supervise and direct employees, and act on behalf of the president (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Along with senior officers' duties, understanding the work context is essential in translating knowledge into practice. Bolman and Gallos (2011) describe the work context of an institution of higher education as ambiguous with varying and competing expectations and perceptions, constant deadlines, and the challenges of leading diverse personalities. The author's state that appearing clueless affects credibility and career longevity. Given the significant level of responsibility and uncertainty of the work context, successors must be well prepared.

Key positions are typically identified by patterns of job progressions (career trajectories) from entry-level leadership positions to executive positions (Rothwell, 2010; Vardi, 1980). A career trajectory indicates increasing leadership responsibilities as one accepts a new position. Career trajectory patterns establish a pool of potential successors. In community colleges, studies show the sequence of progressive leadership positions (Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown, 2002; Cejda, McKenney, & Burley, 2001). Regarding chief academic officers (CAO), Cejda et al. (2001) found career paths start with faculty

chair, which progress to varying administrative positions, including division dean. Seventy-seven percent of division deans progress to the CAO position. Fifty-nine percent of CAOs were internal promotions, establishing an internal labor market (Cejda et al., 2001). Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown (2002) reveal that 52% of CAOs were internal promotions. Previous positions include deans (55%) and other leadership positions (18%) such as those in student affairs, learning resources, and institutional development. For senior student affairs officers (SSAOs), internal promotions occurred from positions of deans (53%) and directors of counseling (19%). Most SSAOs (70%) worked at the same college 10 or more years. The internal promotion rate of chief financial officers (CFOs) was 40%. Previous positions held by CFOs were business manager, auditor, or financial officer. Internal promotions from a vice-presidential position to the president were 22%.

In developing internal successors, the first step in succession planning is identifying key positions. Next is selecting potential candidates (Rothwell, 2010). The third step assesses candidates' knowledge and skills and create individual development plans (Rothwell, 2010). The concern of this study focuses on the third stage of the succession planning process. In creating development plans, Merriam et al. (2007) suggests a mixture of formal and informal learning activities draw on the purposes of individual learning needs, offering a more holistic way to learn and adapt knowledge to the work context. Williams et al. (2007) states that while leadership programs are available, graduates indicate programs inadequately address the needs of rural communities. Fullan and Scott (2009) offer that formal learning is useful but learning in the work context builds professional mastery. Further, individual learning plans guide



the development of leadership capabilities and motivate individuals to seek additional experiences.

Learning administrative leadership begins by reflecting on one's values. Conger and Benjamin (1999) underscore that personal credibility and authenticity are central to learning leadership competencies. Hanson (2013) asserts that learning leadership requires a person to understand their beliefs, values, abilities, and the awareness of fitting with others and aligning to the needs of the organization. Fullan and Scott (2009) claim that a key element in the development process is self-directed learning. Additionally, administrative leadership requires learning in the work context as it is "profoundly" (p. 137) a social experience as peer groups are influential and provide valuable feedback. Therefore, developing professional mastery in the work context is essential as senior officers ensure that college services fulfill the needs of the rural community.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Community colleges provide a wide range of services to communities, including vital workforce education and technical training that fuel economic growth. Rural residents and community college faculty and staff expect senior officers to commit to the cultural values of the community. The prevailing values of rural communities are close relationships, personal authenticity, and community centeredness (P. L. Eddy, 2013; Leist, 2007). Therefore, the personal values of a senior officer must align to the local context and are of utmost importance.

Senior officers must be prepared to meet the demands of the position. In addition to operational management and compliance responsibilities, individuals must be ready for high levels of responsibility while performing a broad scope of undefined duties (Bolman

& Gallos, 2011). The work context involves navigating ambiguous expectations, continually solving unique situational challenges, and managing competing projects and perceptions. The potential consequences of unprepared senior officers may impede the effectiveness of the college, which affects student success. In addition to the values previously mentioned, senior officers need conceptual knowledge and technical skills of the wider community college context. However, individuals must learn to translate the conceptual knowledge into practice to fit the work context (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013).

The wide range of theories and models to study leadership development is vast. Therefore, to study the development of senior officers in the rural community college context, conceptually framing the research is important. Creswell (2009) describes a conceptual framework as an interconnecting system of theories, assumptions, concepts, and beliefs. The author describes the system as a model of what may be occurring and why. While each concept represents an aspect of the phenomenon, the concepts interrelate and form an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Jabareen, 2009). Another area of importance of the conceptual framework is a tool for guiding the meaning of the findings (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). In addition, the conceptual framework provides a perspective for collecting and analyzing data (Glesne, 2005). This study is framed with transformative learning theory and the American Association of Community Colleges model, *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* (AACC, 2013), shown in Figure 1.

The perspectives of transformative learning theory contribute in framing this study. In developing professional competencies in the work context, Illeris (2011) states that, "...competence development implies important and demanding learning

processes...” (p. 60), which is inclusive of the transformative learning process. The author asserts that in developing professional mastery, intensive situations occurring in the work context require the processes of transformative learning.

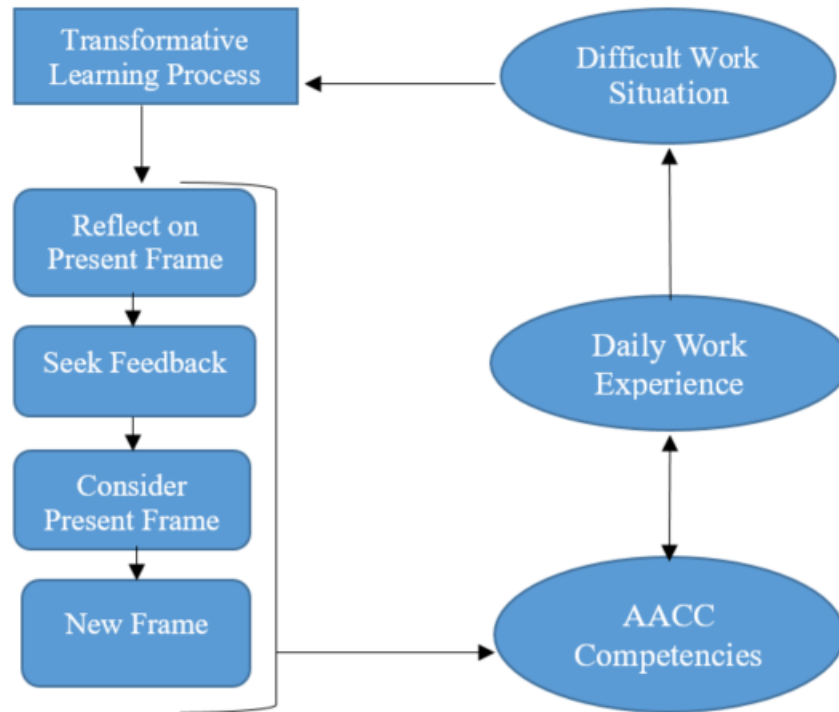


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

In addition, Brock (2010) suggests that intensive situations cause leaders to examine their perspectives when adapting to new roles and environments. Existing literature supports the effectiveness of the transformative learning processes in formal education settings and the work context.

Mezirow first developed transformative learning theory in 1978. The author describes transformative learning as a reflective process where individuals critically examine and make meaning of difficult situations. Mezirow offers that difficult

situations, while subjective in nature, are a stimulus that cause individuals to think differently about themselves, their values, or actions. The transformative learning process involves four learning processes, including discovering present frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, and transforming perspectives. Mezirow describes a present frame of reference as self-reflection on personal knowledge, beliefs, and values in a given situation. A new frame of reference occurs when an individual learns new information and tests new meanings. If the new meaning provides insight, an individual integrates the meaning into their frame of reference, causing a transformed point of view (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning theory supports learning formally in classrooms and workshops and informally in group settings, including the workplace (Mezirow, 2000).

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) competency model also frames this study. In 2005, AACC published *Competencies for Community College Leaders*, which reflects six broad categories of knowledge, skills, and values that embody the community college philosophy. The categories are (1) organization strategy, (2) institutional finance, research, fundraising, and resource management, (3) communication, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, and (6) professionalism. In 2013, AACC launched an updated model, *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders*. The new edition retains the first five categories and assumes the embedded nature of professionalism throughout the model. Updates to the model include performance benchmarks based on years of leadership experience and recommended learning activities related to formal and informal learning in developing the competencies (AACC, 2013). I used the second edition in this study as the benchmarks provide clarity

and meaning of each competency and explicitly advocate a mixture of formal and informal learning. However, I used the literature based on the first edition, given the similarities between the editions and the limited number of studies relating to the second edition. Literature findings indicate that community college presidents embrace and value the AACC competencies as effective practices.

Formal and informal learning processes work together in developing professional mastery (Marsick, 2009; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). Each process has its purposes and is equally valuable in contributing to the development of professional mastery. For clarity, I will describe the processes separately. Formal learning activities are useful in learning theoretical concepts and acquiring other knowledge. Merriam et al. (2007) describes the formal learning process as highly structured, curriculum-driven, leading to grades, and resulting in a credential. Informal learning activities, most often used in the workplace, bridge the gap in translating theory into practice (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Marsick, 2009). Informal learning, as theorized by Marsick and Watkins (2001), involves intentional, unstructured activities embedded into work tasks, interpersonal interactions, and/or trial and error experimentation. The central factor of informal learning is the work context as it influences how people interpret a situation, take action, and receive feedback. Further, the three conditions that enhance informal learning are critical reflection, proactivity, and creativity. Examples of informal learning are mentors, task force membership, committees, boards, or special work assignments (Marsick, 2009). The literature indicates that informal learning activities significantly contribute to learning within the workplace context.

## **Research Questions**

The original research question that guided this study focused on the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college. The question helped me understand the context of senior officers and informed my questions for the first interview.

As previously described, during the interviews senior officers discussed how they developed others. The focus changed the research direction to a future perspective, which led to reframing the research question that guided the study. The subquestions remained the same. Subquestion one led me to the findings and subquestion two provided the context of the college environment: The research question is:

How do senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges?

The subquestions are:

- 1) How do senior officers learn the competencies to lead at a rural community college?
- 2) What competencies do senior officers learn in order to lead at a rural community college?

## **Significance**

Leading a rural community college requires senior officers to learn and adapt competencies that have meaning within the local context (Fullan & Scott, 2009; Piland & Wolf, 2003). Retirements are anticipated (J. E. King & Gomez, 2007; Tekel, 2012), significant workforce shortages forecasted (Carnevale et al., 2014), and attracting employees to rural communities is difficult (Williams et al., 2007). The potential impacts

are too significant to ignore. When the expected vacancies begin to occur, it may be difficult for boards, presidents, or state systems to adequately develop successors (AACC, 2013; Mateso, 2010) as learning to lead takes time and practice (Shirazi & Mortazavi, 2009). The contributions of this study reveal details of successful rural leadership practices and a process of learning pragmatic professionalism by learning reciprocally. These findings promote the understanding of leading at a rural community college and developing the next generation of senior officers. The data may be useful for professional organizations, human resource professionals, community college scholars, higher education professional programs, state higher education systems, presidents, and people with career aspirations for administrative positions.

### **Researcher Perspective**

My career of over 29 years includes varying experiences in human resource development. The first 10 years of my career, I was a corporate trainer. The following 14 years, I served as a community college dean in a rural community, focusing on developing student services advisors and creating scalable support systems (textbooks, recruitment, admissions, student assessment, and enrollment advising). For the past four years, I have served as an Organizational Development Director for a nonprofit, publically funded applied research organization, focusing on rural economic development. My experiences in this position include individual and team talent development, policy and process alignment, and human resource management functions. I have lived in rural areas throughout my life. My passion for rural communities, community colleges, talent development, and my curiosity of how senior officers develop professional mastery led me to conduct this study.

## **Delimitations**

This study was delimited to seven senior officers in one state higher education system. The findings generated insights into rural leadership, a process for developing internal senior officer successors, and useful themes for future studies. My biases include those related to my professional experiences in human resource development and as a former rural community college dean. Therefore, I carefully monitored my biases during the study to ensure the research reflected the experiences of the participants.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Learning*: "...a process that brings together cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values, and worldviews (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 277).

*Development*: "...any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults' work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction..." (McLean & McLean, 2001, p. 322).

*Formal learning*: Learning that is highly structured and curriculum-driven, leading to grades and a credential (Merriam et al., 2007).

*Informal learning*: Intentional, unstructured learning activities embedded in daily work, interpersonal interactions, and/or trial and error experimentation (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

*Competencies*: A term referring to the overarching knowledge, skills, and values a set of concepts related to a position and commonly practiced within a profession (Rothwell, 2010).



*Community College:* An associate's degree granting institution ("Basic Classification," n.d.).

*Rural community college:* For this study, a rural community college is a community college located in a town with a population of less than 50,000.

*Size (public rural-serving categories):* "Institutional size, based on full-year unduplicated...headcount, where small is defined as less than 2,500, medium as 2,500 through 7,500, and large as greater than 7,500. Size is based on 2013-14 data ("Custom Listings," n.d.).

*Senior officers:* Positions at community colleges that report to the president and are responsible for directing strategies, managing operations and resources; supervising and directing employees; and acting on behalf of the president as directed (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

*President:* The chief executive officer, responsible for all internal functions and external relations of the community college (Weisman & Vaughan, 2006).

*Administrators:* Refers to presidents and his or her direct reports (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

*Executive:* Refers to chief executive officers and his or her direct reports responsible for the performance of all departments in the business sector (Jones & George, 2003).

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter I introduces the study background, the research problem, purpose, delimitations, and the significance of the study. In addition, the chapter contains the

justification of the study, an explanation of the conceptual framework, and concludes with the definition of terms.

Chapter II includes a review of the literature relevant to rural community colleges and learning processes relating to professional competency development. Other literature pertains to transformative learning theory and the American Association of Community Colleges competency model.

Chapter III describes the research methodology, the data collection process, data analysis, and researcher biases.

Chapter IV presents the research findings pertaining to how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges.

Chapter V provides the final assertion, discussion, implications for professional organizations, human resource professionals, community college scholars, higher education professional programs, state higher education systems, presidents, and individuals with career aspirations for administrative positions, recommendations for future research, and final thoughts.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In light of the projected retirements, workforce shortages, and the difficulty of attracting employees, the challenges present the opportunity to understand how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges. Distinctive challenges have persisted at rural community colleges for over 40 years, including the difficulty of attracting employees. This qualitative study is framed with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) and the *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* published by the American Society of Community Colleges (AACC) in 2013. The first section of this chapter indicates the distinctive challenges of rural community colleges. The second section describes transformative learning theory and discusses the related literature. The last section presents the AACC Competency model and literature highlights.

#### **Distinctiveness of Rural Community Colleges**

In 1979, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges commissioned a study on the challenges of rural community colleges. The study revealed distinctive, critical challenges related to geographic remoteness and unavoidable cost inefficiencies associated with serving small populations. The distinctive challenges of the rural college included the necessity to provide comprehensive programs, cost inefficiencies associated with low enrollment, communication challenges, supplying the

social and cultural needs of the community, and low visibility. The challenges led to diminished influence with federal and state politicians and other institutions of higher education. Issues included the difficulty of attracting employees. In addition, many employees performed multiple roles, which resulted in the limited ability to compete for grants or other funding and to fulfill regulatory reporting requirements (Vineyard, 1979).

Nearly 40 years later, through interviews with rural community college administrators, Pennington, Williams, and Karvonen (2006) discovered distinctive challenges resulting from an evolving student population, mission changes, funding, and staffing concerns. The most consistent issue discussed by participants was attracting qualified employees, described as affecting most areas of the college. Administrators discussed the significant increase in the average age of students whose educational goals included gaining job skills relevant to the local area. The needs of the aging student population shifted the mission of the colleges from transfer education to workforce development. The changes required additional funding, while state appropriations continued to dwindle. Acquiring grants was difficult given colleges employed minimal staff. Most employees lacked the knowledge and skill to write grants, which resulted in missed funding opportunities (Pennington et al., 2006).

Funding was a critical issue for all colleges, but rural colleges had the constraint of limited access to private funders. Duree (2007) found the remote location of the college limited access to private funding and diminished access to advocate for additional funding streams. Additionally, challenges related to legislative advocacy were long drives to the state capital and the associated costs. Outcomes of reduced funding greatly influenced colleges' effectiveness. Crookston and Hooks (2012) analyzed the impact of

community colleges on communities by examining county employment trends between 1976 and 2004 in 44 states. Data show that established community colleges contributed to significant employment growth between 1976 and 1983. However, between 1984 and 2004 employment growth declined. The authors asserted the period of decline was due to the increased interest in funding social programs, the expansive growth of prisons, and waning public support for funding community colleges. The implication was that decreased funding hampered the efforts of community colleges to provide needed services to the region.

Community colleges struggled with cost inefficiencies. Hardy and Katsinas (2007) suggested that all community colleges share the commitment to open enrollment, academic and career counseling, and remediation services. The authors described the distinctive issues of rural colleges as limited or missing programs and services such as continuing education or non-degree courses, study abroad programs, accelerated courses, and childcare services. Small student populations led to cost inefficiencies, which further limited rural colleges. The issues of cost caused a narrow breadth of programs and services, reliance on state appropriations, and higher costs per student. In addition, the authors reported that staff performed multiple administrative duties due to the community college requirements to offer comprehensive programs and services.

Attracting qualified employees was a primary concern to several rural community colleges. In nation-wide listening sessions, AACC sought to understand the needs of community colleges and discovered rural college presidents and chancellors were constrained by limited hiring budgets to attract employees (AACC, 2012b). The limited budgets led to prioritizing funds for faculty hires rather than administrators. In a study by

Duree and Ebbers (2012), presidents reported that finding qualified individuals to fill administrative positions was one of the most significant challenges and of primary concern.

### **Promotions**

Promoted employees were often unprepared for administrative positions (P. L. Eddy, 2010). Based on qualitative interviews with directors, deans, and lead faculty who had aspirations for administrative positions, Garza-Mitchell and P. L. Eddy (2008) reported limited formal structures to prepare future administrators. Due to the lack of a formal structure, new administrators determined his or her development plan based on perceived needs, having little guidance. Immediate issues were a higher priority than developing a structured development plan for potential leaders. During the AACC listening sessions, as previously described, rural college administrators stated that in light of reduced budgets and limited staff, a system was needed to help colleges develop leaders (AACC, 2012a). Given the dwindling funds of rural colleges, Jeandron (2006) found that national administrative leadership programs were too costly, and travel distance was inconvenient for remote colleges. P. L. Eddy (2013) offered that rural colleges had to make choices on the types of development programs offered and the frequency of participation in an off-campus event.

### **Influences and Expectations**

The local community significantly influenced rural community colleges through expectations, cultural traditions, and relationships. In a study of presidents, Leist (2007) reported community members expected administrators to know and embrace the history, folklore, traditions, and symbolic relationships of the town. In addition, citizens of the

community felt strong ownership of the college and therefore unpopular decisions became a community event. A perception of administrators not acclimated to rural traditions reported similar responses to that of one president, indicating that “Rurals are different” (Leist, 2007, p. 313). The influences of rural communities affected how administrators led. In a study of rural administrators, P. L. Eddy (2013) described local influences as long drives for employees and students and the pressures of long-standing relationships on college decision-making. The author offered that given the constraints of low populations, many employees were extended family members, which led to communication issues on multiple levels and resulted in confidentiality issues. Underscoring the troublesome nature of this point, one president asserted, “You can be absolutely sure that every single living body on the campus knows every single thing about every other living body on campus” (P. L. Eddy, 2013, p. 6).

Likewise, the college influenced the rural community through services and programs. Miller and Tuttle (2007) discovered that rural colleges were a source of community pride and a service hub. Community members viewed the college as the social center of the community and a primary employer. Many businesses located in the community to access the community college’s workforce development services to fulfill talent needs. Pennington et al. (2006) discussed the relational and engagement factors of rural colleges. All participants described the college environment as a “unique family environment” given the long-term relationships with most families (p. 649). In addition, colleges became the economic development engine of the region. The authors provided examples of expectations of the college that included assistance in resume writing, workforce development training, and assisting industry with land transfer deals. Given

the distinctive challenges and community influences, it is important to develop internal candidates to succeed retiring senior officers at rural community colleges.

### **Learning**

Deliberate development processes were deemed as essential to ensure community college leaders learn the appropriate competencies for adapting to “rapidly changing contexts” (p. 3) and leading organizational change (AACCC, 2013). Transformative learning theory frames this study as senior officers learn to adapt to the rural community college culture and translate their knowledge and skills to fit the context. The transformative learning process is a reflective practice as individuals critically examine and make meaning of their assumptions (Mezirow, 1999). A mixture of formal and informal learning activities support the transformative nature of leadership and learning in the work context (Brock, 2010; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004; Illeris, 2011; Merriam et al., 2007).

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Mezirow first developed a theory of transformative learning in 1978 that helped adults integrate and make sense of new insights. The theory centered on reflective practice and critical thinking. The process of transformative learning suggests that individual’s challenge their assumptions when experiencing difficult situations. The challenges promote self-reflection that may cause one to consider a change in perspective. Mezirow built on Habermass’s communicative learning domain, Kelly’s constructivist theory, the reconstructive approach of Chomsky, Piaget, and Kohlberg, and learning theorists Bateson and Cell. Mezirow used elements of these theorist’s models related to how adults interpret, evaluate, and reformulate meaning (Mezirow, 1991).



Mezirow explained the transformation learning process began with self-awareness and reflection on one's perspective. Next, the individual may seek feedback from others, and then consider the viability of the perspective. If the individual believed the perspective was distorted or incomplete, he/she may consider new meaning. The model of transformative learning contained four learning processes, including (1) discovering present frames of reference, (2) learning new frames of reference, (3) transforming points of view, and (4) transforming perspectives. Mezirow described a present frame of reference as individual reflection on personal knowledge, beliefs, and values of a given situation. A new frame of reference occurred when an individual learned new information and tested new meanings. If the new meaning provided insight, it was integrated into an individual's frame of reference, causing a transformed point of view (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow acknowledged that not all learning was transformative, but as individuals learned, the information influenced their perspective, and therefore, new meanings could be crucially important in thinking, feeling, and taking action (1991). Since the 1990s, empirical research on transformative learning has been "burgeoning" (Merriam et al., p. 132, 2007). An annual conference dedicated to transformative learning provided a forum to present and discuss research findings and practices related to the theory. As an example, Merriam et al. (2007) reported the 1985 conference resulted in 85 empirical studies. While widely supported, critiques of the theory suggested that individuals may experience transformative learning differently as difficult situations are subjective, and the willingness to change varies among individuals (Erickson, 2002).

## **Challenging Perspectives**

In higher education, literature supported transformative learning, suggesting that reflection and feedback resulted in expanded perspectives. Through teaching transformative learning to community college faculty in a graduate course, K. P. King (2004) discovered students had deeply felt experiences and adopted new perspectives, when experiencing triggering situations. Students developed a more inclusive view of themselves and others, adopted reflective practices in daily activities, and viewed situations from multiple perspectives. However, some students needed encouragement and support to understand how to integrate the newly discovered aspects. In a quantitative study of 256 undergraduate business students, Brock (2010) found a perspective change was either sudden or subtle. In the course of four semesters, two-thirds of the students reported a change in perspective. The prevailing transformative learning process in the study was critical reflection after trying new roles. The author noted that students' perspectives changed at varying intervals.

In a study with staff and faculty employed in an extension office, Franz, Garst, Baughman, Smith, and Peters (2009) offered the conditions that promoted transformative learning were diverse personalities, work styles, and worldviews linked by a common purpose. Transformative learning framed a peer-based workshop with community college faculty. Eisen (2001) reported peer discussions resulted in integrated learning while individual reflection led to a change in professional identity. The two factors that facilitated learning were peer groups and building trust. The peer-based learning structure enabled the coexistence of individual and peer learning, creating a diverse learning environment. Faculty reported that working closely with a peer was key to

facilitating learning and working on issues of shared concern built trust. The primary influences that supported transformative learning were critical reflection, active learning, dialogue, and support. A small number of participants were not satisfied with the learning event, which the author asserted was an individual's inability to accept peer feedback.

### **Translating Knowledge Into Practice**

Illeris (2011) offered that formal professional programs provide the knowledge and skills that form a conceptual map of a profession. The author suggested that workplace learning differed from other forms of learning in terms of the influences of a broader societal perspective and the emphasis on developing professional skills through applying and practicing conceptual knowledge. Caffarella and Daffron (2013) suggested that an overlooked aspect of professional programs was helping people learn how to apply the professional competencies in the workplace.

In terms of translating conceptual knowledge to practice, Cervero (1991) stated that individuals build professional knowledge by acquiring conceptual knowledge and skills through formal preparation courses, then practice the concepts through work tasks. Professionals then continued to build a knowledge base through conferences, journals, workshops and similar events. The author asserted that knowledge and skills developed through the intertwining of conceptual knowledge and practice. Cervero concluded that theory and practice are indivisible. Therefore, parameters do not exist on "...how, where and by whom this knowledge is produced" (p. 31). This logic led to the assertion that reliance on trial-and-error experiences is valid guidance in developing professional practices. Similarly, Gaventa (1988) supported the notion that individuals have the

ability to produce knowledge through problem solving, analysis of situations, and determining causal conditions. Understanding the interwoven nature of theory and practice as it relates to the workplace is vital when considering how to develop senior officer successors at rural community colleges.

## **Experience**

A central factor in workplace learning is experience. Lindeman (1961) stated that the experience becomes “the adult learner’s living textbook...already there waiting to be appropriated” (p. 7). Building on Dewey, Piaget, and Levin’s work in learning through experience, D. A. Kolb (1984) developed an experiential learning theory based on the idea that adults connect prior knowledge and experiences when acquiring and integrating new information. Kolb developed a model that included concrete experience (performing a task), observation and reflection (observing a situation), forming abstract concepts (thinking), and testing new situations (planning). In addition, the author identified four learning styles that corresponded with the four stages. The learning styles shed light on the best learning conditions related to an individual’s cognitive preference. The four styles included assimilators (based on logic), convergers (understood through practical concepts), accommodators (preferred hands-on experiences), and divergers (relied on observation). A. Y. Kolb and D. A. Kolb (2005) suggested six assumptions related to experiential learning. The first was to conceive learning as a process rather than specific outcomes. Second, all learning is re-learning because as learners become aware of their ideas and discuss situations with others, thoughts are refined. Next, a learner resolves conflicting concepts by reflecting, acting, feeling or thinking when adapting ideas to new contexts. Fourth, holistic learning engaged the mind, body, and spirit by interacting with

the local context. The last assumption was that learning is constructivist in nature.

Learning through experience involved learning processes related to structured, formal plans, structured or unstructured informal activities, and an intermingling thereof to gain the necessary knowledge.

Executives learned to direct their development through an informal learning activity. In a study based on experiential learning through an executive management program, Ballou, Bowers, Boyatzis, and D. A. Kolb (1999) reported executives were inspired by the informal activities within the course and embraced the concepts of lifelong learning. The students (53 executives) had significant prior professional experiences (medical, law, education, and business professionals) but received no development in executive leadership. The executives took a competency assessment, used the data, and created individualized learning plans. The executives reported the most satisfying aspect of the course was constructing learning plans, as it increased self-esteem and confidence, clarified future direction, and helped them regain a sense of control. The critical elements of informal learning were reflection and feedback.

### **Discovering Meaning**

Effective individual and group performance relied on shaping the work context through shared meaning. In studying workers' perceptions of informal learning, Merriam et al. (2007) discovered that learning in the work context occurred regularly but was often unrecognized as learning. Participants described using formal learning opportunities, such as workshops and university classes, to develop job skills. Only when the authors explained examples of informal learning activities, participants recognized activities such as reading, talking with friends and colleagues or engaging in conversations with experts.

The authors suggested employees may be accustomed to addressing daily problems and focusing on achieving work outcomes rather than viewing it as a learning opportunity. This study highlighted how employees may unknowingly engage in informal learning while promoting shared meaning. In studying informal learning effects on teams, Tannenbaum and Cerasoli (2013) found reflection improved effectiveness of a group by nearly 25%. The purpose of this study was for groups to consider reflection and feedback (debriefs) after achieving a goal. The authors concluded that structured, facilitated debriefs were a quick, effective tool for improving team and individual performance.

Daley (2001) learned that professionals understood the meaning of new knowledge by moving between formal learning and professional practice. Through interviews with 80 participants in four professions (social workers, lawyers, adult educators, and nurses), participants discussed the implementation of new concepts from learning events that unexpectedly caused difficult situations with coworkers and/or clients. The authors underscored the influences of shared meaning in the work context in shaping professional practices.

### **Learning Processes**

According to a study conducted by the Education Development Center (1998), professional competence was more quickly learned when formal and informal learning activities were used together in development plans. The national study included 1,000 leaders and workers of large manufacturers. An important finding was that learning in the work context played a significant role in the frequency and quality of learning. Participants reported learning broad information through formal learning first, then practiced the skills through informal learning activities. Informal activities having the

most meaning were meetings, mentoring, relationships, cross training, and performing a job. However, the authors cautioned that learning in the work context was not prescriptive given the unique needs of each company. Therefore, understanding shared meaning in the context was essential. Armstrong and Mahmud (2008) reported that using a mixture of formal and informal learning experiences to learn job-centered skills in the work context resulted in higher quality learning. Skills developed quicker through this process than through several years of general work experience. Formal and informal learning experiences positively accelerated employee development with few disruptions in the rhythm of daily work.

### **Learning Influences**

The Human Resource Development literature reflects the contextual influences on learning in the workplace. Relationships and personal choices fostered informal learning activities. E. R. Eddy, D'Abate, Tannenbaum, Givens-Skeaton, and Robinson (2006) determined the effective and ineffective interactions that fostered or impeded an employee's development. The authors interviewed 81 employees across 24 industries and asked participants to describe one effective and one ineffective development interaction with a co-worker that related to the themes of advice, work-life support, and job or task guidance. The authors discovered that effective influences included personal and relationship factors such as trust, expertise, and multiple interactions. Mutually initiated relationships and individual choice of activities enhanced the elements of effective development interactions. On the other hand, ineffective development interactions were mandates from supervisors. Surprising findings were that longevity of relationships or poor communications did not influence ineffective interactions. Lohman

(2005) found seven characteristics that enhanced motivation and engagement in informal learning. These included initiative, self-efficacy, love of learning, interest in the profession, commitment to professional development, a nurturing personality, and an outgoing personality. The author also found the work context influenced whether individuals preferred interactive projects or independent activities. Factors that influenced activity choices were access to peers and available time and funding.

### **Competencies**

In 2012, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) initiated the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative to understand the potential barriers community colleges experienced and the support needed to achieve a national goal of five million graduates, ready to enter the workforce by 2020 (AACC, 2012a). One purpose of the initiative was to determine the competencies senior officers needed to develop "...realistic, concrete, and actionable responses" to refocus the college on the needs of students and the relevant job skills needed by employers (AACC, 2012a, p. 3). Members of the Initiative included professionals with community college expertise and developers of competency models. One outcome of the study was agreement that the first edition of the AACC competencies reflected the knowledge, skills, and values needed to lead the necessary changes (AACC, 2012a). Another, finding suggested the competency of professionalism was inherent in each of the other five competencies. Professionalism connected to senior officer's ethical values, impacts of perceptions, worldviews, and emotions. In addition, the competency was further described as a learning mindset, using influence and power wisely, taking risks, making difficult decisions, and accepting responsibility (AACC, 2005). The five competencies are (1) organizational strategy, (2) resource management, (3)



communication, (4) collaboration, and (5) advocacy (AACC, 2013). The competency model included examples of realistic, concrete, and actionable performance benchmark examples based on years of experience. The categories were emerging leaders (0-3 years), CEO (0-3 years), and CEO (greater than 3 years). The five competencies of the *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* model (2013) are described in Table 1.

Table 1. 2013 AACC Competencies.

Competency	Description
Organizational strategy	Understands the external and internal conditions and creates strategies to improve the quality of the institution by ensuring student success and the implementation of the mission.
Resource management	Equitably and ethically sustains people, processes, information, and physical assets to implement the mission.
Communication	Demonstrates clear communication through listening, speaking, and writing skills and promotes open dialogue among all members of the college and its stakeholders.
Collaboration	Develops and maintains responsive and mutually beneficial relationships that promote diversity and the success of students.
Advocacy	Advocates the value of the community college by understanding and committing to the mission, vision, and goals of the college.

To understand the value of the AACC competencies, McNair et al. (2011) surveyed 282 community college presidents, recommending the competency model as a framework to develop new senior officers. After accepting a presidential position, the

participants reported having a more holistic view of the requirements and success factors of their direct reports. Over half of the presidents indicated the need for additional development in resource management, organizational strategy, and human resource administration. Kools (2010) discovered wide acceptance of the AACC competencies from presidents of rural and urban community colleges. The presidents ranked the competencies in order of importance. The final analysis showed a slight (.2%) difference between the highest and lowest ranking. The ranked order from highest to lowest was communication, community college advocacy, organizational strategy, resource management, professionalism, and collaboration.

### **Developing Community College Competencies**

Duree and Ebbers (2012) reported that presidents learned how to lead community colleges through graduate studies and professional experiences. However, most presidents agreed that learning experiences such as mentoring and interim roles were the most meaningful and underscored the importance of building skill through a variety of administrative roles. The participants recommended expanding internal development programs given the usefulness of experience and the cost constraints of offsite programs. Kools (2010) found that experience was a powerful way to develop administrative leadership skills. Informal activities were challenging job assignments, networking with colleagues, and progressive administrative responsibilities.

Community college presidents generally agreed a balance of formal and informal learning activities were appropriate practices for senior officers. McNair, Duree, & Ebbers (2011) reported that presidents recommended development activities through a combination of formal and informal opportunities. President's perceived formal learning

through leadership programs, completion of terminal degrees, and programs offered through community college associations. Examples of informal learning activities were leadership institutes, conferences, and participation in internal leadership programs. Hull and Keim (2007) discovered presidents participated in formal development programs such as the Chair Academy through the Maricopa Community College District, the Executive Leadership Institute offered by the League for Innovation in the Community College, and the Future Leaders Institute offered by AACC. Presidents described informal learning activities as job shadowing and mentoring. The presidents agreed that combining theory and practice to learn and adapt broad concepts within a local context was valuable.

### **Research Support**

Several studies recommended future research in exploring how senior officers learn the competencies to lead in a rural community college. Leist (2007) suggested we need more understanding of the competencies of leaders at rural colleges in light of cultural influences. P. L. Eddy (2010) advocated for further study on administrative competencies regarding meaning making to ensure clarity in stakeholder communications and to lead change. Presidents suggested a mixture of formal and informal learning was essential to the practice of administrative leadership (Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Kools, 2010; McNair et al., 2011). P. L. Eddy (2013) recommended the need for deeper understanding of the practical skills to lead rural colleges, which could inform the development of new leaders. Understanding competencies in developing learning plans was underscored as a necessity in the Human Resources Development literature (E. R. Eddy et al., 2006; Lohman, 2005; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Merriam et al., 2007). The

significance of the work context, meaning making, and the mixture of formal and informal learning point to the McNair et al. (2011) recommendation to explore the professional preparation and experiences that support administrative development. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges.

**CHAPTER III**  
**METHODOLOGY**  
**Research Overview**

This chapter explains the research methodology I used to understand how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges. In this chapter, I provide support for selecting the qualitative method for studying the research question. I describe, in detail, the steps I took to identify and select the research site, the participants, the collection and analysis of data, and how the research question changed direction. Additionally, I describe the ethical practices, confidentiality, and validity and disclose my biases. The chapter ends with a summary of conclusions.

The original purpose of this study was to understand the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college. The direction of the study changed to a future perspective when senior officers discussed how they develop others. This study is framed with the American Association of Community Colleges competencies and transformative learning, both discussed in Chapter II. The qualitative method helped me understand the perspectives and the experiences of senior officers through the interactive conversations.

The qualitative approach is considered appropriate when the researcher's intent is to "explore processes, activities, and events" (Creswell, 2003, p. 183). While qualitative research has its purposes, there are critiques. Lichtman (2010) suggests that quantitative

studies strive for objectivity, measurability, and predictability. L. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) offer that criticism of qualitative studies center on the subjective nature of the method, leading to incomplete or misrepresented data. In addition, criticism focuses on the abandonment of scientific procedures and verification (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1989). However, qualitative researchers acknowledge the method's limitations, but highlight its validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest the importance of the method lies in the details of those directly experiencing the phenomena and the individuality and uniqueness of each situation. The methodological congruence of the fit among the research problem, question, method, the information collected, and the systematic processing of data supports the validity of the method (Richards & Morse, 2007). The purpose of qualitative studies are to discover the insights and meaning of intertwined situations within an environment in which individuals are immersed (Maxwell, 2007). Given my interests in discovering the insights, meaning, perspectives, and experiences of how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges, the qualitative method fits the research purposes of this study.

### **Research Setting**

Merriam (2009) suggests basing site selection criteria on either the best or the worst cases. Rural community colleges present an interesting environment to understand how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges. due to issues related to geographic distance, such as the difficulty of attracting employees (Pennington et al., 2006).

The research setting is a public higher education system in a predominately rural state. The system includes seven universities and 25 technical and community colleges.

The system enrolls nearly 500,000 students annually. Over half of the community colleges are located in a rural community, each with long histories of serving rural environments and providing workforce development services.

The higher education system governance includes a governor appointed board of trustees, a chancellor, and presidents. The presidents serve as the chief executive officer of a university or college. The Chancellor reports to the board of trustees and the presidents report to the chancellor. Senior officers report directly to a college president (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 2008) The location of the higher education system office is in a metropolitan city. Within the higher education system, departments provide information, resources, and oversight of the operational systems relating to academic and student affairs. Examples of departments are academic affairs, student affairs, legal, finance, and human resources. Professional development opportunities such as conferences and workshops are available to senior officers throughout the year.

In terms of employment arrangements, the higher education system operates through multiple collective bargaining agreements and personnel plans. Senior officer's positions are within a personnel plan. This personnel plan sets the boundaries of employment, including the conditions of at-will and exempt. At-will means either the college or the employee may end employment at any time. An exempt status means senior officers are not subject to federal overtime laws. The senior officer employment arrangement is in contrast to supervisees. Staff and faculty positions are within collective bargaining contracts that offer a guarantee of employment except for cases of exigency or documented poor performance. Senior officers are often internal promotions at community colleges as discussed in Chapter II. Therefore, promoted senior officers are

familiar with the myriad of procedures involving collective bargaining contracts. These employment arrangements, along with the issues of geographical location, provide an intriguing scenario in which to conduct the study. The next step was to identify the site selection criteria.

### **Site Selection**

To identify rural-serving community colleges for this study, I searched the Carnegie classification system for public associate degree granting, rural colleges in the state higher education system, resulting in 19 institutions ("Custom Listings," n.d.). I eliminated six colleges as they were in the same town as a university, ensuring the potential sites were the primary source of education and workforce/economic development services to the community. I eliminated two colleges that were adjacent to a town with populations greater than 50,000. From the 11 remaining sites, I eliminated an additional college given a prior working relationship with the senior officer. The final list of eligible sites resulted in 10 rural community colleges. Enrollment at the colleges, calculated by full-year equivalent (FYE), measures each student enrolled for the equivalent of one academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The 2013/14 unduplicated FYE at the colleges, ranged from 325 to 4,333 ("Custom listings," n.d.). The eligible community colleges were in towns with populations ranging from 419 to 24,718 (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

### **Participants**

#### **Participant Pool**

My next step was establishing the senior officer participant pool. Maxwell (2005) offers that considerations in selecting the participant pool are one of the most important



decisions in a qualitative study. The author suggests that a participant pool is similar to selecting a panel of experts. Therefore, I sought individuals with direct experiences of the research topic. For this study, participants with the most direct experience were senior officers at rural community colleges. The eligibility criteria I used to obtain the initial pool of senior officer participants include those who were (1) currently employed in a rural, associate's degree granting college within the selected higher education system, (2) a direct-report of a president, (3) oversight responsibilities in academic programs and/or student affairs or workforce/economic development, and (4) a minimum of five years in their current position. The areas of oversight were based on the primary mission of rural community colleges. The reason for a minimum of five years of experience was the increased possibility of understanding the work context, the position duties, and the necessary knowledge and skills.

Based on the eligibility criteria, I formed the participant pool by requesting a list of senior officers who reported to the presidents of the 10 selected colleges from the higher education system's Human Resource department. I cross-checked the senior officer list through organizational charts and human resource manuals posted on the college websites. The list contained 26 participants from 10 colleges that potentially met the eligibility criteria.

### **Participant Selection**

I sent email invitations and attached the Informed Consent form (see Appendix A) to the 26 potential participants. I followed up with a second email two weeks later and offered to schedule a telephone appointment to describe the study further or answer questions. I sought participants for a total of four weeks. From the pool of 26 senior

officers, 16 did not respond, and 11 inquired about the study. Out of the 11 interested participants, four were not eligible, as they did not report to the president, which left seven eligible participants. The seven eligible senior officers met the selection criteria of years of experience in academic or student affairs or workforce/economic development services.

### **Selected Participants**

The seven selected senior officers had oversight of academic affairs or student affairs (5) and workforce/economic development services (2). The participants' years of experience in their current position ranged from five to nine years and all worked for the same higher education system. I sent an email to the senior officers announcing their selection into the study and provided a short biography of myself as an early introduction. I asked for their curriculum vitae (CV) or resume and requested an appointment for a 15-minute phone interview.

Through the phone interviews, I began to build our relationship by discussing their previous professional experiences and collected demographic information. Five senior officers previously held positions in metropolitan areas. Former professional positions were in community colleges, universities, public primary and secondary education, business ownership, and city administration. The years of previous experience in their former positions ranged from two to 25 years.

The selected participants were Caucasian, including four men and three women. Three participants held doctoral degrees, and four had master's degrees. Six senior officers were rural natives. The participants had oversight responsibilities in academic affairs, student affairs, or workforce/economic development services. In addition, each

participant met the selection criteria and had high interest in the study topic. The insights of the senior officers were valuable given their depth of experiences. Each had a strong understanding of the higher education system, the position responsibilities, and the work context.

### **Delimitations**

The study is delimited to community colleges within one state higher education system with a strategic focus on serving rural communities. In designing the study, I considered community colleges in two other states. One was eliminated given the governance by local boards. The other was eliminated as only two colleges met the study criteria.

The study was narrowed given the geographical distance of the community colleges and the need to get as much detail as possible. The study is delimited to one state higher education system, five colleges, and seven participants. The study is documented in detail and can be replicated in other educational settings.

### **Human Subjects**

Ethical considerations promote the integrity of research and protect and develop trust with participants by guarding against misconduct or improprieties (L. Cohen et al., 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). One way to assure ethical consideration is through an Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB process ensures the identification of potential negative consequences of the research and confirms no harm will come to participants ("Institutional Review Board," n.d.). Another ethical consideration is to gain permission to conduct the study. I requested permission to conduct the study from an official in the higher education system. I received verbal permission with the rationale

that participants were public employees. In addition, I received approval to conduct the study from the University of North Dakota's Institutional Review Board.

### **Confidentiality**

Mason (2002) recommends a researcher consider all people, processes, and practices that may be affected by the research and its implications. To ensure the protection of all parties' interests, the higher education system's name is not explicitly identified. In addition, a guarantee of anonymity was provided to protect the identities of colleges, towns, and participants as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). Identifying information was changed in the final report, transcripts, and observation notes. I ensured all participants were aware of the guarantee of anonymity prior to acceptance into the study, and I provided the Informed Consent form (see Appendix A) that explicitly stated the research intent and individuals' rights throughout the study. Participants could refuse to answer any questions and leave the study at any time. I also restated the participants' rights at the beginning of the first interview.

### **Data Collection**

In a qualitative study, the data collected are based on how participants construct the meaning of events, processes, activities, and concerns from the past, present, or future (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, my primary source of data collection was through 14 formal interviews. Seidman (2006) recommends three interviews, the first to build the relationship, the second to clarify the story, and the third to reflect and consider additional information or lingering questions. Thus, to honor the time constraints of senior officers, I merged the elements of the first two interviews. To accomplish this, I sent an email to each participant welcoming them to the study and provided my

background and interest in the study. I followed up with a telephone conversation to collect the participants' demographic data and discussed their background experiences.

To prepare for the first formal interview, I reviewed each college's website to get a sense of the context by reading the mission statement, vision, values and the overview and history. In addition, I looked at the Human Resources Manual to understand the policies and practices under which senior officers operated. I also reviewed the available professional development opportunities through the higher education system office's website. Together, the information provided an overview of the context and helped me to better understand the local conditions that informed my interview questions (see Appendix B) and provided cross-references to the interview data, observations, and informal conversations (Lichtman, 2010).

The process of site observations, suggested by Morrison (1993), is a way to understand a participant's environment. Accordingly, prior to my first interview appointment, I collected data through site observations where I documented the physical environment and observed interactions among staff members and students. At the conclusion of each observation, I immediately recorded the details in my field notes. These observations provided insight into the relational factors that influence the practices of senior officers. Observations are useful in describing a context and demonstrate strong environmental validity (Robson, 2002). In addition, Cooper and Schindler (2001) offer the researcher may notice daily behavior or routines that may otherwise go unrecognized.

I conducted two face-to-face, one-hour structured interviews with each participant over a period of six months. The senior officer interviews were recorded on a high-definition audio recorder and a backup recorder in the event of unexpected technical

difficulties. A copy of the recorded interviews was saved on a USB drive and given to a professional transcriptionist. The transcriptionist transcribed the audio files verbatim and returned the completed files to me on the USB drive. The transcriptionist destroyed all files once the transcribed documents were completed. The paper copies of the transcript and audio files are stored in a separate locked file in my residence and will be disposed three years after the completion of the study. My field notes and research journal are in a single file that provide the documentation of my experiences of the research study.

For the first interview, I prepared questions based on my literature review and the information collected from the websites. The questions centered on acclimating to the local context, preparedness for the senior officer position, and learning activity preferences. For the second interview, I considered the contextual factors from the site observations and conducted a preliminary analysis of the data from the first interview to determine information gaps and clarification points. From the data analysis, described in the next section, I formed questions that focused on the concepts and/or models needed for senior officer positions and guided discussions on the meaning of the stories previously shared.

While the interviews were performed as planned, about midway through the first round of interviews, it became apparent that the direction of the research had changed. The conversations did not center on the experiences of senior officers in learning the competencies to lead at a rural community college but moved toward how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges. The direction was affirmed as I completed the first round of interviews. The emerging data led me to reframe my research question to: How do senior officers develop the next generation of

leaders at rural community colleges? Lichtman (2010) describes that in qualitative studies, a change in the research direction is part of the interactive nature of collecting and analyzing data.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Preliminary Analysis**

I conducted a preliminary analysis on the data from the first interview. To begin, I followed the advice of Seidman (2006) and analyzed the data as I received the Word documents from the transcriptionist containing the transcribed interviews. I printed and thoroughly read each transcript, underlining the interesting data. I looked for consistencies, frustrations, influences, perceptions, and stand out comments. In a process Creswell (2009) refers to as open-coding, I read each interview line-by-line in the Word document, noting the codes in the margin. I assigned a color to each participant then wrote each code on a sticky note with the corresponding color. I added the sticky notes to a flat surface, grouping them by their similarities. I typed the codes into an Excel spreadsheet and assigned a descriptive category name (Lichtman, 2010). In the spreadsheet, I carefully thought about the placement of the codes and renamed and/or added new categories as they emerged. I created two iterations of the categorized data.

To understand the meaning of the coded data Seidman (2006) suggests crafting themes that describe the central concepts emerging from the categories. I arrived at the themes by cross-analyzing the data by the color assigned to each senior officer and looked at the congruency of the emergent themes. I compared the senior officer's themes with the open-coded categories to find the core concepts. I removed duplicate codes and defined each category by considering the related codes and the participant's statements.

The preliminary analysis resulted in 643 codes and 11 categories, resulting in seven themes:

1. Senior officers find “surprising” realities within the position.
2. Senior officers learn strategies to structure and shape the position and balance needs.
3. Senior officers learn professional practices through the realities of the position.
4. Senior officer’s positions are demanding, but worth the effort to see lives changed.
5. Senior officers learn essential competencies that mattered to others in the work context.
6. Senior officers gain conceptual and practical knowledge through university programs and courses, conferences, workshops, and by observing and learning from others.
7. Senior officers apply their knowledge and learn from experiences.

From the analysis, I realized little discussion occurred on how senior officers gained the required knowledge for the position. The participants emphasized the primary importance of relationships and skills while conceptual knowledge was unacknowledged, which led to the questions for Interview 2.

In reflecting on the process I used for the preliminary analysis, the review of the transcripts and line-by-line coding worked well and remained in my process. I realized the sticky notes were not helpful in understanding the depth of the associated text. Therefore, I adapted the technical procedure of coding in Word from Burnard, Gill, Stewart, and Chadwick (2008) that associated the codes to the related text through the style function called “Headings.” The procedure I used in an Excel spreadsheet to adjust codes, assign categories, and cross analyze themes remained the same.



## **Interview 2 Coding and Analysis Procedure**

Since the preliminary analysis focused on the first interview, I began by coding the seven interviews from Interview 2 to ensure a fresh perspective. I assigned each participant a font color to prepare the data for cross-analysis of categories and topics. Following the advice of Seidman (2006), I began the analysis as I received the transcript in a Word document from the transcriptionist by printing and thoroughly reading each transcript and underlined interesting data. I specifically looked for consistencies, frustrations, influences, perceptions, and stand out comments. Next, in the Word document, I read each interview line-by-line to identify excerpts and assigned each a code. Using the process of open-coding, I marked each code by applying “Heading 2” in Word for sorting and retrieval purposes. From the interview data, I cut and pasted like codes into a single column into an Excel spreadsheet and assigned a descriptive category name (Lichtman, 2010). In the spreadsheet, I carefully thought about the placement of the codes and renamed and/or added new categories as they emerged. I created two iterations of the categorized data. The analysis of Interview 2 led to 25 emergent categories and 621 codes.

## **Interview 1 Coding and Analysis Procedure**

Repeating the coding process from Interview 2, I analyzed the seven transcripts from the first interview. Continuing with the exact steps I used to analyze the second interviews, I read each transcript from the first interview and underlined the interesting data. I read each interview in the Word document line-by-line, identified excerpts and assigned a code to each, marking each with “Heading 2.” In a different Excel document, I cut and pasted like codes in a single column on a spreadsheet and assigned a

representative category name. I created two iterations of the categorized data. The first interview resulted in 19 categories and 726 codes.

### **Integrating Interview 1 and 2**

My next step was integrating the coding analysis from Interview 1 and 2. In a new Excel spreadsheet, I moved related codes into columns and assigned a category that represented the codes. Some of the categories stayed the same as in the previous analysis results, and other codes were combined that emerged into new categories. After two iterations, I removed duplicate codes that resulted in 12 categories and 857 codes. I defined each category by considering the related codes and participant's statements.

To understand the meaning of the coded data Seidman (2006) suggests crafting themes that describe the central concepts emerging from the categories. To arrive at the themes, I cross-analyzed the data by the color assigned to each senior officer and looked at the congruency of each individual's emergent themes. I compared the senior officer's themes with the open-coded categories to find the core concepts. Together, these processes led me to create five themes that contained a subset of the nine categories and 542 codes. The list of codes associated with each theme is found in the Appendices. The themes that emerged were:

1. Senior officers navigate the rural environment through trusting relationships, honoring others expertise, pragmatism, and building the community together (Appendix C).
2. The reward of seeing changed lives outweigh the intensities experienced in senior officer's positions (Appendix D).
3. Senior officers develop leaders through reciprocal learning that accomplishes college outcomes while building trust and practical skills (Appendix E).

4. Senior officers smooth the path for emerging leaders through storytelling and sharing collective wisdom (Appendix F).
5. Senior officers stabilize the environment by balancing relational and positional power through inclusivity and transparent decision-making (Appendix G).

### **Axial-Coding**

To construct a grounded theory, the next step was to analyze the data through axial-coding, described as a visual representation of the data (Straus & Corbin, 1990). The interrelationships of the categories reveal an aspect that describes the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Described by Straus & Corbin (1990), categories help researchers discover the conditions that cause the phenomenon, the strategies used to address the situation, the influences of the context (internal), the intervening circumstances (external), and the resulting consequences. The visual representation of the axial-coding results in a grounded theory map (Creswell, 2009).

The central phenomenon that emerged and grounded my study was preparing the next generation of leaders. Influencing the central phenomenon were the position entry qualifications, knowledge, skills, and personal values. An individual must be aware of nuances and expectations of the local context to understand how to apply knowledge and skills meaningfully, which relates to personal characteristics, prior experiences, and persistence (Ottoson, 1995). A pre-conditions box was added to reflect this element.

Senior officers repeatedly discussed their dedication to others' growth including learning reciprocally through shared leadership, which fosters building knowledge and skills. As senior officers and the college community learn to carve the path together, the next generation of leaders are being developed. The cause that influenced the

phenomenon was the surprising intensity and the level of responsibility of the position. Senior officer's often stated they would have been more prepared had they known the realities of the position and expressed the desire to smooth the path for successors. Other causal factors were the importance of personal stability, the purposes for leading, and the rewards of seeing lives changed.

The central phenomenon and the internal (narrow) and external (broad) conditions influences the strategies used by senior officers. The internal (narrow) conditions were preserving the rural values, the high expectations of leaders, proving credibility, and collective bargaining. The external influences (broad) were the cultural norms of the rural community, placing primary importance on relationships, preserving rural values, sharing importance and expertise, and pragmatism. Senior officers use strategies that maximize relationships. The participants reflected on owning, shaping, and acclimating to the position, also describing the need to manage voluminous amounts of information and sharing in the collective wisdom of others. The strategies lead to the consequences. Senior officers stabilize the environment by balancing relational and positional power and genuinely caring about others. In addition, senior officers build trust through modeling best practices, fostering inclusivity, and demonstrating fair and balanced decision-making.

Figure 2 illustrates the Grounded Theory Model. In Chapter IV the details of the grounded theory model and the findings of the axial-coding are discussed.

### **Validity**

Stage and Manning (2003) refer to validity as the extent to which a measure or observation describes that which it intends to describe. To ensure the validity of the

participant data, I sought as many diverse points of view as possible and cross-referenced the findings from observations, college background information, and relevant literature.

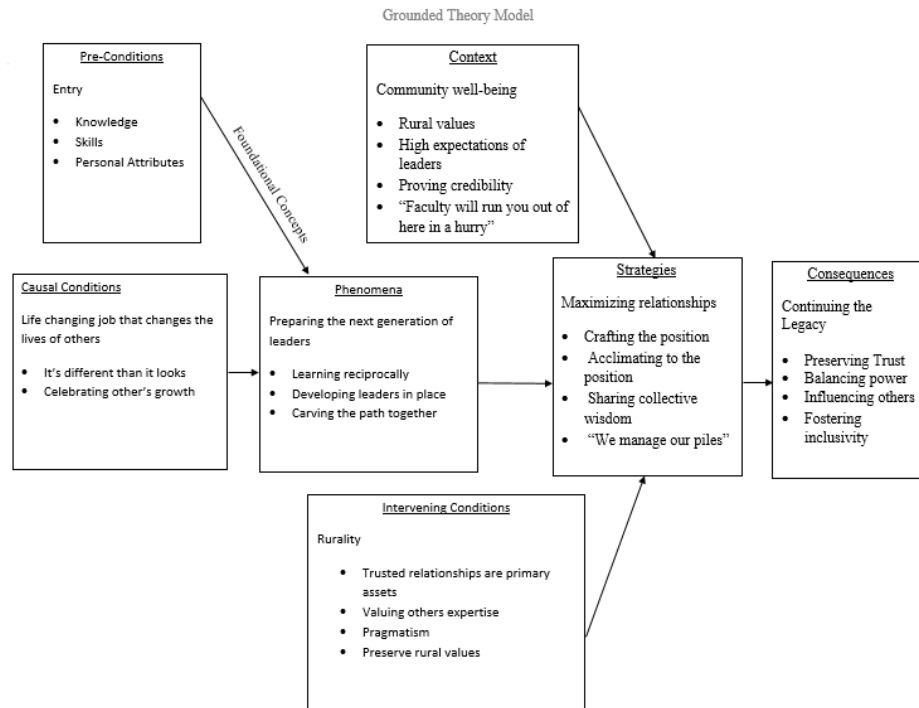


Figure 2. Grounded Theory Model.

A threat to validity is a researcher’s influence on the outcome of the study through their presence. McCormick and James (1988) argue that addressing potential participant’s reactivity to the researcher’s presence and relational style requires the researcher to monitor interactions with participants carefully. To reduce the risk of participant reactivity, I acknowledged and disclosed my biases and prior experiences and reflected on my experiences in a research journal. Additionally, I mindfully used my experiences to ask relevant questions in seeking the intricate details that foster understanding. To rule out the possibility of misinterpretations or misunderstandings,

each participant had the opportunity to review his or her interview transcript and provide feedback.

### **Researcher Bias**

The nature of qualitative studies is telling the collective stories of participants who are experiencing a specific phenomenon through the lens of the researcher (Seidman, 2006). Given the sustained and intensive experiences in understanding participants experiences, Creswell (2009) states the researcher's background and biases must be explicitly identified. My interests and career focus has been in the field of talent development for the past 23 years. In one position, I served as a dean at a rural community college for 14 years in the same higher education system in which I conducted the research. At the time of this study, four years have passed since I held the role and the higher education system has experienced significant changes. My current position, involves several rural communities related to human resources and organizational development. During the time of the interviews, I encountered a situation of an involuntary leadership transition, which required working closely with the board. Through my professional work experience and the participant interviews, I continued to learn about leadership development. I used these experiences as background information to deepen my understanding of the senior officer's experiences.

From the onset of the research experience, I was keenly aware of my prior experiences and biases. Therefore, I ensured a protocol of scholarly inquiry rather than that of a development practitioner. I used my acquired knowledge and prior experiences as an advantage in shaping the interview questions, having conversations that were meaningful to participants, and in observing and documenting the context. In terms of

participants, as previously discussed, one participant was eliminated from the potential senior officer pool given a prior working relationship. I had no professional or personal relationships with the remainder of the participants.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described how I used the qualitative approach to understand the learning experiences of seven senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college. The guiding principles that framed the study were the AACCC competencies and transformative learning theory. The research direction shifted when senior officers discussed how they developed others, which moved the discussion from a historical to a future perspective. The new direction led to reforming the research question to: How do senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges? All selected senior officers worked from five to nine years in their current position in the same state higher education system. The study was limited due to the narrow scope of the site and participant selection; however, the study is documented in detail and can be replicated in other educational settings.

I conducted the study after receiving permission from the University of North Dakota's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and verbal approval from the state higher education system in which I conducted the study. My primary source of data was through two rounds of questions and interactions with participants, resulting in 14 formal interviews. In addition, I reviewed information from college websites and conducted site observations. Data were collected over a six-month period. I organized and analyzed my data through the grounded theory approach, using open and axial-coding. Codes and

categories were organized in an Excel spreadsheet, resulting in themes. Through axial-coding, a grounded theory map was created.

I affirmed the interview data with the information collected from college's websites and observing the senior officer's workplace, which strengthened the validity. I was attentive in using ethical principles, identified and expressed my biases, and followed IRB standards for research credibility.

The quest for insights and understanding a phenomenon through the qualitative approach is like getting in harmony with the interacting parts of a rhythmic dance. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013) offer the qualitative approach is the complexity of changing rhythms and tensions between scientific method and creativity that requires patience, persistence, and discipline. It is my belief that the study results were worth the dance to understand the intricacies of senior officer's experiences that may possibly expand perceptions and foster understanding, as together we seek quality activities that develop the next generation of senior officers at rural community colleges. In the next chapter, I present the study findings.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

I used the qualitative method to understand the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead a rural community college. The direction of the research changed from a historical to a future perspective as senior officers discussed preparing the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges. The change in direction led to reframing the research question to: How do senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges? The study frame includes transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) publication, *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* (2013), as discussed in Chapter II. Transformative learning supports the dynamic nature of leadership development in the work context while the AACC competency model provides a conceptual map of senior officer's job responsibilities.

I conducted two rounds of interviews, resulting in 14 formal interviews. All interviews were recorded with a high-definition audio device and transcribed verbatim. These data were analyzed through the open-coding process, resulting in 542 codes, nine categories, and five themes. Additionally, data were analyzed through the axial-coding process, leading to a grounded theory model. The grounded theory model consists of a central phenomenon, causal conditions, pre-conditions, contextual and intervening

conditions, and strategies, all leading to the consequences. The open-coding process and the grounded theory findings led to the final assertion. The assertion addresses the study's research question: How do senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges?

In this chapter, I first present the findings through the themes, representing the categories, and supporting the quotes from the senior officer interviews. Second, I describe, in detail, the ground theory map, resulting from the axial-coding process. The data findings represent equitable contributions from all seven senior officers. Third, I present the conclusions of the study and summary of Chapter IV.

### **Open-Coding Results**

As discussed in Chapter III, nine categories and five themes emerged from the open-coding analysis, affecting the process of how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges. Table 2 displays the results of the open-coding analysis.

#### **Theme 1: Senior Officers Navigate the Rural Environment Through Trusting Relationships, Honoring Others' Expertise, Pragmatism, and Building the Community Together**

The cultural beliefs of rural residents are close relationships and community centeredness, as discussed in Chapter II. The codes that support this theme include the importance of respectful leadership, understanding the community's history and embedded beliefs, building trust through long-term relationships, and understanding the priorities of a community (see Appendix C).

Table 2. Open-Coding Results.

Themes	Categories
Senior officers navigate the rural environment through trusting relationships, honoring others expertise, pragmatism, and building the community together.	Living rural Reflecting the community Entry knowledge and experience
The reward of seeing changed lives outweigh the intensifying experiences in senior officer's positions.	It's different than it looks It's worth it
Senior officers develop leaders through reciprocal learning that accomplishes college outcomes while building trust and practical skills.	Building mastery in the context Learning reciprocally
Senior officers smooth the path for emerging leaders through storytelling and their collective wisdom.	Orchestrating Harmony
Senior officers stabilize the environment by balancing relational and positional power through inclusivity and transparent decision-making.	Continuing the legacy

### **Living Rural**

Senior officers lead through relationships. The primary “currency” of the rural community are relationships, which weave through every action. The participants describe the importance of relationships in terms of protecting and promoting credibility. Trust is described as the lynchpin of relationships, while placing high value on personal authenticity. Emerging insights include an explanation of rural leadership through the view of two participants who experienced the distinctive differences between leading at an urban and rural community college. Senior officer #2 explains:

I think rural leadership is important in a different way than maybe some other leadership skills. When I moved to a metro area for a while, leadership was different. Leaders embraced people differently than when I worked in the rural area. How much of a different flavor the atmosphere was when we got together at meetings and when we have leadership team things. That team was... here are the people that you work with; here is what the job is. There was nothing more. Whereas in rural leadership I think you have to cultivate, sculpt or kind of work with the culture a little bit. Not that it doesn't matter in other places but I think in rural areas if you don't know who you are working with and build a rapport with them, I don't think that you're ever going to get immersed in the culture in a way that you're going to have a successful journey as a leader.

Senior officer #3 describes how trust builds through equalizing power, pragmatism, and demonstrating credibility:

...it's not about being in charge. The people skills come along with being in charge. I mean, they may have the book smarts and the degree to do it, but I will tell you what, you can fall flat on your face in a hurry if you say the wrong thing to the wrong person....put your education and your degrees in check. Some people want to come in as Dr. Smith or a master's degree in this or whatever. When you get out there in the field, in the industry, they have a skeptical view of, "Oh, here comes Dr. Smith, he's going to tell us what we need to know." Many of those people out there are super smart experts in their field... super experienced. So, check the education piece. You know, down play that because the respect that you gain out there is in what you can do, and doing it.

**Summary of living rural.** Senior officers sustain their leadership position by building trust through personal authenticity and demonstrating commitment to the values of the rural community. Earning respect occurs through gentle, neutral authority. Senior officers downplay credentials apply practical knowledge and skills, and foster community growth. In addition, senior officers appreciate and value other's expertise, leading to long-term relationships. Strong relationships promote commitment and completion of community and college goals that enrich the quality of life and build economic vitality.

### **Reflecting the Community**

Community colleges mirror the cultural and relational expectations of the community. Senior officers provide insight on the importance of assimilating to the culture and building trusting relationships, which require balancing respectful, shared leadership while navigating a multitude of ambiguous expectations and challenging relationships. Each senior officer underscores the value of trusting relationships in laying a path to navigate the vague terrain of disparate perceptions. Senior Officer #3 describes the difficulty in asking questions before establishing trust and credibility:

...we have to have a system that allows us to say, "Hey, I need help here" without it being a sign of weakness. There is so much to know; you just cannot know it all. And, you look at these leadership positions in these colleges where you know everybody is waiting to jump on you. Boy at fault, faculty is going to be all over your ass. There is a cynicism there of, "Well, I don't know, you're supposed to be so damn smart." ...I think it's probably one of the things... criticized of leaders is, "Oh, they don't interact with the staff enough." Well, sometimes staff doesn't want to be involved in decision-making. So I think that there's a certain

element there of you should....well, you're up there, and you're one of them now so good luck.

All senior officers note the struggle of external hires in learning the interconnected systems. Amid the vague terrain of disparate perceptions and the difficulty of knowing when to ask questions, Senior Officer #5, an external hire, shares the difficulty of understanding the systems:

You're in it; you should know it. Now you've been in your position too long, and you're like, "Ok, who do I ask and not feel dumb having to ask this?" And it's like, "Shouldn't I have known it all along?" "Then you're kind of relieved when someone says "Well, I don't really know what that is." And you're like, "Whewwww!"

Four promoted senior officers said the complexity of the interconnecting systems obscure the impacts, and obvious solutions often lead to unintended consequences. Senior officer #1 offers, "We knew enough to be dangerous" and describes the impacts of a decision:

...the K-12 administrators contacted me and wanted to get the legislators on campus. And, lo and behold, we can't ask them for money if it's not within our bonding... even though you can, you're not supposed to because there could be problems. We invited them on campus and quickly, and I remember it to a "T" because the finance person came in and said after the fact, "We can't ask them for money, that's not within our bonding." I'm like, "It would be good to understand that process" ...and then, you know it was interesting to see how people just kind

of fell back and watched you fail...in a sense because they didn't want to be associated because it could impact their jobs in the end.

**Summary of reflecting the community.** Relationships and building trust make or break a senior officer's credibility. Trust is the social glue of relationships and leads to accomplishing goals. Mirroring the community values, self-promotion, and authoritative leadership is off-putting. People expect senior officers to know what and when to do something without guidance. Understanding the expectations and learning the ambiguous interconnected federal, state, and college systems are challenging. Likewise, making decisions before understanding the embedded beliefs and history of the college or asking questions compromises a senior officer's credibility.

### **Entry Knowledge and Experience**

Senior officers build credibility through the knowledge, skills, and values set forth by the college to enter the position. Along with relational skills, theoretical concepts include student theories and models, communications, leadership, and operational management principles. However, all senior officers underscore the equal importance of understanding the appropriate conceptual knowledge and using practical skills that matter to others. In tandem with conceptual knowledge and practical skills, building relationships and personal values such as courage, humility, commitment, adaptable, and authenticity are essential. Four senior officers said the necessary skills depend on the needs of the college. Senior Officer #4 describes the view of relational skills and the minimum qualifications:

I think anybody can come in and do this work as long as they have the right personality. They have checked the boxed on those types of things that people

want. Like a degree or minimum qualification like a bachelor's degree, then the ability to do this, this, this, and this. Well, that individual has to come in and prove that they can do it. So it depends on what we want. There will always be a skill gap, if you want a minimum qual, then you could retrain on the job. I would rather have a good person that meets a minimum qual than have everything that I'm looking for because....they'll grow into that other stuff.

In thinking about preparing for the future and forecasting emerging trends, Senior Officer #6 describes the need for conceptual knowledge:

I believe you've got to have some kind of mathematical reasoning and ability to work with budgets, numbers. So some financial literacy is a necessary part of the work we do. Being able to look and analyze data in order to make decisions. The ability or the desire to read and research and know what's going on in higher education trends and like... population dynamics. Right now the number of high school graduates continues to decrease. We've been tracking this for five years. We're looking at 8th grade classes versus the senior class. We knew the number of high school graduates in the area was going to decline, and we're prepared for the trend.

Senior Officer #5 describes the importance of operational management principles and relational skills:

Having some of those processes that help you as the manager, not so much as the leader but as the manager of what you're doing. That would be good up front because you might find out later that, "Wow! I wish I were looking at this right from the start." But as far as working with people and doing academic planning



and those things, supervising people, if you're learning how to do that as a senior leader, it's probably a little too late. You need some of that experience before you ever get into this. Same with communication... you better have figured out the nuances for that.

**Summary of entry knowledge and experience.** Senior officers stress the significance of understanding theoretical concepts along with the ability to develop long-lasting relationships. The primary concepts needed by senior officers are student development, adult learning models, and operational management. Operational management is important in understanding varying laws, higher education finance, budgets, supervision, and strategic and operational planning. The participants highlight the importance of the right fit of a leader to the work context, including values of authenticity, humility, courage, admitting and learning from mistakes, and a strong personal commitment. Senior officers stress the value of understanding the responsibilities of the position through proper preparation, which participants believe lead to a valuable, less troublesome, leadership journey for the individual and the college.

### **Theme 1 Summary**

Senior officers build trusting relationships through authenticity, committing to the values of the rural community, and promoting pragmatism by valuing others and engaging in the community. The determining factor of rural leadership success is relational trust. Senior officers build and preserve trust while navigating the ambiguities and expectations of others. Participants underscore the significance of understanding theoretical concepts relating to the position, having excellent relational skills, and the importance of the right fit of the leader for the culture.

## **Theme 2: The Reward of Seeing Lives Change Outweigh the Intensifying Experiences of Senior Officers**

Through the interviews, senior officers provide scenarios of the “surprising” intensities of the position but also believe the position is worth the strife to contribute to others’ growth. The codes that support this theme include the difficulty of education positions, a continuous cycle of unfinished work, the broad scope of undefined duties, distrust resulting in drama games, the job is operations and conflict management, difficult decisions prove rewarding, and constant problem solving overshadows the joys (see Appendix D).

### **It’s Different Than it Looks**

Each senior officer describes the intense demands of the position as a myriad of unclear duties and expectations while simultaneously addressing situations or requests from superiors, faculty, staff, and students. Senior officers face shrinking budgets, dwindling staff, the distraction and difficulty of power struggles, ambiguous expectations, and continual surprising situations (see Appendix D). Senior Officer #7 describes the surprise of the large workload and shouldering responsibility:

They’re just huge jobs that are hard to fathom until you actually do them. I don’t know why anybody would volunteer to do it some days because someone’s going to hold you accountable. I mean if the President or Vice President contacts me and says, “...what are we doing about XYZ?” I better know what XYZ is, and I better have a plan to address it. You have to take the initiative to stay current in your profession and ensure... because it might put your entire institution at risk. That’s a fairly weighty thing that but you do have to do it while you are

monitoring the stack and stacks... I mean we manage piles...and asking “Is there anything today I’m at risk of missing?”

Senior officers are in service to other’s and act as a central hub. The participants recall experiences of constant disruptions, a large workload, and managing a voluminous amount of information. Senior officer #5 provides a snapshot of the circumstances:

From a leadership standpoint, you really have to have skills in understanding that your role has a lot to do with servanthood. With facilitating others’ work... sometimes you can feel like you’re not doing anything that you had planned but helping drive what the president and the faculty and the staff and the industry partners need. You have to be able to be flexible and to have multiple projects running. It can be very difficult. I like to accomplish things and check them off. Sometimes there’s nothing that’s checked off... and so that flexibility, that understanding that things are very fluid. And to go from the ability to keep track of a lot of different areas all at one time... to keep track of that without keeping horrendous amounts of paper or electronic files. After a while, you just lose... or ask, “Where is that?” ...the drawer has gotten so full you can’t even find it.

A reality of senior officers is the safety of students and others. Senior Officer #6 describes the difficulty in assessing and making decisions based on precarious student behaviors:

The most difficult is dealing with human life. And I’m faced with those scenarios on a pretty frequent basis each semester. So we have a student that may be exhibiting some behavior that you kind of question whether... if they don’t return tomorrow because they committed suicide or they did something. Because I’ve

sat talking to parents like you're sitting right now for students that have committed suicide or students' that have....or maybe it's a loved one or whatever. They harmed themselves or... So when I tell that student that they can't return next semester, or they're suspended for a year, and this is the reason why. And the anger and the disgust... not only with the student, sometimes it's the parents that are even worse. That's the stuff you've got to deal with; and, it's not the fun part of the job.

**Summary of it's different than it looks.** Senior officers describe the position as being in service to others through a broad scope of demanding, undefined duties. Several senior officers said the expected versus the real role was "unimaginable" and offer the position is not for the faint of heart. In reality, the position leads student retention and academic success while ensuring ambiguous compliance responsibilities and deadlines only found by monitoring stacks of paper and voluminous amounts of electronic information. At the same time, the participants address a constant flow of competing operational and unique challenges and managing conflict. Senior officers make difficult, life-changing decisions that require learning how to handle the repercussions. Likewise, employees are a powerful force and supervision duties prove intensive and more challenging than expected as it involves managing an interconnecting web of internal and external personalities. Surprisingly, little things lead to distrust, resulting in relational power struggles and drama games that are difficult to manage and distract from productive work.

## **It's Worth It**

The professional purposes of all seven senior officers involve making a difference in the lives of people. The participants discuss the desire to help others, the meaning of the work as it relates to student success, the growth and promotion of staff, and seeing happy and employed students. Senior Officer #5 provides a view of making a difference in the lives of people:

...we provide a huge service. We used to have the lowest post-secondary attainment rate in the state. That's something that the people work here feel very, very strongly that we are trying to change, and that's having that passion. Otherwise, you just do your job day-to-day, and you can lose track of, "Why am I doing this?" We really are doing that...we do truly change people's lives. And then we help them realize they can be successful.

Senior officer #2 describes the rewards of seeing the hard work come together during graduation ceremonies:

I think uplifting for me is graduation every year. Although it is a very high time of stress, graduations always remind me that some of those bumps in the road that are not always fun on a dean's or higher level administrative position. When you get to graduation, you have fun, and you applaud those people that work hard. So the team of people that support those students was quite awesome. All the faculty that come and applaud them, and all their families and friends. That's always fun for me.

Senior Officer #6 explains the experience of celebrating others' growth:

A very uplifting experience is when someone that you manage gets an award of some kind or is recognized for outstanding performance. That's a very moving experience for me. I really enjoy that. The same thing is true with students coming back 4, 5, or 10 years later and sharing experiences with you of things that you may have done that has made a difference in their lives. That's the kind of stuff that's the rewarding part of this job... both with employees and students when they excel in what they are doing and are recognized for it.

**Summary of it's worth it.** Senior officers believe it is worth the strife to see the difference they make in lives, including happy, employed graduates, and employee recognition. Understanding the meaning of the position and the commitment to the rural and community college values, the participants help develop leaders by stepping back and letting them lead. Internal development also includes fostering relational trust and preserving the rural culture. Several senior officers report that being unprepared for the realities of the position leads to tough learning experiences that could impede the effectiveness of the college. To smooth the path for internal successors, they gladly invest their time for others growth.

### **Theme 2 Summary**

The primary purpose of senior officer's role involve serving and supporting others. The participants describe the realities of the role as "unimaginable." Senior officers address a constant flow of competing operational and situational challenges related to managing an interconnected web of internal and external personalities. Senior officers learn to manage the little things that lead to distrust, which incites the complexity of power struggles and drama games that distract others from productive work.

### **Theme 3: Senior Officers Develop Leaders Through Reciprocal Learning that Accomplishes College Outcomes While Building Trust and Practical Skills**

As indicated in Chapter II, effective development practices include trust, expertise, and multiple interactions through mutually initiated relationships and individual choice. The codes that support this theme include nurturing employees' growth, modeling excellence, building expertise through experiences, valuing other's expertise, and building trust through learning the work together (see Appendix E).

#### **Building Mastery in the Context**

Experience is a powerful catalyst in developing administrative leadership skills as described in Chapter II. Senior officers extensively discuss promoting employee's professional growth. The participants reflect how curiosity, interests, and doing the work together facilitates development. In addition, discussions center on the interconnecting work and reliance on others, the way knowledge and skills build on each other, how learning is a natural part of working, and developing others through resolving conflicts (see Appendix E). Senior Officer #5 talks about "pulling skills" from people. In a follow-up question, I asked what that meant:

...you know there's this Strength Finders and...when I read it, I went, "Ok, that's what I've been thinking in my head for all these years." It just seems to help that....at in-service time having people do some breakout sessions on things. Sometimes it's the same people all the time, and then I'll think of somebody, and I'll go to them, and I said, "You know, you really were sharing this neat idea, and you just presented that in such a logical, understandable manner, would you do that?"

When asked about a personal learning process, Senior Officer #6 experience summarizes a common response of other participants by shaping development through interests, curiosity, or when solving a problem:

I... focus on those areas where I feel that I need maybe some guidance or strengths because I see what's coming forward into the future in some areas. And so I try to read either through professional journals, the internet or things that are of value to my current position....so sort of informally by reading those things of interest and more formally to target those professional development learning opportunities that are helpful....I think is true of all people, they seek out more formal education or training opportunities when they want to see change or where they anticipate a potential change in their life.

Senior officer #1 discusses how learning ripples through the environment seemingly unnoticeable:

I'm a people person, and I love helping. That's why I went... continued on for my graduate degree. So I wanted to learn, and I made myself present to learn. I just took... I guess, maybe, unconsciously took the experiences that I went through every day, looked at how things could be better and tried to arrange a process. And, you know... at one of our colleges, and I was still very proud of it, the team that we have helps one another. One, I don't have to tell one person to go in and help the other person or vice versa. They just do it. Where one leaves off, the other picks up....and we would have briefings, and we just seemed like we were just a good team.



**Summary of building mastery in the context.** Senior officers model excellence and demonstrate personal values to foster trust, which sets the stage for learning in the workplace. Mistakes and conflict resolution fosters meaning and understanding among others. An informal activity senior officer's use is transparent thinking. This activity helps communications in preparing others for change, facilitating meaningful discussions, and providing a forum for teaching the impact of decisions. Senior officers choose development opportunities for themselves through curiosity, interests, or prevailing challenges, seeking practical information to solve problems or prepare for the future. Formal learning activities relate to a possible career change. The participants emphasize the importance of conceptual knowledge but offer that experience leads to professional mastery. According to the senior officers, meaningful development occurs as a natural part of working as pragmatic skills form that fit the work context. Trial and error learning turns into creative experiments as senior officers learn how to address new challenges. Senior officers recognize leadership talents in others and invite them to try interim leadership positions.

### **Learning Reciprocally**

As described in Chapter II, peer discussions lead to individual and group learning that builds trust and creates a diverse learning environment. Additionally, the literature suggests that daily problem-solving results in learning opportunities. Likewise, in this study, senior officers report developing others through the struggles of working together, planning change, and demonstrating cultural expectations. Senior officers learn reciprocally from peers and networks by solving problems, exploring options with others,

and having trusted advisors (see Appendix E). Senior Officer #5 explains how relationships and trust build through developing others:

I am a relationship builder so, I have this person that I work with who is outstanding....a lot of skills, but wasn't building relationships. So I was unable to really pull on that's person's strengths. So, I have this book that was given to me by one of my peers on leadership characteristics. So what I did is....we scheduled weekly meetings until we went through each of those chapters... and there was some build and reflect activities that the person did ahead of time, and we discussed. I related it to career goals and personal goals. That was probably one of the....in the last few years, one of the highlights, just to see that transformation. Because I took that time to build a relationship and trust with that person, now that person's skills are unbelievable. They were the type of person that would say things and offend people, never meant to, once it finally came out. All it took was working with that person and helping them see the issues. And, the trust being there so that when he didn't... You know, the one day he said, "I don't want to have to think about that always from that perspective." I said, "If you just move past that, to learn to talk in a way that minimizes offending anyone out of respect." I knew he was ready for those conversations. Some people you couldn't but that's part of the relationship building that I try and do with people. They're here. They want to be here. So, how do we get there....and, always through the educational process....myself included.

In talking about working under politically appointed regional boards,

Senior Officer #3 shares a story about reinforcing cultural norms through resolving a conflict:

So, we're under a new administration, which happens every now and then. So, since I've started, I've been through three college presidents and three political leaders...the transitions in those areas have been fairly smooth because there's an understanding of what we do and the value that we provide. But during this last transition, after the Governor appoints the regional leader, a couple of individuals within the organization saw that as an opportunity to sort of self-promote. So we developed this kind of internal operations code of conduct that says this is how we're going to behave... because that person [appointed board members] is always going to change, but we're going to be here for the next 30 years. We had individuals who were just tossing people under the bus left and right. And it kind of became this idea of; you better be at every meeting because if you're not you're going to get the crap beat out of you while you're in there... because they're talking about you, which is something we didn't agree to. So I ended up calling one of our individuals who was holding some people's work up as bad examples. Now it was me that was getting "pinataed" [participant related the experience to the party item of a Papier Mache figure filled with candy, hung from a string, and struck with a stick until it breaks open]. So I just went in and said, "If you've got a couple minutes, we should probably have a little bit of a conversation." Just kind of laid it out that self-promoting was going to come back to bite you in the ass at some point. You grow in this organization or any organization as people lift you forward in the positions. You don't climb there

over the dead bodies of people you've chunked under the bus. So that conflict turned that around, and that person was probably mad at me for a little while but the fact that someone called to their attention that people are noticing what you're doing, and if you're trying to move up in this organization, that's not the way to do it. Because those same people that you're bashing are going to be the ones that either decides that you move forward or not, and it won't work that way. I don't like doing that. It's... conflict is icky. So anyway that's a conflict that was affecting the culture that we had built.

**Summary of learning reciprocally.** Senior officers teach others and network to learn professional mastery. Networking was the key to their successes. Networks provide forums to work through difficult issues, gain new ideas, fortify strengths, and find inspiration. Senior officers navigate the ambiguous, interconnecting systems with peers and make meaning of the difficult compliance requirements. Peer networks guide senior officer's professional practices. Peer networks are forums for giving and receiving honest feedback, discovering skill gaps, and reflecting with others as senior officer's reform or transform their practices or perspectives. In addition, senior officers receive support and feedback from supervisors.

### **Theme 3 Summary**

Senior officers develop others through informal activities including modeling and demonstrating behaviors, promoting meaning making, and transparent thinking. The participants recognize leadership talents in others and invite them to try interim roles and other leadership experiences. Interests in career changes lead to seeking formal learning opportunities. Senior officers seek development opportunities based on curiosity,

interests, or prevailing challenges. Professional mastery develops through creative experimentation requiring trial and error learning. Meaningful development occurs by learning as a natural part of working, where senior officers form pragmatic skills that fit the work context. Senior officers teach others and network to learn professional mastery. Networks provide forums to work through difficult issues, gain new ideas, fortify strengths, and find inspiration. Peers support each other in reflecting and receiving honest feedback that often leads to a course redirection through reconceptualizing practices or transforming perspectives.

#### **Theme 4: Senior Officers Smooth the Path for Emerging Leaders Through Storytelling and Sharing Collective Wisdom**

The experiences of senior officers in navigating the intensities of the position give rise to helping others understand the responsibilities and practices related to the local culture. The codes that support this theme include fostering the growth of others, building an understanding of the job demands, and ensuring the continuity of service to students and communities (see Appendix F).

#### **Orchestrating Harmony**

The prevailing topics include understanding the college culture and the interconnecting systems, preserving trusting relationships, striving for excellence, discerning before taking action, and focusing on the rewards of the work (see Appendix F). Senior Officer #3 talks about building trust while introducing change.

...we've talked about some things. "I've heard you guys are feeling like you're challenged with X. And I found an idea. Some other schools are trying it. Some nationally....some good statistics rates coming from it. What do you guys think

about this?” Let them process a little bit. Let them discuss. Then the next meeting coming back and saying, “So you had some time to think about it. Do you think that would benefit us?” By coming in and letting them think about it, process, and have everybody’s buy-in on an idea. That’s...far, far, more successful.”

Regarding change relating to culture, relationships, and trust, Senior Officer #6 offers:

They’re [new senior officers] going to have to in a short period of time take the time to understand the culture, what are the moving parts in the institution, what is important to the institution and so that’s the disadvantage of getting someone from the outside. The advantage is that you have those outside experiences that someone from the inside may not have.

In discussing change, Senior Officer #4 reflects, “I think empathy is important especially during change. Just figuring out how to put yourself in your staff’s shoes. Like somebody once said, ‘How does that 25-year veteran from this organization feel about you?’ Be in her position.”

#### **Theme 4 Summary**

Senior officers develop the next generation of leaders by focusing on relational trust. Relationships and trust grow by stabilizing the environment, fostering inclusivity, and demonstrating fairness. Senior officers care and understand what matters to people. Preserving trust occurs through skillful communications, which promotes quicker resolution of conflicts. Trust also depends on proving credibility, authenticity, and building consensus. Mistrust occurs when a senior officer is disrespectful, makes too

many errors, or is too transparent, resulting in difficult relationships and competing agendas. Demonstrating fairness includes considering multiple points of view, discerning the level of urgency, and addressing conflicts swiftly.

### **Theme 5: Senior Officers Stabilize the Environment by Balancing Relational and Positional Power Through Inclusivity and Transparent Decision Making**

#### **Continuing the Legacy**

Senior officers continue the rural community college leadership legacy by demonstrating their commitment to rural values through leadership excellence. Senior officer's express rural values through balancing power, demonstrating leadership, using fair practices, fostering inclusivity, and building trust (see Appendix G). Senior officers describe the importance of demonstrating trust and openness, taking action, and stabilizing the environment. Other topics include the art of influence, setting the cultural tone, discerning agendas, using transparent, fair decision-making processes, and providing neutral ground (see Appendix G). All seven senior officers' report stabilizing the environment. Senior Officer #4 provides a scenario in balancing competing agendas:

It's interesting being in a collective bargaining situation, it's challenging right now, especially in our rural campuses. Because what used to be can't exist anymore. That bumps up against the tradition of what collective bargaining is, you know, there has to be a very clear understanding that we, can't just operate the same way. So some of the collective bargaining... play a role in creating this sustainable environment that impedes that process. And moving and creating the new vision of what we're doing is challenged. But the folks that have had a long history here, and it's rooted in what was. A couple of them are really, really

angry. Like angry! You know the bottom line will dictate how we move....it's about something different that they don't have control of. There's a couple of personalities that are really, really strong that have been here for a lot of years. And they're like, "We've been successful, and this guy comes in." It's like, if I gave them a \$100 bill, they'd say, "Well, ok, but it's too wrinkly." You know I bought lunch for our team because we were having a big meeting. And somebody said, "Oh, you ordered way too much." I'm sitting there. I kind of looked and in my mind, I just kind of shook my head and externally I said, "Well, that's so everybody can have some. Then we can even run some upstairs, and you just order more. Just order more because it gives us an opportunity to say, hey, come on down." But I was sitting there thinking, "Are you serious!?" It's the difference of \$30 between having what we have and....so its stuff like that that is... it just blows my mind.

Senior Officer #2 portrays how people depend on leaders to stabilize the environment:

You know, I think another thing sometimes where people get worried and uptight about schools... of course, we're under a lot of duress with shootings in all the media about unfortunate things that happen in colleges. It's stressful. We are potentially stressing students. When they're stressed, they stress out the faculty. I know people that are stressing rely heavily on the leaders to support them. That takes a little more than...I think the general person to be able to tolerate that and deal with those things. I think it's just one of the characteristics of a dean's role.

In discussing how to set the cultural tone, Senior Officer #7 offers:



I think you have to build a culture of trust and openness. You know, my door is always open, and I think most staff know they can come in here, and vent and critique and some even will come in here and say, “I know there’s nothing you can do about this, but...,” then they let it go. Having some of those dynamics are helpful for allowing people to get some things off their chest. Or to put an idea on the table... I mean you want ideas coming from every corner of the place. I think just by example. I think that’s the bottom line...you just have to demonstrate it. I think it’s all about what you value and that you’re living those values... and there’s a consistency and sincerity that comes with what you’re doing.

### **Theme 5 Summary**

Rural leadership requires personal and relational trust and awareness of the culture, including prevailing expectations. Senior officers lead in harmony with the culture, which requires understanding historical perspectives, and acknowledging and responding to the needs of the community. Balancing power includes observing situations, noticing opportunities, and offering suggestions after establishing trust. Participants build the college through sharing leadership, learning with people, telling practical stories, and fostering collaborative decision-making. Likewise, senior officer’s help others understand the bigger picture through the interconnecting systems and how decisions may impact other systems. Seeing and connecting disparate information requires broad thinking. Senior officers need to understand how to fit their knowledge and skills to the work context. Contributing to rural economic development requires a senior officer to own and creatively shape the position to the local circumstances, find new ways of doing the work, and prioritize and focus on impactful tasks.

## **Open-Coding Summary**

Senior officers characterize the position as intensive, given the broad, undefined duties and ambiguous expectations. In addition to daily operations, the participants face competing requests, continual problem-solving, difficult decisions, and conflict resolution. However, all participants emphasize the position is worth it to see lives change. At the heart of senior officer's professional practice, is the desire to help others. Meaningful outcomes include the professional growth of staff and student successes. Several senior officers suggest that experience prepares one for the position. A significant focus of the interviews was how senior officers develop others. The intensities of the position naturally led to the primary discussions of nurturing employee's growth, building trust, learning reciprocally, and doing the work together. These conversations describe how senior officers develop the next generation of leaders.

## **Axial-Coding and Analysis**

As a first step, the open-coding process involved grouping similar data and sorted into separate categories as discussed in Chapter III. The next step included abstracting and analyzing these data. Using the axial-coding process, I cross-analyzing the categories as suggested by Straus and Corbin (1990). I purposefully reflected on the recurring themes across the data and considered the emerging central phenomenon. Through the axial-coding process, I created a grounded theory map to illustrate my findings. As represented in Figure 3, the map consists of separate, interrelated elements, producing a model in which to consider my theoretical assertion. In the following paragraphs, I define the purpose and content of each element of the grounded theory map.

## Central Phenomenon

The core element of the grounded theory map is the central phenomenon. This element represents the underlying, most frequently recurring theme that emerged from the research (Creswell, 2009). Throughout the interviews, the rural community college senior officers regularly discussed the development and growth of others while building trust. Thus, the central phenomenon for my grounded theory is “Preparing the next generation of leaders,” which emerged through the cross-category data analysis.

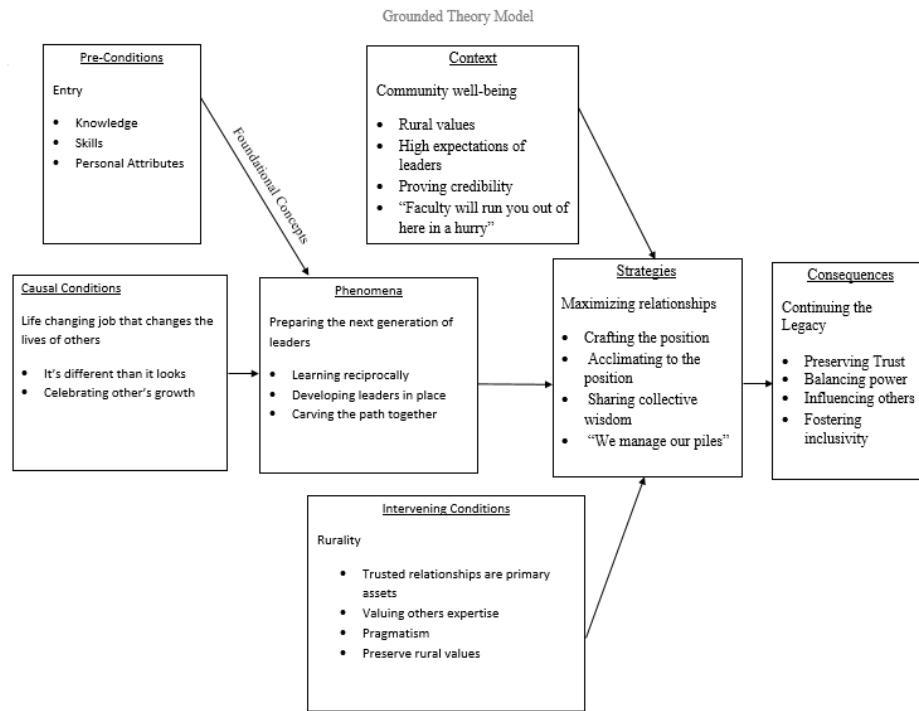


Figure 3. Grounded Theory Map.

Senior Officer #1 describes grooming future leaders through work projects. Shortly after I came in this position, we have a lot of Department and Labor Grants... they’re wonderful but they’re consuming. This smaller grant came through for student and parents. Someone sent it to me and said, “Well, should

we try and do this?” I so desperately wanted to say no. Because of all the grant things we had going on... I read through it, and I said, “Absolutely! We have to apply for that.” The Administrative Assistant that was here was ready for a change... we don’t have a lot of movement mobility because of our size. This other person and I were responsible for the grant decided she should direct it. And she did...and continues and has done a wonderful job. So we helped students, but we helped a staff person. I cut my own throat because I was losing somebody with all that experience. But we’re about people. So, I mean...she periodically brings me a story of something that grant has done for a parent. And so she’ll say, “Look what you guys did because you wrote that grant.”

Senior Officer #6 summarizes how to build trust through performing the work together.

...working directly with faculty on a specific problem, challenge, or an opportunity to work collaboratively together....and to lead that through from inception to completion. To demonstrate to that individual that you’re working alongside them to accomplish an outcome. That’s how you gain trust.

Knowledge, skills, and personal attributes are set by the college as pre-conditions for entering the position. I added a pre-conditions box to the grounded theory map as it influences the central phenomenon. Another element of the ground theory map, causal conditions, influences the central phenomenon. The description of the pre-conditions and causal elements follow.

## **Pre-Conditions**

The pre-conditions box indicates a set of knowledge, skills, and values needed to enter a senior officer's position. Senior officers characterize readiness for the position as an individual's dedication to others' growth, theoretical concepts of the respective department, operational management, and relational skills. In terms of practical skills, the participants point to how building the college together increases trust and understanding. Together, these topics impact the central phenomenon.

Senior Officer #6 provides a view of why a senior officer needs the knowledge, skills, and values relating to developing, managing, and supporting others:

I've just been spending time the past three days with new faculty and staff...and so we have a 6-day training session where those new faculty comes in, and we talked about how you deal with students and empowering students... but also you're here to support their learning and whatever that may be. That's the same way I feel about individuals and their professional development. What are their goals and outcomes? You have to be wanting... to think that because of your skills and abilities. You have the ability to manage and to assist and to support not only faculty but students and the organization. And so, if that is something that's not there, then you shouldn't move into this role.

Senior Officer #7 shed light on the necessary conceptual, practical, and relational knowledge and skills:

Some knowledge you bring in beyond soft skills would be some awareness of... I remember some of my graduate courses about law. I mean, that's really important. The data privacy and anything that you're accountable for in a legal

sense. Even finance, some knowledge of higher ed finance is probably important. Those aren't exciting things to study but I think they have some sense of how the budget process works is pretty important. You probably refer to your graduate coursework fairly... more often than you would think.

Senior Officer #5 talks about the importance of neutrality and broad perspectives: As an administrator, you have to be able to adjust to what the needs are and where the gaps need to be filled. To keep in check... when you're just totally overwhelmed and that...look at things from multiple perspectives. One of the things I have helped a new emerging leader do is to look at things... even if that person really, really irritates you, and you really think they are wrong, try to think about where they are coming from. Why are they so upset that you asked them to do that? It might be because they've had ten new tasks put on their plate. Nothing to do with what you asked... that's really important as a leader to be able to do that. Otherwise, you keep it at the problem level rather than the solution level.

### **Causal Conditions**

Causal conditions, as Creswell (2009) explains, are aspects that influence the central phenomenon. Senior officer's express surprise regarding the intensity and level of responsibility of the position. The participants lament on not understanding the realities of the position and being better prepared, which inspires them to smooth the path for those who follow. Other matters include the importance of personal stability, the purpose of taking the position, and the reward of seeing lives changed. Senior officers talk about the process of developing quiet leaders, stating that people often do not

recognize their leadership abilities. Senior Officer #2 describes the process of engaging potential leaders:

If... faculty have interest in moving into leadership roles; it is sometimes the foresight of current leadership to see those characteristics and suggest, "Maybe you want to think about this. You know, if there's a position that's changing, would you ever be interested?" You know, sometimes it's an intentional conversation with somebody. Something has to spark... some encouragement and interest from current leaders. Reach out to those people to say, "You know, I've noticed you really are doing a great job with this, would you ever consider this?" But I think sometimes then you can make more of an impact on future relationships, future thinking, maybe even motivation. That might be more meaningful than, "Here's the way to become a leader."

Senior officers describe their surprise regarding the intensity and breadth of the position. Senior Officer #6 summarizes what happens when an individual with little management knowledge and experience steps into a leadership role:

It's a shock because they've never had management experience before, they've never supervised anyone before, they've never operated a budget of any size or magnitude, they've never had to deal with conflict... conflict resolution, they've never had to do disciplinary processes on an individual. It scares people to death. So you can't... you can teach that but until you experience that...and a lot of academic leaders, they go back to faculty because they don't like that. They hate the conflict involved and having to deal with difficult decisions. It's like here at the college we hire technical experts that come out of industry to be faculty

members. And there are times where you have individuals that are great in their trade, but they're not very good teachers. So to expect a teacher to be a good manager is the same stretch.

Senior Officer #7 talks passionately about helping others enter the position more meaningfully:

You hate to have people learn by making mistakes; that's not a good way to learn skills as a supervisor or as a director of a department or whatever it might be.

Well, I mean, it just... it prevents you from being as effective as you can be.

That's the biggest impact to me... is that you're just not as good as you could be if you don't have someone prepared for any of those leadership positions. It's all about efficiency, effectiveness... it all trickles down to the student if you're not at that point, you may have some risk of not performing some services that probably should be done.

### **Strategies**

The central phenomenon necessitates responsive strategies. The strategies senior officers use to develop the next generation of leaders is maximizing relationships. Other strategies include stabilizing the environment by balancing relational and positional power and genuinely caring about others. In addition, senior officers build trust through managing resources, inclusivity, and fair and balanced decision making. All seven participants describe the importance of owning and shaping the position along with the understanding of assimilating to the culture. In terms of assimilating, the senior officers underscore the value of building trust before suggesting changes, choosing arguments wisely, and balancing the expectations of others. In the decision making process, the



participants consider what matters to others and discern the urgency and timing of a situation. Senior Officer #6 points to the necessity of discerning situations before making a decision:

The one thing that you don't want to have happen is be faced with a discrimination lawsuit or other types of things because of a decision that you treated two things that looked pretty similar in different ways. So you've got to be careful. So that's why I try not to make rash decisions and important decisions I will bounce off of my supervisor, and he bounces things off of me to make sure that we're not thinking of or remembering all the potential consequences that may be a result of this decision. So, learning how to do that is part... as you grow as a manager, you come to realize and reflect back in your past experiences where you didn't realize, or you didn't understand the unintended consequences of the decisions you made. And so you become a little bit more cautious....there's just a whole host of things that tie together. It's not just a simple decision.

In light of continual interruptions, Senior Officer #7 gives insight on stabilizing the environment while managing multiple priorities:

It's easy to not pay attention because you're so focused on workload and getting things done. And monitoring the stack and stacks... I mean we manage piles... stacks of paper....and making sure... is there anything today I'm at risk of missing, and it's... when you're engaged in it, it's easy to not pick up on some signals... and connecting with people to say, "Hey, is there something wrong," and trying to get to the heart of that. It would be easy to ignore... then I think it causes more damage. Here's just a very specific example. We have a front desk

up here with the receptionist, administrative assistant. Well, my expectation is that the desk always be covered. So if she's on break or at lunch... there's a rotation of other similar staff that are in the same bargaining unit and... I want them to cover when she's gone... And if I don't... if that coverage wasn't in place like it should be... I notice that that individual kind of was acting different... was short with me... was maybe short with other people. Well, what happened was the coverage wasn't there as planned. She felt not valued and unable to take a break, for example... And so again...those may seem like little things....it's based on reading people and if someone has changed... their demeanor, attitude, whatever... I think you have to call it and say, "Hey, you don't seem yourself today. Is there something that's troubling you?" And then encourage them to talk about that. But again you can't just be bopping around here because it's easy to get... workloads are very heavy... and it's easy to not pay attention because you're so focused on workload and getting things done. When you're engaged in it, it's easy to not pick up on some signals... and connecting with people.

Senior Officer #2 offers a glimpse into the embedded cultural aspects and working through conflict while building trusting relationships:

I was very used to assigning all the students to an advisor. Both an academic advisor and a faculty advisor. I had assigned everybody in the organization an advisor and the one program said, "Within our discipline, even faculty that were in that contract, don't advise." I said, "Oh!" Well, I looked at the contract, and it actually says they can advise. Well, they had some view out there that they didn't

advise for this particular group. I don't know the history... didn't understand. But I assigned them anyway. I said, "You know we can discuss it. We can get through it." And if they want to grieve it, they can grieve it. So I went to my Provost and at the time he said, "You know, it might be a great thing to explore and go through and just discuss. Because we haven't talked about this in a long time. Maybe it's time that we looked through it." And I said, "I don't care what the outcome is, but I think it will set a precedence going forward." And so I was trying to decide if I wanted to let a grievance happen or if I wanted to give up on it. We talked through it. And I talked with the faculty, and I said, "I don't understand why you don't... why you wouldn't want to do that for your students?" And found out there was certainly some culture and some history that was a challenge. And we talked through it. We ended up not assigning them. They got the MOU [Memo of Understanding], and they discussed that. So we came to an agreement, and we both were ok in the end. It was fine. But I had to get some organizational culture on that. I had to get the flavor of history because those things are really important and embedded for those faculty.

The central phenomenon necessitates a set of strategies, while the elements of context and intervening conditions influence the strategies. Creswell (2009) describes the context as internal, narrow factors and intervening conditions as external, broad factors.

### **Context**

Senior officers focus on the stability of the college environment. Through the axial-coding process, the internal (narrow) conditions are preserving the rural values, the high expectations of leaders, proving credibility, and difficult relationships. All senior

officers offer that declarative, unilateral decision-making is too contrasting to the college culture and inevitably leads to irrevocable distrust. Strategies that lead to trust are understanding the challenges of others, respecting others perspective and time, and responding to the community's goals and expectations. Part of building trust includes taking some risks but knowing when and how to bend the rules. Senior Officer #5 describes working through a situation and taking a calculated risk:

You really, really have to know people, and you're still going to make mistakes, but you don't want to do something blatant because if you break that trust, then every interaction can be more from a union mentality than a feedback and support and growth standpoint. I've taken some risks, and they've paid off. I mean like, I had somebody who hadn't completed those teaching courses that they have to on time. Well, the person said, "I thought I had until August because that's when I was hired." And I was going to have to re-cert the person. You know, I believe you'll get them done this summer and I just was like, but if he doesn't then I'm stuck going through progressive discipline. So I said, "Here's the deal. Here's our options." I said, "I could non-certify you, and you could reapply. I could take the risk, have you certified. But I'm not willing to have to take the risk of possibly going through progressive discipline if you don't do it. I really like you. I want you to be here so here's what I want you to do. I want you to write me a letter of resignation that I will stick in my drawer, and if you don't get these done in time, you will be resigning. And if not...if you get it done, you come in here and then we'll rip it up together." Yeah, so those you shouldn't just learn through trial and

error unless you're willing to change your job after you've made too many errors. Because there's some errors, if you make, you're just never going to get past it.

Senior Officer #3 shares the necessity of trust and understanding the values of the culture in equalizing power:

To stay in an area, particularly at the community college, rural community colleges... and be there a long time is a good thing. It can't just be the backwater, training grounds for people. I think having some humility is good... to not have that perception of being the boss, whatever because you're really not. I mean, faculty will run you out of here in a hurry. Then having the humility or respect to explain your decisions.

### **Intervening Conditions**

The broad, external intervening conditions, discovered through axial-coding, includes relationships and building trust and are of utmost importance in rural communities. Senior officers discuss interdependent relationships, sharing importance valuing others expertise, and pragmatism. Senior officers emphasize that building trust is the lynchpin to building solid relationships, which pervades every action. Additional cultural norms include trusting those we know, others promote your talents, and proving credibility relates to trusted relationships.

Senior Officer #3 talks about the value of trust and relationships:

I mean, you can make mistakes... but if you are willing to learn from them and not get angry about them. To be able to say, "Oh, you dummy." And I'll give you a classic example. The first time that I was at [a meeting] with my 13-member board—all elected officials. And I went in... very similar room like this

over at the agency and we were talking about setting up a budget for me. I walked into that room, and I got slaughtered. Fortunately, you know, there were guys sitting in the room who I've known from growing up. And those guy's kind of could see that things were going south and started to pull the thing back for me. ...I walked out of there, and I was angry with myself. I was totally prepared for the meeting. What I was not prepared for was the, the, the atmosphere in that room among those legislators. And now, I can run the table on those guys. They're calling me, "Hey, can you come down and testify..."

Understanding and valuing the priorities of the community is an important factor.

Senior Officer #2 offers:

You have to be really paying attention to what the priorities are in those communities... They are trying to preserve who they are and on top of they are trying to trust somebody new coming in. They want to be safe and preserve who they are. They want to keep the things that they've known. For instance, this community is known for a certain type of bird festival, but we hardly have any of those birds around this area anymore... not like we did in the early 1900's but still, we have this festival. And you know, they still want to preserve that. That's a tradition. And every year it drives thousands and thousands of people to get together at a certain time in the fall. So every year it's different, but new generations have no idea why we have that festival. But people want to preserve that tradition. So anybody that talks about getting rid of it is... it's just traditions are important.

## **Consequences**

Effects of performing the strategies represent the consequences in the grounded theory map (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Senior officers offer that the under-development of a new leader could result in harsh learning experiences. If the important groundwork for understanding the nuances of building trust and experiencing the work is not established, then missteps and misunderstandings accrue and result in detrimental outcomes. Senior officers offer experiences and advice in terms of shared leadership, inclusivity, and building trust as vital aspects of preparing the next generation of leaders. The stories that senior officers pass along are those of understanding the cultural nuances of groups and leading accordingly. The participants explain other items demanding awareness such as systems that promote supportive practices, observing situations before making decisions, understanding key responsibilities of higher education systems, and the ability to focus on quality rather than the quantity of work. In addition, a new leader needs to use time wisely, have trusted advisors, and realize that when making decisions everything affects everything. Senior Officer #6 describes teaching new deans about the unintended impacts of decisions:

I have had deans that worked directly with me. One of the things I try to do is to get them to understand that decisions that are being made have ramifications and impact on other types of things in the operation. And so before you make a decision, you need to understand the big picture. What this really means to the institution, to the students, to the faculty, to the staff. And so it takes experience. It takes knowledge, broad knowledge, but you need to understand how that decision will affect other things.

Senior officers underscore the high importance of support networks and trusted advisors to discuss ideas, solve problems, and receive feedback. Senior Officer #3 describes the helpfulness of honest feedback:

You know, you want to develop—and this is where I think is a huge challenge for leaders—I don’t care if it’s private sector or if it’s education or politics or what it is... to keep a group of people around you that will say, “You know what, you’ve got something in your teeth right here, or you’ve got a booger in your nose, or you really screwed up.” Because you get too many people around you that are trying to climb over you or around you or whatever that are going to tell you....you want someone to say, “The Emperor has no clothes, you idiot, you shouldn’t have done that.” That’s the key... I truly believe. That is it... if you’ve got those people that you can count on close enough to you that will tell you the truth, the ground truth. Not the fluffy little, “Oh, you’re wonderful truth.” I think that’s the key to success. It’s that stuff that you don’t know that other people know, but they won’t tell you. But there’s that gem of a few that will say, “Dumbie!” Oh! You want them around. They are actually the canary in the coal mine!

Senior Officer #7 talks about building a culture of trust:

You know, I think you have to build a culture of trust and openness. You know, my door is always open, and I think most staff know they can come in here, and vent and critique and some even come in here and say, “I know there’s nothing you can do about this, but...” then they let it go. And then it’s like, “Ok, I feel better now, I’ll get on with work.” So I think having some of those dynamics are



helpful for allowing people to get some things off their chest. Or to put an idea on the table... I mean you want ideas coming from every corner of the place.

Through axial-coding and the grounded theory map, I illustrated the research findings. The central phenomenon represents the concept most discussed by senior officers, preparing the next generation of leaders. The participants proved their credibility through demonstrating the required knowledge, skills, and personal values. The causal conditions also affect the central phenomenon as senior officers describe the position as surprisingly intensive, which motivates them to develop others. The strategies the participants use to develop others is by preserving trust, balancing power, influencing others, and fostering inclusivity. The strategies are based on the intervening conditions (external) of the primary cultural expectation of authentic relationships and the context (internal) of upholding rural values and balancing the expectations of others. Finally, the grounded theory elements lead to the consequences of passing on the stories, experiences, and advice to the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges.

### **Conclusions**

Through the creation of the grounded theory map, I analyzed the data in a comprehensive format to develop the theoretical assertion. Senior officers develop the next generation of rural community college leaders given the pre-conditions and causal conditions and develop strategies that lead to the intended consequences of passing the story stick to successors. The internal contextual factors and the intervening conditions that influence the strategies presents the need to develop internal successors. The careful analysis of the grounded theory model led to the following assertion. "Senior officer positions are surprisingly intensive, therefore, we develop internal successors through

practical knowledge and experiences that lead to others' growth and continue the legacy of making a difference to the people and communities we serve." The assertion answers the research study question of: How do senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges?

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the five themes and their associated categories and codes and substantiated each with a variety of direct quotes from the senior officer interviews. I also described the grounded theory elements and their relationships that emerged from the axial-coding analysis. The grounded theory map provided a comprehensive format which led to the assertion of "Senior officer positions are surprisingly intensive, therefore, we develop internal successors through practical knowledge and experiences that lead to other's growth and continue the legacy of making a difference to the people and communities we serve."

The final chapter includes the discussion, interpretations, and affirms the findings with the literature. I also suggest implications and recommendations, discuss the limitations, and provide concluding remarks.

**CHAPTER V**  
**DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

**Introduction**

The original purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead a rural community college. The *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* (AACC, 2013) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) frames the study. The AACC competency model broadly describes the job duties of senior officers and transformative learning theory is a reflective process individuals use to critically examine and make meaning of difficult situations. The AACC competencies and transformative learning theory were discussed in Chapter II. Through 14 formal interviews, senior officers directed the conversations from a historical to a future perspective in describing how they developed others. The data led to the revised research question of: How do senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges?" The assertion that emerged from my data analysis was: To continue the legacy of the rural community college and the rural values, senior officers use the intensive challenges of the position to foster reciprocal professional growth that leads to the emergence of the next generation of leaders. The assertion leads to three descriptive concepts (a) rural legacies, (b) pragmatic competence and (c) reciprocal development. The grounded theory approach guided the data analysis. Using the open-coding process, 542 codes were

produced that led to the emergence of nine categories, and five themes (see Appendix C-G). Through the axial-coding process, I constructed a grounded theory model, illustrated in Figure 3.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from Chapter IV and the three descriptive concepts (a) rural legacies, (b) pragmatic professionalism, and (c) reciprocal development. The descriptive concepts are affirmed with the literature and congruent with the *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* and transformative learning theory.

The organization of the final chapter of this dissertation includes two sections. The first section, I describe the descriptive concepts, affirms the findings with the literature, and shows how the results align with the AACC competencies and transformative learning theory. In the last section, I describe the study's implications, future research recommendations, and final thoughts.

### **Descriptive Concepts**

Through the open-coding process, a final assertion emerged from five themes. The assertion, affirmed through axial-coding, led to my grounded theory map as described in Chapter IV. The assertion led to three descriptive concepts that describe meaningful learning practices for developing senior officer successors at rural community colleges. The meaningful learning practices answer the research question of this study: How do senior officers develop the next generation of leaders at rural community colleges? Subquestion one led to the findings: How do senior officers learn the competencies to lead at a rural community college? Subquestion two provided the context: What competencies do senior officers learn in order to lead at a rural community

college? The three descriptive concepts that emerged were (a) rural legacies, (b) pragmatic professionalism, and (c) reciprocal development. The following section explains the descriptive concepts. In addition, sources of validity included senior officer's interviews and affirmed with observations, background information, and the relevant literature.

## **Discussion**

### **Rural Legacies**

Senior officers lead rural community colleges through caring relationships, committing to the rural values, and connecting with the community. The senior officers in this study offer that relationships are the “primary currency” of the rural community and the college, weaving through every action. Through work experiences at urban community colleges, senior officers report the primary focus of leadership was outcomes and relationships secondary. Therefore, a distinctive difference of rural community college leadership is leading through caring relationships.

Senior officers lead rural community colleges in harmony with the rural culture, which requires building trust. Demonstrating trust relates to senior officer's interest in understanding historical perspectives and acknowledging and responding to the needs of the college, the community, and the people they serve. The participants underscore the importance of valuing the priorities, history, and beliefs of the community and the college in building understanding and trust. Learning the rural values entails attentive listening and observing. To demonstrate respect and commitment to the values, a senior officer establishes trust and then suggests change.

Inclusivity requires appreciating and equally valuing other's importance and expertise. Likewise, self-promotion is unwelcome as others protect and promote an individual's talents and credibility. Engaging in the community and leading the college involves proving credibility by applying pragmatic knowledge and skills and subduing credentials, which builds long-term relationships. Honoring and living the rural values leads to the accomplishment of interrelated community and college outcomes that enrich the quality of life. Adapting to the rural environment requires senior officers to own and creatively shape the position while adapting their knowledge and skills to the local circumstances. However, adaptation proves difficult given competing expectations, complex federal, state, and local systems, and the interconnecting web of relationships while receiving little guidance. Perceptions of others in determining senior officer's successes are subjective, but the outcome of not honoring the rural values often leads to a vote of no confidence. Honoring the rural values and developing trust through respectful, caring relationships is vital to senior officers' leadership at rural community colleges.

The literature affirms the importance of relationships. In a qualitative study of 10 senior officers at rural community colleges in Kansas, Pennington et al. (2006) suggest a distinctive difference of rural community colleges is the closeness of relationships. One participant summarizes the view by saying, "We really are different" (p. 649), indicating relationships were close as the college educated several generations of families and knew most people in the community very well. Similarly, P. L. Eddy (2007) discovers the cornerstone of senior officers' success at a rural community college depends on strong community relationships to accomplish the institution's mission.

While these studies affirm the importance of relationships and commitment to the community, the details of relational expectations are missing. Yet, senior officers in the current study say that building relational trust makes or breaks a senior officer's leadership. This information is important, as relationships are a primary rural value and the social glue that leads to quality of life and accomplishing mutual goals. Engaging in the community by contributing practical knowledge and skills in conjunction with others in addressing common challenges and finding opportunities demonstrates a senior officer's commitment to the community.

The interrelated outcomes of the community and college are important, as securing opportunities for the rural region includes appropriately funding programs and services. Crookston and Hooks (2012) finds the lack of funding hampers the efforts of community colleges in providing the needed services to the region. In examining county employment trends between 1976 and 2004 in 44 states, data show a positive correlation between employment growth and appropriately funded community colleges. Connecting to the community through shared purposes was affirmed as Miller and Tuttle (2007) describe rural community colleges as a source of community pride and a central hub for services. Many businesses locate in the community given access to a community college's workforce development services to fulfill talent needs. Community college services and programs add value to communities through economic development and contribute to preserving the rural values.

Committing to the rural values aligns with literature findings. Through interviews with 15 rural community college senior officers in the Midwest, Leist (2007) finds that cultural influences differentiates leadership at rural community colleges from their urban

counterparts. Aligning to the culture requires understanding the rural community by embracing the history, folklore, traditions, and symbolic relationships. In addition, building trust, showing genuine respect, and engaging in the community, is essential as this demonstrates a senior officer's commitment to the rural values. In a qualitative study of 600 higher education senior officers, Scott, Coates, and Anderson (2008) suggest that senior officers lead from relational rather than positional authority, therefore adapting to the local context is essential. In terms of engaging and adapting to the needs of the community, Pennington et al. (2006) discover that rural community colleges meet the needs of the local community. The colleges are the economic development engine of the region. Therefore, colleges provide assistance in resume writing for graduates, workforce development training, and help industry leaders with land transfer deals. Adapting to the rural values and addressing the changing needs of rural communities are essential components when learning the responsibilities of a senior officer.

Few studies describe the details of the distinctions of senior officer's leadership at rural community college involving caring relationships, rural values, community connectedness, and the ambiguous expectations. Thus, the findings on rural values add to the literature. The experiences of senior officers in this study offer a rare view into daily work life, providing insight on the importance of rural values and relationship building amid ambiguous expectations. The participants offer that promoting trusting relationships requires personal authenticity, neutralizing positional power, subduing credentials, and equally valuing others importance and expertise. Likewise, relationships are safe harbor as others promote and protect an individual's talents and credibility. Senior officers underscore the importance of pragmatism in contributing to the rural



community and using knowledge and skills wisely to build trust, credibility, and long-lasting relationships. These findings are vital in promoting our understanding of the rural environment, which informs plans to create meaningful development processes for senior officer successors.

### **Pragmatic Professionalism**

Senior officers agree that developing pragmatic professionalism means equally valuing the importance of conceptual knowledge and relational skills. Senior officers talk about the importance of conceptually understanding the education landscape and operational management principles. Translating the concepts into practical skills requires adapting skills to fit the work context. Foundational practical knowledge includes understanding the revenue streams that support the community college and the associated interconnecting federal, state, and college systems. This knowledge helps senior officers make strategic decision related to programs, curriculum, and staffing. Operational knowledge is vital in managing the college, which includes varying laws, concepts of finance, budgets, supervision, communications, strategic management, and operational planning. Senior officers learn the concepts through formal activities including professional graduate programs, courses, and national and state leadership programs.

Given that rural community values demand practical professional practices, personal authenticity, and commitment, senior officers underscore the importance of the right fit of a leader to the work context. The participants state the importance of humility and authenticity by admitting and learning from mistakes, accepting responsibility, and demonstrating accountability. Adapting to the work environment requires learning from

difficult experiences, reflecting, and considering ways of re-fitting and aligning their unique knowledge and skills.

In considering how senior officer's professional practices align with the AACC competency model that frame this study, the findings suggest mastery of each of the five competencies including (1) organization strategy; (2) resource management; (3) communication; (4) collaboration; and (5) advocacy (AACC, 2013). The senior officers talk about organizational strategy in terms of acute awareness of the external and internal influences that affect the college and their dedication to student success. In addition, the participants advocate and collaborate with the community is to achieve their collective priorities. Resource management and communication was foundational to senior officer's practices in understanding impacts and making difficult decisions relating to finance, employees, and the interconnecting systems and processes.

While senior officer's professional practices align with the AACC competencies, the rationale of the model is not fitting for the rural environment. For example, one assumption of the competency model is that administrators learn the competencies to engage in taking risks and leading change to increase student retention and graduation rates, which is incongruent with rural values. The findings of this study indicate that senior officers lead through relationships and collaborate with the community and the college's faculty and staff through relational practices including leading respectful discussions and fostering the understanding and alignment of goals.

In addition, the assumption of the embeddedness of professionalism within the five competencies is problematic. AACC defines professionalism as an administrator's ethical values, impacts of perceptions, a learning mindset, using influence and power

wisely, making difficult decisions, and accepting responsibility (AACC, 2005).

Professionalism is at the heart of senior officer's professional practice, informing each action. Embedding professionalism in the model may cause invisibility of the competency. Findings from this study show that professionalism is of utmost importance. Senior officers say that trust makes or breaks a leader. In addition, rural values include the expectation of building relational trust, requiring personal integrity and authenticity. If the professionalism competency is not explicit, how will successors understand the ethical concepts that form the foundation of senior officer's professional practices? The professionalism competency must be explicit, perhaps displayed as a central factor in the competency model.

Senior officers report the complexity and the necessity of using creativity to address issues relating to the interconnected federal, state, and college systems, difficult relationships, and emerging new issues. Edwards (2012) defines creativity as the ability to form and reform ideas in finding new solutions to solve problems. In a 2010 study of 1,500 chief executive officers in for-profit businesses, creativity was the primary competency used by executives to navigate the complex economic environment (International Business Machines, 2010). Further, creativity is a competency that may strengthen the AACC model.

Previous studies affirm the principles of the AACC competencies relating to senior officer positions in terms of conceptual knowledge, personal values, and perspectives. Several authors find the competencies were appropriate to senior officer practices (Duree & Ebbers, 2012; P. L. Eddy, 2013; Kools, 2010; McNair et al., 2011). Discerning when and how to use competencies is essential in a senior officer's

professional practice. Bolman and Gallos (2011) find that leadership preparation includes intellectual understanding and personal values. Intellectual understanding relates to learning the concepts that provide an overview of the academic landscape, while personal values serve as an essential foundation for building long-term relationships. The authors provide examples of values such as courage, passion, confidence, resourcefulness, and creativity. In addition, academic leaders tend to view situations through their default perspectives, developing multiple perspectives as they compare and contrast experiences with others. The descriptions of these two areas of leadership development are of importance, as senior officers must understand the balance of leading with their mind and heart and seeing situations from other's perspectives.

However, other authors offer a contrasting view of competencies. From the Human Resources perspective, Hollenbeck, McCall, and Silzer (2006) assert that competency models are useful when viewed as a broad range of knowledge, skills, and attributes that guide professionals and when adapting to varying work contexts. The authors explain that each organization has a wide range of variables such as the scope of work, performance expectations, interpersonal dynamics, social norms, degree of freedom for expressing individual creativity, and respect for others. However, some organizations and individuals have used the competency models as absolutes rather than as a foundation in developing professional growth. Affirming this view, higher education senior officers in the Scott et al. (2008) study suggest competencies were not the determinant of senior officer's capabilities but were a general guide to discern when and how to apply and adapt knowledge and skills that fit the work context. The authors recommend deemphasizing competencies and underscoring the importance of individual

creativity as senior officers must address constant change and neutralize difficult situations.

Promoting individual creativity and inviting senior officers to think beyond standard perspectives are vital in leading the rural community college. Misunderstanding the purposes of competency models and using the concepts as performance measures rather than as tools to inform development may leave a leader questioning the acceptability of applying creativity. Senior officers develop unique competencies through education, practice, personal experience, and worldviews. This unique mix of competency development provide significant opportunities for re-conceptualizing and reforming problems into viable opportunities to solve difficult situations and unique problems. In developing senior officer successors, it is vital to encourage the creative application of competencies, but with discernment.

In learning to adapt to the senior officer role, participants describe surprising, intensive challenges and responsibilities of the position and say the position is about serving others through a broad scope of demanding, undefined duties. Several senior officers describe the role as “unimaginable,” suggesting the position is not for the faint of heart as the realities of the position include a high level of responsibility regarding compliance, operational management, and student success, which requires information and deadlines found only by monitoring stacks of paper and voluminous amounts of electronic information. Senior officers experience continual disruptions, and a constant flow of competing strategic and operational tensions while solving unique challenges, and managing conflict. Senior officers make difficult, life-changing decisions, including learning how to respond to repercussions. Likewise, the participants describe employees

as a powerful force. Senior officers express surprise regarding the intensity and challenges of performing supervision duties, describing it as complex and ambiguous, requiring vigilance in managing an interconnected web of internal and external personalities. Remarkably, the participants offer that little things lead to distrust, resulting in relationship power struggles and drama games that are difficult to manage and distract from productive work. In addition, senior officers describe persistent challenges such as shrinking budgets, dwindling staff, prospective student populations, power struggles, and continually solving unique problems.

Difficult situations shape senior officer's personal ethics and perspectives. The surprising, intensive situations cause the participants to reflect on their responses, actions, and perspectives. The senior officers report that it takes courage to be self-reflective and listen to feedback, often resulting in swallowing pride, admitting and learning from mistakes, adopting new perspectives, and understanding the situations of others. These actions align with the perspectives of transformative learning theory that frame this study. When developing professional competencies in the work context, Illeris (2011) states that "...competence development implies important and demanding learning processes..." (p. 60), which the author offers is inclusive of the transformative learning process and the development of professional mastery in intensive work situations. In addition, Brock (2010) suggests that intensive situations cause leaders to examine their perspectives when adapting to new roles and environments.

In 2013 P. L. Eddy, developed a Multidimensional Leadership Model, based on the AACC competencies and leadership theories, affirming that adopting multiple perspectives leads to expanded options for problem solving. The model's five elements

work together and include the concepts of gender, leadership schema, communication, sense making and reframing, and competencies. Through case studies at rural community colleges, the author finds that trial and error learning and experiences lead to reforming senior officer's perspectives. Eddy's model is a valuable contribution to the field in terms of learning to make sense of situations and expanding perspectives to access a wider range of solutions to solve problems. Further, reframing perspectives is an essential element of development plans for senior officer successors.

The literature affirms persistent issues and challenge of rural community colleges. Through interviews with rural community college administrators, Pennington et al. (2006) discovers distinctive challenges resulting from an evolving student population, mission changes, funding, and staffing concerns. The most consistent issue of the study participants is attracting qualified employees, affecting most areas of the college. The needs of the aging student population shift the mission of the colleges from transfer education to workforce development, which requires appropriate levels of staffing and funding. Another study affirms cost inefficiencies. Hardy and Katsinas (2007) suggest that all community colleges share the commitment of open enrollment, academic and career counseling, and remediation services. The authors describe a distinctive issue of rural colleges as cost inefficiencies due to small student populations, which limits rural colleges. Cost inefficiencies relate to higher costs per student, a narrow range of programs and services, and reliance on state appropriations. In addition, the authors report that staff perform multiple administrative roles to meet compliance requirements and in offering comprehensive programs and services.

Previous studies focus on persisting issues of rural community colleges, however, the realities of the position are missing. The finding of the surprising realities of the position is vital and significantly informs our understanding of senior officer's learning processes. The insights reveal the contextual terrain that may promote greater understanding of the position realities and underscore the importance of learning the appropriate balance of intellectual and emotional responses. The insights of senior officer's regarding the position realities contribute to the literature.

Given the intensities of the position, senior officers stress the importance of understanding the responsibilities of the position and the importance of being well-prepared. Being prepared leads to a smoother transition into the position and a more valuable leadership journey for both, the individual and the college. Several senior officers state that not understanding and anticipating the realities of the position often lead to tough learning experiences that may impede the effectiveness of the college. Senior officer's express concerns of those entering the position without the competencies and experiences of operational management and supervision.

The participants agree that it is disheartening to witness the shock of underprepared peers and the high turnover of the position. Therefore, to smooth the path for internal successors, senior officers say they gladly invest their time for the growth of others. Given the "surprising" intensities, ambiguities, and steep learning curve, senior officers pass on their stories and experiences to others by shedding light on the responsibilities of the position and preserving the rural values, thereby developing the next generation of rural community college leaders.



## **Reciprocal Development**

Senior officers transform the surprising intensities of the position into opportunities to develop themselves and others by learning reciprocally. At the heart of senior officer's professional practices are meaningful outcomes such as celebrating staff and faculty professional growth, recognizing exemplary work, and enjoying the successes of happy, employed students. Senior officers discuss nurturing employees' growth, building trust, and doing the work together. The participants emphasize that it is worth the strife inherent in the position to see lives change.

Senior officers develop others through modeling excellence, demonstrating personal values, promoting meaning making, and talking through ideas. Relationships and trust grow by steadying the environment through demonstrating fairness and fostering inclusivity. Demonstrating fairness includes considering multiple points of view, ascertaining the level of urgency, and addressing conflict swiftly. Meaning and understanding develop by learning from mistakes and resolving conflicts. Using transparent thinking leads to preparing others for change and demonstrating the impact of decisions.

Conceptual knowledge and work experience lead to professional mastery. According to the participants, meaningful development means learning as a natural part of working as senior officers develop pragmatic skills that fit the work context. Trial and error learning is necessary in solving unique challenges by trying creative experiments. The participants choose development opportunities based on curiosity, interests, or challenges, seeking practical information to solve problems or prepare for the future.

Reciprocal learning includes recognizing and developing leadership talents in others, then providing encouragement to try an interim role or other leadership experiences.

Senior officers said networking with peers was the key to their success. Peer networks help participants develop understanding and meaning by talking through difficult issues, gaining new ideas, fortifying strengths, and finding inspiration. Senior officers teach and learn from one another through sharing stories, solving problems, reflecting, and receiving feedback. Trusting relationships lead to reciprocal peer advisement, guiding one another's professional practices, giving and receiving honest feedback, discovering skill gaps, and reflecting with others. Reflecting on these insights often leads to a course re-direction through re-conceptualizing practices or transforming perspectives.

Billett (2002) theorizes workplace pedagogy through three central elements including (a) performing daily work activities, (b) intentionally guiding learning, and (c) guiding learning for transfer. Workplace learning is deemed an effective, viable practice as developing professional mastery requires adapting to the social of the context. The first concept, performing work activities, includes engaging in daily work tasks, stretch projects, observing, and listening. These activities assist in developing professional mastery through daily practice. Issues related to this practice are the lack of awareness and reinforcement of ineffective professional practices or the inaccessibility to knowledge or expertise. In these cases, the second concept, intentionally guiding learning, may occur through interactions and/or guidance from experienced peers, models, coaches, or mentors. These techniques allow employees to develop an understanding of a profession and direct their learning. The final concept, guiding

learning for transfer, includes problem solving, scenario building, and provides ideas for professionals in addressing novel situations. In terms of translating conceptual knowledge to practice, Cervero (1991) offers that building professional knowledge involves acquiring conceptual knowledge and skills through formal preparation courses, then applying the concepts by performing professional work. Professionals continue to build their knowledge base through conferences, journals, workshops, and similar events. The author asserts that developing professional mastery requires the interweaving of conceptual knowledge and practice.

D. A. Kolb (1984) developed an experiential learning theory based on the idea that adults connect prior knowledge and experiences in acquiring and integrating new information. Kolb's model focuses on varying learning preferences including concrete experience (performing a task), observation and reflection (observing a situation), forming abstract concepts (thinking), and testing new situations (planning).

The development of professional mastery occurs through the practice of conceptual knowledge. Illeris (2011) suggest that developing professional skills through applying and practicing conceptual knowledge in the work context is important as it promotes adapting to social expectations. Caffarella and Daffron (2013) offer that professional programs often overlook helping professional students translate and apply conceptual knowledge to the work context. In discussing senior officer mastery, Kools (2010) finds that challenging job assignments, networking with colleagues, and progressive administrative responsibilities are powerful activities in developing administrative leadership skills. Learning as a natural extension of work is substantiated as Merriam et al. (2007) discover that learning in the work context occurs regularly, but

employees' see the phenomenon as addressing daily problems rather than as learning situations. This study highlights how employees may unknowingly engage in building professional mastery through work activities. While senior officers in the current study may not have realized the varying learning processes or activities used in developing mastery in the work context, they develop others through these practices.

Senior officers develop others through daily work activities and shared leadership. The participants teach others by modeling excellence, values, and learning from mistakes. Transparent thinking demonstrates how decisions ripple through the interconnecting systems, resulting in value or unintended consequences. Likewise, in the face of changes, senior officers lead collaborative discussions that fostering meaning making and promote solving problems together. In sharing work projects and working with employees, the participants learn reciprocally while promoting inclusivity through valuing diverse perspectives. Senior officers also develop others by challenging perceptions and status quo thinking. Often conflict is a forum for sharing stories and building mutual understanding, leading to clarity and relational stabilization.

Senior officers said they learn primarily through trial and error experiences. These experiences foster exploring new ways to solve unique problems, anticipating other's needs and behaviors, discovering new possibilities, and building confidence. Other learning activities include listening, observing, taking notes, discussions, learning from experts, experimenting with new ideas, and trying different points of view. The participants use adverse situations as growth experiences.

The literature supports effective development through work activities. In a content analysis, including 99 studies from the Professional Practices literature published

in 2006 – 2007, Webster-Wright (2009) reports that 81% of the articles support traditional practices of delivering content while 19% focus on the critical reflection of learning through practice in the work environment. Theoretically, the studies report that learning is complex, diverse, and situated, but practices continue to focus on content delivery rather than activities that enhance learning. These findings identify an incongruence between the theoretical view of development and delivery practices. For example, Armstrong and Mahmud (2008) offer that a mixture of formal and informal learning experiences in the work context promotes learning job-centered skills, resulting in higher quality learning in that skills develop quicker when employees are aware of the learning goals. However, the authors suggest that experience alone does not lead to high quality learning as one needs conceptual knowledge. In a study of learning activities in an executive management program, Ballou, Bowers, Boyatzis, and D. A. Kolb (1999) report that executives are inspired by informal activities and embrace the concepts of lifelong learning by constructing self-directed learning plans. In using reflection and feedback, the executives said the activity was a catalyst for increasing self-esteem and confidence, clarifying a future direction, and regaining a sense of control.

Self-directing one's learning to continually build professional knowledge is a professional expectation. Therefore, learning how to learn was of high importance to senior officers in developing professional mastery. The motivation for seeking development opportunities include curiosity, interests, and searching for the next thing senior officers need to know. Likewise, the participants said these motivators accelerate learning.

A blend of self-directed learning activities is affirmed through a qualitative study of 600 presidents and provosts, Scott et al. (2008) finds the most effective development strategies occur through a blend of formal and informal activities. Informal activities are self-managed, practice-based, and peer related. Formal activities included workshops, college courses, and degrees. Likewise, Hull and Keim (2007) report that presidents self-determined their learning path in preparing for a senior officer position through formal programs such as the Chair Academy through the Maricopa Community College District, the Executive Leadership Institute offered by the League for Innovation, and the Future Leaders Institute offered by AACC. The presidents describe informal learning activities as job shadowing and mentoring. The presidents generally agree on the value of applying and adapting conceptual knowledge to fit an individual's college environment. Fullan and Scott (2009) offer that formal learning was useful but learning in the work context built professional mastery. Directing one's learning was a key element in the development process. Further, the authors assert that learning administrative leadership requires developing skills in the work context as peer groups are influential and provide valuable feedback.

Several empirical studies support self-directed learning in the work environment through problem solving. As an example, a study of organizations that produce innovations, Garavan, Watson, Carbery, and O'Brien (2015) discover that effective leadership practices are self-directed. Leaders choose development activities to solve immediate or future issues. To ensure the appropriate coverage and depth of leadership topics, the authors recommend leaders first engage in formal learning activities, then purposefully select informal activities to practice the acquired knowledge. Likewise,

through a study focused on succession planning at community colleges, Mateso (2010) suggests planned development is necessary for preparing senior officers. The author underscores the importance of planning by stating that well-prepared leaders are "...vital to address the question of leadership succession because deficient succession planning efforts may subtly weaken the academic quality" (p. 3). An additional finding includes the importance of learning leadership skills within the context to develop meaningful values and applying newly acquired knowledge.

While I agree that self-directed learning in the work environment is vital, it is a leap to indicate that professionals are unaware of the breadth of a profession. It seems rather self-serving, or at least rigid, for learning and development professionals to suggest professionals are unaware of the breadth and requirements of a profession. Likewise, promoting planned learning seems like an ideal view. In practice, learning is messy and usually does not occur in a linear fashion. Often learning presents itself through unexpected situations. Learning through unanticipated situations is evident in the experiences of the senior officers in this study as surprises and problem solving occur daily. Therefore, how does one plan learning when unanticipated problems provide practical learning experiences? Senior officers describe surprises, tough decision-making, and problem-solving as difficult but constitute the most valuable learning experiences. The data from the senior officer study suggests it may not be necessary to plan development in collaborative leadership situations in small rural community colleges. The participants offer that acquiring practical knowledge occurs through interest, curiosity and solving immediate and future needs. By sharing leadership and

solving problems together, learning ripples through the college. Learning processes of senior officers includes gaining conceptual knowledge, practice, reflection, and feedback.

In interviews with 81 employees across 24 industries, E. R. Eddy et al. (2006) finds effective and ineffective interactions, either fostering or impeding an employee's development. Effective development depends on personal and relationship elements including trust, expertise, multiple interactions, mutually initiated relationships, and individual choice. Ineffective development interactions relate to mandates from supervisors. Motivation and engagement factors of self-directed learning are also substantiated. Lohman (2005) reveals seven characteristics that enhance motivation and engagement in informal learning. The characteristics are initiative, self-efficacy, love of learning, interest in the profession, commitment to professional development, a nurturing personality, and an outgoing personality. The author also describes the work context as influencing individual preferences in choosing interactive projects or independent activities. Factors that influence activity choices are access to peers, available time, and funding.

The continuance of the perception that effective development depends on expert delivery of content seems to be wearing thin. The senior officers in the current study believe the best learning content occurs through solving problems and preparing for future trends. Senior officers need practical information that provide solutions for solving operational and emerging problems. It is time to reframe our perceptions of valid learning processes that include a mixture of mainstream and non-mainstream activities.

Senior officers learn reciprocally through interaction in peer groups and by developing employees. Other authors support the reciprocal, unplanned nature of



learning in the work environment. Hanson (2013) asserts that we need to move from isolated development methods to interconnecting learning processes that include the reciprocal nature of personal and organizational discovery and learning. The antecedents reported to drive leadership development include organizational expectations, professional development policies, and how employees engage and find meaning in these activities. Scott et al. (2008) discovers that senior officers prefer development opportunities that foster practical skills to address pressing, daily operational issues specific to higher education. The study's participants express dismay in unchanging development processes and the continuance of content laden development activities, which do not address practical pressing issues.

Senior officers learn extensively by working with peers. In a peer-based workshop with community college faculty, Eisen (2001) reports peer discussions result in integrated learning while individual reflection fosters a change in professional identity. The two factors that facilitate learning are peer groups and trust. The peer-based learning structure allows individual and peer learning to coexist, which creates a diverse learning environment. Faculty report that working closely with a peer is key in facilitating learning and offers a forum for developing trust by talking through issues of shared concern. The primary influences that support transformative learning are critical reflection, active learning, dialogue, and support. The authors report that a small number of participants were not satisfied with the learning event, indicating the inability to accept peer feedback. Reflective learning is affirmed in the literature as well. Tannenbaum and Cerasoli (2013) find reflection improves the effectiveness of a group by nearly 25%. This study considers the effects of reflection and feedback (debriefs) after achieving a

goal. The authors conclude that structured, facilitated debriefs are a quick, effective tool for improving team and individual performance. These findings are important, as facilitating problem solving is a primary responsibility of a senior officer's position.

Senior officers develop others in the spirit of leading through relationships and promoting the rural values including preserving trust, balancing power, valuing the importance and expertise of others, and using knowledge and skills pragmatically and wisely. These actions lead to developing the next generation of senior officers while continuing the rural community college legacy and preserving rural values and thus, assuring a meaningful, quality of life.

### **Summary**

The descriptive concepts of rural legacies, pragmatic competence, and reciprocal development emerged from the themes, leading to the final assertion. The descriptive concepts were affirmed with the literature and presented in this chapter. The concepts suggest that senior officers adapt to the social context and use the unexpected position challenges as opportunities to foster professional growth in developing the next generation of leaders. Rural legacies refers to senior officer's commitment to the rural values of leading through relationships and community centeredness. Pragmatic professionalism describes senior officer's conceptual understanding of the professional competencies of the profession. Reciprocal professional development means senior officers use daily work to foster the professional growth of others and thus, reciprocally develop themselves. Senior officers embody these concepts as their personal values naturally cause them to lead through relationships, use practical strategies in achieving the priorities of the college and community, and incidentally develop new leaders.

### **Implications for Community College Scholars and Governing Bodies**

The findings regarding the importance of personal values in conjunction with conceptual knowledge may inform rural community college governing boards and presidents in understanding minimum qualifications for senior officer positions. The grounded theory map may serve as a guide in developing new senior officers.

An important finding is the discovery of the distinctive difference of primarily leading through relationships at rural community colleges. Senior officers lead through relationships to achieve the priorities of the college and community. This finding may inform rural community college scholars and adds to the body of literature.

### **Implications for Higher Education Professional Programs**

The conceptual knowledge learned in higher education graduate programs serve as a foundation for senior officers in shaping their learning experiences. Findings indicate that when a leader learns how to learn, they self-direct learning and continuously build their professional knowledge. Part of continuously building professional knowledge requires discerning when to gain conceptual or practical knowledge and when practice makes a difference. This discernment is an important skill for professionals to develop.

### **Implications for Professional Organizations**

Findings from this study show that professionalism, as defined by AACC, is of utmost importance. Senior officers said that trust makes or breaks a leader. In addition, rural values include the expectation of building relational trust, which requires the professional characteristics of integrity and authenticity. Therefore, the competency of professionalism should be an explicit, central factor in the competency model. Further, a

competency that may strengthen the AACC model is creativity. Senior officers report that given the complexity of the community college context, creativity is needed to address issues relating to interconnecting federal, state, and college systems, navigating difficult relationships, and developing solutions for emerging issues.

### **Implication for Human Resources Development Professionals**

Individuals learn differently and need to understand their learning process. When senior officers realize their learning process, greater autonomy is perceived and thus self-direct their learning experiences through work activities. By doing the work and becoming aware of information gaps, senior officers discern the best way to acquire and practice new knowledge. Thus, continually building professional mastery. The implication seems simple, but this study shows the process of building mastery as an impactful way to learn and refine professional practices. These contributions add to the literature and can inform learning and development professionals in moving from standardized models of content delivery to guiding professionals in carving their unique learning path in building professional mastery. The finding from this study regarding the value of workplace learning pedagogy in promoting professional mastery may transfer to other professions. This insight may be useful to human resource professionals and scholars as they seek practical, viable options to develop internal successors in the face of the wide-spread projected retirements.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The community college leadership literature focuses on developing competencies for presidential positions, but few studies focus on the development of senior officers. There are several non-empirical articles on developing senior officers. Additional

empirical studies focusing on senior officer development could provide more insights into practices and preferences that lead to meaningful development opportunities.

This study was limited to seven senior officers in one higher education system. Therefore, more studies on this research question need to occur in other rural community college environments. In addition, given the position realities described by senior officers, we need to understand the factors that lead to persistence. Lastly, we need more studies on the work activities that help senior officers develop professional mastery.

### **Final Thoughts**

I set out to understand the competencies and activities that shape the professional practices of senior officers. However, I learned that senior officers primarily work from an ethical and relational perspective. I did not expect to discover the sense of community and dedication to people that each senior officer embodies. Even though I continually study and practice leadership, many practical nuances and perspectives I learned through the study influence my leadership practices. Secondly, but of importance, the value senior officers place on practical conceptual knowledge is insightful. It is interesting to learn how senior officers form relationships to achieve the interconnecting priorities of the community and college. Another insight is that learning seemed to serve as a senior officer's compass in setting their focus, shaping the position, and adapting to environmental changes. Most interesting is understanding the nature of reciprocal learning as senior officers engage in the work with others, including peer networks.

It is humbling, and at the same time exhilarating, to learn new ideas and perspectives. Conducting this study was a pleasure and an honor in looking through the

window of other's experiences and seeking to understand each senior officer's situation and experiences at their rural community college.

## APPENDICES

**Appendix A  
Informed Consent**

**The University of North Dakota  
Consent to Participate in Research**

**TITLE:** Developing Competence: The Learning Experiences of Senior Officers at Rural Community Colleges

**PROJECT DIRECTOR:** Linda L. Thompson

**PHONE:** 218.230.3834

**DEPARTMENT:** Educational Leadership

**STATEMENT OF RESEARCH**

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

You are invited to be in a research study about the learning experiences of senior officers (direct reports of presidents) in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college. You are being invited given your employment as a senior officer.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college. The research is being conducted, as forecasts of unprecedented retirements of senior officers, presidents, and senior faculty are intended just as the nation is expected to have severe workforce shortages. Leading a rural college requires qualified senior officers, however, long term issues exist in attracting employees to rural areas. Therefore, understanding the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college is vital to prepare future successors.

Research questions:

1. What are the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college?



- a. How do senior officers learn the competencies to lead at a rural community college?
- b. What competencies do senior officers learn in order to lead at a rural community college?

### **HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?**

A minimum of six (6) and up to ten (10) senior officers from rural community colleges within the selected Higher Education system will take part in the study. Senior officers must meet the following eligibility criteria to be considered for selection in the study.

1. Currently employed in a rural, associate's degree granting college in the selected Higher Education system,
2. Directly report to a president,
3. Have oversight responsibilities in academic programs and/or student affairs or workforce/economic development
4. Have a minimum of five years of experience in their current position.

I will select the final list of participants in the following order:

1. Most years in their current position in academic and/or student affairs, and The most years employed in the selected Higher Education system.
2. Most years in their current position in workforce or economic development and the most years employed in the selected Higher Education system.

### **HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?**

Your participation in the study is based on three interviews and expected to take about three and one-half (3 ½) hours for up to one (1) year.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?**

You will be asked to participate in one introductory phone interview that will take about a half hour and will be scheduled on a day and time that works for you. During the phone interview, I may ask for your curriculum vitae or access to your LinkedIn™ account to understand your work experiences. Summary notes will be taken during this interview. In addition, you will participate in two separate audio recorded interviews that are two weeks apart. Interviews will be scheduled on a day and time of your choice at a mutually agreed upon location. The second interview will last up to 90 minutes. The third interview will take approximately 30 minutes. I may also take written notes during our interview. You are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer or may end the interview at any time.

## **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?**

There may be some risk from being in this study. The interviews will take time away from your work schedule, which could cause some fatigue. While I don't anticipate risks other than "minimal risk" such as those encountered in the normal course of work, some questions may cause you to recall a memory or experience that causes mental or emotional distress or frustration. If you become overwhelmed or upset by the questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer specific questions. If you would like to talk to someone about distresses that may arise, I will encourage you to seek assistance from a professional. However, the risks are not viewed as being in excess of "minimal risk."

## **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

You may not benefit personally from this study. However, I hope that, in the future, other people may benefit from the study. The anticipated outcomes of the proposed study are insights into the learning experiences of senior officers in developing the competencies to lead at a rural community college, which could inform the future development plans of successors. This data may be beneficial for professional organizations, human resource professionals, higher education scholars, governing boards, presidents, rural community leaders, and those with career aspirations for administrative positions.

## **WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

## **WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?**

You will not be paid for participating in the study.

## **WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?**

The University of North Dakota and the researcher are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the UND Research Development, and Compliance office, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Interviews are confidential and will be conducted at a time and place of your choice. You have the right to review and edit your audio recordings, interview transcripts, and

notes at any time. Any information obtained in this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by assigning codes to all places and people. Individual responses will not be linked to consent forms. The identifying codes and recorded interviews will be kept in two separate, locked containers, each in a different room in my home of which I will be the only person with access. Research data in a paper format will be shredded, and digital audio recordings will be incinerated three (3) years following the completion of the study. If I write a report or article about this study, the study results will be summarized so that you cannot be identified.

### **IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?**

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota. If you decide to leave the study early, please notify me and your data will be destroyed. I will inform you if any significant new findings develop during the study, which may influence your willingness to continue to participate in the study.

### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?**

The researcher conducting this study is Linda L. Thompson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please contact Linda Thompson at 218.230.3834 any day of the week from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. or Dr. Margaret Healy during office hours at 218.251.0025.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279.

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking “Information for Research Participants” on the web site:  
<http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm>

**I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.**

**Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No**

**I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however, I will not be identified.**

**Please initial: \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No**

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent Date

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

#### Interview 1 Questions

1. Brief review of the phone discussion.
2. Tell me about your first few months as a senior officer.
  - a. Were there any surprises?
3. What knowledge and skills are most essential to your success?
4. How did you learn them?
5. When did you first need advice?
6. Where did you go for the advice?
7. Describe an uplifting job experience in your current position.
8. Describe an event that made you feel inadequate in managing it.
9. What advice would you give to your successor?

#### Interview 2 Questions

1. How do you plan your professional development?
  - a. How do you know when it is time to seek new knowledge or skills?
2. When you need to learn something new, how do you go about it?
  - a. Do you have a typical approach?
3. How do you use the professional development workshops and programs offered within the system?
  - a. How do faculty or staff participate?
4. Let's pretend you have retired and your successor was hired from another state. Their background is in K-12. They were a teacher for three years and a principal for two years.
  - a. What are your fears?
  - b. What concerns would you have about their understanding of the position?

5. I understand that in senior officer positions, the learning curve is steep and there is no orientation. I have heard it said that what's needed for the position are good soft skills and the necessary knowledge can be gained through experiencing the work.
  - a. What are your thoughts on this statement?
  
6. Let's say you are promoted to the next level in your college. You will supervise your current position and will help your successor learn the ropes. The successor's former position was as a vice-president in a local business.
  - a. What knowledge and skills can be learned through experience?
  - b. What knowledge or skills do you think should not be learned through trial and error?
    - i. Why?
    - ii. How did you learn these skills?

**Appendix C**  
**Open-Coding: Categories and Codes-for Theme 1**

Theme 1: Senior Officers Navigate the Rural Environment through Trusting Relationships, Honoring Others Expertise, Pragmatism, and Building the Community Together

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Living Rural	
Who you are supersedes what you do	Applied skills are noticeable; credentials are circumstantial
Authenticity builds trust	Know the experiences and interests of others
Value the expertise and importance of others	Long-term relationships and professionalism earn respect
Community rejects aggressive behaviors	Trust is the lynchpin in rural communities
Gentleness and respect carry weight	Use knowledge and skills wisely to influence others
Relationships are the currency of rural context	We trust those we know
Relationships protect and promote credibility	Be a community leader
Rural native as a relational passport	Influence the political system
Relationship building takes time	Trust builds through community engagement
You are a guest	Let others promote your talents
Cultural immersion expected	Questioning local traditions burns trust
Be physically present	Community colleges influence communities
Be sensitive to community needs and priorities	Interdependent relationships
Build trust before suggesting change	Historical identity strongly protected

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Reflecting the Community	
People listen to respectful leaders	Centralized and decentralized systems results in blurred expectations
Shared leadership	Community engagement expected
Relationships and trust are primary	Expected to “just know” what to do and when
Respect others perspectives and time	Ambiguous centralized and decentralized systems
Rigidity unwelcomed	Know community expectations

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### Reflecting the Community

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Self-promotion unwelcomed	Asking for help compromises credibility before trust is earned
Understand challenges of others	Thin line between knowing and asking questions
Understand history and embedded beliefs	Unclear reporting responsibilities
Demonstrate expertise and commitment to group values	Unclear role expectations
We develop new leaders	Respond to needs of community and region
Earn trust before suggesting change	Navigate and lead competitive, collaborative environment
Communication stalemates	Entitled entrenchment causes issues
Competing agendas	Trust makes or breaks you

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### Entry Knowledge and Skills

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Analytic knowledge and skills	Practiced concepts fade to background
Mathematical and financial reasoning	Experiences build from conceptual knowledge
Theoretical knowledge along with relationship skills	Practical knowledge builds by doing the work
Student development theory	Impacts of decisions require experiences
Adult student's models	Curriculum processes
It's dry, but understand budget concepts	Data privacy laws
Communication concepts and purposes	Employment laws
Management concepts and models	Federal and state measures of student success
Collaborative leadership model	HE finance
Management concepts	Supervision skills
Planning concepts	Relationship skills
Operational management	Oral and written communication experience
Facilitation skills	Strategic and operational planning
Time management	Program planning
Madeline Hunter's logic model	Work continually changes, skill gaps are a constant
Leadership models	Right fit for the context matters
Struggle if no management experience	Leading and managing people differ from technical and teaching skills
Progressive leadership experiences necessary	Understand role responsibilities

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## Entry Knowledge and Skills

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Self-trust	Accept help
Self-confidence	Admit mistakes
Be a learner	Apologize
Be accountable to your word	Attitude determines your experiences
Adaptable	Learn from mistakes
Authentic	Know personal boundaries and limits
Consistent	Self-awareness is tough sometimes
Humility	Self-discipline
Inclusive	self-reflection
Positive perspective	Self-reliance
Courageous	Self-responsibility
Don't make excuses	Strong personal commitment
Embrace the unknown	Understand self
Emotional balance	Value diverse views
Focus on strengths	Value others
Future perspective	Patience
Listen, even when it's challenging	Persistence
Mindset of success	Respect others

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**Appendix D**  
**Open-Coding: Categories and Codes for Theme 2**

Theme 2: The Reward of Seeing Lives Change Outweigh the Intensifying Experiences of Senior Officers

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It's Different than it Looks

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Role is service to others	Supervision tougher than it looks
Demanding position	Expected vs. real role surprising
Surprising position realities	Employee and student deaths
Absorb more duties as staff shrinks	Campus safety issues
Ensure the safety of others	Complex facilities and program management processes
Shocking level of responsibility	Multiple layers of approvals take time
Ambiguous reporting responsibilities and deadlines	Complex HE system data
Deadlines loom amid constant distractions and voluminous workload	Frustrating policy constraints
Monitor overwhelming information to find deadlines	Distrust results in drama games
Constant flow of competing, disparate requests	Drama games impede progress
Multiple roles	Competition results in survival politics
Orchestrate and track multiple priorities and projects	Continuous cycle of unfinished work
Vigilance in finding and planning compliances	Accept the position demands constant attention
Budgets are tedious work	Work duties stack up
Surprises occur daily	Repercussions from difficult decisions
Power struggles are difficult and distracting	Layoffs and dismissal conversations are difficult
Entrenchment politics are wearing	Operations management and conflict management are the job
Time-torn between workload and supervision	Continual problem-solving to unique challenges
Supervision is intensive and challenging	Manage and support people
Declining enrollment adjustments require life-changing decisions	Manage multiple personalities in multiple departments
Constant ambiguity	Manage interconnected web of internal and external relationships
Broad scope of undefined duties	Listen to families after tragic situations
No direction, just do it	Employees are a powerful force
No explicit benchmarks of success	Adversity scatters supporters
No orientation	Manage the small things to gain support

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It's Different than it Looks

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<p>Vague responsibilities</p> <p>Intertwined centralized/decentralized systems and blurred expectations</p> <p>Presidential leadership changes results in different duties</p> <p>HE System financial processes and procedures are not easy to figure out</p> <p>Expected to “just know” confusing interrelated systems</p> <p>Ever-changing, blurred boundaries</p> <p>Ambiguity of collective bargaining contract</p> <p>Persistent financial challenges</p> <p>Responsibilities difficult to conceptualize until you take the position</p> <p>Steep learning curve</p> <p>Tough learning experiences impede effectiveness</p> <p>Gladly invest my time for others growth</p>	<p>Ignored issues lead to misinformation and conflict</p> <p>Little things lead to disruptive relationships and mistrust</p> <p>Unintended decision consequences erode trust</p> <p>Unrecognized position power causes relationship imbalances</p> <p>People hang on your every word</p> <p>Silence indicates strained relationships</p> <p>Destructive behaviors are challenging and draining</p> <p>Workforce shortages are frustrating</p> <p>Position is not for the faint of heart</p> <p>Internal development of leaders fosters relational trust</p> <p>Develop others, see where it leads</p>
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It's Worth It

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<p>Desire to help others</p> <p>Mission is to make a difference in lives</p> <p>Embrace community college mission</p> <p>Value technical education</p> <p>Student success means the work is important</p> <p>Build and maintain relationships</p> <p>Orchestrate buy-in and consensus</p> <p>High impact on student success</p> <p>Watching it come together</p> <p>Recognition of leading best practices</p> <p>Effective meant felt good</p> <p>Uncharted territory takes courage</p> <p>Problem-solving leads to streamlined processes</p> <p>Relationships are rewarding</p> <p>Crafting the position</p>	<p>Foster education and economic mobility</p> <p>Worth the strife for student success</p> <p>Higher education partnership development</p> <p>Graduation and staff successes</p> <p>Gratification in completed objectives</p> <p>Staff promotions</p> <p>Others growth and recognition</p> <p>Employees publically recognized</p> <p>Employed and happy students</p> <p>Difficult decisions prove rewarding</p> <p>Rewards outweigh tough times</p> <p>The work has meaning</p> <p>Constant problem-solving overshadows joys</p> <p>Recognizing the joys of the position</p> <p>Serving the community</p>
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It's Worth It

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Conflict management perceived as scary  
work to others

Develop leaders within to preserve  
culture

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**Appendix E**  
**Open-Coding: Categories and Codes for Theme 3**

Theme 3: Senior Officers Develop Leaders through Reciprocal Learning that Accomplishes College Outcomes While Building Trust and Practical Skills

**Building Mastery in the Context**

Model learning from mistakes	Diverse challenges to stretch thinking
Introduce change by adding to others ideas	Curiosity and interest drive development
Model desired behavior	Curiosity accelerates learning
Model excellence and values	Development choices satisfy needs and interests
Transparency teaches impacts of interconnected systems	Next thing I need to know
Building trust through learning the work	Show others the ropes
Learning work together builds trust	Seek mastery of position
Advise and support faculty on concerns and student relationships	Knowledge is foundational, but experience leads to mastery
Responsiveness supports learning	Formal preparation can't cover everything
Empathizing aids development	Education and experience matters, the rest, is learned on the job
Enjoying people builds trust and fosters learning	Knowledge and skills build on each another
Face-to-face fosters learning and trust	Learning is natural part of working
Appreciating others builds expertise and trust	Learn continuously and take notes
Encourage others through their strengths	Practical knowledge is vital
Focus and build on strengths of others	Develop practical skills in context
Learning processes are different for each person	Slow, steady learning builds knowledge and skill
Nurture employee's growth	Helping new leaders helped me learn
Know people; they have real lives	Taught to learn
Promote staff development	Develop others
Spend time orienting new employees	Mentor others
Value and encourage other's talents	Meaningful learning is applying knowledge to solve problems
Value diverse knowledge and experiences	Unexplored challenges call for creative experiments
Value other's expertise	Development, experiences, and soft skills work together

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## Building Mastery in the Context

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Sharing the work	Discernment of decisions learned through experiencing unintended consequences
Navigate leadership changes with others	Discovered lots of problem-solving options through experiences
Allow others to contribute and make decisions	Diverse leadership experiences build expertise
Build inclusivity through work projects	Experience develops decision-making foresight
Build team through individual strengths	Experience teaches how systems interconnect
Know your strengths and rely on other's strengths	Experience teaches to anticipating people's needs, behaviors, and ways of being
Pull together groups for problem-solving	Experiences foster confidence and flexibility
Share leadership and respect other's views	Explore new ideas and try them
Stand back and let others lead	Explore possibilities through questions
Team meetings facilitate information sharing	Fixed my mistakes
We help and teach each other through work tasks	Learn from experts
Recognize leadership talents in employees	Learn through trials, errors, and conflicts
Foster development of others	Panel discussions
Interim role as a "try out"	Stretch projects build skills and connections
Develop new leaders in place	Stretched thinking by trying strategies of other professions
Efficiency and effectiveness require leadership excellence	Talking about a topic
Future leaders lead in current position	Trial and error learning must be grounded in well-developed decision-making skills
Gently develop quiet leaders	Trial and error teaches new and better ways of working
Grow others into the position	Try new points of view
Internal development of leaders based on relationships and trust	Try new points of view
Invite potential leaders to try leadership opportunities	Change is tough, involve employees in decisions
Recognize leadership talents in employees	Conflict is a development opportunity

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## **Building Mastery in the Context**

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Challenge others with credible arguments	Conflict helped me understand the history and others experiences
Challenge status quo thinking	Growth through adverse situations
Challenging conversations bring clarity and stability	Stretch thinking
Learn through conflict	

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## **Learning Reciprocally**

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Consult with others to build a safety net  
Accept and reflect on feedback  
Seek advice from peer group on tough issues  
Benchmark skills against peers  
Connect to peers and learn  
Conversations inspired stretch projects  
Draw on network resources  
Easy to overlook something, collaborate with peers  
Explore options with others  
Fortify strengths through peer groups  
Skill gaps identified through peer conversations  
Honest feedback provides opportunity for course re-direction  
HR dependable guidance and sounding board  
Initiate reflective peer discussions  
Learning communities inspire and nurture  
Networking is the key to success  
Not connecting with networks cause isolation  
Practice with a peer  
Seek clarity with peers on fuzzy compliances  
Seek help to understand system and context  
Find mentors and advisors  
Encouraged by mentors  
Leaders need support  
Supervisor supports and provides feedback on development  
Trust and count on boss  
Trusted, honest advisors are the “canary in the coal mine”

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**Appendix F**  
**Open-Coding: Categories and Codes for Theme 4**

Theme 4: Senior Officers Smooth the Path for Emerging Leaders through Storytelling and Sharing Collective Wisdom.

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Continuing the Legacy

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Actions speak loudly	Authenticity builds trust
Safety threats destabilize the environment	Balance others expectations
Balance communications	Foster respect in challenging conversations
Prove accountability	Address issues promptly
Welcome the expression of frustrations	Build group respect
Build consensus	Care and respect people
Check staff assumptions regularly	Consistent practices and inclusivity foster fairness
Focus and manage time	Establish and communicate expectations
Communicate and stand behind difficult decisions	Face issues and manage conflict head on
End employment of poor performers	Facilitate rumor control
Focus on meaning of work	Follow up on commitments
Judiciously take time to listen to others	Model cultural respect
Influence and set cultural tone	Trust and respect balance power
Manage destructive human behaviors	Give voice to varying views
Preserve relationships thru skillful communication	Ignoring conflict causes damage
Respectful relationships smooth conflict resolution	Lift others up
Share information	Model respect and inclusivity of all viewpoints and communication styles
Stay balanced and guide work	Neutrality builds trust
Build understanding	Facilitate diverse perspectives
Choose arguments wisely	Provide neutral ground to resolve conflicts
Consider what matters to others	Set boundaries of roles and relationships
Base decisions on varying points of view	Stabilize the environment
Discern agendas before taking action	Strong relationships support department's objectives
Discern impacts of compliance requirements	Transparent thinking fosters stability
Discern issue while respecting others	Trust eases impact of decisions
Discern true emergencies	Unify disparate groups
Discern urgency of the issue and timing	Observe and discern before leading change
Focus on solutions not the problem	Follow through builds credibility

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Continuing the Legacy

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Discern the impact of decisions on departments	Model culture of trust and openness
Making decisions without input destroys trust	Building trust takes time
Rash decisions create unintended consequences	Respect is slowly earned
Balance interest of students, the college, and employees	Be present, no technology distractions
Seek multiple points of view	Listen and restate to ensure understanding
Think then make a decision	Listen even when it's hard
Understand how decisions connect	Model excellence
Program decisions impact geographical region	Competing agendas require courageous leadership
Don't dictate	Communicate and stand behind difficult decisions
Understand big picture	Too transparent indicates aggression
Understanding others jobs	Truth check difficult conversations
Disrupting situations destabilize the environment	Unattended cultural threats cause struggles
Aware of perceptions of positional power	Unclear roles threaten co-workers
Navigate issues that impede faculty autonomy	Understand the frustration of others
Negative staff attitudes impact students	Responsiveness builds trust
Communicate carefully	Unresolved issues lead to misinformation and conflict
Resistors are time and energy wasters	Negotiate power struggles wisely
Small things are significant and can cause big disruptions	Understand employee's jobs and struggles
Stress ripples widely	
Too many errors result in lost trust	
Prepare for impending change	
Participate and know employees	

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**Appendix G**  
**Open-Coding: Categories and Codes for Theme 5**

Theme 5: Senior Officers Stabilize the Environment by Balancing Relational and Positional Power through Inclusivity and Transparent Decision-Making.

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Orchestrating Harmony

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Community expectations	Anticipate consequences of trial and error experiences,
Aware of culture	Ask questions and own the position
Learn measures of success	Define role by digging in
Learn HE system language	Figure it out as you go
Make sense of desperate pieces	Play the politics in no win situations
See and facilitate connections	Fill in knowledge and skill gaps on the job
Lead with culture of groups	Find new ways of doing the work
Awareness of interconnected systems	Unintended outcomes cause strained relationships
Everything impacts everything; it's all tied together	Just get started
Reshape knowledge and skills to fit the context	Discern when to take calculated risks
Use strengths to align with others	Shape the position and play with the parts
Aware of challenges and priorities of college	Think broadly
Understand college committees' purposes and values	Value different ways of shaping the position
HE System and collective bargaining	Manage the work
HE System supervision requirements	Manage time
Details of college processes and organization structure	Seek information through relationships
Acknowledge and respond to needs of context	Prioritize
Connect to the bigger picture	Quality vs. quantity work fosters thinking
Observe situations and notice opportunities	Focus on impactful tasks
Budgets and finance processes and impacts on the department	Time is the most precious resource
Know program management and impacts in the geographical region	Balance competing demands
HE system responsibilities	Protect and manage your time
Understand challenges and priorities of college	Organize work wisely

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## Orchestrating Harmony

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<p>Know key players then build support system</p> <p>Revenue generation</p> <p>Curriculum process</p> <p>Understand history</p> <p>Share success and challenging experiences with new leaders</p> <p>Loss of trust incites imbalances</p> <p>Lost trust is loss of confidence in leader</p> <p>Balance - job is difficult, and work is never done</p> <p>Connect with students to reenergize</p> <p>External leadership opportunities give fresh perspective</p> <p>Purposefully count successes</p> <p>Passion, knowledge and experience promote adapting to dynamic nature of the work</p> <p>Recognized personal growth</p> <p>Self-care leads to increased effectiveness</p> <p>Strive for excellence</p> <p>Understand career goals</p> <p>Reflect and give feedback after experiences</p> <p>Learn position with others</p> <p>Build college together</p> <p>Experience and discuss information with others</p> <p>Learn with people and make changes together</p> <p>Seek information and insights from others</p> <p>Observed and learned from previous leaders</p> <p>Turn challenges into opportunities</p>	<p>Organizing information saves time</p> <p>Use a planning or tickler system to manage multiple projects</p> <p>Embrace help</p> <p>Build a support system up front</p> <p>Ask questions and seek information</p> <p>Accept help</p> <p>Know what's important</p> <p>Demonstrate learning from mistakes</p> <p>Develop clear ways to communicate</p> <p>Preserve trust</p> <p>Relationships grease the wheels of progress</p> <p>Rural leadership requires personal and relational trust</p> <p>Know the consequences of decisions</p> <p>Trust is lost by changing things too much</p> <p>Work life balance isn't a luxury; it's necessary to increase effectiveness</p> <p>Interconnected work and reliance on others develop contextual skills</p> <p>Interactions and sharing experiences</p> <p>Position takes time to learn the practices of the college</p> <p>Learn collective bargaining contract administration requires learning together</p> <p>Program development</p> <p>Provide ideas, allow others to shape the outcomes of a project</p> <p>Share wisdom and develop ideas together</p> <p>Practical stories increase understanding</p>
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