CULTIVATING A TASTE FOR CURRICULAR INNOVATION

AT ONE UNIVERSITY

A thesis presented
by
Maureen L. Timmons
to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
2014
Abstract

This study sought to understand whether, and if so how, food can serve as a unifying element in the general education curriculum at a post-secondary institution. Single food-themed courses are slowly emerging in higher education but it is rare to find an institution that has expanded beyond this model into a cross-disciplinarily, food-themed curriculum. Examining the experiences of faculty involved in an innovative food-themed curriculum at one university, and employing the diffusion of innovations theory to provide a framework for the research, this study offers insights into the ways disparate groups come together to create and spread innovative educational change. The participating faculty shared their stories and gave their perceptions about the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the food-themed curriculum. This study finds that while food is potentially a valuable topic to engage students and connect the siloed disciplines that often compose general education, student participation has been limited, and the benefits thus far have been mostly experienced by the faculty in the form of new opportunities for innovative curriculum design, improved pedagogy and collaboration with colleagues. In addition, the current food themed curriculum is currently an overlay to general education and has not been integrated into the curriculum.

Keywords: curricular innovation, food, general education, themed, interdisciplinary, diffusion of innovations, narrative inquiry
Dedication

For as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted to pursue a doctorate degree. Lifelong learning was part of my DNA long before it became an educational buzzword. I’ve always loved to learn despite many challenges and obstacles along the way. The opportunity to merge two enduring passions, food and education has been amazing. Having the opportunity to conduct research that may contribute to the literature emerging in this area on the higher education landscape is an honor especially after being immersed for years in the inspiring works of numerous other scholars.

None of this would have been possible without the unconditional love and support of my family, friends and colleagues. I’ve missed many gatherings and important events during this academic adventure and each occurrence was met with support, compassion and understanding. My Mom, Gail Timmons was always cheering loudest and interested in the daily thesis update despite her battle with cancer over the past two years. Her love has sustained me throughout the process and her pride in what I was doing made every minute worth it. Having Mom (and my brother Matthew) at graduation and the doctoral defense made these two of the most memorable days of my life. Sharing and celebrating important milestones with family and friends is what life’s all about. I’m grateful for everyone who shared the journey with me and I look forward to making up for lost time.
Acknowledgments

The study contributors for this inquiry were critical to this academic adventure. Without their willingness to participate and share their detail rich stories this research would not have been possible. I wish I could name my guide, mentor and host at Narrative University, as his impact on this study is immeasurable. We met through this study and it was as if we had been friends forever. The generous spirit that he gave to this effort was beyond what I could have ever imagined. I only hope that I can emulate his actions and support someone the way he has helped me through this challenging process with such generosity and kindness. He is a true exemplar of an educator- always sharing, learning and teaching. Thank you my foodie friend.

I’m deeply appreciative for my thesis advisor Dr. Leslie Hitch whose early vision and encouragement for combining my passions significantly guided this transformative doctoral journey. Her good humor, patience, support and generosity of time and expertise were instrumental in the completion of this thesis. Dr. Hitch has had a significant impact on my life. A special thank you to the second reader, Dr. Carolyn Bair for her impact on my thesis. Her expertise and input had a significant effect on the thesis especially in the area of general education. Dr. Chris Bosso was kind enough to be the third reader on the advising team. His contributions were kind, clear and concise. In addition, Dr. Bosso’s questions and food expertise were invaluable to this process. I am also thankful for his friendship and generosity. I look forward to continue collaborating through our shared passion for food. The additional support from Dr. Alan Broomhead was critical to the thesis process. His writing expertise, guidance, kindness and excellent questions wrapped
in British humor were a saving grace on many occasions. For his generosity I am eternally grateful.

I am also appreciative to three senior administrators at Northeastern University who generously supported my quest for a doctorate degree. Their formal letters of recommendation for admittance into the Doctorate of Education Program were instrumental in this educational experience. A special thank you to Dr. Philly Mantella, Jack McCarthy and Bill Mallon.

After working at Northeastern for twenty years it is an honor to also be an alumna of this outstanding institution. I am so proud to be a member of the university community and earn a Doctorate of Education degree from Northeastern. This is a dream come true. Now, it’s time to dream a bigger dream…
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 3  
Dedication ......................................................................................................................................... 4  
Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................................... 5  
Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 10  
  Statement of the Problem of Practice .......................................................................................... 10  
  A brief history of general education ......................................................................................... 14  
  External pressures and institutional realities ........................................................................... 15  
A Learned Person – 21st Century Skills ......................................................................................... 17  
Dewey, Food, Education and Inspiration ....................................................................................... 19  
Integrating Food into General Education ....................................................................................... 20  
Problem Significance and Research Justification ........................................................................ 20  
Positionality Statement .................................................................................................................. 23  
Research Question .......................................................................................................................... 23  
Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 23  
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 25  
  Diffusion of Innovations ............................................................................................................ 25  
    Theory rationale ......................................................................................................................... 26  
    History ...................................................................................................................................... 27  
    Diffusion elements and innovation characteristics ............................................................. 29  
    Adopter categories ................................................................................................................... 31  
    Reinvention .............................................................................................................................. 32  
Theory and Practice ....................................................................................................................... 33  
Chapter 3: Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 36  
  Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 36  
    Curricular innovation and reform attempts ....................................................................... 37  
    Integrative and interdisciplinary learning .......................................................................... 40  
General Education ......................................................................................................................... 42  
    Mission alignment ................................................................................................................... 43  
    Resistance to change .............................................................................................................. 45  
    Financial implications ............................................................................................................ 45  
    Innovative curriculum ........................................................................................................... 46  
    Coherence ............................................................................................................................... 46  
Integrating Food into Higher Education– Selected Examples ..................................................... 47  
    Harvard ................................................................................................................................... 50  
    Lebanon Valley College ........................................................................................................... 51  
    Menus of Change ..................................................................................................................... 51  
    The University of California- Berkeley ................................................................................... 52
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Barcelona</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Research Design</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Tradition</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusion of Innovation Influences on Research Design</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Procedure</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Human Subjects</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Report of Research Findings</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative University Backstory</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Introductions</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Perceptions</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from students</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom to Share</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Themes</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program misgivings</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary pedagogies</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty engagement</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support systems</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Closing Thoughts</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings Conclusion</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Discussion of Research Findings</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Themes</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation Challenges</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The power of food as a theme</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The limitations of faculty ownership and shared governance</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-call</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings in Relation to the Literature Review .................................................. 109
  Curricular innovation, reform attempts ......................................................... 110
  Integration in general education ................................................................. 111
  Multi-Disciplinarity ....................................................................................... 111
  Food as a powerful theme .......................................................................... 113
Innovation in the curriculum ........................................................................ 114
  Program misgivings ...................................................................................... 115
Gaps in the Literature .................................................................................... 116
Implications ..................................................................................................... 117
  Additional challenges .................................................................................... 118
  Innovation in the curriculum ....................................................................... 119
  Shared governance ....................................................................................... 120
  The power of food in higher education ...................................................... 120
Future Research ............................................................................................ 121
Conclusions ..................................................................................................... 123
Documents Collected from and Related to Narrative University ............... 125
References ....................................................................................................... 126
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem of Practice

According to Lattuca and Stark (2009), “concerns about what colleges and universities are teaching, how well, assessment and accountability demand from government agencies and funders, the rise of for-profit education, and advances in communications technology have brought curricula and teaching under increased public scrutiny” (p. xiii, xiv). Given their analysis, they believe “the potential for change in post-secondary education is enormous” (Lattuca and Stark, 2009, p. xiv). In many of the 2,774 four year colleges in the United States (nces.ed.gov 2009/10), some thirty percent of the baccalaureate degree is dedicated to the general education program (Boning, 2007; Brint, Proctor, Murphy, Turk-Bicakci and Hanneman, 2009; Harvard Red Book, 1945; Wehlburg, 2010). However, many writers have argued that, the general education curriculum at post-secondary institutions across the country may miss the opportunity to bridge disparate disciplines to create connections, view problems and develop solutions from diverse perspectives (Awbrey, 2005; Boning, 2007; Chavez, 2007; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011; Pittendrigh, 2007; Wehlburg, 2010).

General education is defined by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) as the portion of the curriculum that is common to all students (AAC&U, 2009b, Wehlburg, 2010). It is typically the foundation of post-secondary education and ideally reflects the culture and mission of the institution (Awbrey, 2005, Bok, 2013). When the general education curriculum is misaligned with the values of the
institution it can negatively affect student educational experiences (Awbrey, 2005). According to Ratcliff (1997b) “The educational program of the institution reflects the norms, values, and behavior of the organizational culture” (p.9). The type of general education curriculum chosen and implemented by an institution ideally reflects its mission, values and beliefs about what it means to be an educated person. General education programs across the country vary widely and if they align with the educational vision they present to their internal and external stakeholders this will parallel their educational practices, particularly in the foundational core courses (Nelson Laird, Niskode-Dossett & Kuh, 2009). However, this is not always the case and fragmentation of the general education curriculum may signal to external stakeholders that the values and priorities of the school are not aligned with the institutional mission.

The general education curriculum has been the subject of debate since its establishment in higher education in the United States (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2009a). When Harvard College was established in 1636 it provided a prescribed curriculum to a homogenous group of elite, white males with a unified foundation for their college education (Boning, 2007; Wehlburg, 2010). This unified model continued to serve a similar population until the mid-1800’s (Boning, 2007). In the early 19th century, Yale was among the first to attempt to define general education (Awbrey, 2005). The Yale Report of 1828 argued for the continuation of a prescribed curriculum focused on the classics instead of vocational training for all students. Some have argued that this set general education reform back for decades (Boning, 2007: Kanter, Gamson & London, 1997; Wehlburg, 2010).
The introduction of the free electives curriculum by Harvard’s President Eliot in the mid-19th century to create a more individualized education set in motion another wave of instability in general education. This model also opened a debate about the purpose of general education. The elective system also allowed faculty more time to focus on research; specialization became more prominent and gave more power to the disciplines (Boning, 2007). This combination of events prompted faculty to separate themselves from the institution and concentrate on their disciplines. In addition, the focus on individualized education created fragmentation within academia and cast doubt on the value of a baccalaureate degree (Boning, 2007).

Around the same time, the Morrill Land-Grant of Act of 1862 offered more opportunity for a wider student demographic (e.g. women, African Americans, working class people and immigrants) to attend college (Wehlburg, 2010). This Act required land grant institutions in each state to offer curricula that more closely reflected the changing needs of society during the industrial revolution and increase in the agriculture and mechanic arts sectors by including liberal and practical courses into the curriculum (Boning, 2007). This period in the history of higher education had a significant impact on colleges and universities across the United States. After centuries of a mostly affluent, white male demographic attending college, the rest of the population was offered access to the numerous opportunities provided by higher education (Bok, 2006). The introduction of the G.I. Bill post- World War II resulted in a larger, more diverse population seeking a college degree (Bok, 2006). In the last half of the 20th century the attainment of Bachelor of Arts’ degrees increased from approximately 160,000 to 1.2
million (Bok, 2006). The United States population grew 46% during the same period increased from 150.7 million in 1950 to 281.4 in 2000 (Hobbs and Stoops, 2002).

MacDougall (2000) argued “interdisciplinary curricula can make major contributions to attaining coherence in general education” (p. 239). He identified coherence as the “presence of rich, meaningful, and evolving webs of interconnection between different ideas and bodies of information” (MacDougall, 2000, p. 239) that constitute the multiple disciplines in the general education curriculum. In a traditional general education curriculum the courses are disconnected, or siloed by disciplines (Bok, 2006; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Huber & Hutchings, 2009; Wehlburg, 2010).

Colleges often struggle when attempting to organize and connect their general education curricula. This study seeks to understand whether, and if so how, the theme of food may serve as an interdisciplinary and unifying element in the general education curriculum. To examine this, the researcher asked faculty members involved in the innovative Food Themed Cluster (FTC) at Narrative University (NU) to share their stories and give their perceptions about the rationale, implementation and outcomes of this program. In order to best tell this story the institution, program identifiers and participant identities have been provided with pseudonyms although all stakeholders (i.e. the institution, participants, program identifiers) agreed to fully disclose their identities for this study.

The question that guided this research was: How do faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University perceive its rationale, implementation and outcomes?
A brief history of general education.

This brief history is Ivy League-focused, as these institutions have been exemplars to other schools across the country since they began and continue to act as bellwethers in academia. Harvard and Yale in particular have been at the forefront of general education development and reform throughout history (Boning, 2007; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Wehlburg, 2010). For better or worse, the influence of these two institutions has provided a blueprint of general education for other schools to adopt, modify or ignore for centuries (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

When Charles Eliot was president of Harvard in 1869 he introduced the elective system, offering students choices and creating increased fragmentation in the general education curriculum (Wehlburg, 2010). Then, in 1909 Harvard’s new President Lowell introduced the distribution curriculum framework that offered choices within the general education curriculum to expose students to multiple disciplines. This format was widely adapted across the country in an effort to offer choice within the curriculum. Wehlburg (2010) cited the introduction of the distribution system as the start of the general education movement.

The 1945 Red Book, Harvard’s report on General Education in a Free Society advocated coherence, “a unifying purpose and idea” (Boning, 2007 p.8) to combat fragmentation in general education, noting that general and specialized education were “vital in a free society” (Boning, 2007 p.8). Boning (2007) posits that a coherent general education is defined as one “where students are able to make connections and integrate their knowledge” (p.1). This proposal was not approved at Harvard and yet it still influenced curricular reform at other institutions (Boning, 2007). The Higher Education
Act of 1965 increased diversity in the college-bound population by improving access supported by scholarships to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Over the next decade three quarters of all institutions reduced general education requirements and expanded elective offerings, allowing faculty to focus on their disciplines (Boning, 2007).

In 2007, Harvard again reevaluated general education and “encouraged faculty teaching these courses to create improved learning outcomes by using engaging pedagogies because evidence shows that such pedagogies promote the desired outcomes” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005 as cited in Nelson Laird, et al., 2009 p. 67). The general education curriculum approved by Harvard in 2007 was implemented in the fall of 2009, and the first group of undergraduates experiencing it graduated in 2013. According to Harvard College Dean Hammonds “We have created a curriculum about connecting” (Ireland, 2009, p.2). In addition, task force co-chair Simmons noted, “We don’t think a liberal education is a break from real life – it’s a bridge to real life” (Ireland, 2009, p. 2).

Research confirms that the vast majority of post-secondary institutions employ some form of the distribution model (AAC&U, 2009a). The distribution model is a curricular framework that establishes the requirement for students to select a prescribed number of courses in a collection of disciplines to provide breadth as opposed to the depth offered in the major. The remainder of schools operate with one or a combination of the great books, the same core courses for all, or a thematic curriculum that ideally aligns with the mission and culture of their institution (AAC&U, 2009a).

External pressures and institutional realities.
There is mounting political pressure for institutions to graduate students who are vocationally focused, employable and capable of contributing to society upon degree completion (Mrig, 2013). Employers are among the external stakeholders in partnership with their local institutions that are clamoring for improved educational outcomes (AAC&U, 1995, 2005a, 2007; as cited in Nelson Laird et al., 2009). This is especially true with publicly funded colleges and universities where taxpayers are investing in education and are insisting they receive a return on their investments (Kiley, 2013).

In a recent example of how pressure from external stakeholders can translate into political pressure, the governor of North Carolina, Patrick McCrory proposed legislation to modify the funding of public colleges and universities to reward them for “post-graduate employment rather than enrollment” (Kiley, 2013). McCrory joined a growing contingent of politicians, employers and taxpayers focused on quantifiable educational outcomes with jobs as the result of a college education. The swiftly rising costs of a college education, noted in the College Board’s “Annual Survey of Colleges 2011” (The College Board, 2011), which reports that over 123 institutions charged over $50k per year for tuition, fees, room and board in 2011/12 versus 100 schools that fell into this category just the year before is prompting parents to insist that there be a true value to their students’ post-secondary education and to society as a whole (The College Board, 2011).

External demands for accountability run headlong into institutional realities. Students more often than not are unenthusiastic about their foundational courses and are often anxious to move through them quickly to focus on their chosen disciplines (Boning, 2007; Boyer, 1998; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Wehlburg, 2010). This is due to a variety of
reasons: depending on the criteria established by the institutions, students might have complete, limited or no freedom in their general education choices (Brint, Bray & Horton, 2009, Latzer, 2004). Some students are looking for the path of least resistance as opposed to a cohesive and coherent foundation of courses to build their disciplines upon (Gaff, 2004; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Pittendrigh, 2007; Wehlburg, 2010). Pittendrigh (2007) states that for many students, “the core seemed an arbitrary collection of hurdles, rather than a coherent educational foundation” (p.44).

Hence, there is a conflict between the needs and requirements of the external stakeholders that want college graduates who are employable, have critical thinking skills and are able to synthesize, and the internal stakeholders in the universities. This disconnect between internal and external stakeholders surrounding institutional communities offers numerous opportunities for improvement and alignment. It also leads to conflict about the role of universities (Bok, 2006; Wehlburg, 2010).

A Learned Person – 21st Century Skills

Many higher education administrators, and some faculty, subscribe to the importance of coherence in the general education curriculum at post-secondary institutions as critical to clearly connect baccalaureate foundational courses (Awbrey, 2005; Cronon, 1998; Gaff, 2004). Providing a common set of discussion points across campus can enhance the learning environment and improve educational experiences (Nelson Laird et al., 2009; University of California, 2007; American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2012). In “Only Connect…” The Goals of a Liberal Education, William Cronon (1998) argued that “Being an educated person means being able to make the
connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways” (p.77). In addition, the Yale College Education report (2003) identified the goal of education as the ability to “develop deep skills...[including] the ability to link and integrate frames of reference, creating perceptions that are not available through a single lens” (p.9). If, as stated in most college mission statements, one primary purpose of higher education is to develop an educated person it would seem reasonable that the foundation of the post-secondary experience would integrate opportunities to connect.

In 2002 a collaboration between several education organizations such as the National Education Association and innovative business leaders (e.g. Adobe, Apple, Blackboard, Cisco, Dell, Hewlett Packer, Lego, Microsoft, Oracle, Walt Disney, Verizon, and others) created the Partnership for 21st Century Skills to develop the framework necessary for students to succeed in school, vocations and life (P21.org). In addition to engaging internal stakeholders, this initiative included a 2010 Critical Skills Survey by the American Management Association (AMA) that polled 2,115 of its members. The AMA 2010 survey defined the critical skills as: 1) critical thinking and problem solving; 2) effective communication; 3) collaboration and team building; and 4) creativity and innovation (AMA survey 2010, P.2).

External stakeholders are therefore clamoring for institutions to train students and graduate them with an education that contributes to societal needs (Chavez & Hu Poirier, 2007; Hart Research Associates, 2013; Perez & Howard, 2007; Wehlburg, 2010). The world is interdisciplinary and the ability to make connections across a variety of subjects is a critical skill unlike many other skills, creativity cannot be outsourced (Friedman, 2006; Pink, 2006).
Dewey, Food, Education and Inspiration

To integrate the disciplines, create connections and offer an opportunity to view a topic through multiple lenses, the answer may lie in food (Cargill, 2005). Food, after all is a universal need. Moreover, regardless of background, everyone has cultural attachment to phobias about, ethical or religious restrictions on, and opinions regarding food.

This idea is not new, actually. Early in the twentieth century, American educational philosopher, John Dewey argued for experience in education versus memorization (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). His philosophy inspired numerous educators and researchers to translate Dewey’s teachings into their food-related pedagogy and studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Duster & Waters, 2006; Trubek & Belliveau, 2009). In fact, Dewey used food at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago as the core of the curriculum to engage and educate students (Duster & Waters, 2006). In addition, narrative inquiry researchers Clandinin and Connelly (2000) cite Dewey as a significant influence in their work based on his belief that “examining experience is the key to education” (p. xiii). They also note, “Dewey transforms a commonplace term, experience, in our educators’ language into inquiry term and give us a term that permits better understandings of education life” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). “Following Dewey, our principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.71).

Trubek & Belliveau (2009) are also inspired by Dewey who saw “cooking as the ultimate example of producing knowledge through activity and as a tool for student socialization” (p.16). They believe that when students engage with the topic of food
across the disciplines it aids them in the synthesis and analysis of information (Trubek & Belliveau, 2009).

**Integrating Food into General Education**

The present research study is premised on the notion that food may be a theme and topic to connect the general education curriculum and provide improved institutional learning outcomes. MacDougall (2000) argued that an interdisciplinary cluster in the curriculum can improve both faculty and student engagement in general education. MacDougall (2000) offers hope that institutions and faculty willing to seek new possibilities to create a more connected curriculum will reap the rewards of their efforts.

The topic of food could offer a unifying theme across the general education curriculum. Food affects every aspect of our lives. We engage with it continually. Everyone eats, and therefore food could be deemed a universal language shared by a global citizenry (Cargill, 2005; Chavez & Hu Poirier, 2011; Rozin, 2005; Sommer, Rush & Ingene, 2011; Steel, 2010). By providing an interdisciplinary and holistic experience to enhance synthesis across the general education curriculum, food may offer the opportunity to create the foundation and common educational language for undergraduates.

**Problem Significance and Research Justification**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified an enrollment increase at degree-granting institutions from 2000 – 2010 of 15.3 million to 21.0 million students, a 37 percent increase (NCES, 2014). This is a significant population of students
that could be impacted by infusing connections in the general studies curriculum (Wehlburg, 2010).

Bateman (2010) also cites the Boyer Commission report (1998) noting that while graduates receive a degree for the required credit hours, they lack an understanding of how their courses are linked (Boning, 2007; Chavez, 2007; Huber, Hutchings & Gayle, 2009; Kurland, et al., 2010; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011). These connection skills are critical to the development of synthesis and analysis considered among the essential learning outcomes for twenty-first-century learners (AAC&U, LEAP, 2007; Chavez, 2007; Huber, Hutchings & Gayle, 2009; Kurland, et al., 2010; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011).

The use of food to bring cohesion to the curriculum is spurred by the increasing societal interest in food (Belasco, 2008; Hale, 2010; Miller & Deutsch, 2009; Pollan, 2006, 2009, 2013). Within the last decade, interest in food among the general population has grown rapidly, with two entire cable networks dedicated to food and many others with a portion of the primetime lineup dedicated to food-related programming. This is in addition to books, magazines, social media and blogs. In 2010, Hale dubbed food, “the social network of the ages” noting that the Nielsen research indicates that 70 million unique users visit food-related websites monthly (p.1). In addition, in 2010, over one million households watched Food Network during prime time, up ten percent over the previous year (Hale, 2010). And while book sales in general declined, cookbook sales rose five percent to provide additional data supporting an increased interest for all things food (Hale, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to understand whether, to what extent, and in what ways, food could serve as a unifying element in the general education curriculum. There
are numerous audiences that could benefit from the outcomes of this study. Undergraduates are especially interested in food, where it comes from, how it is grown, how it is prepared and how the employees who grow and prepare their food are cared for (Slow Food, 2013). This level of focus and engagement around the topic of food may provide a unique opportunity for institutions to connect a portion of their general education curriculum thematically through food. Based on the need for coherence in general education identified by the literature, interest in food and potential connective opportunities of a food-themed curriculum, this study seeks to contribute to research on this topic.

A school that has attempted to integrate food into its general education curriculum is Narrative University (NU). The NU Food Themed Cluster, as part of the Themed Course Cluster Network (TCCN) proposes to offer an innovative opportunity to satisfy some of the general distribution requirements through the theme of food across multiple disciplines (NU Network, 2014).

The Themed Course Clusters Network offer an innovative way for students to fulfill some of their general distribution requirements while they examine a topic of interest to them in depth and over several semesters. The networks allow students to examine an idea, theme, or topic by taking related courses in several different disciplines. This approach helps students understand the complexity of big issues. By integrating the perspectives of many different disciplines, students arrive at a more complete and sophisticated picture of those issues (NU Network, 2014).
Positionality Statement

As the Director of Dining Services at my institution and a student in the Doctor of Education program, I am situated at the intersection of theory and practice with an opportunity to offer support to higher education institutions interested in infusing food into the curriculum. I approach this research problem through the lens of a food service professional with twenty years of experience at an elite private institution in addition to a lifelong passion for all topics surrounding food and education. As a doctoral student and a scholar-practitioner, my focus is on the incorporation of food into the general education curriculum at post-secondary institutions, which has the potential to improve learning outcomes for students. My interest in the theme of food as a means to unify the general education curriculum is based on my own experiences in the food service industry and is further informed by what is happening across the U.S. and around the world, as food becomes a more important topic beyond daily sustenance.

Research Question

The question that this study seeks to answer is: How do faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University perceive its rationale, implementation and outcomes?

Summary

The purpose of this research was to study whether, to what extent and in what ways the use of food as a unifying theme at a post-secondary institution may connect the multiple disciplines included in the general education curriculum. Intentionally
connecting one third of the baccalaureate curriculum that focuses on general education may have a significant impact on undergraduate student outcomes if there was a compelling theme to integrate the disciplines that collectively represent general education. Food is a theme that may unify the curriculum in this way. However, the research on infusing thematically food into the general education curriculum is sparse.

This inquiry examined the faculty participants’ perceptions about the rationale, implementation, and outcomes of the Food Themed Clusters at Narrative University to determine whether it might provide a model that could be adopted by other post-secondary institutions.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of Innovations

The question that this study seeks to answer is: How do faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University perceive its rationale, implementation and outcomes? This question focuses the study on how the innovative curriculum was introduced, how it was carried out, and its consequences at the particular institution chosen as the research site. Hence, the theoretical framework needs to be one that can shed light on how innovations spread or don’t spread. Diffusion of innovations theory (DoI) aligns with the components of this inquiry and was a good model for the research exploration.

Sociologist E.M. Rogers (2003) is credited as the originator of Diffusion of Innovations theory. Rogers (2003) defines diffusion as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (p.35). Rogers describes a social system as “a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal” (p. 23). While numerous disciplines have employed the Rogers’ theory, because higher education institutions are one of the most impactful social systems in society (Pervin, 1967), this theory aligns particularly well with this study’s problem of practice. Pervin (1967), argued that, “students and colleges, at least the better of them, reflect the virtues and ills of our society” (p. 317). When contemplating any change or reform in higher education, Pervin (1967) suggests that stakeholders be integrated to address the common goal of the
social system (Rogers, 2003). Viewing an institution as social system aids in understanding the diffusion of innovations theory and why higher education is an ideal model to study.

**Theory rationale.**

The rationale for choosing Diffusion of Innovation (DoI) theory is the quest to integrate innovation in every aspect of our lives (i.e. personal, company, and institution). Rogers (2003) defines innovation as “an idea or object perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (p.36). Innovation is one of the buzzwords of the 21st century and while many institutions proclaim to be “innovative” there is always opportunity for improvement (Kirschner, 2012, p. 2). Understanding how innovations are introduced and spread (or not) at post-secondary institutions may be beneficial to stakeholders. The DoI model provided a lens to examine how the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) at Narrative University (NU) was diffused and the details that surrounded that initiative.

According to Rogers (2003), DoI research traditions include: Anthropology, General, Early and Rural Sociology, Education, Public Health and Medical Sociology, Communication, Marketing and Management, Geography, Economics, Public Administration, Political Science, Psychology, Industrial Engineering and Statistics. “DoI’s multidisciplinary nature cuts across the disciplines…to bridge these divergent disciplines and methodologies…and helps illuminate processes” (Rogers, 2003, p.103/104). This theoretical framework aided in understanding how curricular change diffused to and through the research site. As identified in the previous chapter, general education reform has experienced many challenges throughout history. DoI theory
supported the exploration of how the NU Food Themed Cluster adapted a portion of general education to connect it thematically through the topic of food.

**History.**

While Rogers is the theorist most closely associated with DoI theory, the origins of this model are European (Rogers, 2003). Frenchman Gabriel Tarde’s (1903) Law of Imitation inspired innovation adoption and was the first to identify the S-shaped curve (s-curve) as the cornerstone of his early version of the DoI theory (Smith, 2013). The s-curve measures how the innovation is embraced by the adopter categories (i.e. innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards) over time (Rogers, 2003, p.22). The purpose of Tarde’s observations were to “learn why, given one hundred innovations conceived at the same time… ten will spread and ninety will be forgotten (Rogers, 2003, p.41).” To Tarde, “DoI theory was a basic and fundamental explanation of human behavior change: Invention and imitation are, as we know, the elementary social acts” (Rogers, 2003, p.41). Tarde’s work influenced DoI theory while using different words to describe similar processes, such as ‘imitation’ for ‘adoption.’

Another sociologist and peer of Tarde in Germany was Georg Simmel. Both were engaged with various aspects of DoI theory around the turn of the 20th century. Simmel is recognized as the first academic to be identified as a sociologist, who taught classes in that discipline, according to Rogers (2003). As an outlier himself Simmel theorized that this perspective offered an alternative view of an organization that could provide benefits during diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003). Malcolm Gladwell (2008), author of *Outliers: the Story of Success*, defines the term ‘outliers’ as “something that is situated
away from or classed differently from a main or related body” (p. 3). Outsiders were more easily able to innovate without the pressures of group conformity and general resistance to change. Anthropologists in the United States learned about the concept of diffusion from their European colleagues in the early 1920’s and began to incorporate it into their research (Rogers, 2003). While early diffusionists subscribed to a fairly narrow view that “all social change could be explained by diffusion alone…the dominant viewpoint now is that social change is caused by both invention and diffusion, which usually occurs sequentially” (Rogers, 2003, p.43).

Ironically, while many associate DoI theories with technology-related research, the most influential study employing DoI was from the field of agriculture when Ryan and Gross (1943) studied how farmers adopted hybrid seed corn in Iowa. In 1928, agricultural scientists at a land grant institution, Iowa State University, introduced the hybrid corn they developed to Iowa farmers (Rogers, 2003). According to Rogers (2003), their study “is the most influential diffusion study of all time” (p.31). In addition, the Ryan and Gross (1943) study developed the methodological blueprint for diffusion researchers. Their “retrospective survey interviews in which adopters of an innovation are asked when they adopted, where or from whom they obtained information about the innovation, and the consequences of adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p. 33) is still the benchmark. Their time-tested methodology informs the research design and provides a lens for the present study.

Ryan and Gross’ (1943) influential study introduced concepts that are applicable to research in other fields, such as communication channels, rate of adoption, and time. Such concepts are helpful in framing the present study in the field of education. Also, the
general resistance to change addressed in DoI is especially applicable to higher education (Awbrey, 2005; Kurland, 2010 et al.; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011; Mrig, 2013). The use of the theoretical framework offers the opportunity to learn about resistance in an educational setting and understand how, when and with whom innovation is diffused, stalled or halted (Ryan & Gross, 1943).

**Diffusion elements and innovation characteristics.**

Rogers (2003) identifies four main elements for the diffusion of new ideas: The first element, *innovation*, is an idea (theory or practice) considered new and presented for adoption. The characteristics and the members of the social system determine the rate of adoption of an innovation where it is being introduced. These characteristics identified by Rogers (2003) include “the degree to which an innovation: is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes (i.e. relative advantage); is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters (i.e. compatibility); is perceived as difficult to understand and use (complexity); may be experimented with on a limited basis (i.e. trialability) and results are observable by others (i.e. observability)” (pp. 15-16). These concepts offer a deeper understanding of the elements that impact the adoption of an innovation and contribute to the research design of the present study. Specifically, they provide a valuable lens through which to view all field texts that arose from the research at Narrative University.

The second element is *communication*. The channels by which information is shared are critical to the spread of ideas. Rogers (2003) cites heterophily or homophily as two ways that humans engage. In a heterophilious network, communication occurs among people or a group with less in common, while in a homophilious network,
communication transpires between like-minded individuals. Although most communication takes place amid individuals with similar characteristics, innovation is most apt to occur among more dissimilar people and can often complicate the communication system (Rogers, 2003).

Third, the adoption of innovations is closely tied to time. This component refers to how long it takes for people or organizations to learn of the innovation, navigate the decision process and adopt or reject the idea.

Rogers (2003) identifies five stages in the innovation-decision process:

a) “Knowledge - commences when an individual…[or group] is exposed to an innovation’s existence and gains an understanding of how it functions; b) persuasion – the individual forms a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation; c) decision- when an individual…[or group] engages in activities that lead to a choice to adopt or reject an innovation; d) implementation- when an individual…[or group] puts an innovation to use; and e) confirmation – when an individual seeks reinforcement of an innovation-decision already made, but he or she may reverse this previous decision if exposed to conflicting messages about the innovation ” (p. 169).

As part of the implementation stage, adoption in DoI does not necessarily mean the exact innovation in the precise format in which it was originally presented. Reinvention, a key concept of DoI, is the process of adapting an innovation to suit the needs those involved in the change process.
Finally, the *rate* at which innovations are adopted is closely connected to the social systems involved in the process. Rogers (2003) defines a social system as “a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal” (p.23).

**Adopter categories.**

Adopter categories help organize the knowledge gained when employing the DoI theory by sorting participants with similar characteristics into similar groupings. This methodology provides clarity and allows researchers to better understand diffusion and adoption. Within social systems, Rogers (2003) identifies five adopter categories, which he defines them as “the classifications of members of a social system on the basis of innovativeness” (p. 22).

- **Innovators** – “venturesomeness is almost an obsession with innovators. Their interest in new ideas leads them out of their local circle of peer networks and into more cosmopolite social relationships” (Rogers, 2003, p. 283).
- **Early adopters** – respect, “this category more than any other, has the highest degree of opinion leadership in most systems…and are localites” (Rogers, 2003, p. 283)
- **Early majority** – deliberate “this group adopts new ideas just before the average member of a system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 284).
- **Late majority** – skeptical types “adopt new ideas just after the average member of a system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 284).
- **Laggards** – traditional – “the last in a social system to adopt an innovation” (Rogers, 2003, p. 284).
Limitations.

While there are many positive attributes associated with the diffusion of innovations theory, it also has limitations. The drawbacks include: 1) pro-innovation bias (i.e. assuming all innovations are good, and should be adopted quickly and as presented); 2) individual blame-bias (i.e. blaming the individual person versus the system they are a part of for not adopting the innovation); 3) recall problem (i.e. memories and their timing may be unreliable, the time an innovation takes to diffuse is critical to the process and the participant re-call may imprecise); 4) issue of equality (i.e., innovation often widens the socioeconomic gaps as ideas are adopted) (Rogers, 2003). While conducting the study at NU it was important to be cognizant of these limitations and associated biases.

As an example, the most prominent limitations in this study were a pro-innovation bias and recall problems. The majority of participants were enthused by the opportunities connected to the innovative Food Themed Cluster. However, during this study one participant shared a story of being cajoled by colleagues for questioning the merits of the new curriculum and not fully accepting the new initiatives at face value. In addition, recall of specific dates, innovation and diffusion details were often challenging for participants to remember.

Reinvention.

DoI takes an approach that is radically different from most other theories of change. Instead of focusing on persuading individuals to change, it sees change as being primarily about evolution or “reinvention” of products and behaviors so they become better fits for the needs of individuals and groups (Robinson, 2009). In DoI it is not the people who change, but the innovations themselves that change, are adopted/adapted and
This is an important point and is well suited to the wide variety of institutions and individuals that could potentially adopt an innovation. Re-invention defined by Rogers (2003) is the “degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by a user in the process of adoption and implementation” (p.17). This idea of “reinvention” was not integrated into the DoI theoretical frame or measured until the 1970’s (Rogers, 2003).

DoI addresses and acknowledges the struggles with change and offers insights to inform the challenges identified in the literature review (see Chapter 3) for higher education faculty and students with general education (Awbrey, 2005; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Gaff, 2004; Mirabella & Balkin, 2011; Pittendrigh, 2007). The adopter categories identified by Rogers (2003) speak to the rationale for some of the resistance and how to study and understand it when engaging in diffusion of innovations research.

**Theory and Practice**

Myers (2011) asked the question, “What obstacles slow the translation of new knowledge into systemic intervention and how can we increase the rate of diffusion (p.252)?” To answer, Myers (2011) focused on the diffusion of reform in general education specifically and noted a gap between theory development and practice in higher education. According to Myers (2011), critics and educators agree that students are becoming too specialized too early, too enamored with credentialing, and too instrumentally driven in identifying the purpose of education. Yet these same educators “continue replicating the structures that not only produced this trend, but are accelerating it at a breathtaking pace” (Myers, 2011, p.252). One of the primary contributing factors is the divide that exists between those who create theory and practitioners (Myers, 2011).
Understanding how innovations of curricula in general education spread from the various stakeholders could provide valuable information to all involved. Myers’ study may offer beneficial insights for other post-secondary institutions in their general education programs that may have challenges with a fragmented curriculum (Bok, 2006; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Mrig, 2013; Wehlburg, 2010).

The diffusion of innovations model is a good fit for this thesis as it provides the theoretical scaffolding to support the problem of practice and narrative inquiry methodology chosen to explore this research study. Kirschner’s (2012) summary of five higher education books written by academic insiders in the past four years concludes, academic culture creates challenges for innovation and reform. Further support is provided to highlight the urgency for higher education institutions to become more innovative with additional evidence to motivate higher education institutions:

Once number one in college degrees held by 25-34 year olds, by 2010 the United States was 12th among 36 developed nations. Graduation rates…lag; tuitions rise while the unemployment rate is at a record high for recent…graduates, $1-trillion in student debt—and then our graduates enter the worst job market in years. (Kirschner, 2012, p. 4.)

The problem of practice for this study employed the diffusion of innovations theory to illuminate the various components that helped understand how innovations spread (or do not). This theoretical framework guided the research design by emulating early DOI studies by Ryan and Gross (1943) that chose retrospective surveys to study the diffusion of innovation in their historical inquiry. To do so, this study examines the case of Narrative University, where a food-centric curriculum – The Food Themed Cluster—
was established in 2011. NU respondents participated in retrospective surveys to share their narratives regarding their perspectives of the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the Food Themed Cluster to date. One of the reasons that NU chose to enhance its offerings were identified by external consultants who found that the “current curriculum lacked innovation” (Dr. Physics I, p.5). This rationale combined with declining enrollments and a need for differentiation from peer institutions created the motivation and resources necessary to introduce a menu of new curricular initiatives to more intentionally connect theory and practice for their students.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

Zayed (2012) observes: The “persistence of general education as a topic of
discussion and debate borders on perennial” (p. 143). The research confirms the on-going
reform challenges in the general education curriculum at post-secondary institutions. The
literature review that follows is categorized into three threads related to general education
at post-secondary institutions: 1) curricular innovation and reform attempts; 2)
integration; and 3) food as a unifying theme. In addition, the literature review identifies
challenges in general education that are rooted in the history of higher education,
academic culture, mission alignment, student and faculty resistance, and coherence
(Awbrey, 2005; Boning, 2007; Bourke, Bray & Horton, 2009; Nelson Laird et al., 2009;
Wehlburg, 2010).

First, there is a review of the studies of innovation and reform in general
education curricula then follows an investigation of how a common theme has been used
to try and unify general education curricula finally, there is a review of the place of food
in the curriculum. Although each of these areas has been studied to varying degrees
separately, there is minimal evidence of the combination of these elements in one study.
The present study seeks to make a contribution to the research literature in this area.

There is a deficit of empirical literature on a food-themed general education
curriculum. Even the literature on single course is limited and has been supplemented
with current curricular efforts that have not yet appeared in peer-reviewed journals. The
literature shares what is currently available with the goal of contributing to the gaps in
research on this topic.
Curricular innovation and reform attempts.

A review of innovative models spanned general education reform and unseen opportunities, Mrig (2013); promising models (AAC&U, 2009); integrative learning: opportunities to connect (The Carnegie Foundation for Advancement in Teaching, 2009), and winning by degrees (Auguste et al., 2010). There were also several institutions identified in The Innovative University (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Each of these publications identified colleges and universities illustrating innovative general education curricula that aligned with the mission and learning outcomes of their respective institutions. This review highlights differentiating elements unique to each institution and their general education curricula:

**Portland State University** (PSU) – this general education curriculum is recognized as a good example of reform and is regularly highlighted in journal articles and surveys, and by educational associations. In 1994, PSU implemented a new general education curriculum. The primary objectives of this reform effort were to create a coherent and integrated general education curriculum to “enable graduates to develop the attitudes and skills needed to pursue lifelong learning” (General Education: Promising Models, AAC&U, 2009). The prescribed program at PSU includes a four-year integrated curriculum with interdisciplinary courses and a choice of themes to help connect general education (Mrig, 2013). PSU’s “rigorous and regular programmatic assessment is what made it possible…to roll out a fully interdisciplinary program articulated across four years” (Mrig, 2013, p.33). This university employs electronic portfolios to “collect and evaluate evidence of student progress towards developing metacognitive skills (e.g. critical thinking and social responsibility)” (Mrig, 2013, p. 33). PSU is touted as “an
institution that combined a public mission, large enrollments, and a commitment to innovation in general education” (Henscheid, O’Rourke and Williams, 2009, p. 282).

**University of South Carolina’s (USC)** – USC’s reform process invited input for internal and external stakeholders (i.e. faculty, staff, students, employers, graduate schools) to understand “what students needed from the undergraduate experience in order to succeed upon completion” (Mrig, 2013, p. 31). The “Carolina Core” reevaluated its learning outcomes to confirm relevancy and added two “twenty-first-century outcomes (i.e. information literacy and social responsibility). This model is cited as a cost-efficient option as the university did not modify the number of courses or professors teaching but instead focused on “a mental expectation around outcomes” (Mrig, 2013, p. 31). USC argued that the most important thing was “changing what students are expected to learn in each class” (Mrig, 2013, p.31).

**University of Maryland at College Park** – I-Series (i.e. imagination, inspiration and innovation) “organized around provocative questions and propositions” (Berrett, 2012, p.2). These “i-courses” include the “meaty stuff of a discipline—its debates, approaches to problems, and ways of viewing the world—to freshmen and sophomores, rather than reserving such intellectual pleasures for upperclassmen and graduate students; many are taught by senior faculty” (Berrett, 2012, p.2).

**University of Chicago** – was one of the early adopters to create an interdisciplinary curriculum in the early 1900’s and has continually been identified as an educational leader especially within general education. The University of Chicago “Core” is identified on the Admissions Office website as a “lifelong experience – being part of a dialogue that encourages conversations…across the disciplines.” The institutional
website also distinguishes its general education curriculum as “A vital tenet of the Core is that interdisciplinary collaboration can illuminate complex problems and that this exploration is best achieved when students are well versed in multiple disciplines.”

**Brigham Young University – Idaho (BYU-I)** This institution is regularly recognized as a benchmark for innovation (Auguste, Cota, Jayaram, & Laboissiere, 2010; Christensen & Eyring, 2011). BYU-I created a general education program named “Foundations,” based on inspiration and lessons learned in the reform efforts of the Harvard Core by presidents: Lowell, Conant, Bok and Summers, who each prioritized the general curriculum during their tenure (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). The McKinsey report, Winning by Degrees (2010) also illuminates the unique innovations of BYU-I as one of eight institutions highlighted in this research study (Auguste et al., 2010). In 2005, Kim Clark, former dean of Harvard Business School and triple alumnus of Harvard accepted the position as president of BYU-I (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Clark identified three goals for the institution: 1) improve the quality of all student experiences; 2) make BYU-I available to more students; and 3) lower the cost of education (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

In addition, Clark agreed with numerous others (Awbrey, 2005; Huber and Hutchings, 2009; Wehlburg, 2010) “too much breadth in the choice of courses and lack of integration robs most GE [general education] programs of their intellectual and social value” (Christensen & Eyring, 2011, p. 263). To counter the lack of integration and fragmentation, Clark collaborated with faculty to create a common instructional pedagogy called the “learning model” that is student-focused to “prepare, teach one another, and ponder and prove” (Christensen & Eyring, 2011, p. 260). While this new
campus-wide model was not adopted quickly or seamlessly, eventually BYU-I created an assessment system for faculty and students to review the effectiveness of this model and offer opportunities for continuous improvement and support (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Each institution cited as an innovative curricular exemplar has developed a program that fits the unique needs of its students, and reflects its mission. In addition, each institution has created explicit institutional and curricular learning outcomes. Regular assessments and a supportive infrastructure supports continual review and improvements in the curriculum (Auguste et al., 2010; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Mrig, 2013).

Since Harvard was founded, it has been identified as an educational leader (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Nelson Laird et al., 2009). However, it too, has had numerous challenges attempting to reform the general education curriculum in alignment with the institution’s mission and learning outcomes (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Nelson Laird, Niskode-Dossett & Kuh (2009) noted that, “Harvard University, for better or worse is seen as a bellwether of sorts for general education” (p. 67). For centuries, institutions have attempted to emulate Harvard yet few have the resources or history to accomplish this.

**Integrative and interdisciplinary learning.**

While a single, agreed upon definition of general education is missing, Klein (2005) offers a definition of ‘integrative learning’ as a broad term encompassing “structure, strategies and activities that bridge divides [between]… general education and
the major, introductory and advanced levels, experience inside and outside the classroom, theory and practice, and disciplines and fields” (p.8). Interdisciplinary studies are described as “a subset of integrative learning that fosters connections among disciplines and interdisciplinary fields (Klein, 2005, p.8).

In 2004, the AAC&U and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching released a joint statement on Integrative Learning. According to the two organizations, “Fostering student’s abilities to integrate learning-across courses, over time, and between campus and community life – is one of the most important goals and challenges of higher education… the cornerstone of a twenty-first century education” (Huber & Hutchings, 2004, p. 13). They align with numerous other researchers (Bok, 2006; Fuess, 2011; Wehlburg, 2010) who identify the disjointed general education curriculum as an area of opportunity in the baccalaureate degree and recommend employing “integrative learning to… help undergraduates put pieces together and develop habits of the mind that prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of personal, professional and civic life (Huber & Hutchings, 2004, p. 13).

Interdisciplinary themes were recommended as a component of general education reform seeking to create integrative learning to develop a framework for students to connect across the curriculum (Huber & Hutchings, 2004; Lazerson, 2010). Infusing these practices in the foundational courses of the baccalaureate degree may aid in the balance of degree attainment (Huber & Hutchings, 2004). Bok (2006) suggests that integrative learning may help counter the specialization of the major by proposing creative ways to look across the different problems that confront our society.
General Education

The Yale Report of 1828 was cited as the cornerstone of the great general education debate and initiated a renewed focus on providing students with the knowledge and skills to become an educated person (Boning, 2007). Although the definition of what an ‘educated person’ is does not have a singular meaning across institutions, Cronon (1998) stated that “an educated person means being able to make the connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways” (p. 77). Cronon (1998) lists ten items to answer the question, “what is a liberally educated person?” and his conclusion is that it is someone who is able to make connections.

Gaff (2004) cited the Association of American Colleges & Universities (2004a) as another set of criteria for a liberally educated person: “students should acquire the following attributes: breadth of knowledge and capacity for lifelong learning; abilities to analyze, communicate, and integrate ideas; and effectiveness in dealing with values, relating to diverse individuals, and developing as individuals” (p. 1).

The general education deliberation continues with General Education: Unseen Opportunities, a recent study of 300 institutions where 80% of those surveyed are either currently reforming or recently reformed their curricula (Mrig, 2013). Based on this survey of college presidents and academic leaders, Mrig (2013) recommends that ideally “an institution would design and manage its general education curriculum in such a way as to achieve three key outcomes: increased persistence, competitive and financial advantages, improved quality and employability” (p. 11). Mrig (2013) reports that instead, in their general education reform efforts, leaders often “miss out on opportunities to
position their institutions more competitively and ultimately better serve their mission” (p.11).

**Mission alignment.**

The majority of literature reviewed on general education examined three things: 1) the necessity for coherence; 2) a general resistance to change; and 3) the importance of the role of organizational culture in any proposed modifications (Awbrey, 2005; Gaff; 2004; Mirabella, 2011; Philpott & Strange, 2003; Pittendrigh, 2007). When considering cultural or curricular change, Briggs (2007) emphasized that collaboration is critical to continuous improvement in academia. This idea is especially important for any work within the general education curriculum to engage all represented disciplines in enhancing educational outcomes holistically (Briggs, 2007). Levander and Mikkola (2009) performed a core curriculum analysis that supported the importance of cooperation among the faculty to collectively focus on an educational experience that prioritizes teaching and research.

Nelson Laird et al., 2009 cite general education courses as those that collectively aid in the development of synthesis and critical thinking to support life-long learning in a knowledge economy. In their study on creating an interdisciplinary curriculum, Kurland et al. (2010) provided an example of blurring disciplinary boundaries using sustainability thematically much like the food lens in the present study. Yet while the authors planned for an interdisciplinary (i.e. connections among the disciplines) course, the results more closely resembled a multidisciplinary (i.e. subjects taught separately around a theme or topic, not integrated) effort from the professor’s perspective and learning outcomes
experienced by the students. The courses were taught in a variety of disciplines and yet they were still siloed and students did not experience the connections associated with interdisciplinary pedagogy. For the next iteration of this course, the authors recommended a true interdisciplinary framework to gain a greater synthesis across the disciplines employing the theme of sustainability (Kurland, et al., 2010).

The literature is in agreement that there are opportunities for significant improvements in the general education curriculum at post–secondary institutions in the United States (American Council Trustees and Alumni, 2012; Boning, 2007; Boyer, 1998; Gamson, et al, 1997; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011). In 1998, the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University presented a definitive report on the state of post-secondary education and suggested ideas for improvements. This oft-cited report (Boning, 2007; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011; Pittendrigh, 2007; Wehlburg, 2010) suggested interventions that research institutions could use to improve their undergraduate education. These recommendations included the need to focus on teaching undergraduates in addition to concentrating on research. In other words, according to the Boyer Report (1998), while research universities are charged with educating the country’s leaders, they are more focused on research than learning outcomes for undergraduates, and this contributes to the fragmentation of the general education curriculum.

Derek Bok, former president of Harvard and author of *Our Underachieving Colleges* (2006) summarized some of the primary criticisms of higher education: a lack of clear purpose for general education, fragmented general education, colleges providing job training instead of lifelong learning skills, faculty more interested in research than
teaching and significant barriers between theory and practice. In spite of the numerous disconnects surrounding general education, Bok (2006) argued that there are some indications that a small number of faculty are challenging the status quo to focus on teaching in the general education curriculum. Ultimately, it is the faculty who are responsible for the content and quality of general education and how they connect it, or don’t (Bok, 2006; Boning, 2007; Kanter, Gamson & London, 2007; Nelson Laird et al., 2009).

**Resistance to change.**

Philpott and Strange (2003) presented a lens through which to study any proposed changes to general education. Their analysis offered insight into the inner workings of faculty and staff cultures as they attempted to collaborate on shared initiatives (Philpott & Strange, 2003). In this case it was a living learning community on campus being built to offer a more holistic educational experience, and yet faculty and staff were deeply challenged by the reality of having to collaborate on such a project regardless of its contributions to learning outcomes. This study provided a forewarning that any attempt to modify curricular, cultural or organizational aspects of general education would require a deep understanding of the academic culture and its general resistance to change (Philpott & Strange, 2003).

**Financial implications.**

One item that did not show up in the research on general education was concern about the financial implications of inefficient general education programs (Mrig, 2013). According to the General Education: Unseen Opportunities survey, respondents were
unsure about the costs and financial impact of general education to the institution (Mrig, 2013). Their findings further indicate that an inefficient (i.e. too many courses, low participation) general education program contributes to the rising costs of college (Mrig, 2013). The financial impact of an inefficient and/or ineffective (i.e. fragmented) general education curriculum provides additional support and justification for this study.

**Innovative curriculum.**

An innovative curriculum may offer differentiation in the higher education market as a way to attract students and thereby address declining enrollments, and it may also reduce pressure from external stakeholders (Anonymous, 2013). These stakeholders are advocating for institutions to produce graduates that are able to make connections and are employable (Mrig, 2013). Moody’s Investor’s Service rated its 2013 outlook for all higher education sectors “negative” in January and its findings support the General Education survey (Moody’s HE outlook, 2013). Previously, Moody’s had a “stable outlook for these leading [market-leading, research-driven] institutions and a negative outlook for the rest of the sector since 2009” (Moody’s HE outlook, 2013, p.1). Moody’s (2013) further argues that “To continue to attract students, higher-ed leaders will need to both: create distinctive and value-added programs plus minimize costs, passing those savings along to students” (p.13). Moody’s conclusion aligns with the findings of Mrig’s survey (2013).

**Coherence.**
According to Boning (2007), “Today, a coherent general education program can be defined as one where students are able to make connections and integrate their knowledge” (p.1) both in and outside of the classroom. Employers agree with the necessity for students to be able to make connections across the disciplines that make up the general education curriculum. This was confirmed recently by Hart Research Associates (2013) in a survey of employers on behalf of The Association of American Colleges and Universities. One of the primary findings of the report was: “Employers recognize capacities that cut across majors as critical to …[student’s] success [and] are more important than a student’s choice of undergraduate major” (p.1).

Brint et al., (2009) noted that the lack of coherence in the general education curriculum has been a consistent target in higher education, and there has been a continual call for improvements in this third of the baccalaureate curriculum. Although the reform proposals have been many, the sustainable transformations of general education are few. Some of the most recent ideas for improvement include the integration of “thematic bundles of courses to provide perspectives” (Brint, et al, 2009, p. 635) on important topics affecting our world and society (Carnegie Foundation, 2008; University of California Commission on General Education, 2007).

**Integrating Food into Higher Education– Selected Examples**

Integrating food into undergraduate education may offer an opportunity to assist in connecting elements of the general education curriculum. The literature suggests that a thematic general education could improve connections and coherence across the curriculum (Brint, et al., 2009; Kurland, et al., 2010; Mirabella & Balkin, 2011; Mrig, 2013; Pittendrigh, 2007; Resor, 2010).
The continuing state of flux in general education identified earlier in the literature review offers an opportunity to explore how and if infusing food across the disciplines could offer engaging, cohesive and holistic connections for students to create a solid foundation to build their post-secondary education upon. It also prompts a further investigation into why and how institutions have chosen to develop thematically based general education curricula to create innovative solutions to this collection of fragmented courses.

**Yale University.**

Several examples of food as the catalyst for engaged learning were presented in an article by New York University (NYU) sociology professor Troy Duster and famed chef, restaurateur and activist, Alice Waters (2006). This rare article combining food and education from AAC&U publication, *Liberal Education* (Duster & Waters, 2006) cited John Dewey, one of the most significant educational theorists of the 20th century, as an inspiration and early educator who employed food as a catalyst to engage and educate students at his University of Chicago Laboratory School in 1896 (p.42). In addition, Waters (2006) created the Edible Schoolyards that started in Berkeley, CA in 1995. They have now been replicated across the country to integrate food into the curriculum in K-12 to engage students and enhance learning outcomes. In 2001, Waters partnered with Yale University to cultivate the Yale Sustainable Food Project, which exists to integrate food into the curriculum by connecting theory and practice (Duster & Waters, 2006). This project also encouraged university-based researchers to study this subject and publish the results to expand the literature on this important topic of food and education. To build on and support food education initiatives, Waters also created the Rome Sustainable Food
Project in 2006 to “provide the community of the American Academy in Rome with a collaborative dining program that nourishes scholarship and conviviality” (“Rome Sustainable Food Project-about,” 2012). Recently, the Wall Street Journal Magazine awarded Alice Waters the “Humanitarian Innovator of 2013” award to acknowledge her commitment and contributions to placing food at the core of all levels of education in the United States and globally (Kahn, 2013).

Bonnekessen (2010) concurred with Waters (2006), Duster (2006) and Dewey (1915) that food may be an engaging thematic pedagogy. Bonnekessen (2010) conducted a case study while teaching a class infused with food to delve deeper into education and offered an interesting blueprint for a future single course research design. A single class qualitative study was conducted by Bonnekessen (2010) that focused on classroom observations and demographic surveys to garner data on incorporating the topic of food into the curriculum. The universal language of food (Cargill, 2005; Chavez & Hu Poirier, 2011; Sommer et al., 2011; Steele, 2010) was employed as a means for students to delve deeper into their coursework with the familiar topic of food and investigate potentially sensitive subjects including: socioeconomics, race, gender, culture and class (Bonnekessen, 2010).

Philosophy professor Lisa Heldke, from Gustavus Adolphus College (GAC) responded to a query sent through the Association for the Study of Food and Society list-serve by sharing material that she presented at the 2008 Association for the Study of Food and Society /American Food and Human Values Society (AFHV) conference. Of all the literature reviewed, this material is most closely related to this thesis. Her research included thirty interviews with colleagues at GAC prompted by the question “What’s
food doing in your department?” (Lisa Heldke, personal communication, April 23, 2012). Through a qualitative analysis Heldke (2012) identified food as “a substantive element: Food already is present as a fully integrated, essential, even foundational conceptual component of several departments, including: Biology, Anthropology and Health and Exercise Science” (ASFS/AFHV, 2008). Heldke (2012) also noted that even in disciplines where food holds a significant role, “the importance of food per se is not always recognized or acknowledged— even by disciplinary insiders. Food “does business as something else entirely, which is one of the ways the subject hides in plain sight, even where its conceptual role is most important” (Lisa Heldke, personal communication, April 23, 2012). Because food is such a common element that affects our lives daily in a multitude of ways it is often dismissed as ordinary.

**Harvard.**

Food is often introduced to institutions academically through a variety of departments including dining services, and then trickles into the curriculum, as is the case at Harvard. In 2005, Harvard created the Food Literacy Program introduced through the dining department in an effort to connect food and academics. Years later, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS) at Harvard created a course and lecture series in the fall of 2010 titled: *From Haute Cuisine to the Science of Soft Matter*, taught by Harvard academics and world-class chefs (“Harvard SEAS,” 2010). “The course uses food and cooking to explicate fundamental principles of applied physics and engineering” (“Harvard SEAS,” 2010). The class was so popular among undergraduates that Harvard had to use lottery system to choose from over 700 students for the 300 seats available. In addition, the public lectures were available on a first come, first served basis and were
some of the most difficult (free) tickets to acquire in the city (First, 2010). This course and accompanying lecture series has continued on with the fourth season that began in fall semester 2013. In the 2013 school year, edx and HarvardX, Harvard’s newest online learning initiative, offered a massively open online course (MOOC) featuring the same science and cooking course with 45,000 people registered before the start date (Fulton, 2013).

**Lebanon Valley College.**

At Lebanon Valley College in Annville, PA, Dr. Robert Valgenti received a grant to provide a convivial and educational dining experience on campus beginning fall 2013, resulting in the Engage, Analyze, Transform (E.A.T.) program (R. Valgenti, personal correspondence, June 17, 2013). The mission of this program is to “think of the dining hall as a space where some of the core missions of the college are embodied and enacted through food offerings, creative programming, and the sustainability initiatives” (R. Valgenti, personal correspondence, June 17, 2013). In addition, “This program aims to combine the resources of academic programs, student affairs, and dining services in order to rethink the educational space beyond the walls of traditional classrooms. The purpose of this collaboration will be to further the institutional goals of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, respect for diversity and commitment to sustainability” (“E.A.T-Diversity for the palate,” 2013).

**Menus of Change.**
At the June 2013 inaugural symposium of the Harvard School of Public Health – Department of Nutrition and the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), these two academically diverse institutions, and leaders in their respective areas of expertise, focused on the future of food and the $660 billion dollar revenues the industry generates (‘Menus of Change,’ 2013). They are interested in understanding and focusing on the collective purchasing power of all food businesses on the local, sustainable, health, and environmental factors and improve our planet. Harvard and CIA want to provide an interdisciplinary Global Positioning Service (GPS) for the food service industry. The ‘elemental role that food plays in our lives including nurturing relationships and building community…these connections help drive innovation and growth necessary in our diverse global economy’(‘Menus of Change,’ 2013). This collaborative effort continued in 2014 with an even more urgent message for attendees to work interdisciplinarily to include theory and practice to engage the significant food-related issues impacting our world.

The University of California- Berkeley.

Sponsored by Alice Water’s Edible Schoolyard Project, Michael Pollan, journalism professor at Berkeley and best-selling author of popular books such as Cooked (2013), The Omnivore’s Dilemma (2006) and In Defense of Food (2008) taught the second Edible Education course in the fall of 2012 for 400 students and 300 members of the community (Mindess, 2012). This course was taught through the Journalism School at UC–Berkeley.
Stanford University.

The Food Summit was established in 2010 with the objective of determining the interest in food issues at the seven schools of Stanford including: medicine, earth sciences, business, humanities and sciences, law and engineering (“Food Summit,” 2010). This initiative is situated in Stanford’s Medical School with interdisciplinary and dining services support. The organizer of the cross-disciplinary initiative was Dr. Christopher Gardener of the School of Medicine (Digitale, 2010 November 4). Dr. Gardener is also on the Scientific & Technical Advisory Council for the Menus of Change, 2013 and 2014 initiatives.

University of Barcelona.

The world famous El Bulli restaurant in partnership with the University of Barcelona is creating the Bullipedia Unit, the world first culinary wiki (“Bullipedia,” 2013). The university will provide “academic counseling and create synergies among university experts on different fields of knowledge and the team of El Bulli Foundation” (“Bullipedia,” 2013). This academic unit will focus on the culinary contributions of El Bulli and operate interdisciplinarily. Ferran Adria is considered one of the most innovative and creative chefs in the world and his restaurant El Bulli in Roses, Spain was ranked the best restaurant in the world with over two million requests per year for only 50 reservations per night, six months per year. Beyond this level of popularity, Adria approaches cooking more like an academic researcher than a cook, and this methodology has produced a legion of disciples from around the world who apply to El Bulli to work for free just to be a part of the educational experience (Abend, 2011). When El Bulli was
operating (it closed in 2011), the commitment to innovation and creativity was supported by the restaurant’s schedule (open six months per year) and the balance of the year was spent creating the next season’s menu at the “taller” (i.e. Spanish for food laboratory) in Barcelona. Ferran Adria and his team of chefs have invented numerous avant-garde concepts, such as molecular gastronomy, that have been emulated in the best kitchens across the globe and taught at Harvard (Fulton, 2013).

Adria is also the headliner and a funding source of the Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS) course noted earlier and affiliated with the Alicia Foundation, one of the sponsors of the program (Fulton, 2013). Along with Ferran Adria, Jose Andres, also from Spain and alumnus of elBulli is part of the culinary lineup at the SEAS Food/Science class. In addition, Andres teaches a course, The World on a Plate: How Food Shaped Civilization, at George Washington University that includes other chefs, restaurateurs, scientists and academics (“The World on a Plate,” 2013). In the overview for Andres’ course, he cited Ken Bain’s assertion that opportunities for learning should be presented as an “invitation to a feast” (Bain, 2004, p. 75). Although, Bain likely meant this metaphorically, it suggests that food may offer an engaging topic for students.

Further evidence of the integration of food into the curriculum was published in the *New York Times* article by Spiegel (2012) noting that food is appearing more often in academia. Spiegel (2012) maintains that food is an integral part of many general education programs including agriculture, business, health, the economy, sustainability, culture, war and peace. The critical role of food infused into the disciplines that comprise the general education curriculum was also presented in an article titled “A Food
“Manifesto,” in which Steel (2009) defined food as “a cultural force...that enables us to start thinking not just about food, but through it” (p. 44). This idea supports the concept of using food as a lens to engage students across the general education curriculum. Steel (2009) joins Waters (2006), Cargill (2005) and Spiegel (2012) in classifying food as a commonality shared by all and further identifying food as a unifying and connective element.

Cargill (2005) identified food as an ideal topic to support interdisciplinarity. One of the essential elements cited in Cargill (2005) focused on the critical thinking skill development and synthesis that students may learn by engaging across the disciplines through the lens of food. Academics engaged in interdisciplinary education would also experience benefits in their teaching and research by blurring boundaries of the disciplines (Cargill, 2005). Resor (2010) argued that food integrated thematically aids in connecting students to more global issues through something they interact with and consume multiple times per day. She also supported Cargill’s (2006) contention that the incorporation of food as a theme provides the opportunity for students to understand the impact of their choices across the disciplines. Sommer, Rush, and Ingene (2011) concurred that food offers an ideal connective framework when attempting to understand our world.

Chavez and Hu Poirier (2007) engaged students with an “experiential gourmet approach” (p.505) using food as the common language to provide a diverse classroom with a vocabulary to understand the students’ similarities and delve deeper into the subject matter. Food created a universal lens for diverse classroom populations to focus on shared experiences. Within their food-centric classroom environment, Chavez and Hu
Poirier’s (2007) findings aligned with those of Bonnekessen (2010) who employed food as a unifying element in her classroom experiment to integrate potentially challenging subject matter through the quotidian topic of food.

Currently, there is a lack of peer-reviewed research on integrating food into the general education curriculum. Despite the emphasis on food by popular writers and New York Times best sellers such as Michael Pollan (2013, 2008, 2006), there is a significant void in scholarly research into how and whether the universality of the subject of food can help make the general education curriculum more engaging and facilitate connections across the disciplines. Perhaps for academia, the subject of food is too commonplace (Belasco, 2008; Cargill, 2005; Nestle & McIntosh, 2010) to warrant serious study. Yet, it is universal. According to Heldke (2012), food is often so commonplace it often becomes invisible even when it exists in the academe (personal communication, Heldke, 2012).

However, there is evidence that such programs have emerged and grown at Harvard, Stanford, University of California- Berkeley and Yale. Academics outside traditional culinary, hospitality and food studies programs are engaging with food as a worthwhile and critical topic to teach, study and research.

The true value, interest and connective elements that food offers may contribute to education by creating cross-curricular associations and an opportunity to unify the general education curriculum. Creativity, connection making and synthesis are critical proficiencies necessary to thrive in this global knowledge economy (Friedman, 2005; Pink, 2006; Robinson, 2006). In addition to providing a connected core, the addition of food could engage students by increasing opportunities for retention and improving the skill sets they need to be employable. Vocational preparation and employability are top

**Conclusion**

The present study is focused on innovative approaches to general education employing food as a unifying element and how faculty member perceive the rationale, implementation and outcomes of such a curriculum.

There is evidence of an emerging movement to offer opportunities for students to engage in deeper learning through the integration of food but this is mostly in singular courses (e.g. Harvard, Yale, University of California at Berkeley). An institutional example of the infusion of food into a portion of general education curriculum is Narrative University, the research site for this study.

There is an abundant amount of literature that provides evidence of the challenges that exist in the general education curriculum today and that have persisted for over a century (Awbrey, 2005; Bok, 2006; Boning, 2007; Gaff, 2004; McDougall, 2000; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011; Wehlburg, 2010). The lack of coherence and institutional mission alignment combined with student and faculty resistance creates an opportunity to improve general education. While there is extensive research on the issues in general education (Bok, 2006; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Kurland et al., 2010; Nelson Laird et al., 2009; Pittendrigh, 2007) there are gaps in the literature on how to address them with a unified food-themed curriculum.
Chapter 4: Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to study whether, to what extent and in what ways the use of food as a unifying theme across the general education at a post-secondary institution can create connection across disciplines.

Research Tradition

To align the problem of practice with the methodology best suited to pursue this research a qualitative approach was chosen. A qualitative methodology provides the model investigational platform for this thesis. This approach focuses on understanding the “multiple meanings of participants experiences” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). The type of data collected for a qualitative study includes: interviews with open ended questions, observations and field texts (Creswell, 2003). A qualitative methodology also makes it possible to “establish meaning of a phenomenon from views of participants” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18) when little research exists and the topic is relatively new. A quantitative methodology examines cause and effect thinking using statistical analysis that was not appropriate to research this problem of practice (Creswell, 2003). Creswell (2007) provided justification to support a qualitative methodology as the ideal model to study this problem of practice by noting that, “we conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (p.40). “This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their places of …work and allowing
them to tell their stories…” (Creswell, 2007, p.40).

This qualitative study seeks to understand the experiences of the Narrative University (NU) faculty members by exploring the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the Food Themed Cluster (FTC), employing the application of a food lens to a portion of the general education curriculum. Traveling to the Narrative University campus to meet with faculty and hear their stories about the innovative food themed curriculum aligns with the intent and framework of a qualitative study and narrative inquiry.

The need to understand how the Narrative University (NU) faculty teaching in the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) experienced the rationale, implementation, and outcomes of this food-themed curriculum provided the content for this inquiry. Given the potential impact of a food-infused curriculum, it could be beneficial to understand how this institution created this curriculum as a model for other schools considering a similar approach. This research design also aligns well with the diffusions of innovation theory and the qualitative choice of narrative inquiry. Conducting interviews with the program’s faculty offers the opportunity to understand how an innovative curriculum spread to (and within) their institution and how they perceive its rationale, implementation and outcomes. In addition to learning about how it diffused to the institution it was beneficial to also understand how it was dispersed across the disciplines included in the FTC to create connections in general education.

The methodology that aligned best with the goals of the study is narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method with a lengthy history. Stories have
existed since the beginning of time. There are numerous theorists from various fields (e.g., anthropology, psychology, psychotherapy and organizational theory) who have used narrative inquiry in their research but Clandinin and Connelly (2000) are regarded as the leaders of narrative inquiry in the field of education (Creswell, 2007) and they cite John Dewey as their influence (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This methodology is used to research “the lives of individuals and asks them to provide stories about their lives” (Creswell, 2003, p.15). It can give insight into a deeper understanding as “information is retold and restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology” (Creswell, 2003, p.15). Examples of narrative inquiry studies have included a multi-decade study on teacher knowledge at Bay Street School by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). It is especially suited to studies in education because education is comprised of experiences. A narrative methodology provides the rich, complex and detailed participant stories for understanding this inquiry (Creswell, 2007). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “Educators are interested in life” (p. xxii) and narrative inquiry can illuminate that focus by providing a framework for researchers to explore a deeper understanding of a problem of practice.

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) were the first in educational research to use the term narrative inquiry (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007). The “narrative tells the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social and historical context, and including the important themes in those lived experiences” (Creswell, 2007 p.57). “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p.20).
Stories have a beginning, middle and end and a chronology may also consist of past, present and future (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004). This aligns with the research question: How do faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University perceive its rationale (beginning, past), implementation (present, middle) and outcomes (future, end)?

Narrative inquiry aligns well with the Diffusion of Innovations (DoI) theory that is the theoretical lens for this study. DoI-based studies frequently make use of interviews with multiple participants, as, for example, Ryan and Gross (1943) did when studying the diffusion of hybrid corn farming among farmers in Iowa. Understanding how or to what degree the thematic food curriculum was diffused at NU by faculty and students enriched this exploration through the telling of the shared stories.

Stories or narratives have offered a powerful vehicle for communication and connection throughout civilization (Pink, 2006). Today, innovators, creative gurus, thought leaders, and educators view storytelling as a critical skill necessary to survive and thrive in the 21st century (Isaacson, 20012; Pink, 2006; Robinson, 2006). Employing narrative inquiry will be a way to share the NU faculty participants’ understanding of the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) with others who may be interested and could benefit from their experiences.

One of Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) role models for sharing life experiences through narrative inquiry is John Dewey. Dewey was a pragmatic and progressive thinker who founded the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in the late 1800’s (Duster & Waters, 2006). The laboratory school created a curriculum to put into practice Dewey’s theories of integrating education into student’s lives through experiential
learning, which included food and the kitchen as a central theme to engage students in their primary subjects through the lens of food (Duster & Waters, 2006). Dewey also inspired Alice Waters, noted in the literature review, to create the Edible Schoolyard focused on integrating food into the curriculum and develop the Yale Sustainable Food Project to address the needs of post-secondary intuitions (Duster & Waters, 2006).

The narrative inquiry method employed by Clandinin, et al. (2007) also echoes Dewey’s theories on education and research including three commonplaces of narrative inquiry they identify as: temporality (i.e. all events or people have a past, present and future, placing things within the context), sociality (i.e. individual context) and place (i.e. inquiry location), (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

**Diffusion of Innovation Influences on Research Design**

DoI Theorists Ryan and Gross (1943) developed the original blueprint for diffusion researchers with their study of how a group of Iowa farmers adopted hybrid corn seed. Rogers (2003) cited their study as one of the “most influential diffusions studies of all time” (p. 31). Their “retrospective interviews in which adopters of an innovation are asked when they adopted, where or from whom they obtained information about the innovation, and the consequences of the adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p. 33) was also the model for the present FTC study. The NU faculty members who took part in the study were the primary adoptees of the innovative FTC. The ‘retrospective interview’ created by Ryan and Gross (1943) for DoI studies was employed to understand when the FTC study participants adopted the FTC, where and from whom they learned about the FTC, and the consequences of the adoption of FTC. These themes were woven through the interview questions posed to study participants to gain an understanding of their
perspectives of the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the FTC. In retrospective
interviews, the accuracy of participants’ memories impacts the study outcomes. This was
also true of the NU FTC study especially regarding start dates, program modification
dates, rationale for the NU Clusters and inspiration or best practices gleaned from other
institutions who may have introduced a similar thematic model into their curriculum.

Research Design

The general narrative method outlined by Clandinin & Connelly (2000) proceeds
as follows. First, the researcher negotiates with the participants to collaborate for the
narrative inquiry. Next, the researcher interviews participants and collects field texts (i.e.
on-site observations, notes, interviews, digital recordings, and documents including
marketing materials) to provide content for the story of the food-themed curriculum being
researched. Finally, the researcher re-storied the materials gathered during the inquiry
and provided them to the participants for their comments and to ensure that their stories
were fairly represented. These narratives or stories sought to articulate the study
participants’ perceptions of the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the Food
Themed Cluster at NU. The researcher then re-storied the narratives by sequencing them
into chronological order, connecting different elements and creating an overall flow to
the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To examine the problem of practice, narrative
inquiry offered a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences of integrating
food into a portion of the general education curriculum.

Research site.
Narrative University’s recently created Food Themed Cluster program was the focus for this research study. NU is a small institution founded over 170 years ago with approximately 2,000 students and a large number of concentrations including the newly formed Themed Course Clusters Network (NU blog, 2012). NU was awarded two grants from the Mellon Foundation to “create a model liberal arts curriculum for the 21st century” and “support continued development” of the Themed Course Clusters Network (NU blog, 2012, p. 1). The faculty collaborated to create these innovative “Clusters Network” to thoughtfully combine theory and practice for improved learning outcomes. The Themed Course Clusters Network programs started in fall of 2011 and after a year they had 50 faculty, over 100 students, and eight themed programs in the network (NU blog, 2012). In the fall of 2012, Themed Course Clusters Network added a food themed curriculum, which continued through the 2013/14 school year and began its third year in September 2014.

Declining enrollments, in part were identified as one of the motives for enhancing curricular initiatives at NU in a recent article by Anonymous (2013) in The Chronicle of Higher Education. One strategic model would be developing “institutional distinctiveness” to improve enrollments (Anonymous, 2013, p.2). When the current president arrived at NU in 2008 when the institution was experiencing enrollment challenges which continued through 2011 when NU introduced the Clusters Network initiatives (Anonymous, 2013). In 2012 the Themed Course Clusters Network offerings were expanded to include the food theme that has become the most popular offering of the collection. NU invested significant resources (i.e. time, financial investment and human resources) that the Themed Course Clusters would create an innovative
curriculum that would differentiate them from their peers and appeal to college aged students. It is too early in these initiatives to understand the impact of the curricular enhancements and there is a lack of data to verify institutional impact to date.

The Food Themed Cluster is identified as a multidisciplinary model with the intention among faculty teaching in the program for it to evolve into an interdisciplinary curriculum according to the program director, Dr. Environmental Science (personal correspondence, October, 2013). Interdisciplinarity is achieved when courses are integrated with several disciplines around a theme while multidisciplinarity is described the teaching of a topic through the lens of various disciplines yet not integrated.

Participants.

The participants for this narrative inquiry were six faculty members at Narrative University (NU) who taught in the Food Themed Cluster. The engagement of six faculty members from across five different disciplines represented in the NU Food Themed Cluster offered breadth and interdisciplinarity of perspectives for this inquiry and created an opportunity to fully explore the narratives related to this phenomenon. The professors teaching in the FTC represented a mix of disciplines contributing to this initiative including: Physics, English, Literature, Sociology and Environmental Science (NU Food Themed Cluster, 2013).

NU professor and program director, Dr. Environmental Science queried his colleagues teaching in the Food Themed Cluster in spring 2014 to see if they would be interested in participating in the research for this thesis. Initially, all twenty six-faculty members teaching in the FTC were interested in partaking in the narrative inquiry. When
the IRB approvals from Northeastern and NU were received, the researcher sent an email (Appendix A) to formally invite the NU faculty teaching in the Food Themed Cluster to participate in the research for this thesis. Six members of the FTC faculty responded affirmatively to participate in the study.

**Research Procedure**

The procedure for this study included development the research design based on the narrative inquiry model, IRB submissions and approvals for both institutions involved. In addition, it incorporated communication with study participants, the site visit to collect data and the analysis of field texts (i.e. interview transcripts).

**Data collection.**

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), field texts (i.e. data) are “created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience” (p.92). In narrative inquiry, field texts may include: research interviews, field notes, emails, conversations, documents, life experiences, etc. For this study, those methods were employed, and in addition, the following sources were referred to: the NU website and blog; FTC faculty- lunch and learn; NU admissions tour and marketing materials; dining services tour and travel notes.

The research focused on the six participating faculty members at Narrative University (NU) who developed the program; teach in the Food Themed Cluster and provided valuable insights into the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the FTC. The specific group (i.e. professors at NU) for this study shared stories that were
transcribed, analyzed and then re-storied to create a cohesive and chronological story of the past (rationale), present (implementation) and future (outcomes) of this phenomenon, that is consistent with a narrative study design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007).

Storying and restorying provided the research data for this narrative inquiry. Storying involved collecting narratives from participants as part of the inquiry process. These stories reflected their lived experiences. Through the process of gathering the accounts provided by the selected contributors, the researcher re-storied or reconstructed their narratives. Re-storying, according to Clandinin & Connelly (2000) is the re-telling of narratives to “allow for growth and transformation” (p. 71). Re-storying also permitted the reorganization of stories to follow a narrative chronology that aligned with both narrative inquiry and the diffusion of innovations theory (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Rogers, 2003).

All faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) at Narrative University (NU) were invited via email (Appendix A) to participate in this research study. Six members of the FTC chose to participate. The sole criterion for inclusion in the study was teaching in this newly established program. None of the participants were excluded based on age, gender, ethnicity/race or socio-economic level. The NU respondents were not compensated for their participation in the research.

The procedures for this research included each participant completing a pre-interview information sheet, (Appendix B) and participating in a one-hour interview. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews occurred in sixty-minute sessions in the spring semester of 2014 at Narrative University. In addition, during the site visit to interview the
faculty there was an opportunity for the researcher to gain an understanding of how environmental factors (i.e. campus size, setting, institutional characteristics) impact the study and narrative inquiry. Prior to the face-to-face interviews conducted by the researcher, participants received the interview questions (Appendix C) to assist them in preparing for the interviews.

**Data analysis.**

Following the interviews, the researcher coded and analyzed the transcribed digital recordings. The pre-interview questions offered demographic information on the respondents to illuminate similarities and differences. Each of the six transcripts were coded individually and categorized to align with the rationale, implementation and outcome research question. Mind maps were employed as part of the coding and analysis component of the research to help identify themes that emerged from the faculty member participant interviews.

The data analysis for this narrative inquiry included:

1. Transcriptions of the digitally recorded interviews with faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University.
2. Coded transcripts of the interview sessions.
3. Analysis of interview records to identify themes that emerged from the participant’s narratives.
4. Use of mind maps detected and categorized inquiry themes.
a. “Interaction (personal and social)
b. Continuity (past, present, future)
c. Situation (physical spaces and storyteller’s spaces)” (p.49)

Trustworthiness.

Creswell (2007) wrote “qualitative researchers strive for understanding…during or after the study, qualitative researchers ask, ‘Did we get it right’?” (p.201). To validate whether the re-storying properly represented the participants’ narrative the researcher emailed the re-storied version of their narratives and offered an opportunity for the NU faculty participants to review and offer modifications. The researcher made modifications based on their feedback. In this case, participants verified the accuracy of their narratives and confirm the trustworthiness of the re-storying. For this inquiry, triangulation included: data (i.e. field texts, transcripts), research methods, and the credibility and dependability of the investigator (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007). This combination of procedures, established to ensure trustworthiness and validity to align with the options espoused by Clandinin & Connelly (2000) and Creswell (2007).

Protection of Human Subjects

The Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at both Northeastern and Narrative Universities thoroughly examined and approved the research design to ensure that the protection of human subjects was a priority during this research study. In addition, the researcher successfully completed the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) training protocol and received the approvals of Northeastern and NU Institutional Review
Boards (IRB) for all materials and the research design as required prior to engaging the 
NU faculty participants.

To obtain signed informed consent, the researcher reviewed the customized 
consent form with the participants and provided an oral explanation, answered questions 
and delivered written explanation to all participants prior to beginning the research study. 
In addition, it was made clear that there are no foreseeable risks associated with this 
research. See the customized informed consent form (Appendix - D) that was shared with 
and signed by all participants.

Confidentiality.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the process and the sole researcher 
conducting the study closely guarded all research data. All participants, the institution 
and the program were provided with pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. All data 
(i.e. digital recordings and transcriptions) stored on the researcher’s personal, password-
protected computer, are backed-up regularly and will be destroyed upon degree 
completion. Signed participant consent forms are secured in a locked file cabinet and will 
remain there for three years following the end of study at the home of the researcher and 
no one else will have access to them.

At the conclusion of this inquiry the researcher will share the aggregated findings 
with all participants. At that point participants will not have an opportunity to modify the 
narratives. Their review occurred earlier in the re-storying process and their feedback was 
incorporated into the final document.
Chapter 5: Report of Research Findings

Narrative University Backstory

Narrative University is a small institution with approximately 2,000 students and 150 faculty members (NU, 2014). The campus is located within thirty minutes of a larger metropolitan city and school is nestled in a quaint and hip college centric community. The institution encompasses a relatively large physical space in comparison to the size of the student body. The architecture includes an equal mix of historical and contemporary buildings to signify the institution’s past and future.

The focus of this study, the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) at Narrative University proposes to offer students an opportunity to connect a portion of their general education courses employing a food theme. The FTC requires students to complete three courses in three different divisions, attend six food-themed events and participate in an annual banquet. Beginning in the 2014/15 school year, students will also be required to complete a Seminar class to intentionally connect across the disciplines. Two professors will teach the Seminar from different disciplines within the FTC. As a reminder, the Themed Clusters are optional and are not required for graduation or integrated into the general education curriculum.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand whether, to what extent, and in what ways, food could serve as a unifying element in the general education curriculum. To examine this, the faculty members involved in the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) at
Narrative University (NU) were asked to share their stories and to give their perceptions about the rationale, implementation and outcomes in the Food Themed Cluster. The question that guided this research was: How do faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University perceive its rationale, implementation and outcomes?

The findings of this study are focused on three primary themes: the challenges of integrating the FTC into the general education curriculum, interdisciplinarily pedagogy and student participation and retention in the program, and food as a unifying theme.

Overall the faculty participants’ perceptions indicate that the FTC has been a successful collaboration between the NU administration and the faculty who have volunteered to participate in this initiative. The NU administration presented a framework for The NU Themed Course Clusters Network and the faculty took ownership and created an innovative curriculum without adding new courses or additional faculty. The FTC is an additional layer that may complement the general education requirements for students interested in connecting a portion of their core courses with a food-themed curriculum. Participant responses indicated that in general, the administration and faculty

As a caveat, Dr. Environmental Science noted that the primary intent of the FTC, to date, has not been to address general education requirements specifically although it has been offered as a way to meet some of the general education requirements (Personal Correspondence, May 17, 2014).
appear to be satisfied with the trajectory of this new initiative, which they also note, is still in its infancy. The Food Themed Cluster program coordinators were instrumental in organizing and shepherding this food-themed curriculum through institutional governance channels.

Anecdotally, students who have participated and completed the FTC are also pleased with the outcomes and found their experiences valuable and worthwhile. Yet, the research participants suggest that the program struggles with student recruitment, retention and completion of the program and they are working to address these issues to continually improve the program. In addition, they were all enthusiastic about integrating food into the curriculum as a unifying theme to engage students, make connections and improve learning outcomes.

**Participant Introductions**

These six professors in the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) represent five different disciplines. All are tenured. Four of the contributors are women, two are men, three are coordinators of the FTC program and all volunteered to teach in this Food Themed Cluster. Three of the participants teach in a second Themed Cluster in addition to the FTC. This provided an additional layer of perspective as each Thematic Cluster is organized and pedagogically modeled in a unique manner with differing requirements for completion. Collectively they have taught at NU for 97 years. The professors are introduced in the order in which they interviewed.

Dr. Environmental Science, Ph.D. is the chair of the Environmental Science Department and has been the primary contact and host of the researcher at NU. He was
instrumental in assisting the researcher with coordinating this study throughout the process. In addition, Dr. Environmental Science is one of the three coordinators of the Food Themed Cluster. This additional responsibility started in fall 2013 and he has been teaching at NU for seven years.

Dr. Physics II, Ph.D. is a professor in the Physics Department at NU. He has been at NU for twelve years and has been teaching in the Food Themed Cluster for three years. For him, food is an academic topic and an avocation and “it’s an effective way to teach certain physics topics” (Dr. Physics II, information sheet, p.1).

Dr. Literature, Ph.D. is a professor in the Literature Department. For twenty-six years she has taught at NU. Since 2011 Dr. Literature has volunteered to be involved with the Food Themed Cluster as part of the faculty collaborating on the NU Connection and various components of this institution-wide initiative. Food is more of an academic interest than an avocation for her. In addition, Dr. Literature also teaches in one of the other Themed Clusters.

Dr. English, Ph.D. is a member of the English Department. She considers food both an academic area of interest and an avocation and has been teaching in the Food Themed Cluster since its inception. Dr. English has been on the faculty at NU for twenty-nine years and also teaches in another Themed Cluster.

Dr. Physics I, Ph.D. is one of the founding coordinators of the Food Themed Cluster and is a faculty member in the Physics department. She has been employed at NU for thirteen years. For Dr. Physics I, food is primarily an academic topic and she is “excited to work with faculty and students on complex, multi-disciplinary problems” (Dr.
Physics I, information sheet, p.1). In addition, Dr. Physics I also teaches in a second Themed Cluster.

Dr. Sociology, Ph.D. is a founding coordinator of the Food Themed Cluster. She is a member of the Sociology Department. For ten years Dr. Sociology has been a faculty member at NU and considers food both an academic and avocational interest. Her reason for joining the Food Themed Cluster is that she thought it would be “energizing and a good way to interact with other faculty” (Dr. Sociology, info. sheet, p.1).

**Participant Perceptions**

**Rationale.**

None of the participants interviewed indicated remembering a clear path for how the initial Themed Clusters Network idea evolved. The summer 2010 meeting initiated by administrators requested participation from interested faculty and was confirmed as the starting point from their perspective. It is unclear exactly where the idea of cross-disciplinary Clusters came from although it was the prompt for the first gathering. At the preliminary meeting several of the study participants proposed food as an ideal thematic topic for a Themed Cluster.

**NU general education – then and now.**

Prior to the introduction of the new Themed Course Clusters Network (TCCN), general education at NU was a traditional distribution curriculum typical of a liberal arts institution. It required a prescribed number of courses from the natural sciences/mathematics, social sciences, humanities and the arts disciplines. In addition, there were competency requirements in English, a foreign language, writing, cultural
diversity and quantitative reasoning. It is similar to other peer liberal arts institutions with whom NU was competing with for students. This curriculum was included in the review by consultants who cited a lack of differentiation for the institution. Currently, the NU Themed Course Clusters Network is layered on top of the current general education curriculum according to study participants.

The NU participant interviews indicated that the prompt to review and enhance the curriculum was initiated by the administration (they didn’t specifically cite declining enrollments as the impetus) based on feedback from consultants, while the solutions were faculty-driven. Dr. Physics I noted that one of the findings of the external consultants was that the “current curriculum lacked innovation” (p.5). Faculty members involved in the creation of the Thematic Clusters were enthusiastic about being a part of this initiative to create the innovative cross-disciplinary FTC. Participants offered a variety of reasons for the new NU Themed Course Clusters Network of which FTC was one of the components: “How can we get better? How can we improve on what we’re already doing?” (Dr. Physics II, p.3).

As noted, the NU Themed Course Clusters Network continues to exist alongside the general education curriculum. According to the participants, courses can also be double counted to meet multiple requirements and this often creates confusion for students and challenges for the study participants when they are advising. All professors at Narrative University also provide advising to students.

According to Dr. Literature, general education at NU is “unchanged” since the addition of the Themed Course Clusters Network (p.1). The “new” curriculum “sits on top” (Dr. Physics II, p.9), “floats above” (Dr. Environmental Science, p.1), is “just an
add-on at this point” (Dr. Physics I, p. 12) and it “overlies general education” (Dr. Sociology, p.3). Further comments note that FTC was “meant to enhance, not replace” NU general education requirements (Dr. Environmental Science, p.2) and Dr. Sociology sees general education and FTC as “complementary” (p. 3).

We “assumed students were making interdisciplinary connections [across the general education curriculum] but it was not happening” (Dr. Environmental Science, p.9). The new FTC was intended to help students by “creating a space to do this in the form of a topical collection” (Dr. Physics II, p.1). It was also designed to “study complex problems…e.g. obesity, sustainability, environmental… from different disciplines” (Dr. Physics I, p. 1) and some students “needed help to relate some of their general education courses…and FTC could provide scaffolding” (Dr. Physics II, pp. 1-2).

Drs. Physics I and Sociology volunteered to be the founding coordinators of the Food Themed Cluster and were credited by their fellow FTC colleagues as organizing and shepherding this themed curriculum to fruition. Dr. Environmental Science was invited to join the FTC coordinators in fall 2013 to assist with the many extracurricular activities including speakers and field trips in this Food Themed Cluster.

The faculty participants’ findings indicate that the rationale for the NU Themed Course Clusters Network in general was seeking a “match with the liberal arts and desire to improve critical and interdisciplinary thinking” (Dr. Environmental Science, personal communication, May 13, 2014). The administrative rationale for the Themed Course Clusters Network cited low enrollment concerns and a lack of differentiation as the prompt for NU to create their innovative curricular enhancements, The NU Themed Course Clusters Network.
Program misgivings.

At some point early in the process, according to Dr. Environmental Science, the majority of the 140 NU faculty voted to approve a pilot of the NU Themed Course Clusters Network initiatives. In 2012, there was a second vote to adopt the initiatives as part of the curriculum. Although there was a majority vote by faculty, there are still some reservations about the “new” curriculum. Participants shared some concerns of their own and those of their colleagues during the interviews. Some of the faculty not involved in the new initiatives are “not sure what on earth we’re doing” (Dr. Sociology, p.15), others are concerned that it could “detract from the old curriculum” and consider the new curricular initiatives “too flashy, too trendy…they prefer the current curriculum versus trying to spin and market NU” in this way (Dr. Sociology, p. 3). Other faculty had concerns about “how it would be credited… Would it replace general education? How will it affect my department?” (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 3). Dr. Physics I echoes the comments of her fellow FTC coordinators noting the “anxiety over the new curriculum, how it would impact the old general education requirements and the reluctance to change the old format” emerged as repetitive themes on campus (p. 7). There are questions such as, “how well does it [the new curriculum] really work… Was it the right way to go” (Dr. Physics I, p.7)?

Dr. Literature commented that, “the administration has invested significantly in the new curriculum” (p.22). She voiced her own concerns about the new initiatives, noting, “I like the FTC but the new curriculum has created more work for an already overtaxed faculty” (p.2). To further explain, Dr. Literature shared concerns about financial choices by the administration, impact on faculty’s time and cited what she calls
“curricular minimalism” at NU (p.4). She defined it as having “twenty fewer faculty than we need campus-wide to offer the curriculum we already offer, not to mention anything we spread on top of it” (Dr. Literature, p.4). “Adding this other layer of the new curriculum typically involves courses we’re already teaching, it involves additional administration, it involves additional meetings, it involves follow-up, paperwork, and it’s another layer…and faculty governance is being impacted” (Dr. Literature, p. 4).

Dr. English shared some of the same concerns as Dr. Literature. She noted that a group of faculty members have created an anti-new initiatives blog. One of the questions they are asking is…how sustainable these new initiatives are. Dr. English is also concerned about the sustainability of the NU Network. She shared her thoughts on the significant funding being funneled to the Network: “it takes away from department funding and faculty salaries” (p. 4).

**Implementation.**

The new NU Network launched in 2011 and “about one-third [of the 140 faculty at NU are involved] in the Themed Course Clusters Network” (Dr. Physics I, p. 7). Drs. Physics I and Dr. Sociology invited, recruited and organized the faculty teaching in the FTC. Each of the study participants had a story about how they were connected to the FTC and the coordinators. Many of the professors teaching in the FTC are friends in addition to being colleagues. All participants noted that they enjoy collaborating with each other across the disciplines on this Food Themed Cluster. They are committed to advancing the program together. Rogers (2003) highlighted the importance of having “innovation champion (s)” early in a change process (p. 414). This person(s) is especially
critical to innovation within organizations and is often not in a senior leadership position according to Rogers (2003). The combination of key characteristics such as organizational and collaborative skills combined with influence and credibility among peers employed by FTC champions Drs. Physics I and Dr. Sociology were instrumental to the creation and implementation of this Themed Cluster.

**Challenges.**

The integration of the FTC into general education has been a challenge according to the faculty interviewed. Dr. Physics II states, “this is where it struggles…FTC is broad, has many courses and professors” (p. 6). Dr. Physics I concurs, “The lack of integration with general education is a weakness of the current program” (p. 6). Dr. Sociology notes that there is “no mandate for students to take Themed Clusters…without this, it won’t be fully integrated” (p. 5).

Students learn about the NU Network initiatives from a host of sources including: orientation, NU Themed Course Clusters Network website, marketing materials across campus, word of mouth, advising sessions and from faculty in class. One interesting point about faculty advising from Dr. Physics I illustrates some of the challenges for the FTC:

During academic advising sessions I tend to forget to mention the Thematic Clusters as a particular option. As soon as I am advising a student I feel very compelled to make sure the students are progressing towards graduation. They don’t have to take a Themed Cluster to graduate but they do have to complete their gen ed requirements. I am much more attentive when I am advising to their requirements for their major and their gen ed requirements (p. 6-7).
**Food-themed curriculum.**

The faculty involved in the initial call to action for the NU Network said that the theme of food was presented and “stuck” at the first meeting (Dr. Sociology, p.2). All faculty interviewed were enthusiastic about food as the theme for this Course Cluster. Dr. Dr. Literature said, “Food aligned with my research interests in a liberal arts environment. It helps students make connections ” (p.6). Food is a “great way to bring faculty together on issues…and…it is a popular topic that everyone has a connection to” (Dr. English, p.1). It is the ideal topic to “solve bigger problems through multiple disciplines” (Dr. Environmental Science, p.9). Dr. Physics II considers food “a hook for complex subjects…a vehicle in…like when you have some awful disease and you need mainline drugs, they put in a port…[food] is like mainline access…and…can be used to drive academic enterprise” (p.1). According to Dr. Physics I, “food is an ideal organizing principle…and incredibly unifying topic across the disciplines” (p.9). “Food is a topic that students care about…a good start in the education process” (Dr. Sociology, p. 7). Dr. English suggests, “food is connected with home, nurturing…a metaphor for love, a way to give, it’s a creative act, a performative act (p.7).

The NU faculty participants also cited food as a topic that students could easily relate to and this made it an ideal theme in their FTC courses. They also espoused the multitude of angles where food can connect across the disciplines and with critical real world issues including: sustainability in the food systems, health and wellness, obesity, social justice. Respondents contend that food is at the crossroads of theory and practice and is an important topic to integrate into the curriculum at NU.
The personal connections to food and story are reasons that excited Dr. English as an opportunity to aid in the learning process. As an English professor, she believes “everyone has a story to tell and maybe it begins at home and how they were nurtured and food being a very central aspect” (p. 7). She also cites the marked growth of interest in food through dedicated TV networks, numerous prime time shows, feature length documentaries and best selling non-fiction books used in many college courses.

**Pedagogy model.**

The study participants suggest that overall the Themed Course Clusters Network do not have a clear or ultimate goal to be interdisciplinary (i.e. connections among the disciplines) curriculum and agree that the majority of courses within the FTC are currently taught multi-disciplinarily (i.e. subjects taught separately around a theme or topic, not integrated). Drs. English and Dr. Literature are both from disciplines (English and Literature) that they identify as naturally interdisciplinary. Dr. English states, “I think interdisciplinarily” (p. 5) and Dr. Literature notes, “interdisciplinarity is what I do” (p. 9).

Interdisciplinary pedagogy is natural for some disciplines and curricula, however it is not the common practice for the FTC. During the interviews, one participant noted “I’m not particularly careful about my use of the term(s) [multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary]” (Dr. Physics I, p. 10). Dr. Environmental Science said, “the Food Themed Cluster is currently being taught multi-disciplinarily” (p. 13). I don’t have a “sense of interdisciplinarity as the goal of the program although this would benefit students more…cross-pollination” across the disciplines would offer a start (Dr. Physics II, p. 8).
Outcomes.

The 2013/14 academic year marks the third with the NU Themed Course Clusters Network, so it is still a fairly new undertaking. Dr. Literature envisions the FTC as “amorphous…it is something that exists in various states at various moments…versus seeing this as a fixed thing that you change [it’s a]…work in progress” (p.17). “All these things [new initiatives] have only been around two, or three years…you’re looking at this at the dawn of the program, so come back and see us in five years” (Dr. Literature, p. 17).

The professors in the study noted how the FTC has already impacted their teaching. Dr. Physics I tells of a history of teaching her courses “a mile wide and an inch deep…but noting that] food has added depth to my classes” (p. 6). “Sharing ideas about teaching, learning and connecting with faculty in different disciplines” has been one of the benefits of the FTC for Dr. Environmental Science (p.15). For Dr. Sociology, “it has been an intellectually stimulating” (p.16) and “enriching experience for faculty…we have a great group of energetic faculty and it is fantastic to work together” (p.9). Dr. Physics I has used the FTC experiences to “model valuing other disciplines to aid in understanding why multiple disciplines are needed to solve big problems” (p.11). The opportunity to focus on current topics that the individual disciplines may not have adopted yet has positively impacted Dr. English’s teaching.

According to participant interviews, the infrastructure for evaluating the FTC does not yet appear to exist, or it hasn’t been tapped, although assessment is something in which the professors were interested. They cite a lack of technology, time and administrative reporting requirements as contributors to the missing links on FTC effectiveness to date. Without assessment in the FTC, they note that it is difficult to
know if students are making the connections intended by this new initiative, why the student completion is low and the reasons behind these outcomes. Dr. Environmental Science confirms that currently there is “no assessment of why students didn’t finish [the FTC]” (p. 3).

The student response and participation in FTC has been disappointing and minimal. “Only three students have completed the Food Themed Cluster to date” according to Dr. Physics I (p.3). All professors interviewed for this study indicated that this is the principle challenge for this new program and cite student confusion about the new curriculum in relation to the general education requirements as the primary issue. Students are not sure what the FTC is, why they should participate and how it relates to their general education requirements. Participants suggest numerous other reasons for the lack of participation including: “FTC is one of the more academically rigorous Clusters…which may be a disincentive” (Dr. English, p.12); “Students wonder what is in it for them” (Dr. Sociology, p.3); “There are problems with marketing, messaging and advising [around FTC]” (Dr. Physics II, p. 9); and “although students are interested, they choose a more direct route” through their distribution requirements (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 4-5).

Outside of class FTC requirements include events, blog posts and an annual banquet. These enhancements have also experienced mixed results according to study participants. The blog posts turned into a “dumping ground” (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 16) and did not yield the original intention of assessing outcomes. Dr. Sociology viewed the blogs as “tools to demonstrate multi-disciplinary thought, problem solving, new idea generation… [However, students were]…not making connections” (p. 10). The
banquets were attended by a small but engaged group of students with double the number of faculty to support the initiative – “the ratio between faculty and students is skewed in the FTC” (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 28). Dr. Physics I concurs; we have an “inefficient faculty to student ratio of 8:4” at some events (p. 12).

Impact.

In general, the study participants do not feel the impact on students and the institution has met expectations to date. Conversely, they are in agreement that the impact on faculty involved in the FTC has been extremely positive. Dr. Physics II commented, “The Food Themed Cluster right now it’s pretty neutral. I don’t see it as really having driven much change” (p. 13). The impact of the FTC is “not as expected, probably just policies or something getting in the way” (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 28). “That’s very exciting…the fact that I can work with common purpose with [other faculty] …that have nothing to do with my discipline whatsoever, I find this really satisfying and really interesting…intellectually stimulating” (Dr. Physics I, p. 13). As an example of impact on faculty, Dr. Physics I explained:

There was a talk given on another Program at NU. We co-sponsored it as part of the Food Cluster. It was really interesting. There were other students there that wouldn’t have been there. That was one of the best moments of the Food Cluster for me really being in a discussion format that I’ve never been in before. I learned a lot so I think faculty can really learn from this. I think the Mellon Grant actually has highlighted this point. The Mellon Foundation was interested in this [funding choice] because of
its opportunities for faculty engagement and development, not just
students (Dr. Physics I, p. 13).

**Feedback from students.**

The professors interviewed for this study indicated that students are confused
about what Themed Clusters are, why they should take them, and how they are integrated
with general education (or not). Dr. Literature wonders, “How can the new curriculum be
an attractant if students are not participating. Where is the disconnect” (p. 20)? Dr.
Environmental Science suggests, “we need to find a better way to do what we say we’re
doing (p.28)...and [provide] better messaging” (p.24). He also recommends, “Developing
ways for students to understand, participate and complete the FTC” (p. 22). Feedback
from FTC participants say “they find it valuable – it gets them to think more deeply about
a topic they’re interested in” (Dr. Sociology, p. 15).

The researcher had an opportunity to participate in a private Admissions Office
tour given by an upper-class student while conducting research on campus. During the
tour the student shared her impressions of the Themed Course Clusters Network. She said,
“I just don’t get it and I’m not clear on the benefits of the programs” (anonymous). Later,
during the research site visit, one of the study participants confirmed that this student was
one of NU’s most engaged and involved students.

**Innovation.**

Rogers (2003) defines and innovation as “an idea, practice, or object perceived as
new by an individual or other unit of adoption (p. 36). The study participants shared their
perspectives regarding the innovativeness of the Food Themed Cluster: “The fact that it [the FTC] exists is funded and supported by faculty and the administration [makes it innovative]” (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 25). Having the opportunity to offer a “creative curriculum [that is] allowed to generate its own momentum” is innovative (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 26). Dr. Literature notes, “People here think outside the box – connect across disciplines (p.12)...[Themed Clusters] are an “old idea that is new to NU” (p. 20). There is a “value we have seen…it’s been innovative for this campus to meet regularly with people in other disciplines and talk about curriculum...that’s new here” (Dr. Physics II, p. 13).

**Opportunities**

The FTC faculty members have made modifications to the program since its inception in 2011 based on feedback, observations and outcomes. The program is viewed by coordinators in phases: Phase I – 2011/12; Phase II – 2012/13; Phase III – 2013/14; Phase IV – 2014/15 and Phase V – 2015/16. In the first phase, the FTC requirements included four courses, six events with accompanying blog posts and attendance at the banquet. Phase III added the third coordinator (Dr. Environmental Science) and was modified to three courses, six events and an annual banquet (blogs posts were deleted). Phase III and Phase IV remain the same and Phase V is scheduled to add a seminar taught by two Food Themed Cluster faculty members to intentionally connect the courses. The Food Themed Cluster is at an early stage in its development and participants still very much consider it a work in progress.
In the future, Dr. Physics I “would like to see the Themed Clusters integrated into the general education curriculum” (p. 7). Dr. Environmental Science agrees: “maybe FTC could be a different path to [meet] general education requirements…[in the meantime we’ll] keep working on FTC to continually improve” (p. 11).

Each of the Themed Clusters is organized in a different way. Some are closely linked and have fewer classes and professors, while others, like FTC, offer a large number of courses taught through a diverse group of disciplines. While experimenting with the pedagogy model, the FTC coordinators shared the story of one modification to the program that was unsuccessful in the FTC. They created an offering of three courses in the FTC that did not include any choice for students. This model did not resonate with students. According to Dr. Environmental Science “zero students responded” to the prescribed Food Themed Cluster option and the FTC coordinators quickly discarded that idea and returned to the current model with many courses offered across the disciplines (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 21).

**Wisdom to Share**

When asked what advice they would give to other institutions considering a similar model or if they would do anything differently in hindsight there were several critical pieces of wisdom shared. Dr. Sociology “would have added the seminar at the start to more tightly connect” the FTC (p. 14). This professor also noted “it would be really important to be clear both institutionally then directly with students about what incentive there is for the students to participate [in FTC] (p.14). Dr. Environmental
Science said any institution considering a similar curriculum “must be thoughtful about integrating FTC into general education” (p. 19).

Other participants recommend: “Get funding, try pilots and secure faculty support” (Dr. English, p. 15). Dr. Physics I agrees, “Get started, see what works, modify, learn – experiment first” (p.12). A suggestion from Dr. Environmental Science includes “making the whole [NU Network] more synergistic linking Themed Clusters to the other [NU Network] initiatives” (p.24). He also proposes considering the “structure, risk and value to all stakeholders” (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 18). Drs. Physics II and Environmental Science highly recommend establishing infrastructure to collect and assess program related data. (p. 11 and 22).

**Emergent Themes**

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest, “An inquirer composing a research text looks for the patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across an individual’s experience and in the social setting” (p. 132). This recommendation guided the creation of emergent themes during the journey from the field to developing research texts.

The emergent themes for this inquiry were a compilation of prompts from the interview questions and those that arose from the study participants’ stories and the coding process. Five different disciplines are represented in these narratives and the six participants exemplify approximately one fourth of the faculty teaching in the FTC. Often the theme was not explicitly identified but rather the subject matter and topics emerged through discussions with the FTC faculty participants while in the field.
The faculty members in the FTC appear to be the most highly engaged group of stakeholders in this initiative according to feedback from those who participated in the study. Their teaching and learning have been significantly impacted by their involvement in the FTC. They cite their regular interactions with colleagues from other disciplines as an enriching and intellectually stimulating experience. The faculty engagement related to the FTC collectively garnered one of the most positive and enthusiastic responses during the study. Based on the stories shared by the FTC faculty who participated, the best part of this whole academic initiative has been the cross-disciplinary collaboration. They cited their new and enhanced relationships with colleagues as having a significant impact on their teaching, professional development and student learning within their individual food-themed classes.

External supporters could include the surrounding community and the Mellon Foundation that provided the initial funding to create the NU Network. Several of the study participants mentioned the local community during their interviews. Dr. Environmental Science suggested that if there were a larger cohort of students participating in the FTC it would be nice to be able to coordinate and mobilize them to assist with community driven food-centric initiatives and aid in maintaining a good town/gown relationship with student contributions. He also would like to see a service-learning component grow out of the FTC to expand on the opportunities for turning theory into practice in the neighborhood. In addition, Dr. Physics II noted in his interview that food presents a significant opportunity for community building on and off campus. He suggests, “there may be something specific about the food connection and the capacity to build community around food” (p. 14). There are “huge opportunities” to
create impact on the institutional and local communities and “affinity for the students…the institution” and surrounding community (p. 14).

The institution as a whole touts the new NU Network as its primary differentiator through marketing materials, messaging and other media compared to other institutions. Again, while not explicitly examined during the participant interviews there were no indications that there were any concerns for the institution its in relation to its branding efforts or reputation.

**Challenges**

**Integration.**

According to the NU Network website description of Themed Clusters:

Themed Course Cluster Networks provide an innovative way for you to fulfill some of your general distribution requirements while you examine a topic of interest to you in depth and over several semesters. The networks allow you to examine an idea, theme, or topic by taking related courses in several different disciplines. This approach helps you understand the complexity of big issues. By integrating the perspectives of many different disciplines, you arrive at a more complete and sophisticated picture of those issues (NU: Network, 2014).

To date, Themed Clusters have not been integrated into the general education curriculum at NU. According to study participants the new Themed Clusters are an “overlay” to the distribution requirements. The new NU Networks are described in a variety of ways to explain that the previous general education requirements are fully
intact and unchanged by the new initiatives. The Food Themed Cluster could possibly be used to group a portion of general education requirements if students clearly understood how this could happen and the benefits to them. Currently, study participants describe it as “floating above” (Dr. Environmental Science, p. 1) which is confusing to students. Students were described as having trouble understanding the relationship (or not) between their general education requirements and the optional Themed Course Clusters and the rationale for participating.

**Communication.**

While the standard university marketing vehicles exist for the Themed Course Clusters, such as the website, blogs, admissions marketing materials, and orientation, the faculty interviewed for this research study suggest that there is still a significant challenge with messaging and communicating to students (and some members of the faculty) about the merits, purpose, and logistics of the Food Themed Cluster. According to study participants, students are confused about what Themed Course Clusters are, how they relate to general education, if they are required to complete them as part of general education curriculum, and there is a general lack of understanding about the purpose and reason for students to engage in this new initiative.

**Program misgivings.**

Approximately one third of the 140 NU faculty members are teaching in the Themed Course Clusters and a majority voted to support the new curricular initiatives. Despite this, there are some misgivings about the new initiatives per the majority of the study participants.
Dr. Literature understood the call for new initiatives as “a critical enhancement for the growth of NU” (p.20). Although she is excited about teaching in two Themed Clusters, she indicates that NU “responded quickly” to the consultant’s report (Dr. Literature, p.20). Other participants note concerns from their colleagues about the merits of the new curriculum, its outcomes, and alignment with institutional mission. These program misgivings highlight one of the limitations of the DoI theory. The assumption that an innovation is automatically good, should be diffused and adopted as presented creates a pro-innovation bias. Rogers (2003) noted that a pro-innovation bias is prevalent in diffusion research. He also suggests that it is important to understand why an innovation doesn’t diffuse, where is stalls or in which adopter categories.

**Multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary pedagogies.**

During the ‘lunch and learn’ organized by Dr. Environmental Science the five Themed Clusters faculty members spoke about the differences between multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary pedagogies. They concurred that there was confusion between the two definitions and that there was not a clear sense that interdisciplinarity was the goal of this initiative. The terms that were employed and seemed to resonate more with the participants and lunch group were: cross-disciplinary, cross-pollination and connections.

**Faculty engagement.**

The faculty engagement component of the FTC collectively garnered one of the most positive and enthusiastic responses during the study. Based on the stories shared by the FTC faculty who participated the best part of this whole academic adventure has been the cross-disciplinary collaboration. They cited their new relationships with colleagues as
having a significant impact on their teaching, professional development and student learning in their respective food themed courses.

**Support systems.**

Concerns with the proper infrastructure to support these new and innovative initiatives were echoed throughout the participant interviews. The support systems that appeared to require attention were: technology and the ability to easily track courses for students in the FTC and add the FTC designation to their transcript upon completion. In addition, there were significant concerns from participants regarding the lack of evaluation (and resources to do this) of the program to date. Faculty wondered why students did not join or complete the FTC but only had anecdotal feedback to make assumptions about the reasoning. NU has dedicated significant resources to the ‘new curriculum’ according to those interviewed although the program outcomes have yet to be evaluated collectively. Study participants were interested in student feedback regarding the FTC but were not able to access this data yet due to infrastructure, time and resource constraints. They all acknowledged that this information would be valuable for the FTC to create the continuous improvement that they were committed to and for the program in which they are fully vested.

**Participant Closing Thoughts**

One of the closing thoughts from Dr. Physics II seemed to capture the overall feelings of this FTC initiative at this point. He believes:

> Experiments are good. I think in higher education we need to do a lot more and more often and be willing to fail and try things and quit them if
they don’t work and collect data on what’s working and what isn’t (Dr. Physics II, p. 11).

Findings Conclusion

As the story and restorying of the NU faculty member perceptions of the rationale, implementation and outcomes unfolded, the narrative methodological framework guided by the research question created a chronology for this initiative happening at a point in time during the evolution of the FTC. There were confirmations of pre-existing notions, differences between theory and practice regarding the FTC and a number of complications revealed in pursuit of a new and innovative thematic curriculum at NU. They all felt strongly that food is an ideal topic to engage students and provide context with more complex material based in what they experienced in their classes. They also agreed that food has the potential to connect disparate disciplines that comprise the general education curriculum although that was not witnessed in this study. In addition, each participant understood and articulated the innovativeness of this unique curricular enhancement for NU.

In addition, several opportunities emerged from participants during the research. Their insights provided a deeper understanding of their perceptions and focused on several key areas including: the lack of integration of the FTC with general education; communication challenges with students and faculty; misgivings about the new curriculum from students and faculty; the use of interdisciplinary pedagogy in FTC; infrastructure and assessment.

This narrative inquiry offered insights and a deeper understanding of the NU study participant’s perceptions about the evolution of the relatively new FTC. They are
all fully committed to the food-themed initiative, cite the challenges of creating and implementing a new curriculum, and collectively share a passion for teaching, collaboration across the disciplines and continuous improvement in the FTC.
Chapter 6: Discussion of Research Findings

This research explored whether, and if so how, food served as a unifying, and/or integrative element in the general education curriculum. To examine this, the faculty study participants teaching in the Food Themed Clusters (FTC) at Narrative University shared their stories through a narrative inquiry methodology. They communicated their perceptions about the rationale, implementation and outcomes of their food-themed curriculum. The NU faculty participants reviewed the findings that were restoried by the researcher from their interviews in alignment with the methodology. They had the opportunity to offer modifications to their narratives to assure they were represented as they intended. This study employed the diffusion of innovations theory to provide a framework for the research and offer insights into whether and how disparate groups come together to create innovative solutions and discover how those solutions spread.

As the literature cautioned, attempts to change general education curricula would be challenging (and changing general education was not the priority for NU) (Bok, 2013; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Menand, 2010; Nelson-Laird, et al., 2009; Wehburg, 2010). In addition, Kirschner (2012) argued that innovation in higher education is difficult even for the most committed administrators and faculty. Unfortunately, NU was not immune to some of the trials of curricular reform attempts. Although the literature and study participants agree that a food theme may aid in creating engaging, connective courses, there are challenges with integration into general education and linking courses interdisciplinarily (Boning, 2007; Huber & Hutchings, 2009; Menand, 2010).
The research question that this study sought to answer was: How do faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University perceive its rationale, implementation and outcomes?

This chapter is organized in the following manner. First, the overall findings of the study are synthesized and then analyzed. Next, the common themes that emerged from the research are examined in relation to the theoretical framework, literature review and research design. This illustrates how each component came together to create a holistic (deeper) understanding of the problem of practice and how it evolved during this study. Then, the implications for general education, innovation and food in the curriculum are followed by recommendations for future research and concluding thoughts.

**Emergent Themes**

Three primary themes that emerged from the participants’ perceptions of the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the Food Themed Clusters (FTC) at Narrative University: (1) innovation in the curriculum is challenging; (2) food is a powerful theme; (3) the importance and limits of faculty ownership/shared governance.

**Innovation Challenges.**

There were several challenges identified by study participants during the narrative inquiry. Creating a Food Themed Cluster was an innovative idea. However, study participants identified several challenges while implementing their new curricular enhancement. This initiative encountered some of the long-standing issues that exist in higher education when attempting to modify the curriculum (Bok, 2016; 2013;
Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Mirabella & Baulkin, 2011; Mrig, 2013). First, the FTC was an overlay for the general education requirements, not intentionally integrated or required for degree completion. While some of the courses could serve a dual purpose and fulfill both the FTC and general education requirements this was unclear to students and contributed to their confusion about the benefits of participating in the Themed Course Clusters Network.

Study participants also cited the lack of integration of the FTC into the general education distribution requirements as a challenge for this program. Since the general education curriculum has not changed the benefits for students to add the new FTC overlay to their already significant academic requirements is unclear to them. Although the FTC offers an alternative path for students to complete some of their distribution requirements it appears that they have trouble understanding the benefits, navigating and completing this Themed Cluster. There are also some reservations from faculty on the merits of the new curriculum and its impact on general education, their departments, institutional finances and faculty salaries. The reluctance to disrupt the general education curriculum is a common challenge when attempting to innovate in higher education. Bok (2013) and Menand (2010) both highlight the political considerations in the academy that can often stall or halt curricular reform especially in general education where numerous disciplines are impacted.

According to participants, their students experienced confusion regarding the requirements of the FTC, how it relates to general education and the rationale for participation. This study’s participants see the confusion and lack of understanding surrounding the FTC as connected to communication challenges across the institutional
spectrum. Lattuca & Stark (2009) highlight the necessity for communication in the diffusion process especially “when adding an academic program in order to remain competitive with peer institutions” as is the case with NU (p.306). Part of this confusion is related to communication between the institution, faculty and students. Respondents noted that the Themed Clusters were marketed and communication via the university’s website, admission’s brochures and introduced at orientation. Despite the traditional avenues of communication, participants suggested that even if students had heard of FTC they were confused about its purpose and benefit to them. Furthermore, in the study participants’ roles as advisors they often prioritized completion of NU’s distribution requirements instead of mentioning or encouraging participation in the FTC. Faculty study participants also said they forgot to talk about the FTC in their classes. Rogers (2003) argued that for an innovation to spread, communication is critical. At NU, communication among faculty was effective and did diffuse to create the FTC. Unfortunately, it was not effective for students based on minimal participation and program completion to date.

For many decades, higher education has been the target of numerous insiders for a lack of innovation in part due to its general resistance to change (Anonymous, 2013; Bok, 2013; Christensen & Eyring; 2011; Kirschner, 2012; Menand, 2010). In the past decade, some of the top-ranked institutions in the country have started to integrated food into the curriculum.

Integrating food into single courses in the curriculum is an innovative idea that is in practice at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, UC Berkley and many others (Bonnekessen, 2010; Duster & Waters, 2006; Pollan, 2010; Spiegel 2012). NU created the Themed Course
Clusters Network to help address the declining enrollment issues, a lack of innovation in the curriculum and to create differentiating points from its peers. The Themed Clusters were proposed by the administration and championed by the FTC coordinators (Rogers, 2003).

While interdisciplinarity in the twenty-first-century has received significant attention in theory, the practice of “teaching and scholarship that bring together methods and material from more than one academic discipline” is challenging (Menand, 2010, p.95). The academic structure of siloed disciplines contributes to the difficulties with interdisciplinarity (i.e. connections among the disciplines) pedagogy (Bok, 2013). At this time, the FTC is mostly taught multidisciplinarily (i.e. subjects taught separately around a theme or topic, not integrated). Study participants indicate that although they believe students would learn best from an interdisciplinary curriculum that was not the institutional directive for this program and that model has been difficult to operationalize (Menand, 2010).

The most significant challenges for the FTC have been a lack of integration into general education, student confusion and communication issues to explain the purpose and benefits of the new curriculum. These issues are closely related and have created barriers to student participation and retention in the FTC.

The power of food as a theme.

The purpose of this study was to understand whether, and if so how food could serve as a unifying element in the general education curriculum and the findings were mixed. According to participant feedback, the theme of food provides many opportunities to improve learning and engage students while studying significant real-world problems
through multiple disciplines (e.g. Harvard, Yale, Stanford, UC-Berkeley). Participants believe that although the group of students participating is small they are highly engaged. Since the FTC has not been explicitly integrated into general education it is also impossible to assess what type of impact it may have in the long run.

Some of the most enthusiastic and passionate responses from study participants were those narratives that explained why food was chosen as one of the themes for the Clusters. For two thirds of the participants food was both an academic interest and an avocation for them. The other third of interviewees identified more with the academic properties of food as their primary focus. These outcomes did not align with similar disciplines but instead were more personal.

**The limitations of faculty ownership and shared governance.**

The model of shared governance and faculty ownership at NU appeared to function well according to study participants. This could have been a theme but it was not within the scope of this research. Instead, it would be recommended as a topic for future research.

**Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework employed for this research study was the diffusion of innovations (DoI) theory. This study was guided in particular by the work of pre-eminent DoI theorist, E.M. Rogers (2003) who defines diffusion as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (p. 35). A social system is identified as “a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal” (Rogers, 2003, p. 23).
One of the most significant social systems is a higher education institution (Pervin, 1967). The key elements of diffusion (i.e. innovation, communication, channels, time) were prominently exhibited throughout this study and illuminated the analysis of the findings. Prior to the site visit and narrative inquiry being conducted it was unclear how/if the theoretical framework would benefit this study. The DoI theory provided understanding of the outcomes experienced at NU in the FTC.

The findings indicate that members of the NU “social system” were engaged across disciplines to work towards the common goal of creating and implementing Themed Clusters to aid their students in making intentional links between theory and practice. The channels of communication used to invite all interested faculty to participate in the new initiative were initiated by the NU administration. Rogers (2003) describes this top-down model as a “centralized diffusion system” which is hierarchical in nature (p. 394). While the FTC started as a centralized diffusion system, the findings indicated that it morphed into a “decentralized diffusion system” (i.e. spread horizontally) (Rogers, 2003, p. 395).

According to the study participants, approximately one third of the 140 NU faculty members participate in the different Themed Clusters. Once food was identified as one of the Themed Clusters, Drs. Physics I and Sociology used their professional and personal connections to invite faculty to be part of the Food Themed Clusters. According to Rogers (2003), they filled multiple roles in the diffusion process including “champions” (i.e. support innovation despite resistance) (p. 414) and “opinion leadership” (i.e. informal influence) (p. 27). In addition, based on the DoI theory, they would be categorized as early adopters (i.e. respected, local opinion leaders) in this process and
aided in both the innovation and the diffusion among the faculty in the FTC (Rogers, 2003, p.283).

As highlighted in Rogers (2003), “time is an important methodological enemy in studying a process such as diffusion” (p. 126). Participant recall lacked specific dates regarding the timeline for The NU Network, the Themed Clusters and the Food Themed Cluster adoption. Without the dates it is unclear exactly who adopted to which element(s) of the FTC and when. In addition, the interviews with study participants did not yield data that could definitively identify adopter categories. However, the field texts and transcripts did offer some clues to guide assumptions regarding how those involved may be categorized. In general, the majority of narratives described the administration as the innovator, the FTC coordinators and several others as early adopters and the remaining participants as early majority. Another interpretation of the data within the same group of participants and non-participating faculty indicated characteristics of late majority and laggard (i.e., participating, but skeptical and displaying a degree of resistance). Based on their rate of adoption (i.e. speed of innovation implementation) in the FTC innovation, the innovators in this case appeared to be a combination of administrators and convening faculty who created curricular enhancements to differentiate NU and aid students in making intentional connections between theory and practice (Rogers, 2003). Lattuca & Stark (2009) also included the DoI theory in their explanation of how curricular change does (or does not) occur. They cite the importance of both the internal and external influences on curricular change, which figured prominently in the NU curricular initiatives (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Faculty members that neither voted to adopt the new curriculum nor are vocally resistant are likely part of the late majority or laggard
categories. Participants described feedback from colleagues that would be considered late majority, skeptical about the new curriculum and the laggards who are typically identified as traditional but in this case may also be part of the resistant contingent of faculty described by study participants. One study participant described a contingent of non-participating faculty members who created an anti-NU Network blog to share their opposition and skeptical views of these new initiatives. This group “who were greatly oppositional” (Dr. English, p.4) questions, “how sustainable it [the new NU curricular initiatives] is” (Dr. English, p. 4)?

Another element of the DoI theory that was exhibited in the NU FTC study was the idea of re-invention. According to Rogers (2003), early diffusion studies meant replicating the innovation. More often, re-invention of an innovation occurs when “the new idea changes and evolves during the diffusion process as it moves from adopter to adopter” (Rogers, 2003, p. 180). The participant narratives revealed a significant amount of re-invention of the FTC and individual courses, by discipline and extra-curricular requirements since the program’s inception as noted in Chapter 5. In addition, each of the Themed Clusters is intentionally organized and modeled differently offering opportunity for sharing and learning across the Clusters. Half of the respondents teach in two of the Themed Clusters and they indicated that the differences between the Clusters offered opportunities for growth, experimentation and collaborations.

The analysis of findings for this study were more clearly understood in part due to the DoI theoretical components including the “attributes of innovations” (i.e. relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability) – to help explain different rates of adoption (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). An institutions considering curricular
change they may benefit from integrating the DoI elements into their implementation plans pre-emptively to understand some of the fundamentals that are necessary for an innovation to diffuse (Lattuca & Stark, 2009).

The majority of participants felt the new curriculum could enhance the general education and yet the institution was cautious and chose a low risk innovation model by maintaining the distribution requirements. NU did not add any new courses and instead created the Themed Clusters as an overlay to general education. Several participants felt that general education was being eroded by the new curriculum and therefore may not have clearly identified with the “relative advantage” of the new curriculum. Rogers (2003) defined relative advantage as “The degree to which an innovation is perceived better than the idea it supersedes” (p. 15).

The majority of the general education literature supports the numerous advantages of an integrated (i.e. thematic, interdisciplinary, connections between theory and practice) curriculum (Huber & Hutchings, 2009; Kurland, et al., 2010; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011) and also the general resistance to change in higher education and in general education specifically (Awbrey, 2005; Bok, 2013; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011).

The FTC meets the needs of the adopters interviewed as it aligns with their interests in food as research, an avocation and/or academic endeavor. Trying new things energized most participants and others found the FTC interactions to be intellectually stimulating. The idea of connecting courses around a theme is not completely new to NU or to higher education. For respondents and the institution, the new curriculum was compatible and “consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of
potential adopters” (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). The alignment with institutional goals and objectives was beneficial for the NU Network initiatives and contributed to the swift rate of adoption among faculty participating in the study (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Nelson-Laird, et al., 2009; Pace, et al., 2010).

DoI theory offered insights into the confusion students were experiencing in the FTC. The complexity of the program (i.e. lack of integration into general education, lack of clarity about benefits, communication issues) significantly impacted the participation, retention and completion of the FTC to date. Because the merits of the FTC were difficult for students to understand their participation was negatively impacted (Rogers, 2003). The literature indicates that some students are resistant to or dissatisfied with general education (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Lazerson, 2010; Wehlburg, 2010) and adding to that with a new curriculum that is difficult to use has yielded only three students completing the FTC to date.

Study participants have been able to make adjustments (i.e. re-invention) to the curriculum in each phase of the program as they test the FTC. Rogers (2003) also credits the “trialability, the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis” (p. 16) as a key element in diffusion of an innovation. The trialability has worked well for faculty across the Themed Clusters but it has not translated to student participation. Perhaps the modifications that participants are making will translate into student engagement also. Based on participant feedback, diffusion occurred swiftly until it reached the students at the implementation stage. Several of the trials were beneficial to the process to allow the institution and faculty to try an innovation without committing to any changes in general education or the courses that are currently offered. One
adjustment that resulted from the “trial” to date is the addition of a Seminar to “stimulate cross-disciplinary understanding of topics presented in class” (Themed Clusters: Food, 2014).

The observability of the FTC results is both a positive and negative attribute of this innovation’s rate of adoption. Faculty collaboration on this Food Themed Cluster is one of its outstanding outcomes, according to participant accounts. However, the lack of participation by students is a concern for respondents. Due to the small number of students that have completed the program there may be a void in observability by their peers. According to Rogers (2003) if an innovation is difficult to “observe or describe to others” (p. 258) then this can negatively impact the rate of adoption, which was exhibited in this study.

All theories have their shortcomings, and DoI is no exception. Rogers (2003) identifies four primary criticisms, two of which appeared in this research study. The pro-innovation bias is defined as “the implication…that an innovation should be diffused and adopted by all members of a social system, that it should be diffused more rapidly, and that the innovation should neither be re-invented nor rejected” (Rogers, 2003, p. 106). Several participants shared stories about colleagues who questioned their concerns about the merits and sustainability of the NU Network of curricular innovations. This implication was an example of pro-innovation bias where a new and innovative idea is considered good and should not be questioned (Rogers, 2003). As an example, when participant and non-participant faculty questioned the sustainability of the NU Network, the financial implications and the merits of the whole program they were probed by colleagues who were pro-NU Network. Pro-innovation colleagues asked why they
wouldn’t fully support the NU Network? Wasn’t it fun? Didn’t they like to explore fun ideas with students?

**Re-call.**

Rogers (2003) states, “Time is an important methodological enemy in studying a process such as diffusion” (p. 126). As noted earlier, time is one of the key components of DoI. “One weakness of diffusion research is a dependence upon self-reported recall data from respondents as to their date of adoption of a new idea” (Rogers, 2003, p. 126). During the interviews participants were asked to recall their perceptions of the FTC including the history of how it evolved including questions of when each of the following components started: the first meeting, the NU Network implementation, Themed Clusters and the FTC? However, Rogers (2003) noted, “hindsight is not completely accurate” (p. 126). When study participants were asked to reconstruct specifics of when, where, why and how the FTC was created there were some gaps in the details. The majority did not offer specific dates and those that did share dates noted that they were not sure of their accuracy. Other field texts (i.e. NU website, marketing publications, letters from the President) were employed in an attempt to recreate the timeline associated with the adoption of the FTC. In addition, all participants have validated their restoried narratives of the findings and had the opportunity to offer modifications.

**Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

Three primary threads were explored for this literature review for this study including: curricular innovation, integration and reform attempts, general education and food as a unifying theme. Several sub-categories also emerged that also appeared in the
study including: impacts of academic culture on innovation, institutional mission alignment, resistance and coherence. Some of the findings were consistent with the literature while others contradicted the literature.

**Curricular innovation, reform attempts.**

The FTC outcomes aligned with several of the innovative curricular models highlighted in the literature including: “offering a choice of themes to help connect general education” (Mrig, 2013).

According to the literature, curricular innovation and reform attempts are typically slow to occur if they are attempted at all (Awbrey, 2005; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011). The NU Network curricular enhancements were created and implemented quite expeditiously (in about one year) because they are an overlay to general education and did not add any new courses. The NU research findings contradicted the literature in numerous ways including: the institutions’ willingness to change, the speed of adoption, the introduction of multiple innovative curricular enhancements simultaneously, and willingness to adapt curricula as needed. However, this swiftness of change identified by study participants was enabled by several key NU decisions including: no new courses added to create the FTC, it is not integrated with general education and it not mandatory requirement for graduation. Instead, it is an overlay in relation to the general education curriculum, which has caused confusion for students about the benefits and role of the FTC in the baccalaureate degree.

In the literature, MacDougall (2000) argued that an interdisciplinary cluster in the curriculum can improve both faculty and student engagement in general education. At Narrative University, faculty engagement interdisciplinarily (i.e. connections among the
disciplines) in the Food Themed Cluster was high although the courses were mostly taught multi-disciplinarily (i.e. subjects taught separately around a theme or topic, not integrated). Participants indicated that students in the FTC found the topic of food engaging even though it was unclear if they were experiencing it in an interdisciplinary way. MacDougall (2000) offers hope that institutions and faculty willing to seek new possibilities to create innovation in the curriculum will reap the rewards of their efforts. The study respondents did experience positive impact on their teaching and learning through participation in the FTC.

Integration in general education.

Klein (2005) defines integrative learning as a broad term encompassing “structure, strategies and activities that bridge divides, such as general education and the major, introductory and advanced levels, experience inside and outside the classroom, theory and practice, and disciplines and fields” (p.8). The NU Network’s portfolio overall was created to address many of these elements. The Food Themed Clusters also align with numerous “integrative learning” components.

Multi-Disciplinarity.

One study in particular (Kurland, et al., 2010) had similar outcomes when the faculty implemented a sustainability-themed interdisciplinary (i.e. connections among the disciplines) curriculum. Like NU, the outcomes at the institution that was the subject of that study more closely resembled a multidisciplinary (i.e. subjects taught separately around a theme or topic, not integrated) experience for both faculty and students. According to the NU study participants, while there was not an explicit directive to teach
the FTC interdisciplinarily, that was the original intent. The majority of the faculty members interviewed said they teach their FTC classes multidisciplinarily and also agree that an interdisciplinary model would be better for student learning. Several participants that reported teaching their courses interdisciplinarily attribute that outcome to what they do naturally because of their disciplines. At the time of the study, most participants approached food through the lens of his or her discipline. Based on this model, the students would need to piece together – or integrate – these disparate sets of knowledge from the various courses themselves. Some students may succeed in this, but others may not, without guidance. In this respect, the FTC is similar to the general education curriculum in that it presents a variety of courses, which may or may not add up to an integrated body of knowledge. If it doesn’t, then for the student, it was just a collection of courses they completed. If it does, then the student should come away with an interdisciplinary knowledge about food, but perhaps more importantly, they are trained in viewing an issue through various lenses, and integrating those perspectives. At the time of this study a valuable opportunity for the new FTC is not yet fully realized – the food theme is a engaging and connective topic, but the FTC may not be going as far as teaching students how to approach a topic by integrating insights from various disciplines, lenses and perspectives. To more intentionally address the integrative and intentional connections between theory and practice in the FTC, program coordinators have created a seminar class to address these concerns that have emanated from the initial phases of the FTC.
Food as a powerful theme.

This literature thread was consistent with the study in finding that food is an impactful and engaging theme that adds depth and connection in higher education (Bonnekessen, 2010; Cargill, 2005; Duster & Waters, 2006; Resor, 2010). Each study participant provided examples of food as a unifying theme in their pedagogy. They described the food theme as: engaging, an organizing principle, an interesting topic for students, a subject that exists in all disciplines, adding depth to their teaching, providing context for more complicated courses, easy to relate to, a topic students care about and feel comfortable discussing, aligning with their research interests, a great motivator, naturally interdisciplinary and the perfect connector.

Food was chosen as the theme for the FTC and it works well in individual classes. For those few students who have completed the FTC the faculty members believe that they were able to make connections in their individual classes. It was unclear whether or not students made the connection across their courses and with the extra-curricular FTC events in the way the program was envisioned. To date, participants suggest that the FTC outcomes are disappointing due to the limited number of students completing this Themed Cluster. To address this, FTC coordinators have created a seminar class to more intentionally connect the FTC and extracurricular events. However, the faculty study participants indicate that the impact on their teaching and learning has been both rewarding and intellectually stimulating. For them, food has been a unifying theme to collaborate across the disciplines.
Innovation in the curriculum.

Anonymous (2013) identified an innovative curriculum as a differentiating element that may attract students and address declining enrollment issues at post-secondary institutions. NU chose to respond to their decline in enrollment by creating an innovative collection of curricular enhancements. Study participants commented that the NU Network, having the full support of administrators, a majority vote from faculty and outside funding, was “innovative.” Yet, although NU did develop and implement a menu of new initiatives they did not disrupt the pre-existing general education curriculum or add any new courses to this effort (see Appendix E). NU chose a model that preserved the core distribution requirements while experimenting with a variety of 21st century learning initiatives (i.e. Themed Clusters, Study Abroad, Student Research Grants).

Kirschner (2012) cited several books by higher education insiders that shared similar conclusions that “academic culture strangles innovation and reform” (p.3). Institutions committed to maintaining academic tradition may find it difficult to innovate. Kirschner (2012) also noted, “The hard-working and deeply committed administrators and faculty…college[s] are not unique in seeking ways to make progress, while still preserving the status quo” (p.4). This contributes to the existing evidence that there are significant challenges when attempting to modify the curriculum. NU’s ‘innovative curriculum’ where the new initiatives are an overlay to the general education requirements also supports Kirschner’s (2012) contentions (Kurland, et al., 2010, MacDougall, 2000).
Program misgivings.

The literature review indicates some resistance to general education and curricular change among the faculty members at post-secondary institutions (Awbrey, 2005; Bok, 2006, 2013; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Kurland, et al., 2010; Pittendrigh, 2007). In addition, student dissatisfaction with general education was also evident in the literature (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Gaff, 2004; Lazerson, 2010; Wehlburg, 2010). The majority of concerns about the new curriculum for this study appeared to be more appropriately characterized as misgivings or reservations instead of resistance. The concerns that emerged in the study findings focused on several elements for faculty and students. For faculty, the misgivings were presented in several forms including: a general confusion for members not participating in the Themed Cluster’s initiative about what it entailed; the overall merit of the new curriculum; the time requirements (e.g. additional administration, meetings, follow-up and paperwork) and negative financial impact on faculty salaries and departmental funding.

Participants indicated that students’ lack of participation and retention in the FTC might be related to confusion about the program in relation to general education. Respondents noted that students didn’t understand how the FTC worked with NU’s distribution requirements, how participation would benefit them or the rationale for their extra efforts. In addition, participants noted that students did not clearly understand the benefits of participation in the FTC. Lack of time or interest in trying to add another element to their undergraduate degree requirements likewise contributed to only a small number of students who completed the FTC to date. What appeared, as resistance to the
FTC may have been a lack of communication with the students or a lack of knowledge of how to engage with this program?

**Gaps in the Literature**

The findings of the FTC study confirm the challenges that occur when attempting to modify or reform the curriculum (Bok, 2013; Menand, 2010; Wehlburg, 2010). Discussions about how the new curriculum would relate to general education occurred early in the brainstorming sessions to create the NU Network. There were concerns about how changes would impact faculty, disciplines and departments. Rather than alter general education, NU chose to introduce four curricular enhancements without modifying or intentionally integrating the Themed Clusters into the general education requirements. Without changing general education or introducing new courses, NU created four new initiatives to enhance the curriculum to connect theory and practice in about a year. This rate of adoption, the pace of FTC creation and introduction into the curriculum occurred individually and institutionally at NU within a relatively short period of time. One of the key elements of the diffusion process is time (Rogers, 2003). The period from learning of the innovation to implementation and rate adoption by participants (i.e. faculty and students) is relevant along the diffusion of innovation continuum (Rogers, 2003). Creating an overlay to the curriculum at NU instead of modifying it offered the opportunity for rapid diffusion and adoption for faculty. Students did not have the same diffusion response. The initial grant funding secured by NU administrators may have been instrumental in the rate of adoption as it addressed the financial issues that can often impede the speed of an innovation being implemented (Rogers, 2003).

The faculty members that participated in this study were enthusiastic about
creating this food-themed overlay for the general education curriculum. In addition, the FTC coordinators were critical in choosing the food theme, creating the pedagogical model for this Themed Cluster, recruiting faculty and implementing this program. Rogers (2003) described the critical “role of champions” (p.414) as particularly important within an organization. He further indicated that it was especially important to have a champion(s) when the innovations are “costly, highly visible, or radical” (Rogers, 2003, p.414). The FTC aligns with each of those descriptors of an innovation. The NU champions (i.e. FTC coordinators) collaborated and shepherded the FTC to fruition and are fully engaged in continually improving the offerings for their students while enjoying the cross-disciplinary learning they are experiencing. This group of faculty was excited about new and innovative curricular changes and motivated to participate in the FTC and collaborate to continually improve it.

**Implications**

There are two important implications from this study: innovation in the curriculum and food in higher education.

The research question that this study sought to answer was: How do faculty members teaching in the Food Themed Cluster at Narrative University perceive its rationale, implementation and outcomes?

Originally, this study was focused on employing food as a themed to improve the connection across the collection of disciplines that compose general education. This focus evolved during the study as Narrative University chose not to modify their general education curriculum in an effort to develop differentiation among peers, address-
declining enrollments and create innovative curricular offerings. Modifying general education was not the driving force for NU when introducing the NU Network initiatives. Thus, the problem of practice for this thesis re-focused on the potential for the topic of food to offer an innovative and unifying element to thematically connect courses across the disciplines (Cargill, 2005). This study concurred with the challenges present when attempting to modify the curriculum. Participants identified food as a theme that collectively interested faculty teaching in the FTC. It also provided an engaging topic for students in their individual courses to add depth and a common understanding with more complex subjects but has not yet been able to connect courses across the curriculum.

Narrative University initiated the NU Network in 2011 to help students more intentionally connect theory and practice. One element of the Themed Clusters initiatives is the Food Themed Cluster (FTC) and it was the focus of this study. The findings suggest that NU created the Themed Clusters, a part of the NU Network, to address decreased enrollments, a lack of innovation in the curriculum and a need for differentiation among their peers. The FTC was intended to offer students a thematic option to connect a portion of the general education curriculum through the theme of food. Although this was the original intent, participants suggest that the FTC has not been integrated into the general education curriculum, and therefore it is unclear at this juncture if the theme of food is helping students to connect a portion of their general education distribution requirements.

**Additional challenges**

To address declining enrollments and to differentiate among peer institutions, NU chose to add four curricular enhancements instead of modifying their general education
requirements. Participants reported that early in the NU Network planning sessions there were discussions regarding how the new curriculum would be integrated. Faculty voiced many concerns about how any change to the general education requirements would impact them, their departments, budgets and disciplines (Bok, 2013; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Menand, 2010). Rather than disrupt the general education curriculum, NU chose to create enhancements to connect course thematically as an overlay to the distribution requirements.

Implications for other higher education institutions considering curricular innovation may find the results from this study beneficial and insightful when considering similar initiatives. The marketing materials and communication vehicles employed to share information about the NU Network, Themed Clusters and the Food Themed Cluster are plentiful and professionally produced. Despite the communication framework that exists at NU, only three students have completed the program to date. Rogers (2003) suggested that time is a key element within the diffusion process as it relates to the rate of adoption for an innovation. Rogers (2003) defined the rate of adoption as “the relative speed with which an innovation is adopted by members of a social system” (p.23). The FTC was introduced in 2011 and while the faculty members teaching in this Themed Cluster adopted this innovative curriculum quickly, the student’s have been slower to adopt this new initiative.

**Innovation in the curriculum.**

There were numerous lessons learned when attempting to integrate an innovative pedagogy model into the curriculum. As several participants suggested, the fact that the
FTC exists, is funded and is continually evolving is innovative. Faculty voluntarily collaborating across disciplines to create opportunities for students to connect courses employing the theme of food is innovative. The ability to prototype, launch and iterate the FTC is innovative and models some of the most successful companies in the world (e.g. Amazon, Google, IDEO, Facebook, Twitter) and aligns with the “trialability” and “re-invention” of DoI theory (Rogers, 2003; Ryan & Gross, 1943).

**Shared governance.**

Bok (2013) noted that various stakeholders (i.e. administrators, trustees, faculty, students and external interests) engaged in shared governance at higher education institutions can often result in decisions being delayed, stalled or halted. The FTC was created with a shared governance model and participants indicated that they had institutional, administrative, trustee and financial support for their program. Faculty participants collaborated with peers across the disciplines to create and implement the FTC. According to respondents these relationships with administrators and other FTC faculty were cooperative and communal. Even with a shared governance model in place this did not translate into the intended outcomes for students. This study may highlight an area of focus for all stakeholders involved in curricular change.

**The power of food in higher education.**

The power of food as a theme in the Food Themed Cluster yielded unanimously positive responses from participants. Each faculty respondent offered an example of how the topic of food improved depth, context, student engagement, relevancy for challenging material and pedagogy (Cargill, 2005) all participants were enthusiastic and passionate
about the integration of food in their courses. This single course example impact of the food-theme may translate into connecting multiple courses interdisciplinarily with the addition of the Food Seminar.

The institutions identified in this study as exemplars integrating food in the curriculum (i.e. Harvard, Yale, Stanford, UC–Berkeley) remain committed to including this theme into courses and sharing their food-themed seminars with their surrounding communities. This sampling of institutions in addition to NU each cite the power of food as a universally connective topic that engages students, allows for more depth within individual disciplines and the potential to work cross-disciplinarily to address significant food-related issues (e.g. food systems, obesity, hunger, sustainability).

**Future Research**

This research sought to understand whether; to what extent, and in what ways food can serve as a unifying element in the general education curriculum. To examine this, the faculty involved in this innovative curriculum at Narrative University shared their stories and gave their perceptions about the rationale, implementation and outcomes of the Food Themed Cluster. This study’s narrative inquiry that captured the insights of the NU study participants may offer guidance to other faculty, administrators or institutions considering a similar thematic curricular initiative. In addition, the literature highlighted a void in research on the topic of thematically connecting the general education curriculum with the topic of food. This study may contribute to the gap and provide understanding for educators interested in a comparable curricular initiative.

Based on the findings in this study, additional research on student perceptions of
the FTC program, their interest or lack of interest in participation and why would be beneficial to understand. This knowledge could help craft a different communication and/or curricular plan to clearly articulate the advantages of choosing the cross-disciplinary courses available in the FTC and improve participation. It would also be interesting to experiment with a model that requires each student’s participation in one of the Themed Clusters as part of the general education requirements. This study investigated food as a theme to connect a portion of the general education curriculum at NU. Several NU faculty participants are interested in a fully integrated, food themed general education option. If NU were to expand and fully integrate the food theme as a way to connect all general education requirements, this would be a fascinating model to study.

The FTC is in the first three years of implementation. A follow up study of the same program and how it has evolved in several more years with a similar research design may provide additional insights into this innovative program. It would also be interesting to see what impact the new curricular initiatives have had on enrollment. If some of the challenges were addressed, particularly assessment data it might offer insights into what prevented students from wholly embracing the FTC. In addition, a study that focuses on student perceptions; issues around interdisciplinarity and why this is difficult to implement and diffuse; the connection of general education to student’s desire to attend an institution as seen through the lens of enrollment leadership, comparative studies on diffusion of curriculum innovation in higher education with other institutions; and a study employing the food theme to connect all distribution requirements in the general education curriculum.
Conclusions

The FTC outcomes to date have been mixed according to study participants. While this food-themed curriculum is still in its infancy the student participation, retention and program completion has been lower than anticipated. Faculty respondents noted that while their students thought the idea of the FTC was interesting, they were not willing to commit to the curricular and extra-curricular requirements to complete the program. At the time of the study only three students had successfully completed the FTC. Students were confused about the benefits of the FTC and how it related to their general education requirements. Even faculty teaching in the FTC cited their focus on prioritizing distribution requirements during advising sessions instead of encouraging participation in the FTC.

Participants suggest that the connections among faculty in the FTC have been beneficial and improved their teaching through engaging with colleagues from different disciplines. FTC faculty participants were all enthusiastic about the positive experiences and intellectual stimulation they have gained from their involvement in this food-themed curriculum. They also stated that integrating food into their FTC courses positively impacted their students by adding depth, the ability to relate more effectively to complex topics and creating an ideal model to examine real world problems.

While conducting this research, the term Gastronomic Literacy emerged from a compilation of what is occurring with food and curriculum in higher education, the literature and this inquiry. For this study the term gastronomic literacy is defined as: the ability to understand the impact of food and its connective properties in our lives, society
and the world interdisciplinarily. As food in the curriculum expands perhaps gastronomic literacy will as well.

Rogers (2003) posits, “getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is difficult” (p.1). Therefore, a common problem for many individuals and organizations is how to speed up the rate of diffusion of an innovation. The adoption of new ideas is particularly challenging in higher education (Bok, 2013; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Thelin, 2011).

Thus, this study may offer insights into the challenges involved in curricular innovation. Although the FTC is still “in the midst” of fully realizing the potential impact of this relatively new program, the fact that it exists, is funded, supported by administrators and a dedicated cadre of faculty provides a model for other institutions considering similar curricular modifications to intentionally connect courses across the disciplines. In the end, this may be a cautionary tale or a new and delicious offering from the curricular feast of higher education. Most likely, it’s a bit of both.
Documents Collected from and Related to Narrative University

Anonymous (2013), *Chronicle of Higher Education*

Narrative University (2014). Admissions Department marketing materials

Narrative University (2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014) Blogs

Narrative University (2014). Food Themed Cluster website

Narrative University (2014). Themed Course Clusters Network website

Narrative University (2014). Intuitional website
References


doi:10.1080/00220670903323404


doi:10.1080/00220670903323883


doi:10.1080/00377009003284997


