Understanding the International Exchange Organization: A multi-site case study exploring how industry leaders within U.S. secondary international exchange engage in innovative practices to make ongoing sense of their mission.

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Abstract

This research study explored how industry leaders within U.S. secondary international exchange organizations engage in innovative practices to make ongoing sense of their mission. The main purpose of this study was to discover the way in which these leaders make sense of their organizational missions, especially during challenging situations, which are further complicated by the changing nature of the industry. The multi-site case study was grounded in Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995) and included a pilot interview, document review and semi-structured personal interviews with five study participants currently working in two different international exchange organizations. The study results show that all seven characteristics of sensemaking were present at some level in regards to decision making based upon the mission of the organizations. It was further shown that the changes that have occurred in the secondary international exchange industry in the past five years seemed to have increased the focus on organizational mission, and new practices have been developed to assure continued focus on this for future guidance in decision making situations. This study also supports the literature on the importance of having a clear and concise organizational mission statement which offers guidance to leaders and organizational members through decision making in challenging situations.

Keywords: secondary international student exchange, international exchange leadership, sensemaking theory, sensemaking of organizational mission
Dedication

I dedicate this to my entire family, those still here on earth to support me, and those who sent inspiration from above.

To my husband Joe, thank you for your patience and understanding through this long process.

To my daughters Chantal and Nicole, you provided more inspiration to me than you could ever imagine. I love you to infinity and back infinite times!
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The goal of this research was to gain insight into the practices of leaders in secondary international exchange organizations. This insight is important as 76,324 secondary students came to the United States from other countries for international exchange in the 2011-2012 school year alone (Council on Standards for International Educational Travel, 2013). This large number of secondary international exchange students includes two different types of exchange programs; the educational exchange program (F-1 visa) and the academic cultural exchange program (J-1 visa). The academic cultural exchange program is unique as it was developed by the United States Department of State and guided by the principles of developing understanding of other cultures, and ultimately, peace building efforts between nations. As such, the majority of organizations that sponsor these secondary international exchange students have clear mission statements focused around the ideals of intercultural understanding and acceptance. In order to be successful in this mission, it is imperative that the international exchange students, host families, host schools, and host communities all have positive experiences. However, because of the complexities of working with people from varying cultures, backgrounds, belief systems, and age groups; this can be an overwhelming task. Therefore, it seems imperative that leaders within these organizations make ongoing sense of their organizational mission and apply this understanding of the mission in the course of their daily work, especially in relation to challenging situations when important decisions are being made.

The academic cultural exchange industry is governed by the United States Department of State. In 2010 there were several changes made by the Department of State in regards to the regulations and oversight of the academic cultural exchange programs. Some of these changes included the running of criminal background checks on each host family member ages 18 and
over, the implementation of standard host family application questions and guidelines, the
necessity of monthly contact reports being completed for each exchange student and their host
family, and all local representatives being annually screened, tested, and certified by the
Department of State. These changes created much controversy within the secondary international
exchange industry and caused the organizations working in this industry to evaluate their
practices and make changes to their processes in an effort to be compliant with the new
regulations.

In addition to the regulatory changes put into effect by the Department of State, many
leaders in the academic cultural exchange industry have expressed concern over the recent rise in
social media and increased technology that allows international exchange students to
communicate with their natural family and friends in their home countries at any instant. This
instant and frequent communication has created new challenges for decision makers in these
organizations as students are often communicating with friends and family about issues and
concerns before they are being reported to the sponsoring organizations that are responsible for
their well being while they are participating in their international exchange program. Many in the
international exchange industry state that this increased layer of complexity in communications
has facilitated change in the communication practices within their own organizations, and with
their foreign partner organizations that recruit and prepare the students for their international
exchange experience.

Another complexity in the international student exchange industry in recent years is the
increased popularity of the secondary educational exchange programs (F-1 visa) where students
enroll primarily in private high schools throughout the United States. Educational exchange
programs are governed by the Department of Homeland Security and currently have far fewer
regulations than those of the academic and cultural exchange (J-1 visa). Educational exchange programs have greatly increased in popularity in recent years, rising from 6,541 program participants in 2007 to 48,636 program participants in 2011 (www.csiet.org). With fewer government regulations for sponsoring organizations to follow, increased program popularity in countries abroad, and the ability for sponsoring organizations to monetarily compensate the educational exchange host families; this increased competition has created additional challenges in the way that academic and cultural exchange organizations have had to approach their work.

Given the many recent changes in the secondary international exchange industry, and the increased popularity of international exchange programs in general; the purpose of this multi-site case study is to understand how leaders in secondary international exchange organizations describe their sensemaking of the organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry.

**Problem Statement**

Currently, there are no studies to be found in the literature that pertain to ongoing sensemaking of organizational mission within the secondary international exchange industry. However, it is likely that most, if not all, of the 65 organizations listed on the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel website (www.csiet.org) as sponsoring organizations for incoming secondary international exchange students, have organizational mission statements. Mission statements are common practice in business and non-profit organizations for good reason. Mission and vision statements in organizations create unity in the behavior of employees and allow these employees to focus on activities that create value for their customers (Rampersad, 2001). Publishing and enacting a mission statement is a particularly good practice for ensuring operational success in any type of business or non-profit organization.
However, the reality is that in many organizations, there is often a gap between what the organization states it will do (their mission), and what its employees actually do on a daily basis (Crotts, Dickson, & Ford, 2005). When dealing with the safety and well-being of teenagers who are in a new and different culture far away from their families and friends, this gap in understanding could potentially create situations that are problematic not only for the international exchange students, but for all parties involved in the international exchange experience. And, equally as important, these misunderstandings could potentially have long lasting negative effects on the perceptions of all parties that are involved in the international exchange experience. Therefore, there is a great need for organizational leaders in the international secondary exchange industry to better understand the importance of ongoing sensemaking of their organizational mission and the impact this could have on not only their own organizations, but on the multiple stakeholders and communities involved in the international exchange experience as well.

In conducting an extensive literature review, no studies were uncovered that specifically pertained to the ongoing sensemaking of organizational mission within the secondary international exchange industry. Further, there were no studies found that pertained to the secondary international exchange experience from the perspective of employees, leaders, or volunteers within this industry. As such, this multi-site case study could lead to important perspectives that could enhance the understanding of key organizational members within this industry, assist these leaders in making practical changes for the enhancement of their organizations, and pave the way for future studies in the secondary international exchange industry.
During the review of literature, there were several studies uncovered that related to the secondary international exchange experience from the international exchange participant’s perspective. Although these studies are helpful in understanding the impact international exchange can have on the participants (international exchange students), they lack the perspective of those who work within the industry and witness hundreds, if not thousands, of secondary international exchange experiences with all of the key stakeholders involved in the exchange experience. A study done with the leaders in this industry would complement the existing literature by offering another perspective through the many years of experience and retrospection that go along with this.

The vast majority of the secondary academic and cultural exchange sponsor organizations are non-profit. It could be assumed then, that those who work within this industry are working towards a mission that involves the primary goal of greater understanding or acceptance of those from other cultures. By better understanding how key decision makers understand and view the work they do, and how their understanding of the mission of their organizations might play a role in their work, it was anticipated that this study would highlight the work done within the industry and give all organizational members a better comprehension of both the challenges and importance of their work.

This work is very important to the future as secondary international exchange is growing substantially each year, both in the private and public school sectors. In fact, from 2007 to 2011, the number of combined secondary school exchange students in the public and private sector in the United States rose from 35,545 to 76,324 (www.csiet.org). The international secondary exchange experience affects many people including the sponsoring exchange organization employees and volunteers, host schools, host communities, host families, natural families of
participants, foreign partner organizations of the U.S. exchange organizations, and the exchange students (or participants) themselves. Better understanding of this industry, and the work within it that could potentially impact so many stakeholders, could lead to improved experiences for all involved parties in the future.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the way in which leaders in the secondary exchange industry make sense of their organizational mission, especially during challenging situations. This sensemaking process is even further complicated given all of the regulatory changes that occurred in 2010 and the increase in technology and social media that makes communication across the globe instantaneous. The study was grounded in the Sensemaking Theory of Karl Weick (1995) and influenced by several other researchers and scholars who have studied the value of mission and leadership.

**Research Question**

The primary research question for this study was: How do leaders in secondary international exchange organizations describe their sensemaking of the organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry?

**Significance of the Study**

With ever increasing technology, global business, immigration, and worldwide education and nonprofit organization expansion; it is more important than ever that people are inter-culturally competent. In reflecting on how the society in the United States has become much more globally focused over the past few decades, one could speculate that this trend will not only continue, but that it will become even more prevalent in the future. And, this is not happening just in the United States, but across the world. The recent increase in international activity
suggests that inter-cultural understanding and inter-cultural communications competency will be a major factor for the future success of youth globally. And, the complexities of our world becoming “smaller” and more connected also lends credence to the fact that our business, political, and organizational leaders need to make better sense of what is going on, and create better maps to help them understand the realities of working in an ever-changing environment (Ancona, 2012).

Because of this global connectedness, many secondary school students choose to participate in secondary international exchange programs in an effort to become more culturally aware and competent. According to the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (www.csiet.org), 76,324 high school aged youth came into the United States on secondary educational exchange programs during the 2011-2012 academic year. Spending a semester or academic year abroad, and living and studying in another culture, gives students the opportunity to expand their cultural knowledge and become more culturally aware and adept (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Brown & Brown, 2009). Gudykunst (1998) has done extensive research in international exchange and describes the international sojourn as a major contributor to reducing world conflict by giving the participant a value system that allows them to be a mediator between cultures. However, participating in a secondary international exchange program can be extremely stressful and students must be properly prepared for, and supported, during their exchange program in order to be successful in these experiences and create the goodwill between cultures that lies at the heart of this industry.

Secondary academic and cultural exchange programs are overseen by the United States Department of State and exist to “to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange
that assist in the development of peaceful relations” (http://eca.state.gov/about-bureau). As a part of this understanding, there is the hope that secondary international exchange experiences create change for all parties involved in the experience, and that those parties then share their experiences with others who they are in contact with. It is believed that through this sharing there is a “ripple effect” into communities worldwide that enhances the prospect of peaceful relations between nations being accomplished.

There is currently very little literature available on the topic of secondary international exchange in general. Further, there is a large gap in the literature about organizations within this industry and the practices of these organizations and their employees or volunteers in facilitating these secondary international exchange experiences. Therefore, there is little relevant data available to assist secondary international exchange leaders in the pursuit of thoroughly understanding and improving this experience for their international exchange students, host families, host schools, and host communities. Because of the lack of information about this industry currently available, as well as the drastic growth being experienced in international exchange students coming to the United States, this multi-site case study has the potential to make major contributions to the industry. Focusing on how key decision makers who work within secondary international exchange organizations make sense of their mission on an ongoing basis, especially given the recent challenges, changes and expansion in this industry, is just a small contribution to begin exploring this industry and the important work that is being done within it.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking examines how one gives meaning to their experiences and then consequently
contributes to a shared understanding with others they associate with. It looks at one’s own sense of identity, and how individuals interpret events, thus affecting their future actions. Sensemaking is an ongoing and evolving process that would allow for continual interpretation and understanding of the mission of an organization, and subsequently would provide context to reflect on the role that key members play within the culture of that organization. Weick (1989, p. 246) stated, “action creates traces which people make sense of retrospectively and use as guidelines in subsequent action”. Weick states that sensemaking has the following seven characteristics: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Understanding these seven characteristics of sensemaking, and taking them into consideration during the course of this research study, provided useful insight into how ongoing sensemaking of an organizational mission can affect the decisions and ongoing work of leaders involved in the ever changing and continually evolving secondary international exchange industry.

Figure 1.1

Sensemaking Theory
Overview of Research

A multi-site case study was employed for this research. A qualitative approach was chosen as it involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach, studying how people bring meaning to things in their natural setting (Creswell, 2007). Further, qualitative studies focus on ordinary ways of making sense of things while still pursuing the understanding of complex interrelations (Stake, 1995). The case study approach was chosen as it allows us to study issues within a bounded system, such as the specific and limited industry of secondary international exchange. As there have not been previous studies in this field, this case study will help in developing potential new theories in this line of inquiry. It was also chosen to provide the rich and holistic information that could be beneficial in more thorough understanding of the problem and depth of information for practical solutions that could potentially be implemented into the field of practice. It was also anticipated that the case study model would potentially uncover interrelationships between sensemaking of organizational mission and decision making during challenging situations.

Multiple data sources were utilized for this study. First, a pilot study was conducted to test the methodology and personal interview questions. There was also extensive document review in an effort to identify and comprehend the publicly published mission of each organization. Finally, semi-structured personal interviews were conducted with five leaders at two secondary international exchange organizations who serve in decision making roles during challenging situations.

Positionality Statement

The researcher in this study has over ten years of experience directly in the field of inquiry. Because of this factor, the researcher was aware that there was a possibility for personal
bias in the study. Because of this, the research was conducted in an open and accepting manner, being mindful of not leading the participants in any specific direction, but rather allowing for authentic voices of the participants to come through. The role of the researcher was that of a participant observer, carefully documenting the data uncovered in the study and not changing or modifying this data in any way. The utilization of a pilot study prior to document review and personal interviews also allowed the researcher to become aware of the potential for personal bias at each stage of the data collection process in order to further limit the possibility for bias.

**Limitations/Assumptions**

It is important to note that in qualitative studies, and specifically in cases studies, there are a number of limitations that can occur. Because of the scope of the information gained in a qualitative study, this study was conducted with two organizations and five study participants. This was purposefully done in an effort to complete the study in a timely basis. Although there was great depth of information gathered during the study, it must be realized that this is a relatively small study that shows limited perspective. One of the greatest criticisms of case studies in particular, is the difficulty in achieving external validation, or information that can be utilized and applied across the industry in its entirety. This is certainly a limitation in this study as well, but it is an important first step into the field of inquiry and creates opportunities for future research.

It is also important to note that the researcher has several years of experience in the industry being studied, and therefore has the potential for bias. Creswell (2007) reminds us that qualitative research is often conducted in an effort to seek understanding of the circumstances in which we work or live, so this is not unusual. In order to protect against the possibility of
personal bias, the researcher only utilized sites and participants in which there was no prior experience with or prior knowledge of.

This study was designed to include document review and personal interviews. Although it may have been advantageous to also include field observations, this was not included in the study due to the researchers’ current position in the industry, and the high likelihood that this type of access would have been denied.

Assumptions were also made during the course of this study. First, it was assumed that the study participants would be honest and forthright. Open ended questions were asked in the personal interviews in an effort to elicit the beliefs, behaviors and sensemaking of each study participant. This is in line with a constructivist approach to qualitative research, but the data is completely reliant upon the disclosure of study participants. In order to protect against receiving partial or false information, anonymity and confidentiality of participation was assured. It was also assumed that participants would be aware of their organizational mission and be able to respond accordingly to the personal interview questions.

Conclusion

Weick’s Sensemaking Theory (1995) provided a comprehensive lens for viewing the perspectives of key decision makers involved in secondary international exchange in the United States. Understanding how these leaders make ongoing sense of the mission of the organizations they work with provided great insight that could affect the experiences for key stakeholders involved in future secondary international exchange programs. Of particular interest, the research question not only addressed the general sensemaking of the organizational mission, but also the ongoing aspect of this understanding, as well as the enactment and retrospection involved in the sensemaking process during particularly challenging situations.
By utilizing a multi-site case study, this research gained multiple perspectives from key leaders and decision makers at two different secondary student exchange organizations to add further depth and understanding to this important issue. Reflecting on these perspectives adds significant value to the sparse literature available within this industry, as well as opens the path to further studies within this industry for the future.
**Definition of Key Terms:**

Leaders/Key Organizational Members: Those who are involved in a leadership or decision-making role within their organization.

Mission: The reason an organization exists and what its primary goal is (Rampersad, 2001).

Secondary International Exchange: Secondary school students who travel to the United States to study at an accredited public or private high school for the purpose of fostering global understanding through educational and cultural exchange (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

Sensemaking: To literally “make sense” of an experience. A cognitive activity to frame situations retrospectively, based on past information or experiences (Weick, 1975).

Stakeholders: Those who are involved in or affected by the actions of an organization. In the context of this research study, this could include, but is not limited to, international exchange students, host families, host school officials, foreign partners of the sponsoring organizations, and the natural parents of exchange students.

Vision: A long term dream or image of the desired future (Rampersad, 2001).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review focuses on better understanding of Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995), why sensemaking and understanding of an organizational mission is so important, the role of leaders or decision makers in relation to their organizational mission, and then concludes by looking at the impact of secondary international exchange. Reviewing and understanding the literature on each of these subject matters will serve to highlight the overall importance of the research question and provide a strong foundation and perspective for this case study.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking, simply put, is a way that people structure the unknown so they are better able to react to it (Ancona, 2012). It is a way to view the ongoing reality of our situations, try to create order of them, and then make sense of them retrospectively (Weick, 1993). The questions that guide the central components of sensemaking are: “What or who is it?”, “What does it mean?”, and “How should I respond?” (Harris, 1994, p. 309).

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking has seven key characteristics. These characteristics are:

1. Grounded in identity construction
2. Retrospective
3. Enactive of sensible environments
4. Social
5. Ongoing
6. Focused on and by extracted cues
7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy
In order to fully comprehend sensemaking theory, one should examine and understand all seven components.

Weick stated that “sensemaking begins with a sensemaker” (Weick, 1995, p. 18). This is the idea behind the first characteristic of being grounded in identity construction. Sensemaking affects how people construct their identities, which results in how they act in response to any given situation (Maitlis, 2005). Who we are shapes the way in which we see the world, and this is continually being redefined with all of our new experiences (Mills et al., 2010). Understanding this is especially relevant in a dynamic and changing work environment where consistency in decision making is important. One must understand who they are before they can know what they think and what they should do in any given situation (Weick, 1995). However, identities are constantly shifting and changing based upon each individuals constant interactions and experiences. And, an individuals’ concept of themselves can change dependent upon other peoples’ opinion of them. Therefore, people will think of themselves as something in particular, such as a leader or a follower, in any given situation, and they will continue to think in that particular way as they make sense of the situation at hand. This tendency can facilitate a tendency to lock people into very limited options in sensemaking (Weick, 2002).

Sensemaking is also retrospective. Each of us lives in a reality that is constantly changing as we try to make sense of the world around us. Retrospection allows us to create order and make sense of what occurs (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Having clarity on values also gives one a sense of what these experiences mean (Weick, 1995). By using retrospection, decisions can be made more meaningful and put into a larger context, where the past and future can both be considered in any given course of action (Weick, 1995). In this sense, sensemaking is a comparative process (Mills et al., 2010). It is this constant ebb and flow of retrospection, as well
as putting the current situation into context, that allows people to make sense of their situations based upon past experiences.

Action is also a key component of sensemaking. However, the activity or action around sensemaking is always in respect to the environment one is currently experiencing (Mills et al., 2010). In this sense, sensemaking is about how actions and personal interpretations interplay and materialize (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2005). The characteristic of being enactive of sensible environments incorporates this thought. People tend to think while they are doing (or being active), and then they develop solutions and explanations while they are experimenting with and talking about different ideas. Action and talk are cyclical (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2005) and actions subsequently construct the environment in which one continues to make sense (Weick, 1995). In this way, sensemakers will actually construct what they interpret. The sensemaking is enacted and this social activity creates the environment of the organization (Brown, 2000).

Sensemaking is also social. Social processes aid people in interpretation. Sense is created through conversations and trying to determine possible meanings (Weick, 2002). Even in a monologue situation, one presumes a certain audience, and the monologue changes as the perspective audience changes (Weick, 1995). Communication is an ongoing social process which allows people to find their meanings and understand their circumstances in order to predict a certain reality (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2005 and Harris, 1994). However, the social aspect of sensemaking is not just limited to conversation. It also includes physical and/or symbolic interactions such as routines, rules, procedures, symbols and language choices (Mills et al., 2010).

Sensemaking is also ongoing; it never starts or stops (Weick, 1995). It considers the past, present and future all at the same time (Hall, 2011). There is no “timeout” from sensemaking, it
is a process of continually producing and sustaining shared meanings (Weick, 2011). It is an ongoing process that finds one in the middle of complex situations which they constantly try to sort out and continually revise (Weick, 2005). Sensemaking involves moving between the simple and complex, coming up with plausible meaning and testing and shifting meanings based upon results and reality checks with others (Ancona, 2012). It is a recurring cycle of daily events during which clear patterns emerge (Rouleau, 2005). Sensemaking is the process of exploring an ever-changing set of data, interpreting this data based on personal experiences, coming up with plausible explanations, acting on these interpretations and continually looking for cues to better enhance ones’ understanding and outcomes (Ancona, 2012).

Focusing on and extracting cues is the sixth characteristic of sensemaking. The cues that one extracts from any situation will enable them to better develop a sense of meaning. However, because of past experiences, people tend to look for cues that already fit their understanding, and therefore they are vulnerable to overlooking crucial pieces of information (Weick, 2002). This extraction of cues makes the process of sensemaking very quick, by keeping focused on simple familiar structures that center around outcomes rather than processes (Weick, 1995). Because of this, context is a crucial component. Context not only affects what is extracted as cues, but it affects the interpretation of those cues as well (Weick, 1995). And, once one has context and cues, they use their past experiences to try to understand what is happening and what should be done in any given situation.

The final characteristic of sensemaking is plausibility over accuracy. When one is searching for meaning, any explanation is better than no explanation (Weick, 2002). Sensemaking is not about the truth, or about being accurate. It is about the continual redrafting of emerging stories and sustaining motivation of plausibility (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2005). People, in
general, have a need to filter information and come to quick conclusions. The easiest way to do this is to take a cue from their past, and compare this with the present cue, to interpret and elaborate on plausible meanings (Weick, 1995). This allows people to separate information quickly and filter meaningful information out of large volumes of data. Plausibility also allows one to maintain motivation and action (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2005). This sense of action further allows one to move on and search for meaning in new situations.

As clearly outlined above, sensemaking is a complex process that happens very quickly. Organizational leaders, who can struggle with daily complexities and help others to struggle with them as well, can create shared meanings through the process of sensemaking (Weick, 2002). This is especially important during times of crisis as sensemaking during small issues can help to manage or prevent larger issues (Weick, 1988). In a global environment filled with increased complexity and unpredictability, it is clear then that sensemaking is critical for improved understanding (Ancona, 2012). And, in the ever changing and rapidly evolving industry of secondary international exchange, global understanding is critical to future success for all stakeholders involved. This is precisely why the ongoing sensemaking of organizational mission by leaders within secondary international exchange organizations is such a crucial area of research to explore for current literature.

The Importance of a Mission

One of the primary purposes of a mission statement is to inspire and promote commitment towards an organizations core purpose and values (Simons, 1995). A mission unites an organization and reminds its people about the purpose of their work (Brown, Yoshioka, & Munoz, 2004). A mission includes the identity of the organization, why the organization exists, what its’ primary goal is, and who its’ most important stakeholders are (Rampersad, 2001). The
mission guides everything from developing strategy, defining success, searching for new opportunities, deciding where to allocate funds, and the solutions to pleasing key stakeholders (Scott, Jaffee, & Tobe, 1993). It keeps leaders focused on where they currently are and where they need to go in order to move their organization forward (George, 2003). Further, a well-defined mission helps determine the definition of success within an organization and gives leaders a guide to help steer their employees towards continually fulfilling that mission (Brown et al., 2004).

Having a shared purpose and values can have a tremendous impact on an organization (George, 2003), providing meaning and purpose as well as defining appropriate courses of action for the organization and its members (Denison & Mishra, 1995). Commitment to a mission is seen as a critical component for high performance (McManus, 2000), engaging the employee through a sense of purpose and motivating employees to go the “extra mile” in serving their stakeholders (George, 2003). Missions create unity in employee behavior and lead people to act with focus, creating greater value for key stakeholders (Rampersad, 2001). Having a clear mission also helps employees to perform better when under stress as they can focus their activity and be strategic, rather than reactive, in their actions (Scott et al., 1993).

As easy as all of this may sound, it is actually very difficult to execute (Crotts et al., 2005). In fact, it is quite commonplace for employees to feel there is a gap between the stated organizational mission and the actual daily practices of their organization (Ekmekci, 2012). This gap in understanding often leads employees to make assumptions about what is acceptable in their work (Simons, 1995). One way to avoid this is to make sure there are key elements of the mission written into each employees performance objectives (Calfee, 1993). It is also imperative for organizational leaders to make sure their decisions and actions are consistent with the
organizational mission statement (McManus, 2000). This consistency gives clear direction that enhances the ability for all organizational members to better understand and act according to the organizational mission.

Interesting to note, mission and vision can create both order and chaos; order because it offers direction, but chaos because it challenges the way that people think about their organization (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). In order to capitalize on this, a vision or mission must have a guiding philosophy as well as a tangible image, or vivid description, which makes the mission more engaging (Collins & Porras, 1991). It should be a statement of intention that directs management and influences their perceptions of key issues (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). In challenging situations then, this offers a way to focus attention and decide which actions are most strategic, or most in line with the organizational philosophy.

Having a shared mission and values is completely reliant on the sensemaking of all organizational members (Thomson & Hall, 2011). However, ensuring this continual focus on the organizational mission, and using sensemaking of this throughout the operations of an organization, is a responsibility that falls directly on leadership to execute on a daily basis (Thomson & Hall, 2011). The process of sensemaking of an organizational mission offers the roadmap to bring a team together and enable shared actions (Ancona, 2012) which will ultimately result in better experiences for all stakeholders involved. Sensemaking, in essence, leads an organization to view relationships with their stakeholders in a certain way that influences all of their interactions with them (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). At the most basic level, sensemaking provides a useful way to uncover processes that contribute to organizational outcomes (Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). Since sensemaking is seen as a key component to successful experiences and outcomes for leaders and their respective organizations, it is essential
to understand more about the impact these leaders can have on their organizations through this process.

The Role of Leaders

Leadership is a very large and well studied area of inquiry. For the purpose of this study, the impact of leadership (or key organizational members) will only be explored as it pertains to the understanding of organizational mission and how that might play out in the decision making process that is performed by this highly influential group. Peter Senge (1990) stated that “Few acts of leadership have a more enduring impact on an organization than building a foundation of purpose and core values” (Senge, 1990, p. 10). This component of leadership is one that will be of the most value in better understanding the impact of the key organizational members’ ongoing sensemaking of organizational mission and the impact this has when dealing with challenging situations that can affect so many stakeholders.

Although there are many traits of great leaders, this research will focus on just a few. Kouzes & Posner (2002) have focused their work on five practices of exemplary leadership. In the third practice, inspiring a shared vision, it is clear that good leaders keep the overall purpose of the organization in view, continually sharing this with others as well as basing their actions on this shared purpose (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). This is an important concept as most organizations are quite complicated and there are typically mixed messages within organizations about expectations and direction of the organization. This is why it is believed to be especially important for leaders to continually keep the focus on what the mission of their organization truly is (Crotts et al., 2005). Leaders need to have the key qualities of designers, teachers, and stewards; who build a shared vision, challenge current ways of thinking and foster new patterns or systems of thinking (Senge, 1990). These leadership traits help leaders to take the
understanding and actions of individuals within their organizations and bring them together to work towards the best interest of the organization as a whole. Great leaders also contribute their own unique insight to situations by their past experiences in the industry and their organization. Based on this knowledge and experience, they help to create conditions that allow others to create a common vision, giving greater direction to the entire organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Colins and Porras (1991) felt so strongly about this that they stated, “the one universal requirement of effective leaders – is to catalyze a clear and shared vision of the organization and to secure commitment to and vigorous pursuit of that vision” (Collins & Porras, 1991, p. 51).

In leading an organization towards excellence, it is clear that the leaders play the most crucial role in understanding and managing the mission of an organization (Ekmekci, 2012). These organizational leaders must be deeply rooted in the mission or vision themselves in order to pass this on in the organizations they work in (Collins & Porras, 1991). Most employees want to understand their organization’s purpose and they want to feel like they are making a contribution to that purpose. Therefore, it is an essential part of a leader’s job to actively communicate and act out the organizational values and mission on an ongoing basis (Simons, 1995). Middle managers specifically play a critical role in mediating the sensemaking of top managers and employees alike, in order to affect future understanding and actions (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Doing this helps to create a shared identity and a shared meaning, or a purpose for everyone’s work within the organization. Both shared meaning and shared identity are fundamental for sensemaking, which allows a group of people to construct meaning and therefore better understand their combined experiences (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). This is especially imperative in the climate of continuous change that is currently happening in the secondary international exchange industry, as well as many other industries. Being able to make
sense of the relationships between multiple sources of information, while remaining focused on a strong mission and direction, is a key leadership skill to move any organization towards success (Moore, 2013). And, leadership vision during times of change influences the perception of the past, present and future so that the ideal state can be achieved (Gioia, Corley, & Fabbri, 2002). This is why key leaders and decision makers need to make ongoing sense of their organizational mission and enact this understanding throughout the course of their work, especially during those challenging situations that require important decision making skills. In the industry of secondary international exchange, these decisions affect many key stakeholders, and can have long lasting effects on the perceptions and attitudes of all involved.

**The Impact of Secondary International Exchange**

Karen R. Hughes, a past Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy at the U.S. Department of State said “Just as previous generations needed basic literacy in the three R’s, the next generation will need technological and global literacy skills to be competitive in our increasingly diverse and interdependent world – and study abroad has become the foundation of global literacy” (Hughes, 2006). Hughes goes on to state that she believes international student exchanges have been the single most effective public diplomacy tool for the past fifty years, resulting in beneficial change for the host country and the participants themselves. Hughes believes a large component of this experience is the ability for people to learn alongside us and then draw their own conclusions and opinions about the United States. She further states that people within the United States should continue to remain open to this; by being open to new cultures, ideas and opportunities.

This same notion is reinforced by Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005) whose study from 2001-2003 concluded that living in another culture changed one’s stereotypes and offered
alternative views of the world. Their study further concluded that past participants of international exchange experiences were more aware of cultural differences and more compassionate in their responses to these cultural differences. International educational exchange, they believe, is a personally enriching experience that shapes a better rounded and more culturally sensitive individual, who is more aware of themselves and others (Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005). Their study concluded that successful international exchange participants were better able to work in dissimilar environments, understanding and appreciating their own cultures as well as the cultures of others (Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005).

In the first-ever large scale study to explore long term benefits of study abroad, Dwyer & Peters (2004), tabulated results from over 3400 past participants of international exchange. This study concluded that international exchange is a personally defining experience that has life-long impact on the participants. The most significant changes noted in the study were an increase in participant maturity level, increased self-confidence, better understanding of cultural values and biases, and a lasting impact on world views (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Further, this study showed that nearly half of all international exchange participants went on to engage in international work or volunteerism after their international exchange experience. Understanding where these participants end up working leads us to another important aspect of facilitating successful exchange experiences. In their chosen field of international work and volunteerism, these past participants could have long lasting effects on others who participate in international work and volunteerism in the future, thus creating a ripple effect that spans out to many others over the course of many years.

Brown & Brown (2009) also studied the transformative potential of participating in international educational exchange. Their study showed that the increased cultural competence
that is gained through international exchange transforms participants into bridges between cultures, being able to understand and appreciate both cultures, and thus being able to mediate between those cultures upon their return home (Brown & Brown, 2009). Because of the effects of this factor alone, Brown & Brown (2009) concluded that international student exchange could make a major contribution in the reduction of world conflict. This notion is also supported in a study by Bachner & Zeutschel (2009) that concluded that participation in international educational exchange not only opens one’s mind to new ideas, but it increases one’s level of tolerance, respect for other nations, desire for peace, interest in international affairs and level of social involvement. This study further suggested that the ongoing effects of international educational exchange not only enhanced the participant’s international perspective, but also supported the prospect of international peace and cooperation in the future, simply by the influence these participants had on other people (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009).

Although most past international exchange participants report that their exchange experience was both personally satisfying and successful, it is clear that the impact of international exchange extends beyond the participants themselves. In the Bachner & Zeutschel (2009) study, the host family experience was quoted as the most important and influential aspect of an international exchange program. It has been suggested in another study by Olberding & Olberding (2010), that the “ripple effects” of international educational exchange are about four times greater than the direct number of international exchange participants themselves. Additionally, the Olberding & Olberding (2010) study concluded that the international exchange experience might have an even larger impact on indirect participants such as program chaperones, host families, host schools, and host communities; than it has on the participants themselves. This study concluded that the indirect participants in international exchange, such as
those listed above, also increased their knowledge and understanding of cultures, which resulted in a greater interest in peacebuilding efforts by all affected parties (Olberding & Olberding, 2010).

Because of the long-term effects of international exchange on participants and all other stakeholders involved with the international exchange experience, as well as our increasingly complex world, it seems imperative to future international relations that these international exchange efforts continue successfully. And, in order to be successful in this industry in an effort to increase international understanding and acceptance, the work conducted by the sponsoring organizations in this industry needs to be done with some degree of understanding, foresight, and consistency. It would seem than, that to be successful in this effort, key organizational members and leaders within this industry would need to understand the importance of their organizational mission, and commit themselves and others to keeping focused on this mission during the course of their work, especially in the challenging situations that occur regularly because of the changing nature of this industry.

Conclusion

As shown by the literature, secondary international exchange is an important public diplomacy effort that can affect a multitude of stakeholders across the world. With the goal of increasing international peace and understanding, it is an important area of inquiry, with very little literature currently available to assist leaders in this industry. To be successful, key organizational members in this industry need to have great clarity in the importance of their mission, especially while making decisions in the midst of the multitude of challenging situations that occur within this industry. Being focused on an organizational mission allows these key organizational members to drive the actions of all organizational members towards a common
purpose, being focused on those values that affect their key stakeholders. A clear understanding of mission should allow for strategic decision making, which is driven by the sensemaking of not only the organizational leaders, but all organizational members. Being focused on this process of sensemaking, should then drive the actions of the organization and its’ members towards the fulfillment of their mission. Understanding that sensemaking is an ongoing process of extracting cues and looking for plausible meanings based on past experiences and current environments, sensemaking of the organizational mission is therefore a key component of leading secondary international exchange organizations into the fulfillment of increased public diplomacy for future generations.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to draw upon the information gained during the literature review, and expand this into an understanding of how this particular research study was conducted. To accomplish this, the chapter will include information on the research methodology, design, data collection and data analysis processes. The chapter will conclude with information on quality assurance measures taken throughout the study.

Methodology

To understand how key decision makers within United States international exchange organizations describe their ongoing sensemaking of their organizational mission amidst challenging situations, a multi-sight case study was conducted. Using data from two separate organizations within the secondary international exchange industry allowed the researcher to look at different organizational missions, and explored how sensemaking of these missions is described and enacted upon in different environments. By utilizing this specific methodology, and interviewing key organizational members directly, the data gathered reflects authenticity of voice and depth of information, coming from varying perspectives and sources.

Making ongoing sense of organizational mission can be a very individualized matter which not only draws upon a persons’ past experiences, but also their understanding of cues and actions. The researcher conducted document reviews and semi-structured personal interviews to come to a better understanding of both the published organizational mission, and how key organizational members make ongoing sense of this; as well as explore how this understanding might subsequently influence the key organizational members’ actions when making decisions in challenging situations.
Research Design

A descriptive multi-site case study using qualitative methods was chosen as it allows participants voices to come through in a relevant and authentic manner. A qualitative study takes an interpretive, naturalistic approach, attempting to interpret phenomena through the people who make sense of it in their natural setting (Creswell, 2007). A key component of qualitative research lies in the perspectives of the subjects involved in the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Qualitative research begins with a worldview and a theoretical lens which inquires into an issue. In this study, Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995) was chosen. During the course of the study, data was collected in the form of words, and analyzed through an inductive process that constructed a picture of the issue at hand (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Research Tradition

A multi-site case study was chosen as it allows a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the research problem from multiple perspectives (Lewis, 2003). Case studies look at issues that occur within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007) such as a specific setting or industry. In this research study, this bounded system was the secondary international exchange industry. Case studies involve detailed, in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). By utilizing a multi-site case study, rather than a single case study, there is more valid generalization of the study results (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

The multi-site case study was also chosen as it offers different perspectives (Creswell, 2007). This study was also designed utilizing the logic of replication, repeating the procedures for each participant and study site to add depth of information (Yin, 2003). This research tradition ties nicely into the theoretical framework, having been utilized in prior practice by Karl Weick. Finally, the case study method allowed the participants voices to come through and
provide depth and breadth of information, along with differing perspectives, that provided the most thorough and beneficial information for future leadership within the secondary international exchange industry.

**Role of Researcher**

The researcher who conducted this study has spent over ten years working within the secondary international exchange industry, both as a field supervisor and subsequently as an operations manager. By working within these different roles, the researcher noticed inconsistencies in the awareness, understanding, behavior, and decision making of employees and volunteers involved in the secondary international exchange industry. Believing this discrepancy could lead to inconsistent exchange experiences for all stakeholders involved, it is an issue that intrigued the researcher and warranted more thorough investigation into this problem of practice. As a practitioner in this field, there may have been insights that were gained through data collection and analysis that an outside researcher may have missed. However, because of this personal experience, the researcher was also aware that there could be some personal bias inherent in this study. The researcher was careful to remain objective, and conduct interviews and document reviews with an open and accepting attitude; with the objective of relating the perspectives of the participants clearly and accurately, and without personal bias. The utilization of a pilot study prior to conducting document review and personal interviews allowed the researcher to be aware of any potential for bias during each stage of the data collection. Further, triangulation of data through personal interviews with multiple participants and document review of two different organizations also limited the potential for bias.

In a further effort to control bias, the researcher was careful to assume the role of a participant observer, thoroughly documenting the data presented by participants and not
changing or modifying this data in any way. The data analysis process included review of audio tapes, field notes, document review spreadsheets and cross checks between all of this data to further ensure the limitation of personal bias in the study.

**Recruitment and Access**

Participants were recruited through a referral process involving contacts the researcher had within the secondary international exchange industry. Initial contact was made through e-mail, and once a potential study participant responded, all communications continued in email form until the personal interview was conducted. Full disclosure on study considerations was shared with prospective study participants and a standard informed consent form was utilized. There was no incentive for participation, except the sharing of study results for those study participants who wished to utilize this in their future business practices. The identity of study participants and their respective organizations is held strictly confidential and is protected through the use of pseudonyms. Fair treatment of all participants, and ensuring no harm to them, was strictly adhered to at all times during the study. All forms associated with the recruitment and access process can be found in Appendixes A-D.

**Study Participants**

Participants were chosen for this study using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling of key organizational members working with two different organizations gave this study the ability to show different perspectives of this problem (Creswell, 2007). Key organizational members, who work with secondary international exchange students, host family members, and school and community members impacted by secondary international exchange in the United States, were sought through personal referrals. In all cases, these key organizational members were employees of their respective international exchange organization (not volunteers).
Participants were initially approached through referral, taking into consideration that the study was aimed at showing ordinary cases within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007).

The original design of the study allowed for a maximum of three key organizational members within two different secondary exchange organizations to participate. This would allow the researcher the opportunity to gather sufficient information from those who share common attributes (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the design of utilizing members from two different organizations ensured depth and variety of information and allowed for better validation and generalization of study results.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval through Northeastern University, potential participants were sought for this study by utilizing personal references. The initial contact with prospective participants was through email correspondence. Once potential participants responded to the initial email request from the researcher, an informed consent form was sent for their review. After review of the informed consent, and a follow-up email from the researcher to answer any questions, personal interviews were then scheduled at the convenience of each participant. Although email solicitations were sent to potential participants in five different secondary international exchange organizations, response was only received by members of two organizations.

Final participation in this study included five different leaders, who work at two different organizations in the secondary international exchange industry in decision making roles. The researcher intended to recruit a total of six participants, to include three participants each from two different organizations. However, at one organization, there were only two people who served in a decision making capacity during challenging situations. Therefore, no other employees or volunteers at this organization would qualify for participation in this study and the
decision was made to proceed with five participants. It was also preferred in the original research design that each participant has at least five years of experience in the secondary exchange industry so as to have a personal basis of understanding for the retrospective nature of the data being sought.

The first organization with study participants is a medium sized organization working in both the cultural secondary exchange field (J-1 visa program) and the academic secondary exchange field (F-1 visa program). Both participants from this organization had less than five years experience in their current positions, but were well aware of the changes in the industry, as well as how their predecessors had made decisions in the past. Additionally, they had related experience prior to joining this particular organization.

The second organization with study participants is a large sized organization working in the cultural secondary exchange field (J-1 visa program, as well as in other types of adult exchange programs. The participants from this organization all had several years of experience working strictly in the cultural secondary exchange industry.

The following table highlights the participants involved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Industry Experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Under 5</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Over 5</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Over 25</td>
<td>Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Over 30</td>
<td>Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Over 25</td>
<td>Executive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected through document reviews and personal interviews. The data collection took place in three rough phases: document review, a pilot interview and semi-structured personal interviews. Although these were originally planned to be linear phases of research, these phases did overlap with each other due to the availability of study participants and discovery of additional documents for review. This subsection will highlight information and processes associated with each of the phases of research conducted.

**Document Review**

This phase of the research study included the review of written materials, websites, and social media sites of the organizations in an effort to document their published mission statement(s). According to Butin (2010, p. 99), “Because documents are in fact such a pervasive part of our lives, they can offer a wealth of unanticipated data”. Because organizational missions are vastly considered public documents, this documentation represents what the organizational persona is to the public. In addition, the document review phase allowed the researcher to better understand specific organizational lingo and be informed about the organizational mission in an effort to engage and better understand study participants in open discussion during the personal interviews conducted in phase II (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Once study participation was confirmed by the participants, the researcher began the process of document review by going to the appropriate website(s), and searching the site(s) for anything related to organizational mission, philosophy or vision. At the same time, social media sites of each organization were searched for, found and reviewed. Each time this was done, the mission and vision statements were extracted from these sources and entered into a document summary form (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The exact wording of each published statement was
documented, and the location of each source was then noted along with this on the form. When all sites and documents had been reviewed, the information on the document summary forms was transferred onto a document review spreadsheet.

The following figure highlights the documents and/or social media sites the researcher either self-discovered or was directed to by study participants. The review of documentation in this phase of the study was limited to publicly available information about the organizational mission, philosophy and/or vision.

Table 3.2 Documents Reviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document or Site Reviewed</th>
<th>Organization A</th>
<th>Organization B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Signature Block of Participants</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youtube</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordpress</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Handbook</td>
<td>Not available for review</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pilot Interview**

The pilot interview process allowed the researcher to practice the interview questions with a key decision maker within a secondary international exchange organization not utilized in the final study. This pilot interview took place in person, while the researcher was in the process
of recruiting study participants. The pilot interview allowed the researcher an opportunity to test the structure of the interview and gauge the quality of the research questions, as well as to practice the skill of remaining neutral throughout the interview in an effort to limit the possibility of researcher bias (Seidman, 2006). It also allowed the researcher to practice the ability to increase the possibility of open dialogue and reflective sharing needed for Phase III of this study.

The pilot interview was conducted with an Executive level employee of a mid-sized cultural and academic exchange organization (J-1 visa program and F-1 visa program) that was not chosen for inclusion in the main research study. This study participant has over twenty years of experience within the secondary cultural exchange industry (J-1 visa program), and over ten years of experience working within the secondary academic exchange industry (F-1 visa program). The purpose of the pilot interview was to gauge the effectiveness of both the research question and personal interview questions, as well as to gauge the time allotment for future interviews. The interview was conducted in person so the researcher could also gauge the effectiveness of the semi-structured interview process, and put into practice proper interviewing skills to assure personal bias would be as limited as possible during the personal interview process with final study participants.

The pilot interview was conducted on May 1, 2014 and lasted approximately 25 minutes. Upon completion of this interview, all interview questions remained in their original format as they seemed to be appropriate and effective for the study at hand, as well as meeting the study’s time parameters being proposed to participants. Through this practice, the researcher also uncovered subtle nuances in interviewing, such as verbal agreement with statements and the interjection of personal comments that were noted to abstain from during the personal interviews with final study participants. This was deemed important due to the researcher not wanting to
lead the interviews in any given direction, and limiting the possibility for personal bias to enter into the data collection.

**Personal Interviews**

The personal interview has been defined as “the main road to multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p. 64). This phase of the study included personal interviews conducted with key organizational members within secondary international exchange organizations, to understand how they make ongoing sense of their organizational mission statements, and how this potentially influences the decisions they make in challenging situations. Each of the study participants had unique perspectives to share that added to the depth of this study. The personal interview allowed for clarity of information in that unclear or incomplete answers were immediately followed-up on by the researcher (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). In all cases, interviews were conducted via telephone, based upon the preferences of the study participants. These interviews lasted approximately 25-35 minutes each and were recorded on a hand held digital recording device. The following table shows the date and length of each personal interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>App. Interview Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>May 9, 2014</td>
<td>25 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A</td>
<td>May 15, 2014</td>
<td>35 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>May 29, 2014</td>
<td>35 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td>June 6, 2014</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>June 11, 2014</td>
<td>35 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The primary research question for this study was: How do leaders in secondary international exchange organizations describe their sensemaking of the organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry? This overarching research question led to the following questions that were utilized during the personal interview process:

- Interview Question 1: How did you approach challenging situations five years ago?
- Interview Question 2: Has this approach changed in the last five years, and if so, how?
- Interview Question 3: When facing a challenging situation, what factors are you considering in your decision making? Is your organizational mission ever part of the equation?
- Interview Question 4: Assume we are five years in the future. Your organization has no major challenges for the year. What does this ideal look like and how did you get there?

The interview questions were designed utilizing an inductive approach, with an orientation towards uncovering information about the past, present and future. The mission statement was intentionally left out of the content of the first few questions in an effort to have this genuinely emerge from the participants, rather than lead them in any given direction.

Upon completion of each interview, the researcher personally transcribed each individual interview from both the tape recording of the interview, as well as handwritten notes that were taken as a back-up source in case of poor audio quality. This allowed the researcher to become intimately familiar with the interview answers, in an effort to prepare for data analysis.
Data Analysis

For the document review portion of this research, the researcher gathered information from organizational publications, websites, and social media sites that document the organizational mission as shown in the previous table (Table 3.2). All statements found that pertained to organizational mission, philosophy and/or vision, were recorded verbatim onto a document summary form (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The document summary forms were then utilized to review, summarize and clarify the most important aspects of each statement from each document. Afterwards, the organizational mission, philosophy and/or vision portion of each document was synthesized and added to an excel spreadsheet for the sake of comparison. Upon completion of the spreadsheet, the researcher examined this for content, clarity, and consistency. Patterns were noted, and all consistencies and inconsistencies were documented accordingly. This pattern continued into the final phase of the personal interviews.

Personal interviews were an integral aspect of this research. During the interview phase, the researcher digitally recorded the interview with the prior permission of each participant. Hand written notes were also taken by the researcher as a back-up source to achieve an accurate account and thorough recording of the original data in case of recorder malfunction or poor audio quality. Upon completion of each personal interview, the researcher self-transcribed the interviews from a combination of the audio recordings and hand written notes. These transcriptions were then used as the starting point for data analysis of the interviews.

When reviewing the personal interview data for analysis, a general inductive analysis method was utilized. Stake (1995) suggests that one should use a process of categorical aggregation, looking for the frequency of themes, as well as looking at individual instances. Lincoln & Guba (1985) believe that coding, categorization and analyses of themes utilizing
Inductive data analysis enables researchers to make sense of the volume of data they handle. This was especially important given the large volume of data that was generated through the personal interviews. To begin the data analysis for interviews, the researcher read through each individual transcript, highlighting key phrases in each answer. Once completed, the researcher then looked at each interview question across all interviews, re-read the transcripts of each personal interview for that question, and grouped common themes that were found through the highlighting. This action led the researcher to code the data for each question.

When reviewing and analyzing the personal interview data, coding was utilized. Codes are essentially labels for assigning meaning to information so the researcher can quickly find, organize and disseminate information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A two level approach was utilized in this study with first level coding to summarize segments of data, and subsequent pattern coding to group this data into smaller themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For each question, similar answers were grouped together and assigned a code that aggregated the idea presented. From there, a pattern emerged for each question that could then be analyzed and reported. This process allowed the researcher to continue to review and analyze the data in an easier format, which allowed for the development of themes and findings.

Figure 3.1 Data Analysis Process for Interviews
Data Storage

To ensure protection of human subjects and provide confidentiality, pseudonyms were utilized for all study participants as well as their respective organizations. The list of pseudonyms is only known by the researcher, and is kept in a password protected computer file in the personal computer of the researcher. The personal interview transcriptions are also kept in the same password protected file, with the hand written copies being kept in a locked drawer in the researchers’ home office. These files are only accessible to the researcher, with the password being confidential and unknown to all others.

As guided by best practices in research, all notes and transcriptions will be kept for three years after the successful defense of this thesis. At the appropriate time, all information will be destroyed by shredding or by destroying of the originals as well as any copies.

Trustworthiness

The key to trustworthiness in any qualitative study is triangulation of data. Triangulation is best described as use of multiple methods, sources, and/or theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2007). Because this was a multi-site case study, utilizing two separate secondary international exchange organizations and five different study participants; there was already a degree of validity built into the study design (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). This is an
important element as the researcher’s professional background and biases could potentially influence the perceptions of the data collected, and this study design also assists in minimizing the possibility of bias. Additionally, the use of document review, as well as personal interviews, is another effort to increase the validity of data obtained by utilizing multiple sources of data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The use of audio recording in the semi-structured interview style provided yet another measure to ensure validity (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009), as the participants authentic voice could be heard and recorded for analysis.

Creswell (2007) focuses on eight strategies to ensure validation in qualitative research. These strategies are:

- Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field
- Triangulation – multiple and different sources or methods
- Peer review or debriefing
- Negative case analysis
- Clarifying researcher bias
- Member checking
- Rich, thick description, allowing readers to make decision on transferability
- External audits

Of these eight, Creswell (2007) recommends that researchers utilize a minimum of two in any study. This particular research study utilized three of these methods; clarifying researcher bias, triangulation of data from multiple sources and/or methods, and the use of rich, thick description to allow readers to make decisions about transferability. Creswell (2007) also addresses issues of reliability in qualitative research. By utilizing audio recordings of the personal interviews, and
with the researcher personally transcribing these interviews and further coding them for emergent themes, it is believed that a high degree of reliability was achieved (Creswell, 2007).

Conclusion

This chapter presented the research design, methodology, and strategies utilized to conduct the multi-site case study of leaders sensemaking of organizational mission in the secondary international exchange industry. It presented this information so that this study could be easily replicated in the future, as well as to allow the reader the opportunity to gauge the trustworthiness of this study. The results of this work will be highlighted in the next chapter on research findings.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this research study was to uncover how leaders in secondary international exchange organizations describe their sensemaking of the organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry. Based upon the goal of this study, and considering the theoretical framework and qualitative methodology chosen for the study, a pilot interview, document review process and semi-structured personal interviews were conducted.

This chapter will highlight the participants and their respective organizations involved in the study, and highlight the data that was obtained during the pilot interview, personal interviews, and document review process. After a brief overview of the pilot study, more thorough information will be given on the data gathered in each of the interview questions, and a synopsis of the interview information will follow. Then, the data obtained from the document review process will be presented. The chapter will conclude with an summary of the information that emerged during the study as a whole.

Study Participants

This subsection will identify the study participants and give a brief overview of the organizations they work in. It will also give a brief overview of each organization as uncovered during the document review process.

The first organization with leaders who agreed to participate in the study (Organization A), is a mid-size international exchange organization that works in both the cultural secondary exchange market (J-1 visa program), as well as the academic secondary exchange market (F-1 visa program). There were two participants from this organization who currently serve as the
Directors of each program area (J-1 visa program and F-1 visa program). Both of these participants have been in these specific roles for less than five years. Although this was not the ideal length of time in the industry according to the original directive, each participant had previous work experience in a related field and both were well versed in the changes that have occurred in the industry in the past five years. For these reasons, both participants were included in the study. An additional participant was sought from this organization, but it was concluded that there were no other key decision makers within the organization who served in the work capacity needed to be included as a participant. In consideration of participant confidentiality, these participants will be referred to hereafter as Participant 1A and Participant 2A.

The second organization with leaders who agreed to participate in the study (Organization B), is a large cultural exchange organization that operates exchange programs in the secondary cultural exchange market (J-1 visa program), as well as other short-term, college level, and adult level cultural exchange programs. This organization does not operate an academic secondary exchange program (F-1 visa program). There were three leaders who agreed to participate from this exchange organization, including one Program Manager and two Executive level participants (a Vice President and a President). Two additional participants from this organization were sought, but eventually declined participation due to scheduling conflicts. Each of the three participants from this exchange organization has over twenty years of individual experience in the cultural exchange industry, and works within the secondary cultural exchange program area (J-1 visa program). In consideration of participant confidentiality, these participants will hereafter be referred to as Participant 1B, Participant 2B and Participant 3B.
Table 4.1 Overview of Organizations (CSIET, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organization A</th>
<th>Organization B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listed with Council for Standards in Educational Travel (CSIET)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit – 501(c)3 status</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of annual secondary students sponsored (app.)</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of countries sending secondary students (app.)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary international exchange programs</td>
<td>F-1 and J-1</td>
<td>J-1 only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pilot Interview**

This subsection describes the pilot interview process. The subsection gives the purpose for this process, as well as highlights the actual interview and concludes with a short summary of the outcome gained from this process.

The research process began by conducting a pilot interview with the Vice President of a mid-sized cultural and academic exchange organization (J-1 visa program and F-1 visa program) that was not included in the final research study. This study participant has over twenty years of experience within the secondary cultural exchange industry (J-1 visa program), and over ten years of experience working within the secondary academic exchange industry (F-1 visa program). The pilot interview allowed the researcher the opportunity to gauge the effectiveness of both the research question and personal interview questions, as well as to gauge the time allotment for future interviews.

The pilot interview was conducted in person and lasted approximately 25 minutes. Upon completion of the pilot interview, all original interview questions remained as they were as they seemed to be appropriate for the study. The researcher also discovered some personal habits
during the interview interviewing, such as verbally agreeing with answers and interjecting personal comments that needed to be abstained from during the personal interviews to reduce the possibility of bias.

**Personal Interviews**

The primary source of data for this research was obtained through semi-structured personal interviews with leaders in the secondary international exchange industry. Personal interviews were conducted with the five study participants in May and June of 2014. The purpose of these interviews was to uncover how leaders in secondary international exchange organizations describe their sensemaking of the organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry. This subsection will review the personal interview process, show how the interview questions relate to the theoretical framework, give an account of the interview responses to each question, and conclude by sharing additional comments gathered during the personal interview process.

A semi-structured personal interview approach was taken to give the participants the opportunity to share their stories and perspectives, while still maintaining consistency of data for the purposes of data integrity and applicability of study findings. Study participants were given the option of face to face, online video conferencing, or telephone interviews. Each individual participant involved in the study chose to be interviewed via telephone, and each personal interview lasted between 25 to 35 minutes.

This research study, including the personal interview questions, was guided by Karl Weick’s Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking examines how people interpret and make sense of something that then guides their actions in subsequent situations. In order to understand how this framework worked within the personal interview process, Table 4.2
illustrates how each interview question directly relates to key components within Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did you approach challenging situations five years ago?</td>
<td>Retrospective, Grounded in Identity Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has this approach changed in the last five years; and if so, how?</td>
<td>Retrospective, Ongoing, Grounded in Identity Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When facing a challenging situation, what factors are you considering in your decision making? Is your organizational mission ever part of the equation?</td>
<td>Grounded in Identity Construction, Enactive of Sensible Environments, Driven by Plausibility over Accuracy, Focused on and by Extracted Cues, Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assume we are five years in the future. Your organization has no major challenges for the year. What does this ideal look like and how did you get there?</td>
<td>Enactive of Sensible Environments, Ongoing, Driven by Plausibility over Accuracy, Grounded in Identity Construction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The personal interview process began by first describing and verifying the interview protocol and then obtaining the informed consent of each participant. Each participant was also given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and/or withdraw before the personal interview began. After this, the researcher obtained verbal permission to audio record the interview for the purposes of data integrity. All participants agreed to the interview protocol and informed consent, as well as the audio recording of the interview, and each stated that they had no questions about the study. A brief introductory statement was read that gave participants an overview of the purpose of the study, as well as highlighted some of the changes in the secondary exchange industry over the past five years. The substantial increase in international student participation on F-1 academic exchange programs, the changing Department of States regulations within the J-1 cultural exchange program, the changing expectations of secondary
international exchange students, and the immediacy of the exchange students’ international communications through technology and social media, were the primary factors of change highlighted in this introduction. With these factors in mind, study participants were asked to answer the interview questions highlighted above in Table 4.2, and summarized hereafter.

**Question one: How did you approach challenging situations five years ago?**

Because Participants 1A and 2A had not been in their current positions for five years, this question was altered slightly to ask instead if they knew how their organization approached challenging situations five years ago, or how they themselves approached these situations when they first began working in the secondary international exchange industry. Both participants approached this situation in the same manner, stating that when they began working in the industry, they talked to all involved parties in challenging situations to get a verbal account of the situation at hand. Participant 1A also added that it was clear that this was handled differently by different people prior to her employment at this organization, which was dependent upon each individual’s management and problem resolution style. Participant 1A also added that she would also review any pertinent documentation that went along with the situation at hand. Some of the examples of this documentation included email communications, text messages, facebook posts, etc. Participant 2A mentioned that the complexity of the issues along with the number of people involved in these situations, made getting all of the perspectives difficult, particularly when this participant first began working in their current capacity. Participant 2A further stated that this has taken time and practice to better understand all of the complexities involved in the process of problem solving and decision making within this industry.

Participants 1B and 2B echoed the same sentiments; that five years ago it had been important to communicate with all parties involved, and try to see the whole picture, or to get the
perspectives of everyone involved in any given situation. Both of these participants also added that it was important to try to figure out the facts, sort out the emotions, and then try to determine why the situation happened in the first place. Participant 1B also added that legal consequences were evaluated, as this element can complicate the decision making process and create tension for all parties involved in a challenging situation.

Participant 3B answered differently than the other participants and stated that student safety was the primary consideration in every decision making situation five years ago. This participant further added that all related paperwork or documentation, such as host family applications and email communications, would also be reviewed during the decision making process.

Chart 4.1: How were challenging situations approached five years ago

The theme emerging from this question indicates that verbal communication, with all parties involved in the situation, was the most common approach to decision making prior to the changes in the industry. Verbal communication was sometimes supplemented by document review, and in a few cases there were the additional considerations of legal consequences and
student safety issues coming into consideration. It also seemed to be the culture of Organization B to try and uncover the source, or the facts, that contributed to the issue in the first place, in an attempt to better understand the underlying problem(s) and base their decisions off of the factual data available.

**Question two: Has this approach changed in the last five years, and if so, how?**

Four of the five participants (1A, 2A, 2B, and 3B) felt that the last five years has brought about much more documentation when facing challenging situations. Participant 2B specifically mentioned the process of writing and submitting Incident Reports to the Department of State, which the Department of State began requiring for any potentially challenging or serious situation a few years ago. Three of the five participants also mentioned the development of a more extensive vetting (or screening) process to become a host family that became required by the Department of State during the past five years. This more thorough process of vetting and ongoing documentation is something that is now utilized much more frequently than five years ago, as it simply wasn’t as extensive of a requirement by the Department of State in the past. The same three participants all mentioned that this documentation process allows decisions makers to better communicate and aides them in the process of trying to separate fact from perceptions when they are in the middle of a challenging situation.

Both participants 2A and 3B talked of very extensive guidelines, or protocols, that their respective organizations have developed in the past few years to assist them in approaching challenging situations. For Organization A this is a four step process, while for Organization B it was described as a 3 phase approach. Both sets of guidelines involve a process of extensive communications with all parties involved in each challenging situation. These involved parties might include the local representative, the exchange student, the host family, the foreign partner
of the sponsoring organization, and the student support person from the main office of the organization itself. If the situation does not rectify itself after these communications, then the organization proceeds to verbal and/or written warnings, program probation, and/or possible cancellation of program participation and repatriation of the international exchange student. Participant 1A also spoke of the extensive communications between all parties involved in each challenging situation, but did not refer to the organizations step by step guidelines or protocol specifically.

A few other interesting perspectives were shared in relation to this question. Participant 1B talked about the increased complexity of decision making in recent years given the rise in popularity of social media, and the increased speed of communications that now exists between the exchange students and their friends and families in their home countries. It was noted that this made challenging situations even more difficult as everything is now communicated so quickly and involves many more people than it did in the past. It was also noted that these communications tend to be based on personal perspectives and were not always a true indication of the facts. Two of the participants from Organization B (2B and 3B) also discussed the recent changes in their organizational structure that separated the student support services from the area of the organization that is responsible for placing and overseeing students within their host families. This change was recently implemented by the organizational leaders to try to reduce the possibility of a conflict of interest that could interfere with the decision making process during challenging situations, especially in situations where students may need to be moved to a new host family or repatriated back to their home country.

Participant 1A also spoke about the current ability to refer to the Department of State regulations and to be able to rely on these regulations for guidance when making difficult
decisions. However, this same participant also noted that even though there are standard regulations that all cultural exchange organizations must abide by, there is still a lack of real data available about the best practices of organization in applying these regulations across the industry.

Finally, one participant (2B) talked about the concern for liability. This participant felt that it has become increasingly important in the past few years to consider the possible liability of any action when making decisions involving exchange students. This was deemed important as there are many times legal actions that could arise from these decisions for the exchange organizations themselves, as well as for their foreign partners.

Chart 4.2: How has this approach changed in the past five years

The primary theme emerging from this interview question is that documentation has become much more important in the past five years. This documentation is reviewed more thoroughly, and even required by the Department of State for those situations that could be potentially harmful to an international exchange student, to a host family, or to the reputation of the exchange industry in general. It was also noted that communication with all parties involved
in the situation is still a key factor in decision making. However, one participant stated that communication has become more difficult with the increased speed of international communications through cellular technology and social media. It was also conveyed that it was important for both organizations to establish a process, or guidelines, to follow in challenging situations. This could be a result of increased concern for liability and/or compliance with the Department of State regulations. It was also noted that Organization B had enough concern about this that they reorganized the organization in an effort to limit the potential for conflicts of interest to occur in these challenging situations.

**Question three: When facing a challenging situation, what factors are you considering in your decision making? Is your organizational mission ever part of the equation?**

All five study participants agreed that the organizational mission plays a part in their decision making in challenging situations. Three participants (1A, 2B and 3B) felt very strongly about this, stating that the organizational mission really drives every decision they make. Participant 1B however brought another perspective; that sometimes the organizational mission can get a bit lost in the heat of the emotion that is involved with everyone involved in these challenging situations. The final participant (2A) mentioned that the mission is always in their mind, albeit sometimes in the background, and stated that she thought about in a more general sense when approaching challenging situations.

Four of the participants (1A, 2A, 2B and 3B) stated that they consider the opportunity for a student to learn responsibility and/or be most successful in their future when considering different options and outcomes in these situations. This factor was conveyed as being especially prominent in the situations where they are considering the repatriation of an international
exchange student. One participant (3B) very eloquently stated that many see student repatriation as a failure; however this participant has found that it can be a great learning experience and can be the best thing for a student long-term, as it may better prepare them for future successes, as well as to teach the student to accept responsibility for their actions. In relation to this sentiment, although not specifically stated in the same terms, Participants 2A, and 2B stated that their organizational missions are all about learning and education. As such, they felt it was important to look at each situation for the learning opportunity involved, and to factor this into their decision making.

Participant 1A also had an interesting perspective revolving around the possibility of organizational involvement in challenging situations. In each situation, this participant asks if the organization played any role in creating the situation. This participant questions if the organization properly and consistently supported the student, and considers how the local representative and host family handled each individual situation. It was commented that there is a need for greater consistency and training in this area so this factor can be minimized as much as possible in the future. And, the participant felt that these standards should be shared with all organizations across the industry to benefit all future student exchange participants. Although the Department of State gives the J-1 industry regulations to abide by, this participant feels there is a lack of standards, or best practices, to better aid these organizations in supporting those regulations consistently.
All study participants agreed that their organizational mission plays a part in decision making in challenging situations. This theme carried through to include not only the mission statement as it is published, but as it is lived through the experiences of the international exchange students. Providing the best learning opportunity for international exchange students, and ultimately, being aware of the impact this experience could have on their long-term success in life, these decision makers were truly trying to live their organizational mission statements within their decision making capacity. Although it was mentioned that there is opportunity for improvement in this area (need for consistency and training as well as trying to keep emotions from impacting the situation), the general consensus was that decision makers always have the mission in their minds in some capacity during challenging situations.

**Question four: Assume we are five years in the future. Your organization has no major challenges for the year. What does this ideal look like and how did you get there?**

This was certainly the interview question that yielded the most diverse set of responses. There was much reflection and contemplation as to the variables that could play into creating an
ideal for the future. Participants 2B and 3B felt this was not possible at all. Participant 2B stated it was not possible because “people are always going to be people”, and as such there would always be conflict and misunderstanding. Participant 3B contributed to this same thought and stated that they felt it was not even a desirable outcome as “sometimes the most challenging situations are the best character builders”. Working for an exchange organization that has an organizational mission focused on educational opportunities, this was an important distinction for this participant as he felt that challenges can sometimes provide the greatest learning opportunities for all parties involved in a situation.

Two of the participants, 1A and 1B, talked extensively about the importance of training and education to achieve this goal. Participants 1A and 1B both focused on training for all levels of the exchange organizations staff. However, Participant 1B elaborated further and also talked about the importance of training and preparation for the international exchange students and the host families, particularly in the area of inter-cultural awareness and education. These same two participants also reflected on the importance of a clear vision and an understanding of the organizational mission by all parties involved in the international exchange experience, not just by the organization’s staff and/or volunteers.

Participants 1A and 2B also talked about the importance of clear and consistent communications. They expressed a need for exchange students and host families to feel supported while participating in both cultural and academic exchange programs. Both of these participants felt strongly that ongoing communication is the key to making this happen, and believe this is a responsibility of the exchange organization and its’ volunteers or employees.

It was also noted by Participant 2A that proper screening, or vetting, of international exchange students and host families alike could help to alleviate many challenging situations.
Proper vetting would screen out those international exchange students and host families that were not open-minded enough, mature enough, or flexible enough to facilitate the possibility of a successful exchange experience. And, finally, it was noted by Participant 1A that there should be a system of checks and balances; a way to make sure everything is going well before any situation elevates to a higher degree and becomes even more challenging.

The lack of agreement on an overwhelming theme in this area was interesting. Opinions were quite varied as to how this could happen, if this could happen, and even whether or not this is a desirable outcome. Clear understanding of the organizational mission or vision could directly tie to the training and preparation of international exchange students, staff, volunteers, and host families, as well as lead to clear communications for all of these parties. Although stated a bit differently, the responses primarily revolve around the notion of clarity and understanding for all parties involved in the exchange experience. The most interesting theme to emerge, however, was the notion that this ideal was not possible or desirable. To understand the learning that can
come out of challenging situations is truly a remarkable example of how one can truly embody and live out an organizational mission based upon inter-cultural learning opportunities and acceptance of different perceptions and worldviews.

Additional Insights

At the conclusion of each interview, the study participants were given the opportunity to add any additional comments or clarifications they felt were related to the study topic. Although these insights did not necessarily directly relate to the themes that emerged from the study, they were still important enough that they warrant discussion.

Three of the study participants (1A, 2A, and 1B) specifically talked about the need for consistent standards within the secondary international exchange industry. Participants 2A and 1B, reflected mostly on the need for the Department of State (overseeing J-1 programs) and the Department of Homeland Security (overseeing F-1 programs), to cooperate and ensure the same standards are in place for J-1 and F-1 programs at the secondary school level. Both participants felt this would benefit international exchange students, host families, and international exchange organizations alike. Both Participants 2A and 1B also felt that by monetarily compensating host families in the academic exchange (F-1 visa) program, it changed the motivation for host families and organizations alike. Participant 1B expressed concern about the possibility of compensation being more important than the students themselves to the F-1 program host families and sponsor organizations. And, both of these Participants also felt that the current F-1 standards, or lack thereof, fail in assuring adequate protection for F-1 international exchange students. Participant 1A reflected more on the need for consistency of standards within the J-1 exchange programs themselves, stating that every organization tends to do things their own way and this creates problems as international exchange students communicate with friends on other
exchange programs and compare their experiences. This can lead to these students being unhappy in their own situations and feeling as if their exchange experience is not living up to the experiences of others. Participant 1A felt this could be rectified by the open sharing of best practices across the international exchange industry. This same participant further stated that the Council on Standards for Educational Travel (CSIET), as the organization that promotes and recognizes quality international exchange programs, should devote more time to allowing and promoting this type of training and organizational sharing across the international exchange industry.

Participant 2B talked about the increase in required paperwork for the Department of State for cultural exchange students (J-1 visa program) that occurred in the past few years. The required monthly contact reports for host families and international exchange students, and the importance of submitting incidents reports in potentially challenging or serious situations are very time consuming. This participant felt that the increase in reports actually detracts from the overall experiences of field staff or volunteers, host families and international exchange students alike. Understanding these reports were set up to ensure student safety, Participant 2B further related that she felt this did not make a difference in this area, but rather just made the exchange experience seem like a chore for all of the parties involved.

All of the participants also mentioned the need for consistent training and communication at some point during the interviews. Both Participants 1A and 2B talked about the need to support and train host families. Additionally, Participant 2B talked about the importance of keeping host families connected to each other, as well as to the local volunteers. Participant 2A related the same sentiments, however in relation to the schools. It was felt by both Participant 2A and 2B that these connections would result in benefits for all stakeholders involved in the
exchange experience and would be an important part of continued success for future programs. Participants 1A, 1B and 3B also talked of the need for consistent training at the local level with representatives and/or volunteers. The training mentioned was both mission-driven and skills based training. And, finally, Participants 2A and 1B talked about the need for the international exchange students themselves to be better prepared and trained prior to embarking on their exchange experience.

It was interesting to note the consensus throughout the personal interviews. As participants explained their experiences five years ago, the process seemed messy. It sounded as if the verbal communications were difficult because of the number of stakeholders involved and the complexity of the issues. When talking about current practices, it seemed as if all study participants had found a way to make this process smoother in the past five years. The addition of gathering and reviewing written documentation, and clearer organizational guidelines during challenging situations gave greater clarity to the process and helped the participants to gain focus. Even through this gain in clarity however, the study participants still reported that verbal communication is still a key factor in these situations. All participants also reported that they consider their organizational mission, to some degree, during challenging situations. The relative ease in which they did this varied, but there was consensus that this was important to focus on when making decisions. Thoughts on how to improve on this in the future were varied, but communication; either verbal, through training and education, or through a clear vision, seemed to be a central theme once again.

**Document Review**

Document review is an important process for understanding organizational culture. What an organization publishes and promotes about their mission and vision is an integral piece of
understanding how employees and leaders alike make sense of their organization and conduct their daily work, including how they approach decision making situations. Because of these factors, it was critical to include this process in the study in an effort better understand and frame the published mission statement, and to evaluate the consistency and regularity with which this statement appeared. This subsection will provide an overview of the document review process as well as share the results that were gathered in this phase. The subsection will conclude by addressing initial emerging themes, which will be further explored in the following chapter.

A document review process for each respective organization was conducted, once the study participants were identified and participation was confirmed. The purpose of the document review was to have a more thorough understanding of each organizations published mission while the personal interviews were being conducted. This process began with the researcher reviewing the websites of each organization, and then continued with reviewing additional materials and social media sites that either the researcher uncovered or the study participants referred the researcher to. All of these documents were available to the general public. Hence, nothing of a confidential or private organizational nature was shared with the researcher. This document review process allowed the researcher to become familiar with the published mission and/or vision statements before and during the personal interview stage in an effort to better understand the language and ideological concepts being conveyed by the study participants during the personal interview process.

When the websites, documents and social media sites of each organization were reviewed, the mission and vision statements were extracted from these sources and recorded on a document review spreadsheet. These published organizational statements were then reviewed and analyzed for content, clarity, and consistency. Table 4.1, shown below, illustrates the
highlights of the document review spreadsheet and the findings uncovered during this process.

This table contains the pseudonym of each organization as detailed earlier in the subsection on study participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document or Site</th>
<th>Organization A</th>
<th>Organization B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Original Philosophy Statement and Mission/History Statement</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Signature Block of Participants</td>
<td>Original Philosophy Statement</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Original Philosophy Statement</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>2nd version of Philosophy Statement</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youtube</td>
<td>3rd version of Philosophy Statement</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>4th version of Philosophy Statement</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>4th version of Philosophy Statement</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>5th version of Philosophy Statement</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordpress</td>
<td>Original Philosophy Statement with one additional sentence</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement with one additional sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Handbook</td>
<td>Not available for review</td>
<td>Original Mission Statement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4.3, Organization A has both a mission/history statement and a philosophy statement published on their website. Although similar in wording, each statement is equally distinctive. Each of these statements is a bit lengthy, containing three full sentences in each statement. The philosophy statement was included in the email signature line of one of the
two participants from this organization verbatim (Participant 1A). However, neither the philosophy or mission statement appeared in Participant 2A’s emails in any format. In reviewing the social media sites for Organization A, the same philosophy statement was only captured verbatim on two of the seven social media sites (Facebook and Wordpress). The remaining five social media sites for this organization had four different statements that described who they are as an organization. Of these same five remaining sites, only two, Pinterest and Instagram, use the same descriptive statement about the organization. Further, on these same five sites (Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn), the original philosophy and mission statements could not be located anywhere on the organizational page or profile.

Organization B has a very clear one line mission statement. This mission statement was found verbatim on all five social media sites for this organization (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Wordpress). This same statement is also included verbatim on the inside cover of the student guide, which is distributed to every international exchange student participating in their program, as well as being published on the organization’s website. Additionally, the mission statement appeared on all three study participants’ (Participants 1B, 2B and 3B) email signature blocks in the same exact wording and format. On the international website affiliated with this organization is another variation of the same mission statement, which states that all of their organizations worldwide share a common mission and vision.

In reviewing documentation, a theme emerged that seemed to imply that the consistency and clarity of the mission statement of Organization B could lend itself to better overall understanding and interpretation of their organizational mission, thus allowing leaders in this organization to better construct their work identity and understand what will enable them to be successful within their organization. The brevity of the statement would further lend itself well to
allowing those associated with this organization to actualize this statement and internalize its’ meaning, therefore enacting the mission with greater clarity of purpose. Although Organization A had similar themes in all of their published statements, there were slight variations in each statement that could lead to confusion and lack of clarity for leaders and decision makers to consistently understand and apply the organizational mission, especially when in the midst of a particularly challenging situation. Further, the length of both the mission and philosophy statements for Organization A could prove to be difficult for memorization or actualization for any of their stakeholders.

Summary

This chapter offered the opportunity to explore the data collected on how leaders in secondary international exchange organizations describe their sensemaking of the organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry. This qualitative case study offered personal narratives that showed compelling understanding and actualization of organizational mission. It also highlighted opportunities for improvement and inconsistencies in current perceptions and processes.

Through the document review process, it was discovered that there is not always clarity and consistency of published mission statements. This lack of consistency and clarity could ultimately impact the decision making of individuals associated with an organization. Having a clear and consistent mission, which is easily understood and actualized by all stakeholders within an organization, could actually then provide greater direction and clarity when approaching these same challenging situations.

The secondary cultural and academic exchange industry has seen many changes in recent years. These changes have impacted the decision making process of leaders in the industry, as
well as added new challenges and considerations into the process. However, even with all of these changes, it seems that leaders are still focused on the mission and purpose of their organizations in their decision making capacities. The recent changes in the industry were regarded in both positive and negative viewpoints, with all study participants acknowledging the changes and the effect they have had in some regard.

The next chapter will delve into these findings in greater depth, and examine the findings based upon the theoretical framework. It will further discuss implications for practice and make recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study was conducted to understand how leaders within United States international exchange organizations describe their ongoing sensemaking of their organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry. Specifically, the study involved leaders in this industry and asked them to reflect on the way in which they approached challenging situations five years ago, how they currently approach them, and how they would hope to improve this for the future. These leaders were also specifically asked about the role of the organizational mission during this process. To better understand and frame the data received during the personal interviews, there was also a document review process based on the published mission and/or philosophy statements of the organizations these leaders worked in. This document review is an important piece to a study grounded in ongoing sensemaking, especially in a climate of change. Having a clear vision is a key factor during times of change as this provides a foundation on which key stakeholders can develop and interpret information (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Through this notion, comparing the published vision and/or mission statements of the organizations will also serve to validate and triangulate the data obtain through the personal interviews.

This chapter will highlight and discuss each of the research findings as they relate to the research question and the interview questions listed above, and relate these findings to the literature reviewed earlier as well as the theoretical framework for the study. Additionally, it will offer conclusions based upon the entire range of data gathered during the course of the research study. The chapter also includes the practical and theoretical implications gained from the study. Finally, the chapter will conclude by recommending areas of future research in this field.

**Research Findings**
The following sub-section will review each of the personal interview questions and highlight the most significant findings from these questions, relating this information back to the literature and the theoretical framework. This will be followed by general conclusions that will tie this information together as it pertains to the research question.

**Finding 1: The approach to challenging situations five years ago**

During the personal interview process, study participants were asked “How did you approach challenging situations five years ago?” This was deemed an important question to frame the study in an effort to gain perspective on the ongoing nature of sensemaking, better understand the retrospective characteristic of sensemaking, as well as understand the identity construction of study participants.

Prior to the changes in the J-1 cultural exchange program government regulations, and the advance of new technologies that facilitated instantaneous communications worldwide, the primary method of problem solving found in this study on the secondary international exchange industry was verbal communications. Given the complexity of the challenging situations in this industry, and the multiple stakeholders that needed to be communicated with in these situations, making consistent decisions was a very complex and difficult task as reported by study participants. Based upon the difficulty and complexity involved, it could then be presumed, and was reported that, decisions could be inconsistent. The inconsistencies revolved around the differing and multiple parties involved in each situation, and the specific decision maker who was gathering the information about the situation at the time. Although documentation of the issues was occasionally reviewed by decision makers, there was a lack of formal organizational procedures and protocol five years ago within the two organizations involved in this study. What resulted from this lack of documented procedures and protocol could indicate that there was a
subsequent lack of focus on the mission of the organization in these situations, and inconsistencies in decisions or activities based upon the lack of common direction that a common mission and shared values provides. This unity of value is an important part of what a mission provides to an organization (Rampersad, 2001). Although both organizations clearly had published mission statements five years ago, and this should have provided a clear direction for all employees and volunteers to follow, it didn’t seem as if this were consistently true in decision making activities during challenging situations at that time. Two of the study participants did state that they tried to review documentation related to each situation, but in retrospect, this was lacking in comparison to what their current organizational protocol calls for.

Only one study participant had paperwork or documentation as their primary method of gathering information about challenging situations five years ago. This was the study participant with the longest tenure in the industry, as well as the most senior title amongst the study participants. This method of problem solving may have been something that had been personally developed and learned over the years of experience, or it may have just been the personality of this particular individual. It could also be that others are verbally communicating to gather the information and provide it to this person. In any case, it is an interesting exception to note.

Table 5.1 illustrates the way in which the interview data from this question ties back to the theoretical framework and shows the beginning of the sensemaking process reviewed for this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>Quote(s)</th>
<th>Key Sensemaking Component(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A, 2A, 1B, 2B</td>
<td>All four of these participants talked about the importance of verbal communications five years ago</td>
<td>Social, Retrospective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>“When I first started, I was unprepared for the complexity of layers of communication with all the different people.”</td>
<td>Social, Retrospective, Grounded in Identity Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td>“We’ve always felt it is important to see the whole picture, the whole situation…Why did they do this?”</td>
<td>Retrospective, Grounded in Identity Construction, Enactive of Sensible Environments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Finding 2: Changes in approach to challenging situations now

The second question asked of study participants during the personal interview was “Has this approach changed in the last five years; and if so, how?” This question was posed to allow us to again examine the retrospective, ongoing, and identity construction characteristics of sensemaking.

Each of the participants in the study was able to be retrospective in looking at how their approach had changed in a decision making capacity over the past five years. It was concluded through this study that the documentation process involved in challenging situations has vastly improved over the past five years. This improvement has led to greater clarity of communications between all parties involved in challenging situations, as well as more depth and breadth of information being available to assist leaders in the decision making process. This clarity of communications ties directly back to the social element of sensemaking and how talking about a situation will provide clarity and understanding. Although verbal communications was still noted as being a significant factor in the decision making process for the study participants, this process has now been complemented by the addition of greater written documentation which provides additional available data from all perspectives involved in each situation. It was also noted by one study participant that this increased documentation protects international secondary exchange organizations and their foreign partners in regards to possible liability and legal actions. Two of the study participants discussed the fact that their
respective organizations had developed very specific written protocol for decision making in challenging situations over the past few years. This protocol directly reflected the organizational mission or philosophy in both cases. This was a significant change in practice to undertake in an effort to keep decisions consistent and in line with organizational mission. As the literature showed earlier, a clear mission helps employees perform better under stress, and allows them to be more strategic rather than reactive in their actions (Scott et al., 1993). With the increased government regulations regarding documentation, and the increased awareness of the benefits of this documentation, this was seen as a significant and worthy change in the industry practices which has led to more consistency and clarity when making decisions in challenging situations.

The answers to this interview question allow us to clearly see that sensemaking is a part of decision making in challenging situations currently, even though not specifically asked about as of yet. The components of sensemaking seen in these answers are social, retrospective, focused on and by extracted cues, driven by plausibility over accuracy, and enactive of sensible environments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>Quote(s)</th>
<th>Key Sensemaking Component(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>“the complexity…sorting out the facts…what is fact and what is perception. Trying to figure that out.”</td>
<td>Driven by Plausibility over Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>“it depends on circumstances, what’s transpiring…why…collect information.”</td>
<td>Social, Enactive of Sensible Environments, Focused on and by Extracted Cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>“You need to talk to the source. Communications is the glue that holds it all together.”</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>“There’s just less tolerance now…less patience than 5 or 6 years ago.”</td>
<td>Retrospective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 Finding 2 Tie to Theoretical Framework
Finding 3: Factors considered in challenging situations

The third question asked of study participants during the personal interviews was “When facing a challenging situation, what factors are you considering in your decision making? And, is your organizational mission ever part of the equation?” This question leads to the heart of sensemaking of organizational mission amidst challenging situations. It addressed the sensemaking characteristics of identity construction, enactive of sensible environments, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues and driven by plausibility over accuracy.

All study participants confirmed that organizational mission is a direct factor involved in their decision making process amidst challenging situations. In fact, four of the five participants stated that the impact of the organizational mission on their decisions was a key factor. These same four participants tied this directly back to at least one direct sentiment that was published in their organizational mission statement, reiterating this statement almost verbatim during their personal interviews. In this way, the organizational mission has clearly impacted their identity construction, and their being enactive of sensible environments (Weick, 1995). They are seeing themselves as leaders and decision makers in their respective organization and acting in accordance with the published mission of that organization. One can also see the way in which they currently extract cues from challenging situations, and their ongoing sensemaking of their mission in each challenging situation (Weick, 1995) as they try to discover facts from verbal communication and documentation, as well as try to uncover the reality of these situations and make decisions based upon the overall mission of the organization. This also shows that these leaders are considering the impact of their decisions as they relate it to their common purpose and shared values with other key stakeholders involved with their organization. The clarity of values that the mission statement provides helps to define their course of action in each of these
situations, just as discussed in Denison & Mishra (1995). Further, it was evident that their actions were now based on shared purpose and vision as defined by Kouzes and Posner (2002). It also became clear that sensemaking of the organizational mission now plays a much greater role in decision making, as shared meaning and identity were key elements discussed in their sensemaking and decision making process (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The sensemaking of these organizational leaders has also proven to be enactive (Weick, 1995), in that the actions of the decision makers are creating more consistency in their organizations and thus affecting the environment around them, which will continue to support future actions that are also more consistent with the organizational mission.

This key question yielded responses from study participants that covered all seven of the characteristics of sensemaking.

Table 5.3 Finding 3 Tie to Theoretical Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>Quote(s)</th>
<th>Key Sensemaking Component(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>“I listen, probe, investigate and check my decision against this (the mission)”</td>
<td>Social, Focused on and by Extracted Cues, Ongoing, Driven by Plausibility over Accuracy, Identity Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>“I think…did we do this? Did we do what we said we would for them?”</td>
<td>Enactive of Sensible Environments, Identity Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td>“Basically we’re a learning company, our mission is all about learning…there’s learning involved in taking responsibility for your action.”</td>
<td>Grounded in Identity Construction, Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>“There are often educational opportunities in these circumstances around difficult situations.”</td>
<td>Grounded in Identity Construction, Retrospective, Ongoing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finding 4: Getting to the ideal with no challenging situations

The final question that was asked during the personal interview phase of this research study was “Assume we are five years in the future. Your organization has no major challenges for the year. What does this ideal look like and how did you get there?” This study question was aimed at the purpose of discovering information about the ongoing, enactive of sensible environments, identity construction and plausibility over accuracy characteristics of sensemaking.

The ongoing characteristic of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) was approached quite differently by study participants in relation to their future efforts and outcomes. It was however, concluded through this question that most participants felt that a clear understanding of the organizational mission, that was communicated properly to all stakeholders involved in an international exchange experience, was a valued and desired outcome. Weick (1995) expressed this sentiment by stating that clarity of values can give one a sense of what their experiences mean. Interesting to note however, this was approached differently by participants, with emphasis being put fairly equitably on training, education, and/or communication. Although the ideal of understanding the mission is valued and desired, it was also noted by most study participants that it would not be possible, or maybe even not completely desirable, to not have challenging situations in this industry. Three of the study participants felt this way and expressed their ideals again as it related to their organizational missions of learning and education. The sentiment behind their thoughts on this was that this industry deals with people, and people are never consistent and predictable; especially given the diverse range of ages, cultures and environments that are represented in an international exchange experience. One participant related this directly back the organizational mission which focuses on personal learning and
growth, stating that sometimes the most significant personal growth comes through challenging situations. This retrospective viewpoint leads us back to the notion that clarity of values can give meaning to an experience (Weick, 1995), but that does not necessarily mean that there will not be challenges that arise. It also shows us the characteristic of being enactive of sensible environments as the leaders understand the mission of their organization, act in accordance with it, and set the environment for future decisions to be based on the same understanding.

The varied responses to the future possible question also show us that each person’s identity construction and sense of plausibility affects the way in which they make sense of their organizational mission, the way in which they extract cues from each situation, and the way that they project their own understanding into setting precedents for future actions. This shows the importance of the ongoing characteristic of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) as well. It also became clear through this study and specifically through this interview question, that by using retrospection, decisions were made more meaningful and put into a larger context (Weick, 1995) as participants reflected on their past experiences, examined their actions and decisions in relation to their organizational mission, and expressed their desires for the future.

Table 5.4 Finding 4 Tie to Theoretical Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>Quote(s)</th>
<th>Key Sensemaking Component(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>“Training is huge! We need to identify goals and communicate clearly”</td>
<td>Enactive of Sensible Environments, Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>“There needs to be…understanding of mission by all”</td>
<td>Social, Grounded in Identity Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td>“Communication is key”</td>
<td>Social, Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>“The more challenging experiences are the best character builders…maybe they won’t see that at the time though.”</td>
<td>Retrospective, Grounded in Identity Construction, Ongoing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

After reviewing the findings of the personal interview questions, and comparing these answers with the information gained through document review, several conclusions can be drawn. This subsection will highlight these conclusions, review how the study results directly relate to the characteristics of the theoretical framework as posed by the research question, as well as highlight other conclusions based upon analysis of the study as a whole.

It was made clear through this study that leaders in the secondary cultural and academic exchange industry utilize sensemaking of their organizational mission while making decisions in challenging situations. Although it seems that this may have been true to some degree in the past, the recent changes in the Department of State regulations and oversight of these international exchange programs has strengthened the organizational leaders’ ability to stay focused on this mission as they review increased documentation and continue to communicate to key stakeholders during especially challenging situations. Each study participant was retrospective in examining and considering the actions of the past, and how this has shaped the current environment in which they work, thus also showing the characteristic of being enactive of sensible environments.

Through this study, leaders in the international secondary exchange industry showed all of the characteristics of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) in relation to their organizational mission. Identity construction was evident in that the organizational mission was clearly a part of these leaders’ thoughts, and the way in which they viewed themselves as a decision maker who ultimately tries to consider the organizational mission in each challenging situation. Their identity as a leader in their organization, with the mission that the organization has, resulted in how these leaders acted during challenging situations. There was also a clear presence of the
retrospective nature of sensemaking, as the study participants had clarity of values, provided by the organizational mission that could be applied to each situation and then put into a larger context upon reflection of the decisions made. This retrospective characteristic also gave the study participants the opportunity to consider past, present and future all at the same time, which brings in the ongoing characteristic of sensemaking. The process of continually producing and sustaining shared meaning is inherent in this characteristic. It was also clear through the extended use of verbal communications in challenging situations that leaders in this industry were utilizing the characteristics of enactive of sensible environments and social. While being enactive of sensible environments, the decision makers were developing solutions and explanations based upon their organizational mission, as they talked through each challenging situation with all key stakeholders involved. The social characteristic of sensemaking comes into play through these discussions as well. The social characteristic of sensemaking is further evidenced in the procedures and protocols that were developed by the international exchange organizations in an effort to guide leaders through these challenging situations. The protocol and procedures by both organizations call for documentation of any challenging situation by all parties involved. This not only reflects on the social aspect of sensemaking, but it also aids the decision makers in extracting cues. By extracting cues through conversations and documentation review, the decision makers are able to try to find out what’s really happening, and then determine a course of action, based upon the organizational mission and in line with organizational protocol.

This study especially highlighted the ongoing and retrospective nature of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) as it relates to organizational mission. By considering how challenging situations were addressed in the past, how they are currently addressed, and how one might hope to
eliminate these issues in the future; the study gave insight as to the changes in the secondary international exchange industry, and how these changes have affected decision makers in challenging situations. The study data seems to confirm that there is an increased focus on organizational mission over the past five years, as it relates to all stakeholders involved in the international student exchange experience. The relation to organizational mission during challenging situations may have been present in the past, but this study concluded that it is more easily recognized now that there is added documentation for decision makers to review and consider. The depth of this focus on organizational mission however, seemed to be relevant to the clarity and consistency of the mission statement itself, and how others in the exchange organization might also make sense of this mission. This finding is in line with Ancona (2012) whose study showed that sensemaking involves coming up with plausible meaning and testing and shifting this based on results and reality checks with others.

The study results also suggest that a clear and concise mission statement aids in the process of sensemaking of organizational mission for these leaders. This was evident through the document review process and subsequent personal interviews. Organization B had a very clear, concise and consistently published mission statement, and as such, the leaders in that organization seemed to be able to better articulate and enact this philosophy, conveying quite easily how this mission influences their decisions. Although the leaders in Organization A also seemed focused on their mission amidst challenging situations, there was a more noticeable lack of clarity and conviction in their answers, and more consistent concerns expressed over the lack of standards in the international exchange industry, and within their own organization, during their personal interviews. As Senge (1990) declared, it is the leaders that build a foundation of purpose and core values for their organizations. If the leaders themselves don’t have a clear sense
of the organizational mission, and the organizational mission statement itself is not clear and consistent, than how could one expect consistent decision making and actions during especially challenging situations? This study showed a marked difference in the published mission statements that correlates with the actions taken during challenging situations and further coincides with the literature’s focus on the importance of a shared purpose and mission. This finding also supports the writing of Brown et al. (2004), who posited that a well-defined mission helps determine the definition of success within an organization and gives leaders a guide to steer towards fulfillment of that mission.

The study also supports the literature written that claims there is unity of behavior and actions based on purpose when there is an understanding of the organizational mission. Kouzes and Posner (2002) state that leaders should align their actions with values, thus enabling shared actions across the organization. They further state that by inspiring a shared vision, the overall purpose of an organization stays in view, with leaders sharing this with others and basing their own actions on this vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). It is a leaders’ job to actively communicate and act out organizational values and mission on an ongoing basis (Simons, 1995). By comparing the two organizations involved in this study, there seemed to be consistency to support this literature. The organization with the clearest and most concise mission statement also had leaders who more consistently approached their decision making with their organizational mission in the front of their mind.

Clearly all seven characteristics of sensemaking came to light through the responses to the personal interview questions. It was also apparent that both of the respective organizations these leaders work for had made significant changes in processes revolving around decision making in challenging situations. One organization even went as far as to restructure in an effort
to have their organizational structure better support their mission during challenging times. It could easily be surmised from these actions that the changing nature of this industry caused these organizations to become more innovative in their practices in an effort to continue to prosper in this industry in the future.

**Practical and Theoretical Implications**

This subsection will review the implications of this study for both practical and theoretical purposes. This subsection will highlight some possible actions that can be taken to benefit leaders and organizations based upon interpretation of the study results.

It seems as though leaders and decision makers across almost any industry should be able to gain important information from this study as many of the conclusions about sensemaking of an organizational mission can be utilized across industries. Although this study focused on sensemaking of an organizational mission during challenging times in an industry with many recent changes, many of the lessons learned could be put into practice in any business or organization. For the purposes of this research study however, the practical implications highlighted will focus specifically within the international secondary student exchange industry.

The first practical implication for organizations in this industry is the importance of publishing a clear, concise, and consistent mission statement. It was evident that all of the participants in this study wanted to do quality work, and wanted to make a difference in the lives of all of the many people who are involved in the international exchange experience. However, a lack of clarity in organizational values or mission can clearly affect the leader’s ability to consistently define a course of action during challenging situations. Further, lack of clarity can cause these leaders to question their decisions and look for outside guidance and directive, which may or may not be in line with the organizational philosophy. Ekmekci (2012) reminds us that in
leading an organization towards excellence, leaders play the most important role in understanding and managing the mission of the organization. If this mission is not clear, then the organization is likely to have each individual leader’s varied sensemaking of the mission lead them in different directions. This sentiment is echoed by Thomson and Hall (2011), who believe that having a shared mission and values is completely reliant on the sensemaking of all organizational members. In the industry of secondary international exchange, this sentiment should extend to all of the many different stakeholders that are ultimately affected by the international exchange experience; to include the international exchange students and their families, the host families and communities, and all of the employees or volunteers that work within the industry.

Another implication from this study is that sensemaking of an organizational mission by decision makers can keep them focused on the best possible outcomes during challenging situations. A clear understanding and sense of meaning and purpose can help decision makers define a course of action (Denison & Mishra, 1995). And, with the retrospective nature of sensemaking, these decisions can be made more meaningful by understanding the larger context (Weick, 1995). This can lead to more consistency and purpose with each subsequent decision that is made and create an environment in which all employees and volunteers associated with the organization are also tied into the organizational mission. In a changing industry, such as secondary international exchange, leaders with vision can influence the perception of the past, present and future so an ideal state can be achieved (Gioia, Corley & Fabbri, 2002). The long lasting effects of this type of synergy will not only ensure future success for the organization, but also be quite rewarding for all involved.
To continue on with this same theme, it would be recommended that organizations look at mission driven training for all of their key stakeholders. Having a clear understanding and perspective on the importance of the mission of the organization could frame difficult situations in a different way, thus allowing greater perspective when in the midst of these challenging situations. Extending this training to all organizational members, international exchange students, foreign partner organizations, host families, and host schools; it is believed that a lower percentage of difficult situations will turn into major challenges.

To aid in resolving challenging situations, it is also recommended that local representatives and/or volunteers undergo skills training. Training in conflict resolution, problem solving, mediation skills, and intercultural communications could all be beneficial in giving the field level staff the necessary tools to resolve minor issues, and keep these issues from becoming more serious. Additional culture specific training would also be beneficial so the field staff can better understand the perspectives and frame of reference of the students involved in these situations, based upon their native cultures.

Another implication for practical application would be to develop global family networks. These host families could train, support, and assist each other with better understanding and comprehension about the international exchange experience. Personal experiences could be shared and insights about how to resolve issues could be mutually beneficial. It would be particularly advantageous for new host families to be able to draw on the experiences and insights of those families who have had multiple experiences with hosting.

More involvement with the host school population should also be an aspiration. Many schools promote the importance of global citizenship and cross-cultural understanding. However, few schools go beyond the minimum curriculum requirements to make this happen. The
development of global citizens or ambassadors within the schools would allow the international exchange student an immediate support system they could turn to for assistance. These global citizens could be staff members or students, who have an understanding of the importance of cultural understanding and have been trained in how to support these efforts. Further, they might be able to offer insights to the local representatives or volunteers associated with the international exchange students in regards to placement with particular host families and communities. Creating this type of partnership would be beneficial for the international exchange students, student body, and school officials, and could result in better experiences for all of them.

It also became clear through this study that the increased documentation that has been required from the Department of State for cultural and academic exchange over the past five years has changed the way that leaders are making their decisions. The increase in documentation has provided better data with which to understand challenging situations and has ultimately aided the leaders in the ability to sort out facts from perceptions and emotions when making decisions. This clarity also allows them to focus on the bigger picture, more easily considering the organizational mission in each of these situations. Organizations across the secondary international exchange industry should develop protocol that allows for documentation in challenging situations in an effort to gather clear, in depth information relating to each individual situation at hand. Given the multitude of people and perspectives that can be involved in these situations, it also allows for consistency in allowing all perspectives to be represented, as well as creates a clear path for consistent decision making.

The inconsistencies between the cultural exchange programs (J-1 visa program) and academic exchange programs (F-1 visa program) was another topic that emerged during the personal interview portion of this research. In order to assure the most successful exchange
experiences for all secondary students, it is suggested that the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security, who respectively oversee these programs, work together to develop consistent standards for all secondary international exchange students. By focusing on the importance of public diplomacy and increased cultural understanding and acceptance, as well as enhanced student safety and well being, this goal should be achievable.

The increased use of social media was also mentioned during this study. In the context of the personal interviews, this was mostly discussed in a negative light, given the challenges that can exist due to instantaneous communications with a large mass of people worldwide. However, social media can also be utilized to promote specific ideals and communicate messages to this same audience. Organizations in the secondary international exchange industry should focus on the use of social media to promote their mission and ideals. Communicating clearly and consistently can reinforce the mission of these organizations and aid them in training for all key stakeholders as well as the recruitment of host families who are aligned with their mission.

In reviewing the theoretical implications, this study strongly supported Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995), and showcased all seven characteristics of this theory. Examples of being grounded in identity construction, retrospective in nature, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, all were highlighted in at least one instance in the study. This theory was of great benefit when looking at the importance of understanding an organizational mission and how leaders enact this understanding when facing challenging situations. It was clear that using retrospection, extracted cues, identity construction, and ongoing sensemaking of the organizational mission made for consistent, thoughtful, and meaningful decisions during the challenging situations that can occur within secondary international exchange. And, in both
organizations involved in this study, the sensemaking of the mission by leaders seemed to lead to improved protocols and structure that supported the organizational mission even further.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

This could possibly be the first study into the importance of organizational mission and sensemaking of this mission by leaders in the secondary international exchange industry. With the greatly increased number of program participants, the changing nature of the industry, and the anticipated needs for future generations to be inter-culturally aware and accepting, this is a significant study. The significance comes not only from the implications for practice, but also for the opening of a new field of inquiry. It is realized however, that this study was done on a rather small scale. For future studies, it would be recommended to conduct a more comprehensive version of this same study; to include a greater number of organizations, industry leaders, and varying perspectives. Since this is such a rapidly changing industry, it would also be recommended to conduct a longitudinal study, capturing this same data in future years.

Another interesting study would be a comparative study, which could focus on a number of different variables. Studies comparing secondary cultural and academic exchange programs (J-1 visa programs and F-1 visa programs), small to large organizations, non-profit to profit organizations, or newer versus more established programs could yield interesting results.

Another noteworthy study may be to conduct this same basic study including different types of employees or volunteers. Included could be mid-level employees, or employees and/or volunteers that work directly in the local communities rather than in the national offices of these organizations. Another variation of this might be to conduct a study with Student Advisors or Counselors that are many times employed by students exchange organizations, or to include the foreign partners that work across the world with the U.S. organizations and students. This could
be done to gain a better understanding of the sensemaking of organizational mission across all levels in an organization, and how this sensemaking impacts the work being done at different levels and in different capacities.

As this might also be the first study of any type involving leaders in the secondary international exchange industry, it would be recommended that other types of studies are conducted in this industry in an effort to inform and influence future practices. Some of the topic areas of interest might include leadership direction, governance, impact of policies on key stakeholders, best practices in relation to decision making, and impact of leadership practices on field level employees and volunteers.

This study could also be transformed and altered to fit into any type of non-profit organization. Sensemaking of organizational mission is imperative in many different fields of work, and is particularly influential in a non-profit setting. It would be interesting to note the differences in this sensemaking ability across different types of organizations, as well as to compare how this influences decision making and leadership practices in general.

**Summary**

The purpose of this research study was to understand how leaders within secondary international exchange organizations describe their ongoing sensemaking of their organizational mission amidst challenging situations, complicated by the changing nature of the industry. The study was successful in gathering information about how organizations in this industry publish and communicate their mission across multiple avenues, how decision makers approach the many challenging situations that arise in this industry, how this approach has changed in recent years, the consideration of the organizational mission in decision making in these situations, and the continued desire for positive outcomes focused around the organizational missions in the
future. Through the use of personal interviews the authentic voices of the participants were highlighted in an effort to provide a rich narrative from which conclusions could be drawn. The document review process gave further insight into this problem of practice. These insights are significant as there is currently a lack of literature available to assist leaders within this industry. With the large increase of international exchange program participants, the changing nature of the industry, and the life-long impact that these exchange experiences have on multiple stakeholders, this was an important first step into this field of inquiry with the hope of continued study. The importance of this field of research is brought to mind again in the sentiments of Karen Hughes, a past Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy at the U.S. Department of States. In remarks to the American Council on Education, Hughes (2006) stated that international student exchanges have been the single most effective public diplomacy tool for the past fifty years. With continued study, the next fifty years could prove to be just as significant.
References


Weick, K. E. (2002). Leadership when events don’t play by the rules. *Reflections-Society for Organizational Learning, 4*(1), 30-32.


Appendix A: Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

UNSIGNED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Margaret Kirchoff, Principle Investigator; Rae Lenway, Doctoral Student and Researcher

Title of Project: Understanding the International Exchange Organization: A multi-site case study exploring how industry leaders within U.S. secondary international exchange engage in innovative practices to make ongoing sense of their mission.

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to explore leadership practices within the secondary international exchange industry.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place at a time and place that is convenient for you and will take about 30 minutes. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to discuss your opinions about how you make sense of your organization’s mission amidst challenging situations complicated by the changing exchange industry.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about the innovative practices of leaders within this industry.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being part of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Rae Lenway at 651-454-4918, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Margaret Kirchoff at 202-425-7111, the Principal Investigator.
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA  02115. Tel:  617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Margaret Kirchoff and Rae Lenway
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introduction
As we previously discussed, you were selected for this study because you have been identified as a leader in the field of secondary educational exchange. Through this study, we are hoping to gain information about how leaders in this industry make sense of their organization’s mission amidst challenging situations complicated by the changing industry.

Informed Consent Form
To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you will need to review the form I sent you. Essentially, this document states that all information will be held confidential, your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and we do not intend to inflict any harm.

Permission to Audio Record
Because your responses are important and I want to capture everything you say correctly, I would like to audio record our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will personally transcribe the audio file as well. I am the only person who will be listening to this, and will erase this information once the transcriptions are completed. Do I have your permission to audio record?

Do you have any questions about the interview process or the informed consent form?

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study. I have personally worked with international students at the secondary and university level for many years so this study is of great interest to me. During my doctoral coursework at Northeastern University, I took classes in leadership and in international student studies and was particularly intrigued by the coursework that revolved around organizational mission and crisis situations. After not being able to find any literature relating to secondary exchange organizations in this area, I was compelled to create this research study.

To get started, I’d like to learn a little bit about you. Tell me about your background and experiences in secondary exchange.

As you know, there have been many changes in the regulations in this industry in the past few years. Additionally, some people in this industry tell me they’ve noticed a substantial change in the industry lately based upon the number of students that are now participating in these programs as well as the expectations these students are coming to the program with. The expansion of the F-1 programs and the immediacy of communicating globally through social media may have also impacted this field. Given the fact that you are working with teenagers from so many different cultural backgrounds further complicates things when you are faced with challenging situations that require you to make decisions that affect so many different parties.

What I’d like you to do is think back to how you approached challenging situations five years ago and describe how you approached these challenging situations then.
Has this approach changed in the last five years, and if so, how?

When facing a challenging situation, what factors are you considering in your decision making?  
   Probe – Is the organizational mission ever a part of this equation? If so, how?

Assume we are five years in the future. Your organization has absolutely no major challenges for the year. What does this “ideal” look like? How do you think your organization got there?

Is there anything further you would like to add, or clarify, that you think would be of benefit?

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate your insights and will be transcribing this data soon. After my transcription is complete, I am happy to send you a copy of it if you would like to review it for accuracy.

Once I have compiled all of my information and written my final document, I will make sure you also receive a copy of this. If in the meantime, there is anything else you think of, please don’t hesitate to contact me.
Appendix C: Sample Phone Script

Hello POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT NAME. I am following-up on the email I sent you regarding the research study on leadership practices within the secondary exchange industry. I was hoping we could talk about the possibility of your input in this study. Would you have just a few minutes to talk now or would there be a better time to call?

As you read, the purpose of this study is to better understand the practices of leaders in secondary international exchange organizations as related to making sense of their organizational mission amidst the challenges and changes within the industry. Participants would be asked to participate in an interview with me to discuss this topic. This interview would take approximately 30 minutes. Additionally, I would like to take a look at any supporting documents you feel are important in communicating your organizational mission.

I want to assure you that you and your organization will remain anonymous throughout this process. I will be using pseudonyms in my writing, and will utilize these same pseudonyms in my written notes. Your identity will be kept confidential. All information gathered will be kept in a locked drawer or on a secure, password protected computer. After three years, this information will be destroyed.

If you choose to participate, I will share complete findings with you so you can utilize this information in your future business practices if you should choose to. In addition to you, I am hoping to obtain data from one other organization so as to help us all better understand how to address these challenges, and ultimately, better aid students and exchange organizations in the future.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can choose to withdraw at anytime. There is no compensation for involvement, other than receiving the data obtained through the study itself.

Is this something you might be interested in pursuing? If so, can we go ahead and look at schedules now to find a 30 minute timeframe for the interview?
Appendix D: Sample Recruitment Email

Dear NAME,

Hello POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT NAME. I received your name from NAME OF REFERRER. I have worked with NAME OF REFERRER through Nacel Open Door/CSIET. The reason your name was given to me is that NAME OF REFERRER told me you are an experienced leader within secondary student exchange. As a part of my doctoral studies at Northeastern University, I am currently pursuing a study on leadership practices within the industry. Specifically, I would like to look at the practices of leaders to see how organizational mission is considered when facing challenging situations and decisions amidst all the changes in this industry. I was hoping you might consider participating in this study.

Participants would be asked to participate in an interview to discuss this topic with me for approximately 30 minutes. This could be done in person, via internet conference, or via email; dependent upon your preference. I would also like you to send me supporting documents that state your organizational mission.

As you may already know, according to the latest CSIET report, over 76,000 secondary students came to the United States in 2011 to participate in secondary educational exchange. This number has more than doubled since 2007. And, with the recent changes in government regulations, the increased ease of international communications through technology and social media, and the continuous challenges of inter-cultural communications, leaders in this industry face many challenges in their daily work. This is why this study was developed and why the results could potentially be of great value.

If you choose to participate, you and your organization would remain confidential throughout the entire process through the use of pseudonyms. The identity of you and your organization will also be kept confidential. Complete findings will be published and shared with participants so this information can be utilized in your future business practices. Data will be collected from two different organizations so there is a better understanding of how to address these challenges, and ultimately, better assist organizations in their future decision making.

Your participation is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at anytime. There is no compensation for involvement, other than receiving the data obtained through the study itself.

I would very much appreciate the opportunity to include you in this research. Please contact me at lenway.r@husky.neu.edu or 651-454-4918 to schedule our interview, or ask any questions you may have. I look forward to speaking with you soon!

Best Regards,

Rae Lenway
Student/Researcher at Northeastern University
Doctorate of Education program