Driving from the Middle:
The Role of Community College Academic Deans During Periods of Planned Change

A thesis presented by
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To
College of Professional Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
September 29, 2018
Abstract

American higher education is in crisis. Persistent opportunity and achievement gaps limit college access and completion for low-income and underrepresented students. Fewer students are completing their studies on-time, thus prolonging their entry into better paying, career-focused employment. Meanwhile, the cost of attending college and related student loan debt continues to escalate. There have been calls for comprehensive systemic change dating back to the 2006 Spellings Commission, yet performance data demonstrates that little has improved. While there is voluminous research on change and change management in higher education, there remains much to be learned about implementing and sustaining change, and about the roles and behaviors of specific actors beyond the college president or executive leaders. This study focused on the role of community college academic deans as middle managers during planned organizational change. Study participants included eight academic deans from community colleges in the Northeast that are currently implementing guided pathways. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was utilized to examine how participants made sense of the experience of being middle managers during planned change. Findings revealed four superordinate themes that characterized their experiences: deans’ roles and responsibilities; leading & managing; mindset; and executive-level sense-making/sense-giving. Knowledge generated from this analysis can inform the professional preparation, ongoing development, and day-to-day practice of community college academic deans and other middle managers, and executive leaders as they work together to advance student success by improving organizational function and performance.

Keywords: academic deans; community college; guided pathways; interpretative phenomenological analysis; middle managers; planned change; sense-making/sense-giving.
Acknowledgements

One important outcome of doctoral studies is the completion of original research as an independent scholar. Yet no one travels this odyssey alone. I would like to thank my participants without whom this research could not have been accomplished. Your enthusiasm for sharing your experiences made a tremendous impact on me as a scholar and a practitioner. I promise to pay it forward!

Next, I would like to thank Dr. Brian Bicknell, my advisor, who answered every question, read and re-read many drafts and cheered me on along the way. I would also like to thank Dr. Joseph McNabb, my second reader, who encouraged me to pursue qualitative research and helped me to understand the essence of IPA. I had an advising “dream team” and I will be forever grateful for their professional guidance.

I also want to recognize the kindness of many friends and extended family members who stayed with me over these years even though I declined most of their invitations and was often distracted, exhausted, and self-absorbed. In particular, I want to thank Jane Shea and Jane June (my third reader) – two respected colleagues and good friends – who not only listened, but also asked questions about my work. Your support meant more than you realize.

Finally, the most profound gratitude goes to my immediate family. To my parents who, despite their declining health and personal losses, were so proud. Dad, I am just sorry I couldn’t get it done soon enough for you to enjoy the party! To my children who celebrated many of their own accomplishments and milestones during these last years, yet always managed to be there for me. Most especially to my husband who pretty much did everything for me while I ignored him for many hours every weekend, I know what you did for me and I can never thank you enough. Let’s start working on that list of things to do when I am done!
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to describe how community college academic deans make sense of the experience of being middle managers during periods of planned organizational change at institutions that are implementing guided pathways. Knowledge generated is expected to inform the professional preparation and ongoing development of community college academic deans and other middle managers, executive leaders, and guided pathways change advocates and planners as they work together to advance student success by improving organizational function and performance.

Statement of Problem

American higher education is in crisis. Persistent opportunity and achievement gaps limit college access and completion for low-income and underrepresented students (Association of American Colleges & Universities [AACU], 2015; Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012). Fewer students are completing their studies on-time, thus prolonging their entry into better paying and career-focused employment (Complete College America [CCA], 2014a). Meanwhile, the cost of attending college and the related student loan debt burden continues to escalate (The Institute for College Access & Success [TICAS], 2017).

Since 2006, when the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (CFHE), known as the Spellings Commission, released its controversial report calling for expanded access, improved student learning, and consolidation and streamlining of financial aid programs (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2006), colleges and universities have been called upon to dramatically improve access and outcomes by revamping policies and practices. Despite voluminous research on organizational change and change management in business, higher education, and the public sector (Burke, 2014; Kezar, 2014b; Kuipers et al., 2014), there remains much to be learned about implementing and sustaining such change, and about the roles and
behaviors of specific actors beyond the activities carried out by the college or university president or executive leaders. There is a need for additional change management research inclusive of practitioner voices within the public sector, which is a contribution this study makes (Kuipers et al., 2014).

This study addresses the problem of practice of how community college academic deans experience their role as middle managers during a planned organizational change. Gallos (2002) likened the “middleness” of an academic dean’s professional life to “living in a vise” (p. 174). While conventional wisdom once depicted the office of academic dean as an administrative support for faculty (Walker, 1967), the academic dean’s role has changed significantly as societal expectations for higher education have advanced. To expand opportunities for a more diverse student body and to drive organizational improvement, academic deans engage not only with faculty but also with students, colleagues, employers, policy makers, legislators, funders, and other community stakeholders (AACC, 2013; Behling, 2014). Change leadership is the essence of a dean’s work (Bragg, 2000).

Academic deans drive change from the middle by taking cues from external stakeholders and executive leaders, and by guiding faculty and staff members through change implementation (Hanley, 2014). Research has demonstrated that academic deans often work in high stress environments (Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, & Sarros, 1999; Wild, Ebbers, Shelley, & Gmelch, 2003) replete with role conflict and ambiguity (Montez, Wolverton, & Gmelch, 2003; Wolverton, Wolverton, & Gmelch, 1999). Yet there is growing recognition that academic deans play an instrumental role in leading and sustaining change in colleges and universities (Beresford & Michels, 2014; Cleverly-Thompson, 2016; Rouleau, 2005).
A significant body of management research has demonstrated the positive contributions that middle managers make to strategy development and implementation in business (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). Research on successful change implementation in higher education has suggested coupling visionary executive leadership with collaborative strategies that engage cross-functional teams of faculty and staff members, including academic deans, to examine institutional data, review best practices, and design new or improved processes (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Kezar, 2014b). Middle leadership in higher education is often exercised through relational influence, rather than positional power (Branson, Franken, & Penney, 2016). The role of academic deans as middle managers and emerging senior leaders must be recognized and better supported so that colleges and universities can more effectively design, implement, and sustain the changes necessary to meet dynamic contemporary demands (A. Floyd, 2016).

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

While management research has focused for many years on the involvement of middle managers in change, the overall body of research is disparate and suffers from substantial variation in the definition of key terms and in research emphases (Wooldridge et al., 2008). Much of the extant research on organizational change in higher education credits the knowledge, skills, and personal qualities of executive leaders who set the vision and context for large-scale or systemic change and inspire organizational members to follow (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Cloud, 2010; Eddy, 2010). A perception of higher education middle managers as bureaucrats limits broader recognition of their capacity to lead strategic organizational change (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Many studies have identified the challenges and stress factors faced by academic deans (Montez et al., 2003; Watba & Farmer, 2006; Wild et al., 2003). Few studies have examined how
community college academic deans make sense of their role as middle managers and the conditions under which they effectively drive planned change.

**Relating the Discussion to the Audiences**

Participants for this study were recruited from community colleges implementing guided pathways. The inquiry was conducted using an IPA approach, a qualitative methodology that examines how participants construct meaning from their lived experiences with certain events or phenomena (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By using a qualitative methodology to examine the experience of community college academic deans implementing guided pathways, this research has aimed to provide a more nuanced understanding of how defined roles, responsibilities, and other factors influence their efforts. Findings examined antecedent conditions that contributed to success, and/or common challenges that impeded implementation. The influence of psychosocial factors such as sense-making and sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), organizational trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), and implicit theories of change were fully interrogated (Leith et al., 2014).

This study brings authentic practitioner voices to the literature on the role of the community college academic dean. Learning through the practical experiences of peers complements theoretical knowledge and can be a powerful form of scholarship for practitioners and for the education and training professionals who prepare these middle managers for leadership roles (Bereiter, 2014). As such, this work informs curriculum and instructional strategies used in leadership development and graduate education programs. Findings also have the potential to inform the preparation, ongoing professional development, and day-to-day practices of community college executive leaders as they strive to empower faculty and staff members to be intentional innovators in crafting solutions to improve student success (AACC,
2013). This inquiry also sought to expand current research on effecting change in community colleges through guided pathways (Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017). Perhaps most poignantly, the personal experiences of community college academic deans navigating the complexities of change from the middle of the institution have been revealed. Results provide deeper insight into the power and potential of human interaction to bring about deep and sustaining organizational transformation.

**Significance of Research Question**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that just 32% of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students enrolled in a baccalaureate program at an open admissions institution in 2009 achieved that credential six years later (NCES, 2017a). Only 22% of a similar cohort of students who started at two-year public institutions in 2012 completed their studies three years later (NCES, 2017b). Across the country, African-American, Latino, and low-income students are less likely to complete college than their white middle-class counterparts (AACU, 2015). For those students who manage to complete their studies through the baccalaureate degree, student loan indebtedness is steep. In Massachusetts, average student debt at graduation is $31,563. (TICAS, 2017).

These bleak completion outcomes are exacerbated by data demonstrating the economic advantage of attending college. In the contemporary economy, people without some education beyond high school cannot compete for living-wage, sustainable employment that allows entry into the middle class (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). In Massachusetts, the wage premium for workers with a bachelor’s degree is nearly double that of workers with only a high school diploma (Thompson, 2017). There is strong evidence suggesting that workers with an
associate degree, certificate, or some college, enjoy a sizable wage premium also (Belfield & Bailey, 2017).

American higher education has a mandate for change to bring more students increased access and timely completion as well as stronger alignment with workforce needs (The White House, 2009; USDOE, 2006). Such change has been incentivized by the federal government, philanthropic organizations, and state legislators (Bill & Melinda Gates, n.d.; Lumina, n.d.-b; Salmon-Fernandez, 2014; The White House, 2009). Yet, implementing and maintaining comprehensive and systemic change in higher education is difficult (Lenartowicz, 2015; Shugart, 2013).

A growing body of research suggests that colleges and universities can improve student retention and on-time completion by implementing comprehensive, integrated system changes. Often termed guided pathways, these changes increase the structure of academic programs and reduce administrative obstacles to enrollment, financial aid, and student advising (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006; Scott-Clayton, 2011). These reforms cannot be accomplished in a piecemeal manner; rather, colleges and universities must commit to concurrent planned changes across their institutions, given the synergies among targeted reforms (Grossman et al., 2015).

This study that gives voice to the experience of community college academic deans engaged in guided pathways implementation is important for several reasons. It has demonstrated that community colleges appreciate the need for change and are deliberately pursuing evidence-based systemic improvements. This study concretized guided pathways implementation and revealed the mechanisms through which middle managers were facilitating change processes and the factors that influenced their success.
By specifically examining how academic deans make sense of their roles and responsibilities during planned change, the findings from this study complement and expand upon earlier research on factors that influence the perception of organizational change in community colleges (Van Wagoner, 2004). Further, the study has illustrated how community college academic deans carry out the leadership functions associated with being “champion of the cause” (McKinney & Morris, 2010); it simultaneously brings practitioner perspectives into the higher education literature on the role of middle managers in the implementation of planned change (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002).

Focusing on the authentic lived experiences of community college academic deans as agents of organizational structure and institutional process change, this study resonates with practitioners. It has the potential to enhance the skills, knowledge, and abilities of academic deans and other middle managers driving similar planned changes. Findings can also assist executive leaders in understanding more comprehensively the factors that motivate employees to change, that support their efforts, or that hinder their success.

Lastly, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of guided pathways as a change strategy by focusing specifically on community colleges and the particular factors that influence change implementation. Past reports have evaluated the effectiveness of guided pathways programs (Strumbos, Kolenovic, & Tavares, 2016) or of interventions like intrusive advising (Sutton, 2016). Few studies have addressed successful implementation of guided pathways or the procedural roles and processes of specific actors like community college academic deans; this study contributes to filling that scholarly gap.
Research Problem and Research Question

This IPA study has described how community college academic deans make sense of their roles as middle managers during planned organizational change at institutions that are implementing guided pathways.

The primary research question that guided this study was: How do community college academic deans make sense of their lived experience as middle managers during planned change?

Definitions of Key Terminology

Community College

The term community college refers to a two-year postsecondary institution that offers programs of study leading to immediate workforce entry or transfer to the baccalaureate level. Community colleges typically grant certificates or associate degrees, but in some regions of the country, they may also grant the baccalaureate degree. Publicly-funded community colleges are this study’s focal point because of: their diverse student body and open-access mission; their significance to economic and workforce development; and the fact that over 40% of all U.S. undergraduates are enrolled in these institutions (AACC, 2017b).

Academic Deans

The term academic dean refers to a managerial position within the academic affairs division that is primarily responsible for the overall leadership and management of instruction and services for credit programs. Academic deans were selected as the focal point of this study because their intermediate position within the organization’s structure requires them to work simultaneously with executive leaders, faculty and staff, and colleagues across the institution, as well as with external constituents. Their duties and responsibilities illustrate the linking function
performed by middle managers as they negotiate system changes up, down, and across an institution (Balogun, 2003; Marshall, 2012).

Middle Managers

Middle managers can be defined as those individuals who provide coordination for daily operational activities and leadership for strategy within an organization. They typically report to a senior manager and have supervisory responsibility for employees within a unit or division. Thus, they are situated vertically within an organization (S. W. Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992).

Planned Change

Planned change is a deliberate process involving the implementation of a specified strategy that requires employee behavioral change leading to improved organizational outcomes (Porras & Silvers, 1991). The planned organizational change that is the focus of this study involves the implementation of guided pathways, a contemporary system of reform that has been shown to increase community college student retention and completion (Bailey et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Middle leadership in higher education is often exercised through relational influence, rather than positional power (Branson et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that middle managers are “language-based workers” (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) who serve as interpreters and sellers of change (Birken, Lee, & Weiner, 2012; Rouleau, 2005). In this capacity, the importance of social interactions with group members, especially informal communications that help constituents make sense of and negotiate the change process, has been demonstrated (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Clear, consistent, and personal communication from middle managers facilitates employee commitment to change (Salih & Doll, 2013). Successful middle managers draw upon their tacit understanding of organizational dynamics to
contextualize change messages in conversations with different stakeholder groups (Rouleau, 2005). Since appreciation for context, individual and group dynamics, and the psychological forces undergirding responses to change are essential tools for middle managers engaged in change initiatives, Kurt Lewin’s (1947, 1948a, 1948b, 1951a, 1951b, 1951c, 1951d) theory of planned change was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study.

**Lewin’s Theory of Planned Change**

Lewin’s three-step model of change, known as unfreezing-change-refreezing, is often considered the foundational theory for most complex and all-inclusive contemporary change frameworks (Burke, 2014, p. 124). However, as a German-born Jew with a passion for social justice and with roots in Gestalt psychology, Lewin’s interest in and understanding of change was far more complex and all-inclusive than commonly assumed (Burnes, 2004b). The three-step model represented just one of four interrelated theoretical constructs (Burnes, 2004b). Other components include: field theory, group dynamics, and action research (Burnes, 2004a, 2004b).

**Field theory.** Field theory is a “method . . . of analyzing causal relationships and of building scientific constructs” (Lewin, 1951a, p. 45). Group behavior focuses on examination in field theory, and the field is comprised of the social, cultural, political, ethical, and personal circumstances or environment in which a group is situated (Burnes, 2004b). The interactions, relationships, and behaviors between and among group members reflect the symbiotic nature of their relationships (Burnes, 2004b). Change in individual or group behavior results from internal or external psychological forces impacting the whole field (Burnes, 2004b).

Six characteristics distinguish field theory (Lewin, 1951a). The method has been defined as *constructive*, suggesting that “the meaning of any concept [can be] derived from its relationship to other concepts” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p.411) rather than abstracted from a
hypothetical ideal. Next, it has been considered a *dynamic approach* that treats group behavior and interactions among group members as existing in “quasi-stationary equilibrium” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p. 411) or in an active process in which change is always occurring, yet the essential form remains relatively constant. Field theory has been further characterized as a *psychological approach* given its emphasis on behavior and the influences that define the properties of one’s field or life space (Lewin, 1951a, pp. 61-62). Concern with *analysis beginning with the situation as a whole* (Lewin, 1951a, pp. 62-63) distinguished field theory from other contemporary methods. Rather than studying individual behavior in discrete chunks, Lewin asserted that studying general properties like psychological atmosphere would lead to a deeper understanding of the whole (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). Thus, the focus in field theory is on *behavior as a function of the field at the time it occurs*, and significant emphasis has been placed on studying current rather than historical conditions (Lewin, 1951a, pp. 63-64). Perhaps the most complex component of field theory was Lewin’s attempt to develop *mathematical representations of the psychological situation* using geometric topology, a form of mathematical mapping, to illustrate group interactions, relationships, and influences (Lewin, 1951a, p. 64).

**Group dynamics.** Psychological research has demonstrated that the goals individuals set for themselves are strongly influenced by the standards and norms of the group to which they belong or aspire to belong (Lewin, 1948b). Thus, Lewin’s research focused on the social, cultural, political, intellectual, and/or other such forces that influenced decisions and actions of group members, or *group dynamics* (Burnes, 2004b). He contended that change efforts should focus on altering group behavior and developed processes—through action research and the three-step model—to assist group members in meaningful examination of issues and in planning for tangible behavioral change (Burnes, 2004b).
**Action research.** Lewin considered change to fundamentally be a learning process in which group members shared a sense of urgency and commitment to collective action to address common concerns (Burnes, 2004b). This learning process involves a cycle of problem definition, research, careful planning, and ideation leading to action; it then proceeds with an assessment of impact, leading to more research and planning, refined action, and further evaluation (Lewin, 1948a). In this context, group members can draw on field theory to examine forces impacting the group and then analyze group dynamics to better understand their collective behavioral response (Burnes, 2004b). Informed by honest and objective appraisal, the quality of learning derived from this cycle compelled Lewin (1948a) to declare that “action, research, and training [were] . . . . a triangle that should be kept together for the sake of any of its corners” (p. 211).

**Three-step model.** Noting that group habits or customs were difficult to disrupt, Lewin (1951d) asserted that effecting lasting change required an analysis of an entire social field and group values and norms. He argued that the most strongly held values and norms would be the points of greatest resistance to change and suggested that transformation efforts focus on de-emphasizing their relevance to group members (Lewin, 1951d). He reasoned that, once group beliefs shifted, the behavior of individual group members would shift too (Lewin, 1951d).

However, attaining a desired level of behavior was a step, not the goal, in realizing enduring change. Noting that group conduct often retreated to familiar patterns, Lewin (1951d) advocated a three-step change process that sought a stable state of changed behavior as its eventual goal. The first step—*unfreezing*—required that group members become discomfited by current conditions so that “the shell of complacency and self-righteousness” (Lewin, 1951d, p. 229) would shatter to motivate collective change. The next step—*moving*—signified the process through which group members advanced to the desired state (Lewin, 1951d, p. 229). The final
step—freezing—described the process through which groups make new behavior permanent (Lewin, 1951d, p. 229). The process is often described and depicted as linear and sequential. See Figure 1.

\[\text{unfreeze} \rightarrow \text{change} \rightarrow \text{refreeze}\]

*Figure 1*. Change as three steps. (Cummings, Bridgman, & Brown, 2016, p. 34)

**Critics of Lewin’s Theory of Planned Change**

Lewin’s work dominated the field of psychology and organizational development through much of the 20th Century (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). His critics challenged the theory as naive, inflexible, and sluggish. Focusing solely on unfreezing-change-refreezing, the model was criticized for its lack of complexity and its failure to adequately represent the multilayered nature of organizations or change processes (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). Further, it was argued that the model and its derivations would not result in lasting and transformative change (Kanter et al., 1992). Others objected to the concept of refreezing, arguing that modern organizations must adopt changes resulting in greater flexibility and responsiveness to dynamic future conditions, thus they would not be affixed to a static frozen state (Child, 2005). Additionally, the importance Lewin placed on changing group behavior and the collective processes required to bring about that change was regarded as slow and inefficient (Burnes, 2004a).

Lewin’s efforts to develop mathematical diagrams depicting the relationships between and among group members and the psychological forces impacting their individual and collective actions, drew sharp criticism in the areas of academic rigor and practical relevance (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). Those seeking applicability found these theoretical calculations difficult to comprehend or apply (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). Lewin (1951c) argued that these calculations were among several tools he used for “finding new knowledge about, and deeper
insight into, psychological processes” (p. 4). However, this aspect of field theory was rejected by peers in mathematics and psychology, and it was hardly examined after his death (Burnes & Cooke, 2013).

**Rationale for Using this Framework**

This study was conducted using an IPA approach. IPA is a form of qualitative research that examines participants’ interpretation of their lived experiences with certain events or phenomena. Its essence lies in understanding that every person construes his or her own experience from a unique perspective shaped by physical, emotional, cultural, historical, and time-bound characteristics. While Lewin’s focus for analysis was group behavior, he contended that individual behavior was strongly influenced by standards established in the group with which a person identified. Thus, the interactions, relationships, and behaviors among group members not only reflect the symbiotic nature of relationships among the individuals within the group (Burnes, 2004b), but they also influence each individual’s interpretation of lived experience. Sans the geometric topology, Lewin’s theory was deemed a “robust and holistic approach to understanding and changing behavior” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013, p. 421). This theory supports efforts to maintain an idiographic focus on the participant’s interpretation of lived experience during planned change while also examining the influence of social, cultural, historical, political, ethical, or other circumstances in which the participant’s group is situated. Ideography is essential to IPA.

**Applying the Theory to this Study**

Lewin’s theory of planned change is comprised of four components: field theory, group dynamics, action research, and the three-step model. In this section, the ways in which each of
these constructs were applied to the proposed study are outlined. This analysis provided the foundation for shaping interview protocol questions and strategies for qualitative data analysis.

**Applying field theory.** To interpret individual lived experiences, the researcher must understand the context in which each individual participant is situated. Field theory provides the conceptual umbrella under which the researcher can construct this understanding. First, by interrogating the breadth and depth to which an individual defines a situation in its entirety, the researcher can better grasp the individual parameters of each participant’s lifespace within that whole. Since field theory is essentially a psychological approach, it provides a strong foundation for exploring psychosocial factors that influence change implementation, including implicit theories of change, sense-making and sense-giving, and organizational trust.

**Applying group dynamics.** Lewin contended that change efforts must emphasize changing group behavior. Academic deans as middle managers facilitate change processes with important stakeholder groups through their relationships with group members, their proficiency in helping others make sense of changes, and their implicit understanding of organizational dynamics. Group dynamics provide a platform from which to interrogate how academic deans influence group values, norms, and behavior.

**Applying action research.** Action research is essentially a continuous loop of group learning. It begins with a definition of the problem followed by development and implementation of an action plan; finally, it involves evaluation of the plan’s effectiveness. This assessment informs the group’s understanding of the problem, revision of the plan, and further assessment. As middle managers, academic deans work closely with stakeholder groups to ensure academic quality and effectiveness. The concept of action research guided inquiry into methodology and
enhanced this researcher’s understanding of the intentionality behind change processes, as well as potential connections among action, research, and training.

**Applying the three-step model.** The three-step model provides a framework for understanding what needs to happen during change. Thus, it allowed the researcher to systematically examine how the academic dean contributes to generating a sense of collective discomfort with the current situation, to developing a plan to help the group move to a new level of behavior, and to insuring that group behavior remains stable over the long term.

**Conclusion**

Despite voluminous research on organizational change and change management in business, higher education, and the public sector (Burke, 2014; Kezar, 2014b; Kuipers et al., 2014), there remains much to be learned about implementing and sustaining such change and about the roles of specific actors beyond presidents or executive leaders. This study intended to bring authentic practitioners’ voices to the literature on community college academic deans and their experiences as middle managers during periods of planned organizational change. This role must be recognized and better supported so that community colleges can more effectively implement and sustain large-scale, systemic change initiatives (A. Floyd, 2016). It is anticipated that findings can effectively inform curriculum and instructional strategies used in higher education leadership development and graduate education programs; the findings also have the potential to support the preparation, ongoing professional development, and day-to-day practice of community college executive leaders seeking to empower staff to lead change. Using Lewin’s dynamic approach to planned change, findings provide a unique peer learning opportunity for community college academic deans engaged in guided pathways implementation.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that just over half of the students (53.8%) who enrolled in a baccalaureate program in 2009 achieved that credential six years later. For those students who started at two-year institutions in 2012, only 31.6% completed within three years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.). Meanwhile the cost of attending college and the corresponding student loan debt have escalated (The Institute for College Access & Success [TICAS], 2017). Labor market analyses demonstrate that people without some education beyond high school cannot compete for living-wages and sustainable employment in the contemporary economy (Carnevale et al., 2016). The American system of higher education has a mandate for deep change. This change must bring about increased access and completion for more students, stronger alignment with workforce needs, and improved financial efficiencies (AACC, 2017a; USDOE, 2006). The problem is that organizational change at colleges and universities across the country has proven difficult to achieve and sustain (Shugart, 2013; Watson & Watson, 2013).

This literature review presents an examination and integration of literature on three interrelated topics: (a) change in higher education; (b) the middle management perspective and academic deans; and (c) psychosocial factors that influence change implementation. The review was guided by research questions seeking to better understand organizational change in higher education, and factors that impact its facilitation. It begins with a summary of sociopolitical factors driving the demand for change; it then follows with an overview of research and key concepts associated with organizational change and change leadership. The implementation of guided pathways is introduced as a present-day exemplar of response to the change mandate. Next, research on the middle management perspective and academic deans is presented with
emphasis on roles and responsibilities and how deans effect organizational change. Lastly, psychosocial factors that influence organizational change facilitation are considered; these include implicit theories of change, sense-making, and organizational trust.

**Change in Higher Education: The Mandates, Challenges, and Processes**

**The Mandates**

**The Spellings Commission.** The report from the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (CFHE) (a.k.a. the Spellings Commission) was a defining moment in contemporary higher education reform (USDOE, 2006). With emphasis on innovation and flexibility, the CFHE called for expanded access; consolidation and streamlining of financial aid programs; improvement in student learning; and increased transparency, accountability, and entrepreneurialism (USDOE, 2006). Critics decried its overreliance on market-oriented outcomes, indifference toward extant reforms, and the undue administrative burden and costs associated with implementation (Perley, 2007). However, the dual legislative emphases on costs and quality in the Higher Education Act of 2008 reflected many of the CFHE’s recommendations (Morgan, 2008).

**Incentivizing nationwide reform.** In 2009, President Obama launched the American Graduation Initiative (AGI), declaring that, by 2020, the United States would exceed all other countries with respect to college graduation rates. Focused on strengthening community colleges, increasing college completion rates, and addressing affordability, the AGI established a national reform agenda (AACC, 2017a). Federal funding incentivized these reforms. One such example was the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Grant Training Program (TAACCCT) funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Employment & Training Administration (USDOLETA) which provided community colleges with resources to expand and strengthen
career and technical programs that prepared graduates for high-skill, high-wage jobs in key sectors like healthcare, information technology, and manufacturing (USDOLETA, 2011).

Simultaneously, state level reforms were taking place. In Massachusetts, the state’s 15 existing community colleges successfully competed for two $20 million TAACCCT awards, one in Round 1 and another in Round 4. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts also won a competitive technical assistance grant to jumpstart work with Complete College America (CCA), one of several national organizations focused on reforms to boost student success and completion. These grant resources buoyed statewide reform efforts delineated as part of the Vision Project, a five-year strategic plan for excellence in public higher education (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education [MADHE], n.d.). Taken together, this funding and technical assistance laid the groundwork for introducing performance-based funding. Metrics, introduced in 2013, rewarded increased college completion rates and the accomplishment of Vision Project goals (MADHE, n.d.)

**Private foundations and professional associations.** National and local foundations reinforced calls for reform by making competitive resources available. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with an endowment of over $40 billion, prioritized projects seeking to increase access and completion of high quality degree programs leading to living wage and in-demand occupations (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.). The Lumina Foundation, with an endowment of over $1 billion, committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high quality degrees or other industry credentials to 60% by 2025 (Lumina Foundation, n.d.-a). CCA, through technical assistance and field research, convened a coalition of states focused on redesign of their public higher education systems (CCA, 2014b). On the community college front, the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (CCFCC) challenged
member organizations to fundamentally redesign the student experience, reinvent the institution’s role within its community, and reset the system by incentivizing success (AACC, 2012).

In Massachusetts, the Boston Foundation issued a report demanding statewide community college reform underscoring the economic mandate for stronger alignment with workforce needs and pointing out potential obstacles to change (Alssid, Goldberg, & Schneider, 2011). Subsequently, the Boston Foundation promulgated a change strategy that paved the way for CCA implementation in Massachusetts and for incentivizing reform through performance-based funding (Kazis, & Couturier, 2013).

The takeaway. American higher education must reinvent itself. The controversial Spellings Commission recommendations have reverberated through policy re-invention and funding re-formulation at both the national and state levels. Common reform proposals have promoted market-oriented strategies linking postsecondary success to career outcomes and access and completion strategies that reduce achievement gaps and increase graduation rates, all which focus on the inventive and entrepreneurial restructuring of the U.S. system of higher education.

Considering this mandate and incentives for change across the country, it seems inexplicable that Conrad Appel III, a Republican member of the Louisiana State Senate, accused the Louisiana Board of Regents of circling the wagons in 2016 to fend off necessary improvements in the system’s effectiveness and efficiency (C. Appel, personal communication, January 31, 2016). Is higher education impervious to change? A key word search using the Google search engine returned 1,970,000 hits for the phrase “organizational change in higher
education,” but over 26,200,000 hits for the phrase “resistance to change in higher education.” In the next section, the challenge of change in higher education is examined.

The Challenges

A widely-accepted adage states that change is the only constant in life. Change theories, change strategies in business and higher education, change leadership, and factors influencing the success of organizational change have been studied extensively (Burke, 2014; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Kezar, 2014b; Toma, 2010). Thought leaders in management and the social sciences have offered countless solutions for improving quality and performance and for reengineering business processes in higher education (Abdous, 2011; Antony, 2014; Sorensen, Furst-Bowe, & Moen, 2005). Yet realizing and sustaining comprehensive organizational change in colleges and universities remains elusive (Lenartowicz, 2015; Marshall, 2011; Shugart, 2013). In this section, key change concepts, theories, and the process of change are examined. Guided pathways implementation is offered as a contemporary exemplar of deep organizational change in higher education.

Organizations as open systems. Using the biological concept of open-systems theory to describe organizational change, Burke (2014) noted the symbiotic relationship between systems (or organizations) and their environments. He favored organizational approaches to change, reasoning that modifications in any single unit ultimately impact operations within other units and across the entire system. Burke (2014) cautioned that diffusion of power and authority in complex systems can weaken the overall impact of change efforts; thus, he argued for efficient and effective use of energy across the system.

Evolutionary or revolutionary change. Researchers have grappled with the scope, depth, and rapidity of organizational change. Most change theories and strategies fall within two
broad constructs: evolutionary or revolutionary. Evolutionary change is gradual and
developmental in nature and can be conceptualized as continuous improvement. The application
of lean principles for reducing waste and increasing process efficiencies characterizes an
evolutionary change process (Antony, 2014). Revolutionary change can be defined as a shock to
a system (Burke, 2014). The theory of punctuated equilibrium offers a framework for
considering radical, or revolutionary, change within a system (Gersick, 1988). Given the
mandate for deep change described previously, punctuated equilibrium is examined next.

**Punctuated equilibrium paradigm.** Theories within this paradigm share a common
assumption that “systems evolve through the alternation of periods of equilibrium, in which
persistent underlying structures permit only incremental change, and periods of revolution in
which these underlying structures are fundamentally altered” (Gersick, 1991, p. 13). Punctuated
equilibrium theorists assert that: (a) systems do not evolve gradually and/or necessarily from a
lower to a higher stage; (b) the *deep structure* of a system consists of an implicit set of
assumptions about how people within the organization operate together and is largely immutable;
(c) systems make choices which preserve deep structure during periods of equilibrium or inertia;
and (d) revolutionary periods are typically transitory and intense phases during which deep
structure is dismantled and rebuilt (Gersick. 1991).

It stands to reason that significant disruption in structure could produce beneficial and/or
detrimental outcomes in a given system. Prigogine and Stengers (as cited in Gersick, 1991)
argued that no single shock could produce a comprehensive organizational change immediately,
and they also asserted that effective communication strategies would ensure change across the
system. Kezar (2005), meanwhile, cautioned that radical change processes may cause more harm
than good, and that completely disassembling a shared governance system—a proxy here for
deep structure—could paralyze an organization. These findings suggest that revolutionary change may be unsustainable, but they also provide a point of departure for considering how and why organizations resist change.

**Resistance to change.** State Senator Appel castigated the Louisiana Board of Regents for defending the status quo and accused campus leaders of holding students “hostage by [doing] what is best for those operating within individual institutions or systems” (C. Appel, personal communication, January 31, 2016). Alssid et al. (2011) had previously lambasted the Massachusetts community colleges for failing to meet their obligations as drivers of workforce and economic development. Pronouncements like these generate damaging perceptions about public higher education. Yet there is evidence to suggest that, while colleges and universities may be viewed as open systems, their functional objective is more conserving—that is, they seek to “change only to be able to remain unchanged” (Lenartowicz, 2015). Research into change resistance revealed several theories and contextual factors, including the impact of implicit theories of change and the interrelationships among campus leadership, as well as the purpose, history, and process of change.

**Implicit theories of change.** Implicit theories of change include the tacit beliefs that individuals hold about how change happens that are molded by individual experience and interpretation of events and circumstances. According to Dweck (as cited in Kezar, Gehrke, & Elrod, 2015), individuals generally lack awareness of these beliefs and rarely engage in thoughtful consideration of their legitimacy. Intentionally uncovering these beliefs and investigating their validity can contribute to more successful change efforts (Zenios, Goodyear, & Jones, 2004). Kezar et al. (2015) developed a framework to help change teams collectively address implicit attitudes, define intended reforms, and develop strategies for realizing reform.
Campus leadership and purpose, history, process. One critical change leadership obligation is to encourage and inspire followers toward a common goal by helping them understand the context and the call to action. Sense-making is the process through which a leader defines and interprets circumstances and events for constituents (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Presidents, as the focal point of campus leadership, play an indispensable role in helping the campus community understand and effect change (Eddy, 2003).

The behavior, communication style, and past performance of campus change agents other than presidents contribute to cooperation or resistance to change as well (Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008). Ford et al. (2008) noted the importance of contextual factors like experience with promises kept and trustworthiness of the change agent; the effectiveness and inclusiveness of communications; the effect of potential distortions of change concepts and goals; and/or the impact of perceived uncertainty or inconsistency by the change agent. Devos, Buelens, and Bouckenooghe (2007) demonstrated interconnections among the nature of a change (content), the quality of trust in management and historical experience with change (context), and the extent of collective involvement sought by a change agent (process). Other researchers have underscored the impact of trust on organizations during periods of innovation or change (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Dovey, 2009; Lines, Selart, Espedal, & Johansen, 2005).

Organizational change in higher education. The current mandate for change in higher education essentially represents a paradigmatic shift, or what researchers define as second-order change (Levy, 1986). Kezar (2014b) emphasized that such change is characterized by comprehensive changes in policies and practices and by a fundamental shift of attitudes and beliefs regarding the work of the organization. The history of the American system of higher education provides recurring examples of second-order change.
Higher education in the United States evolved from a model that first only served the elite to the contemporary model serving most people, the latter which is progressively transitioning to a system that provides universal access (Trow, 2007). Precipitated by a fundamental redefinition of who is being and who should be served, each of these transitions forced structural changes to evolve so that institutions could better meet student needs. The current transformation was prompted by the emerging labor market which began demanding sophisticated technical skills and postsecondary degree attainment for right of entry, and by the changing demographics of the student body with their diverse needs (Bruininks, Keeney, & Thorp, 2010; Merisotis, 2015; Pelletier, 2010). These changes have compelled faculty and administrators to reconsider: basic assumptions about the purpose of higher education, what constitutes effective teaching and learning, and how to increase student success by engendering an advantageous learning environment. Duffy and Reigeluth (2010) defined such revolutionary change as an occurrence that impacts an entire institution and its culture; it is intentional and transformative. Shugart (2013) contended that this kind of deep change requires a leadership structure and leaders that acknowledge institutional history, setting a vision for the future while negotiating the difficult process of letting go of the past.

A contemporary exemplar. As noted previously, growing importance has been placed on incentivizing higher education reform. In 2009, President Obama launched the AGI, declaring that by 2020, the United States would exceed all other countries with respect to college graduation rates. Focused on three imperatives—strengthening community colleges, increasing two and four-year college completion rates, and addressing affordability—the AGI defined the national reform agenda (The White House, 2009). Philanthropic organizations and professional associations incentivized similar reforms to fundamentally restructure the student experience to
reconsider the institution’s role within its community and to incentivize completion (AAAC AACC, 2017a; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d., Lumina, n.d-b.).

Intrinsic to each of these schemes is a critical assumption that postsecondary education should and must be accessible to all people, particularly those historically underrepresented. Reforms demand dramatically improved and on-time completion success in transfer or job attainment; stronger labor market alignment; simplified navigation through college processes; and robust wrap-around supports to insure student success (Scott-Clayton, 2011; Van Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016). Several national foundations and advocacy organizations promote such reforms under the umbrella term of guided or structured pathways.

Guided pathways as organizational reform. Organizational change is a term that most people implicitly understand but few define similarly. To this point in the literature review, the concept has been loosely defined as disruptive, radical, systemic, transformative, deep structure, or second-order change. To fully understand the complexity and totality of guided pathways implementation as organizational change, the following excerpt from a recent case study is offered:

Institutional change can be thought of as characterized by two dimensions: the extent to which students throughout the entire college experience a change (“diffusion to students” or “diffusion”) and the extent to which college faculty and staff modify their norms and beliefs to align with those underlying the change (acceptance). . . . [guided pathways] represent a systemic change effort because its goals are to comprehensively change the way a college interacts with students across the institution and to transform the culture of the college to one that regards completion as a primary mission of the institution (Grossman et al., 2015, p. 3).
Indeed, guided pathways implementation requires cross-campus reforms to boost completion and involves every college function, from enrollment and student services, to academic affairs, to financial services, to the technology and network infrastructure. Reforms typically involve realigning curriculum with labor market needs; increasing the quality and navigability of career and college information; defaulting students into highly structured programs of study with few elective choices; and providing intrusive advising and student supports (Van Noy et al., 2016). Advocates underscore that these reforms cannot be accomplished in a fragmented manner; rather, institutions should commit to simultaneous organizational changes due to the synergies among targeted reforms (Grossman et al., 2015).

Committing to a guided pathways implementation requires genuine commitment by all members of the institution to examine, reconsider, and change nearly every policy, procedure, or process on campus. It is tantamount to asking faculty, administrators, and support staff to dismantle an institution’s deep structure, or the “set of givens about the group’s situation and how it will behave” (Gersick, 1991, p. 15). This intensive endeavor inevitably challenges implicit assumptions about students and what constitutes effective teaching and learning; it may generate confusion as the emphasis shifts from increasing enrollment to increasing completion (Shugart, 2013). Having demonstrated the reform mandate and examined key change concepts, the next section examines how change happens and describes models for understanding organizations and change leadership.

The Processes

Four theoretical models characterize major approaches to the change process; each model is defined by forces motivating the change and by processes involved in realizing the change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Life-cycle theories assume that change is the result of a natural
developmental process that is sequential and immutable. *Teleological* theories are characterized by a focus on an end goal or purpose that serves as the change motivation. *Dialectical* theories view change as the result of a struggle between conflicting forces. *Evolutionary* theories depict change as the consequence of an ongoing battle for survival of the fittest. While Van de Ven and Poole (1995) argued that any change could be viewed through one or more of these lenses, teleology informs the process approach to change in this study.

**Teleology.** Teleological change is best described as “purposeful cooperation” (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 514). It depicts goal-oriented change that is built collectively by the individuals that comprise a single group, unit, or organization. Teleological change often results in a break with past conventions and ways of thinking about a certain issue, understood as second-order change. Any deviation from a desired end state or goal can jumpstart the change process (Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2009). Teleological change processes involve data-informed, educated decisions; selection of the best solution or strategy; and provision of adequate resources and supports to realize the needed change. Teleological change is intentional and planned.

**Planned change.** Lewin’s (1947) three-step model of planned change provides a simple framework for understanding the work of intentional change. He argued that the first step in the change process is to *unfreeze* current behavior and implicit beliefs regarding the quality and effectiveness of a unit or organization by presenting evidence that change is needed. Data showing steady declines in student enrollment, retention, or completion could indicate this need in higher education. The objective during this phase is to inspire collective action. The next phase is to *move* the unit or organization to a new and improved state in which policies and practices have been transformed to achieve the desired end state. The objective is to achieve this
transformation. The final phase is to refreeze new behavior and beliefs so that changes are stable and protected from slippage back into former, less productive activities.

Huy (2001a) defined four ideal types of planned change, including: commanding, a coercive and directive approach for achieving radical change immediately; engineering, a more collaborative approach focused on process reengineering in a reasonably quick timeframe; teaching, a longer-term intervention that seeks to uncover and transform implicit attitudes that undermine change; and socializing, an incremental approach that focuses on cultivating improved relationships among organizational members to improve performance. Change leaders must recognize the constraints that time and content place on change strategies and develop the capacity to work within each of these types fluidly (Huy, 2001b).

Past experiences and sense-making capacities of different subcultures within an organization can influence the outcome of a planned change initiative. Unique subcultures within an institution—administrators, senior faculty, junior faculty, and support staff—experience and respond to planned change in different ways (Locke & Guglielmino, 2006). Change leaders must acknowledge this dynamic and propose processes that elicit universal involvement (Locke & Guglielmino, 2006).

Organizations and leaders. To understand the dynamics of change, it is important to understand how organizations function and how leaders influence their functioning processes. Several integrative organizational models offer clear perspectives. Weisbord (1976) emphasized the interaction between the structure of an organization (formal system) and organizational culture (informal system) as key to understanding and improving organizational effectiveness. He conceptualized the role of change leaders’ as monitoring organizational elements and insuring alignment among purposes, structure, rewards, mechanisms for change, relationships,
leadership. Nadler and Tushman (1980) contended that a high degree of congruence between inputs (strategy) and the transformation process (organizational structure) would result in improved organizational function and performance. In later work, Nadler and Tushman (1989) introduced the concept of *framebending* to conceptualize second order change; they also defined a role for a *magic leader* who served as a central change agent. The Burke and Litwin (1992) causal model for organizational performance and change provided a more nuanced perspective by addressing structure and culture, and transactional and transformational elements. In this model, leaders provide direction and role modeling.

Each of these organizational models identified leaders or leadership as imperative to organizational function by insuring alignment or congruence, serving as central agents of change, or providing overall direction and role modeling. Each also acknowledged the importance of leadership at multiple levels across the organization.

*Leadership for change*. Change leadership has been dissected from many perspectives. The influence of leader traits and situational characteristics on change success has been analyzed (Vroom & Jago, 2007; Zaccaro, 2007). The intersection of leadership and team collaboration, identity, or power and influence have also been examined (Solansky, 2008; Yukl, 2014). Transformational leadership, meanwhile, is often cited as critical to instigating organizational change (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Kezar, 2014b). The literature also advocates collaborative forms of leadership, specifically adaptive, and shared or distributed leadership (Elrod & Kezar, 2016; Klempin & Karp, 2015; Randall & Coakley, 2007). In the spirit of purposeful cooperation, collaborative strategies are considered next.

*Adaptive leadership*. Adaptive leadership encourages inventive approaches to organizational problems that have no known solutions. Heifetz (1994) defined adaptive problems
as those that demand new ways of thinking and learning in contrast with technical problems that are of a more routine nature. In higher education, adaptive problems are often those that challenge implicit assumptions, beliefs, and norms and that require change to the institution’s deep structure. Klempin and Karp (2015) asserted that adaptive change is transformative. Thus, the adaptive leadership model is a valuable framework for change leaders in higher education (Randall & Coakley, 2007).

**Distributed and shared leadership.** There are similarities between distributed leadership and shared leadership theories. For example, both describe leadership as the product of an interactive process among a group of individuals rather than of the efforts of a single individual. Distributed leadership focuses on interactions among leaders, followers, and their unique circumstances (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). By contrast, shared leadership emphasizes the “dynamic interactive influence process among individuals in work groups” (Conger & Pearce, 2003, p. 286) that leads to the accomplishment of collective goals.

Elrod and Kezar (2016) recommended the implementation of shared leadership through cross-functional teams representing different levels of organizational responsibility and control. Several studies specifically highlighted the importance of mid-level project managers and/or deans in facilitating and sustaining change in colleges or universities (Elrod & Kezar, 2016; Klempin & Karp, 2015). Middle managers are recognized as critical change intermediaries and praised as innovators, effective communicators, and committed employees in business (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2001b), and are thus essential to a shared leadership change process.

**Summary**

The 2006 report from the CFHE stimulated contemporary higher education reform. With emphasis on innovation and flexibility, the CFHE demanded expanded access; consolidation and
streamlining of financial aid; improvement in student learning; and increased transparency, accountability, and entrepreneurialism in U.S. higher education (USDOE, 2006). The federal government, professional associations, charitable foundations, and state governments echoed calls for higher educational reform by making competitive resources available and by introducing performance-based funding schemes.

While there is an undeniable mandate, genuine change has been difficult to achieve and sustain in this sector (Lenartowicz, 2015; Marshall, 2012; Shugart, 2013). Change theories, change strategies in business and higher education, and change leadership have been studied extensively (Burke, 2014; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Kezar, 2014b; Toma, 2010). The current transformation from a more exclusive model to a system that provides universal access for all students has forced colleges and universities to reconsider basic assumptions about the purpose, goals, and delivery of higher education and how to support all students to succeed. Guided pathways implementation is a contemporary exemplar of such radical change for colleges and universities; it represents change that is intentional and planned.

Research has demonstrated that many factors can influence the success of organizational change. Understanding organizational dynamics, the role of leaders, and the change process itself is critical. Implicit attitudes and beliefs, trust in change leaders, and the effectiveness of leader sense-making are key contextual factors. Leadership is also an important consideration. Transformational leadership is important to the initiation of change, but adaptive leadership encourages creative problem solving and transformation. Distributed or shared leadership engages multiple levels of leaders across the organization and is crucial to facilitating and sustaining change. At intermediate organizational levels, research has demonstrated that middle managers can be innovators, effective communicators, and change leaders. In higher education,
academic deans—as middle managers—are often key actors in facilitating and sustaining change.

This section described the sociopolitical context for change in higher education, defined organizational change and some of its challenges, and described change models and change leadership theories. The evidence presented thus far supports the idea that leadership for change at multiple levels within an organization is imperative. Research has demonstrated that middle managers, like academic deans, are important actors during organizational change. The next part of this literature review describes the middle management perspective and the role of academic deans.

**The Middle Management Perspective and the Role of Academic Deans**

Middle managers are positioned at the nexus of strategy formation and daily operations (Wooldridge et al., 2008). The middle management perspective is defined as explicit acknowledgement of the contributions these individuals make to the development and implementation of organizational strategy (Wooldridge et al., 2008). In this section, the evolution of management theory leading to the middle management perspective is examined. The review then focuses on the ways middle managers communicate and encourage cooperation. In the final segment, the role of academic deans as middle managers and change agents is explored.

**Evolution of Management Theory**

The historical evolution of key management theories contextualizes the contemporary middle management perspective (Parera & Fernandez-Vallejo, 2013). Each theory demonstrates an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the human dynamics that underlie the function of an organization. Taylor (as cited in Parera & Fernandez-Vallejo, 2013) asserted that productivity could be increased by standardizing production procedures and enforcing strict operating rules.
In Taylor’s model, the role of a manager or supervisor was to oversee and control processes to ensure homogeneity and maximum throughput. Fayol (as cited in Parera & Fernandez-Vallejo, 2013) argued against such rigidity, emphasizing that certain values shape individual approaches to management and, consequently, they influence processes. As one example, Fayol asserted that, while some managers claim authority exclusively through positional power, others do so through personal characteristics like intelligence, experience, or initiative. Mayo (as cited in Parera & Fernandez-Vallejo, 2013) studied the emergence of informal leaders and informal workgroups, noting the influence of psychological and social factors on productivity in the workplace.

However, Barnard’s (as cited in Parera & Fernandez-Vallejo, 2013) theory of formal organization best foreshadowed the current middle management perspective. Based on the concept of cooperative behavior, Barnard (1938/1968) argued that formal organizations required their members to exhibit good communication, willingness to serve, and a common purpose. He stressed the strategic value of formal channels of communication. He also noted the need for capable communication centers (i.e. officers, supervisors, managers) to interpret communications regarding external conditions and to relay progress updates, challenges, and concerns. For Barnard (1938/1968), “the most universal form of human cooperation, and perhaps the most complex, [was] speech” (p. 46), or human communication. In the following section, the ways that middle managers communicate and encourage cooperation are examined.

**Communication and Cooperation**

While earlier research on middle managers emphasized their role as strategy implementers, more recent work has focused on their role as mediators between the executive and tactical levels of an organization (Wooldridge et al., 2008). A mediator serves as a go-
between to assist divergent parties in arriving at common understandings or agreements. This brokering role requires effective communication skills (Fisher & Ury, 2011). There is no single definition for communication within the middle management literature. Related constructs such as diffusing and/or synthesizing information, sensemaking/sense-giving, and selling change serve as appropriate proxies.

Middle managers are “language-based workers” (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). They serve as both interpreters and sellers of change (Birken et al., 2012; Rouleau, 2005). In this dual capacity, the importance of social interactions, especially informal communications that help others make sense of and negotiate the change process, has been demonstrated (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Clear, consistent and personal communication from middle managers also facilitates employee commitment to change (Salih & Doll, 2013).

Successful middle managers draw upon their tacit understanding of organizational dynamics to contextualize change messages in conversations with different stakeholders (Rouleau, 2005). This capability positions them to effectively negotiate the acceptance of change with internal and external constituents (Rouleau, 2005). Middle managers hold the power to positively influence stakeholders at multiple levels—up, down, and across an organization (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Gaining such cross-functional buy-in and shared leadership for a change vision is vital to systemic institutional change (Elrod & Kezar, 2016). Several studies have pointed to the importance of mid-level project managers and/or deans in both facilitating and sustaining change in colleges or universities (Elrod & Kezar, 2016; Klempin & Karp, 2015). In the next section, the role of academic deans as middle managers is explored.
Academic Deans: Middle Managers and Change Facilitators

While the extant literature on organizational change and change management in higher education emphasizes the role of executive leaders in leading transformational change (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Eddy, 2010), there is recognition that middle managers, specifically academic deans, play an integral part in implementing and sustaining change in colleges and universities (Beresford & Michels, 2014; Cleverly-Thompson, 2016). It has been suggested that the role of the academic dean is stressful, ambiguous, and often misunderstood (Montez & Wolverton, 2000; Wild et al., 2003; Wolverton et al., 1999). This lack of clarity often contributes to disparity in the perceived effectiveness of academic deans (Bray, 2008; Gmelch et al., 1999). Yet, deans who possess strong interpersonal skills and the ability to navigate effectively among multiple and disparate priorities can create a positive working environment and gain the collective buy-in necessary to advance institutional initiatives (Ray, 2011; Wepner, Henk, Clark Johnson, & Lovell, 2014). This section reviews research on the role of academic deans and how they implement organizational change.

What do academic deans do? The position of academic dean has been defined in different ways through history and across institutional types. Walker (1967) placed emphasis on the deans’ relationship with faculty and on the role of creating an atmosphere in which faculty could excel in teaching. Noting the increasingly administrative nature of the academic deans’ position, Sarros, Gmelch, and Tanewski (1998) underscored the significance of their role as leaders and change implementers. The balance between leadership and management in the deans’ role has been examined and essential duties delineated to include promoting diversity and openness to multiple perspectives, understanding legal issues, promoting technology integration, developing and managing resources, and maintaining institutional integrity (Montez et al., 2003).
Interestingly, Watba and Farmer (2006) described many of those duties as among the most significant challenges facing community college deans. It has become increasingly clear that academic deans can play an influential role not only in implementing but also in shaping change strategies (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010). Crafting a vision, encouraging teamwork, mentoring faculty and staff members, managing change, resolving disputes, and responding to student concerns are critical responsibilities of academic deans (Behling, 2014).

In some institutions, the dean serves as the chief academic officer. In many baccalaureate institutions, an academic dean is an expert who provides leadership for an academic discipline (Meyer, 2014). In community colleges, most academic deans serve in a managerial role with responsibility for multiple programs and disciplines that employ faculty members as content experts (Meyer, 2014). The title of associate dean or director may also describe an academic middle manager (Pepper & Giles, 2015). For the purposes of this review, the term academic dean has been defined as a middle manager, either a specialist or a generalist, reporting to a senior executive leader such as a provost, vice president, or chief academic officer. This individual has leadership and management responsibility for multiple academic programs and/or disciplines and the associated faculty, staff and students.

Academic deans in the middle. Having “huge responsibility and little power” (Pepper & Giles, 2015, p. 49) characterizes the circumstance of many individuals involved in academic middle management. Academic deans must maintain a good working relationship with executive leaders while balancing the myriad expectations of faculty members (Gallos, 2002). Tasks depicting the middle nature of the role include: representing faculty needs, interests, and desires to administrators; managing conflicts among faculty members while sustaining a positive working climate; ensuring effective communications across various departments; and developing
beneficial relationships with external stakeholders (Sarros et al, 1998). Hanley (2014) likened deans’ responsibilities to a dance in which one is simultaneously managing relationships with executive leaders, faculty members, colleagues in other divisions, and students.

**Role conflict, role ambiguity, and stress.** Given the breadth and depth of their roles and responsibilities, research has demonstrated that academic deans most often work in an environment replete with role conflict and ambiguity (A. Floyd, 2012; Montez et al., 2003; Wolverton, et al., 1999). Role conflict results from circumstances that force deans to engage in discordant activities such as offering advocacy and support for faculty members while being required to evaluate their effectiveness (Wolverton, et al., 1999). Role ambiguity also stems from academic deans not having access to adequate or updated information from which to make informed decisions or take appropriate actions (Montez et al., 2003). Several studies identified stress factors associated with academic middle management positions. These included feelings of being overwhelmed by responsibilities or isolated in the position (Pepper & Giles, 2015) or the strain of juggling multiple priorities, addressing fiscal exigencies, and balancing numerous stakeholder demands (Wild et al., 2003).

**Determining deans’ effectiveness.** In a study examining how academic deans and directors are evaluated, researchers noted the degree to which the social context—interpersonal interactions with faculty members and other social behaviors—influenced faculty perceptions of effectiveness. Along with achieving important measurable outcomes such as securing resources, these social exchanges contributed to a dean’s success in gaining buy-in and support for meeting organizational goals (Rosser, Johnsrud, & Heck, 2003). Similarly, Bray (2008) examined the behavioral standards that faculty members at selected research and liberal arts institutions defined as typical of successful academic administrators. Attributes included communicating
often and well, valuing participation and ideas generated by the faculty, setting vision, providing input and demonstrating effective managerial skills. More than simply defining faculty expectations, however, this study demonstrated that academic deans must be cognizant of various stakeholders’ expectations as they strive to successfully perform countless functions. Considered together, these studies illustrated the generative potential of the academic deans’ role in gaining support from faculty and staff members for organizational vision and goals and for success in facilitating organizational change efforts.

**Academic deans as agents of change.** Researchers have studied the multifaceted contributions of middle managers in fostering a constructive workplace climate and culture and in facilitating strategic change initiatives (Balogun, 2003; Beresford & Michels, 2014; Bystydzienski, Thomas, Howe, & Desai, 2017; Cleverley-Thompson, 2016; Ray, 2011; Wepner et al., 2014). It has been suggested that one of many critical responsibilities deans manage is being able to “influence how people feel about their work and to engage them in setting the institution’s direction” (Ray, 2011, p.658). Placing intentional emphasis on inclusivity, respect for multiple perspectives, and then establishing policies and practices reflective of those principles encourages the openness and commitment that are important antecedents for transformation (Bystydzienski et al., 2017; Ray, 2011).

Academic deans also provide a critical linking function as they simultaneously experience personal change, construe change for peers and direct reports, and coordinate activities to accomplish strategic organizational goals (Balogun, 2003; Beresford & Michels, 2014). To execute these functions effectively, academic deans must draw from their interpersonal capabilities to relate with and listen to different constituents and to mediate and arrive at mutually acceptable middle ground with a diversity of actors (Wepner et al., 2014).
Summary

The evolution of management theory demonstrated a progressively sophisticated understanding of the human dynamics that underlie organizational function. Founded on the concept of cooperative behavior, Barnard’s (as cited in Parera & Fernandez-Vallejo, 2013) theory of formal organization best foreshadowed the contemporary perspective on middle management. This perspective is defined as explicit acknowledgement of the contributions middle managers make to the development and implementation of organizational strategy (Wooldridge et al., 2008).

Recent research on middle managers has stressed their role as mediators between the executive and tactical levels of an organization (Wooldridge et al., 2008). This brokering role requires effective communication skills (Fisher & Ury, 2011) since middle managers often interpret and sell change to others (Birken et al., 2012; Rouleau, 2005). It has been argued that middle managers can positively influence stakeholders up, down, and across an organization (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Gaining this kind of cross-functional buy-in and shared leadership for a change vision is vital to deep, effective, and sustainable change in colleges and universities (Elrod & Kezar, 2016). Research has shown that middle managers, specifically academic deans, play an integral part in implementing and sustaining such change in higher education (Beresford & Michels, 2014; Cleverly-Thompson, 2016).

For the purposes of this review, the term academic dean has been defined as a middle manager, either a specialist or a generalist, reporting to a senior executive leader such as a provost, vice president, or chief academic officer with leadership and management responsibility for multiple academic programs and/or disciplines and the associated faculty, staff, and students. This section then addressed three key aspects related to academic deans. First, it illustrated that
the role and function of the academic dean is broad and deep, and that it has been defined in different ways through history and across institutional types. Next, it was shown that academic deans experience role conflict, ambiguity, and job-related stresses and further, that their effectiveness is often judged not only by accomplishing specific objectives but also by the quality of their interactions with faculty and staff members. Finally, this section demonstrated that academic deans are well-positioned because of their location in the middle to build a culture and climate conducive to transformation. In the final section of the literature review, psychosocial factors that influence the facilitation of organizational change will be considered.

**Psychosocial Factors That Influence Change Processes**

Recently Louisiana State Senator Appel castigated the Louisiana Board of Regents for defending the status quo and accused campus leaders of holding students “hostage by [doing] what is best for those operating within individual institutions or systems” (C. Appel, personal communication, January 31, 2016). Massachusetts community colleges were lambasted for falling far short of their workforce development responsibilities (Alssid et al., 2011). Declarations like these generate damaging perceptions about the quality and relevance of higher education.

Yet, higher education leaders have a professional obligation to ensure that their institutions are responsive to changing circumstances, and that they are efficient and effective particularly during times of transition. Theorists suggest that while colleges and universities may be viewed as open systems, their actual functional objective is more conserving and autopoietic (self-reproductive) in nature—that is, seeking to “change [enough] only to be able to remain unchanged” (Lenartowicz, 2015, p. 959). This viewpoint leads to a logical supposition that higher education is change averse.
College and university organizational systems—policies, processes, and procedures—are built through human interactions between and among the individuals who comprise the college community. Thus, to understand psychosocial factors that influence organizational change, these exchanges must be examined carefully to reveal both their overt and unspoken interpretations of meaning. In this section, three such factors are considered: implicit theories of change, leader sense-making/sense-giving, and organizational trust.

**Implicit Theories of Change**

Implicit theories of change are the unspoken beliefs that individuals hold about how change happens; these are molded by individual experience and interpretation of events and circumstances (Kezar, 2014a). Implicit theories of change can be broadly characterized as either *incremental*, a belief that individuals, characteristics, or circumstances are somewhat flexible, or *entity*, a belief that these same factors are relatively stable and fixed (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). According to Dweck (2009), individuals normally lack awareness of these beliefs and rarely engage in thoughtful consideration of their legitimacy. Research has demonstrated that implicit theories of change can generate unintentional and unanticipated impediments to reform on college campuses (Kezar et al., 2015).

However, research has also demonstrated that implicit theories of change can and will shift when people are motivated to reach a particular outcome (Leith et al, 2014). Intentionally uncovering these beliefs and investigating their soundness contributes to more efficacious change efforts (Zenios et al., 2004). This emphasis on intentionality and involvement of campus change agents in conversation and reflection is consistent with the concept of deliberation and discussion (Kezar, 2011) which has been identified as necessary for realizing deep and sustained change. Kezar et al. (2015) proposed a framework to help cross-functional change teams
structure these conversations, confront assumptions, and engage in a cooperative process to define reforms, set goals, identify needed supports, and outline guidelines for working together. Engaging in such “courageous conversations” (Shugart, 2013, p. 14) has been acknowledged as an important step in realizing deep and effective change.

This section has defined and analyzed the impact of implicit theories of change and has argued that an intentional process of uncovering these assumptions contributes to greater buy-in and support for campus change leaders and their constituents. The next segment discusses how individuals and organizational leaders understand and interpret change for themselves and others.

**Sense-making and Sense-giving**

Sense-making and sense-giving are generally understood to be the processes through which individuals define and interpret circumstances and events for themselves and for others as part of the process of instigating change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Significant disruptions to a system and the resultant uncertainty and events that accompany such disturbance often provide a jumpstart to the initiation of a sense-making process in organizations (Weick, 1995). Strong evidence suggests that colleges and universities deeply engaged in transformational change are more successful in meeting their goals when sense-making opportunities are purposefully designed as part of a change process (Kezar & Ecekel, 2002). This contention supports the value of the deliberation and discussion strategy (Kezar, 2011) introduced in the previous section.

Encouraging and inspiring followers toward common goals by helping them to understand the imperative for change, providing a more specific form for a call to action, and envisioning the way forward are often perceived as critical obligations of executive leaders. Eddy (2003) contended that presidents, as the focal point of campus leadership, play an indispensable role in determining how followers will interpret change (sense-giving) in their
choice of how best to frame the transformation desired. She asserted that presidents must carefully consider the impact of all communications modalities, including the spoken word, written communication, and symbolic gestures.

Research has demonstrated that, in the absence of leader sense-giving, organizational members with appropriate expertise will step in to fill the void (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Other stakeholders like middle managers have been recognized as institutional actors that can and do lead the process of sense-making and sense-giving (Balogun, 2003; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau, 2005). Balogun (2003) identified “interpretation as the key middle-manager task” (p. 79), acknowledging their responsibility to change personally while helping others to change and to maintain business operations while implementing changes within a division. Middle managers have also been credited with successfully promoting strategic change with external stakeholders due to their proficiency as sense-givers (Rouleau, 2005).

This section investigated how sense-making and sense-giving is conducted by various institutional stakeholders and the ways in which these processes influence change facilitation. Specifically, middle managers have been acknowledged for their interpretive skills. Considered together, these studies support the perspective that, as middle managers, academic deans are strategic interpreters during change. The next part of this chapter considers the nature of trust between and among individuals and groups in an organization and how trust impacts change efforts.

Organizational Trust

As the demand for increased accountability intensifies, a fundamental shift in public perception of higher education has transpired (Baert & Shipman, 2005). Research has illustrated that such scrutiny threatens genuine qualitative improvement as educators seek to meet external
mandates to optimize funding and minimize risks associated with innovation (Findlow, 2008). The implicit assumption that schools are not attempting to do their best, which is coupled with limited educator involvement in the reform process, further undermines educator trust (Jewell, 2013). Schultz and McGinn (2013) discovered strong connections among trust, stakeholder participation, and education quality improvement.

Trust as a construct generates deep visceral response. There are multiple definitions in the literature and as many applications of the construct in research. Rotter (1967) defined general interpersonal trust as the belief that one’s word or promise can be relied upon. Psychologist Erik Erikson (1993) identified trust as a foundational element to healthy personality development. Mayer et al. (1995) defined trust as the predisposition by an individual to accept a modicum of vulnerability in relationship with another based upon confidence that the other’s aims and intents are honorable. Each of these definitions builds upon one another in terms of complexity; however, they still do not explain how trust develops or operates in organizations.

**How trust works.** The seminal integrative model for organizational trust proposed by Mayer et al. (1995) provides a structure for considering trust between people and its impact on organizations. This model describes characteristics that enhance trust and the anticipated outcomes of trust. It also describes attributes of the “trustors” (individuals who are trusting) and the trustees (individuals to be trusted). The seminal work of Mayer et al. (1995) undergirds most contemporary research on trust.

The model’s emphasis on one’s willingness to assume vulnerability is particularly significant. Mayer et al. (1995) argued that earlier definitions of trust lacked differentiation from other constructs that contributed to trust like cooperation, confidence, or predictability, and that dyadic trust represented an assumption of risk by the trustor that could not be controlled. They
contended that the actual outcome of trust between two people was *risk taking in relationship (RTR)* and that this inclination to assume uncertainty could lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. For example, a supervisor’s assessment of employee trustworthiness may result in the supervisor assuming risk by empowering the employee with greater responsibility; conversely, an employee’s perception of supervisor trustworthiness may lead her to implement and champion proposed changes with no promise of compensation or recognition (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 725).


**Ability, benevolence, integrity.** Mayer et al. (1995) contended that the trustor’s belief in the ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trustee influenced trust development. Managers who can set strategic vision and utilize effective performance management systems to effect change (proxies for ability) are better-positioned for sustained success (Cho & Poister, 2014). Skillful academic deans who maintain an optimistic viewpoint, recognize others’ accomplishments, and demonstrate caring behaviors (proxies for benevolence) build a constructive foundation for working with faculty, staff, and students (Ray, 2011). Change managers who are perceived as open, communicative, and accountable (who are proxies for integrity) are more successful in gaining buy-in for strategic change initiatives than those who are not (Smollan, 2013). Thus, it can be concluded that the ability, benevolence, and integrity of individual change leaders
contributes to the development of trust with individual faculty and staff members which can ultimately lead to success in the facilitation of systemic change initiatives. Having shown how trust between two institutional actors can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes, the next section addresses the impact of trust between and among groups or teams within an organization.

**Beyond the dyad.** Deep and systemic institutional change requires not just individuals but many stakeholders to work together; these groups include faculty, administrators, executive leaders, professional staff members, and front-line workers from various functional areas such as academic affairs, enrollment services, and the like (Community College Research Center, 2015; Elrod & Kezar, 2016). Thus it is important in a consideration of if and how trust develops between and among groups or teams in an organization. Extending the theoretical framework developed by Mayer et al. (1995) to the development of mutual trust between teams, Serva, Fuller, and Mayer (2005) conducted a longitudinal study using project teams in an undergraduate management information systems course to test hypotheses about trustworthiness, risk-taking in relationship, and reciprocal trust. They confirmed general support for the extension of the Mayer et al. (1995) trust concepts to the team level and validated the proposition that changes in trust over time constitute a mutual process.

Extrapolating tenets of the Mayer et al. (1995) model, Tan and Lim (2009) hypothesized that perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity of coworkers were positively related to trust in coworkers; trust in coworkers was positively related to trust in the organization; and finally, trust in the organization resulted in greater emotional commitment to the organization and improved performance. Collecting survey data from 226 insurance agents employed in 14 agencies within a Singapore-based life insurance company, Tan and Lim (2009) confirmed the importance of trust in coworkers; the results, however, did not fully correspond with the Mayer et al. (1995)
model with respect to the ability dimension. Interestingly, these researchers hypothesized that the Chinese cultural context—high collectivism and power distance—may have influenced this result. While the study did not fully validate all aspects of the Mayer et al. (1995) model with groups, it was among the first to extend the theory to coworkers and organizations (Tan & Lim, 2009).

It has been suggested that the behavior, communication style and past performance of change agents contributes to perceptions of trust and to openness or resistance to change (Ford et al., 2008). Researchers have emphasized the impact of trust on organizations, particularly during periods of innovation or change (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Dovey, 2009; Lines et al., 2005). Other studies have illustrated the complex interrelationships linking the nature of the change, the quality of trust in management and/or immediate supervisors along with historical experience with change, and the extent of collective involvement sought by the change agent (Devos et al., 2007).

**Summary**

Research has demonstrated that implicit theories of change can generate unintentional and unanticipated impediments to reform on college campuses (Kezar et al., 2015). Yet, implicit theories of change can and do shift when people are motivated to reach a collective outcome (Leith et al., 2014). Intentionally uncovering these beliefs and investigating their soundness contributes to more effective change efforts (Zenios et al., 2004).

Sense-making and sense-giving are generally understood to be the processes through which individuals define and interpret circumstances and events for themselves and for others as part of the process of instigating change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Middle managers have been credited with successfully promoting strategic change initiatives with external stakeholders,
due to their proficiency as sense-givers (Rouleau, 2005). Research supports the contention that, as middle managers, academic deans act as strategic interpreters during organizational change.

Trust is a complex and important factor that influences the facilitation of systemic change. The Mayer et al. (1995) model for organizational trust provides a framework for understanding how trust develops and contributes to the accomplishment of shared organizational goals. The model has been successfully extended to trust between and among various stakeholder groups.

**Summation**

Myriad external forces are driving a transformation of the American system of higher education. Increased global competitiveness and rapid changes in technology have impacted virtually every employment sector and have accelerated the movement toward postsecondary degree attainment as the minimum entry requirement for securing sustainable, living-wage occupations. As a result, colleges and universities are undergoing an extraordinary transformation toward providing universal access for all people. This radical change has compelled faculty, staff, and administrators to shift attention toward increasing completion and, along with that, to adjust many long-held beliefs about what constitutes good teaching and learning. They have also reexamined how best to support students as they navigate their college experience. Research has demonstrated that this change has been difficult, and progress has been slow. This study sought to better understand how change happens by examining the lived experiences—that is, the roles, responsibilities, and conditions under which mid-level administrators, specifically academic deans—facilitate systemic change within their divisions or schools, and across their institutions.
Review of the literature substantiated a need for the proposed study in three important ways. First, the sociopolitical context driving the demand for change in higher education provided a compelling argument for transformative or second-order change. Guided pathways implementation was offered as an exemplar of complex evidence-based institutional reform that can assist colleges and universities in meeting external mandates and achieving completion goals. Further, the review demonstrated the need for change leadership at multiple levels to advance its execution. Transformative leadership was identified as important to instigating change; however, distributed or shared leadership at multiple levels was underscored as necessary for implementing and sustaining necessary reforms.

Next, the literature review illustrated that academic deans, as middle managers, are positioned to facilitate organizational change in multiple directions—with executive leaders, with faculty and staff members, and with peers across the institution. While the day-to-day life of an academic dean can be stressful and fraught with ambiguity and conflict, the literature provided strong evidence of the generative potential for academic deans to gain shared support for a change vision and for implementing and sustaining operational reforms.

Finally, the literature identified several psychosocial factors that can influence the facilitation of organizational change efforts; these included implicit theories of change; leader sense-making/sense-giving; and organizational trust. Extensive support emerged for developing thoughtful processes to uncover implicit beliefs or theories of change and for collaborative strategy development to accomplish proposed goals. Next, while a central change champion is typically tasked with responsibility for sense-making/sense-giving, the literature demonstrated that other institutional actors will and should assume this role individually and/or collectively. Making sense of change for co-workers has been defined as an obligatory task that middle
managers must perform effectively (Balogun, 2003). Finally, the literature revealed the complex and nuanced impact of trust on the success of change efforts. Seminal work offered by Mayer et al. (1995) provided a framework for considering organizational trust between individuals, or between and among groups or units.

This study significantly contributed to scholarship by bringing authentic practitioner voices to the extant literature on academic deans and their facilitative role in second-order change. Learning by example can be a powerful form of scholarship, particularly for those in the field of academia and for the education and training professionals who prepare mid-level administrators for leadership roles. The study has also contributed to current research on guided pathways implementation and has uncovered specific professional development needs or obstacles to change that may require further examination. Given a dearth of qualitative research on academic deans overall and on community colleges deans specifically, this study directly addressed a gap in the literature. Finally, the study connected emerging research on guided pathways with the existing and vast literature on change in higher education.

Of interest to practitioners, this study has revealed the day-to-day experiences of academic deans who are or have been navigating the complexities of systemic change facilitation. This simple affirmation of the complexity of the inherent challenges of the change process may be enough. However—and perhaps more importantly—the findings provide deeper insights into the complex power and potential of human interaction to bring about deep and sustaining change.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to examine how academic deans at community colleges implementing a guided pathways approach made sense of their experiences as middle managers during planned change. The research question guiding the study was: How do community college academic deans make sense of their lived experience as middle managers during planned change? This chapter presents the research design employed. It opens with an overview of the qualitative approach to research including a discussion of its philosophical grounding in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and an outline of the IPA strategy of inquiry. A detailed description of participants and procedures follows. In the final section, criteria for conducting a quality qualitative research study are addressed. Topics include ethical considerations, credibility, transferability, the internal audit, researcher positionality, and potential limitations.

Qualitative Research Approach

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm underlies the design, data gathering, and data analysis strategy for this study. This is one of four principal research paradigms; the others are positivism, post-positivism, and critical-ideological (Ponterotto, 2005). Positivists and post-positivists seek to explain phenomena by demonstrating cause and effect relationships between variables (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). While positivists and post-positivists differ regarding the degree to which they believe reality can be understood, both seek universal laws that define phenomena, or an etic understanding (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). Positivism and post-positivism paradigms undergird quantitative research approaches (Ponterotto, 2005). The critical-ideological paradigm seeks to address societal inequities that privilege certain individuals or categories of people and subjugate others (Ponterotto, 2005). Criticalists view
reality as subjective in nature and use their inquiry to reveal social injustices and to effect societal transformation (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005).

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm posits that there is no single objective reality, but rather that reality is socially constructed in response to each individual’s unique personal context (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). While positivists seek to define a single objective reality, constructivists-interpretivists seek to understand how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). This constructivist-interpretivist paradigm undergirds qualitative research (Ponterotto, 2005). It is consistent with the researcher’s assumptions about the nature of reality, and it fully informed the decision to employ a qualitative research approach in this study.

The qualitative research approach is distinguished by several characteristics (Creswell, 2013). First, qualitative research is conducted in the field or natural surroundings rather than in a formal laboratory setting (Creswell, 2013). Next, it assumes an idiographic focus on each participant’s interpretation of his or her own lived experience (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). Rather than relying upon survey instruments to collect data, the researcher is deeply engaged in data collection through multiple approaches—interviewing participants, reviewing documents, or observing participants in their natural settings (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers work with participants over an extended period of time, through prolonged engagement, to gain deeper comprehension of their beliefs, behaviors, and social norms; this is referred to as gaining an *emic* understanding (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). Since this mutuality is critical to gaining such insight, the researcher must recognize potential biases and develop the capacity to manage their impact on the research process (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). This qualitative study was
conducted utilizing an IPA strategy of inquiry that examines participants’ interpretations of their lived experiences with certain specific events or phenomena (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Informed by phenomenological philosophy, IPA is grounded in the belief that subjective experience is a meaningful source of knowledge (Smith et al., 2009). Its theoretical underpinnings include phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015; Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology refers to the study of experience (Moustakas, 1994). Its essence lies in a belief that every person construes his or her own experience from a unique perspective shaped by physical, emotional, cultural, historical, and other time-bounded characteristics (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher immersed in this approach understands that these experiences are unavoidably interpretative in nature (Smith et al., 2009).

Hermeneutics refers to the study of interpretation, defined by Moustakas (1994) as the “art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood” (p. 9). The hermeneutic circle, one of two constructs integral to IPA, describes the iterative nature of interpretation that requires the researcher to move continuously between understanding the larger context and the specific facet under examination (Smith et al., 2009). IPA involves a double hermeneutic, defined as the simultaneous role of the researcher attempting to see and understand a phenomenon from the participant’s perspective while also attempting to see and understand the participant’s meaning-making process (Smith et al., 2009).

Idiography refers to IPA’s intentional focus on the individual and his or her discrete experience with a person, place, idea, event, or phenomenon (Wagstaff et al., 2014). IPA studies typically engage a small number of participants and are not designed to identify general scientific
principles or theory; they rather seek to understand and interpret discrete, lived experiences (Callary et al., 2015; Connelly, 2010).

Jonathan A. Smith, founder. Smith (1996) introduced IPA methodology and argued for its inclusion in health psychology research. He asserted that IPA represented an intermediate position between two more prevalent, but opposing, research methods in social psychology: social cognition and discourse analysis (Smith, 1996). Social cognition research focuses on the measurement of the inner emotional and intellectual activities of participants using survey instruments and other quantitative data collection and analysis tools (Smith, 1996). Discourse analysts advocate for a qualitative research approach, asserting that what participants say is largely influenced by situational factors such as the social expectations of the circumstance in which the questions are asked (Smith, 1996). Through a detailed illustration of how one individual made sense of her experience with dialysis treatment for renal failure, Smith (1996) argued that IPA could make a strong contribution to health psychology research by engaging social cognition researchers in meaningful dialogue.

Interpretative vs. descriptive phenomenology. It is important to distinguish interpretative phenomenology from descriptive phenomenology to understand the contribution IPA has made to this study. The theoretical contributions of Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer highlight key differences.

Husserl and lifeworld. As a descriptive phenomenologist, Husserl sought to describe experience by defining two distinct phases of experience (Dowling, 2007). The initial phase, considered a pre-reflective state, involves a firsthand, unconscious and deeply absorbing experience within one’s everyday life, or lifeworld (Dowling, 2007). The second phase involves conscious consideration of that experience through a process of reflection, leading to ascription
of affective characteristics such as joy, satisfaction, or disappointment (Shinebourne, 2011). For Husserl, the development of a *phenomenological attitude*, or conscious understanding of experience, resulted from a process of *phenomenological reduction*, through which thoughts are turned away from immersion in the experience toward one’s consciousness (Dowling, 2007). Husserl contended that researchers’ preconceptions must be completely set aside during such process (Reiners, 2012). This is often referred to as bracketing or the *epoche*, “a continuous process of self-restraint” (Butler, 2016, p. 2036), and it is intended to free the researcher from preconceptions.

**Heidegger and being-in-the-world.** Heidegger, an interpretive phenomenologist, maintained that it was impossible for a person to encounter a new experience without *fore-conception*, which is defined as one’s prior experiences, opinions, and predispositions (Dowling, 2007). He argued that researchers should prioritize new experiences over personal fore-conceptions (Smith et al., 2009). Yet, he acknowledged that the researcher’s personal experience of being in the world would contribute to the richness of interpretation and meaning-making (Reiners, 2012). Thus, while interpretative researchers should acknowledge their biases to achieve greater objectivity, they must also realize it is impossible to bracket these fore-conceptions completely (Reiners, 2012). Heidegger is also credited with introducing the concept of the hermeneutic circle, described in the previous section (Dowling, 2007).

**Gadamer and openness.** Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, asserted that perceptions and opinions developed through prior experiences were inextricably linked to one’s capacity to understand and interpret new phenomena (Dowling, 2007). Thus, he advocated a process of openness defined as willingness to interrogate past experiences and prejudices to understand
how they influence methodological choices, questions asked, and interpretations derived 
(Nystrom & Dahlberg, 2001).

Since the researcher is a community college academic dean engaged in guided pathways implementation, it would be impossible to completely bracket prior experiences. The IPA approach is an alternative strategy that addresses this dynamic. Even more, IPA honors the role of the researcher’s experience in understanding and interpreting the experiences of their participants (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

**Appropriateness of IPA Strategy**

IPA researchers examine how people make sense of significant events in their personal or professional lives (Smith et al., 2009). Implementing a guided pathways approach powerfully represents a significant event in the life of a college or university, and in the professional lives of its faculty, staff, and students. Committing to guided pathways implementation requires sweeping institutional changes and genuine commitment by all members of the institution to examine, reconsider, and revise nearly every policy, procedure, or process on campus. It challenges long-held assumptions about students, institutional policies, and processes, and who holds accountability for student success. Implementation of a comprehensive guided pathways approach is tantamount to asking faculty, administrators, and support staff to dismantle an institution’s deep structure, or the “set of givens about the group’s situation and how it will behave” (Gersick, 1991, p. 15).

A guided pathways implementation is an epoch-making event in the life of a community college and its faculty, staff and students. Given IPA’s emphasis on how participants make meaning of significant life events, it was considered a highly appropriate methodology to examine how community college academic deans engaged in guided pathways implementation
were making sense of their experience as middle managers during such change. IPA informed
the study’s design, the analysis of data, and the presentation of findings.

How IPA Shaped the Study

Data collection. Given its idiographic focus, the one-on-one interview is considered a
principal method of data collection in IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, et al., 2009). Using
a semi-structured interview format, the researcher develops an interview protocol with open-
ended questions that encourages participants to tell their stories in rich detail (Smith et al., 2009;
Smith & Osborn, 2015). Prompts for each question ensure that the researcher assists participants
in expanding their stories with detailed accounts of thoughts and feelings (Callary et al., 2015;
Smith et al., 2009). While unstructured interviews have been applied in IPA studies, novice
researchers are often challenged in guiding such interactions and generating useful data (Smith et
al., 2009). In this study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were employed. The researcher
fully addressed the general challenges of being a novice researcher by conducting mock
interviews prior to engaging study participants. She also maintained a reflexive research journal
as a means of managing the influence of personal biases on the design, data collection, and
interpretation of data in this study.

The IPA researcher may use several formats to conduct interviews, such as in-person,
electronic or surface mail, by phone or Skype, and/or focus groups (Brocki & Wearden, 2006;
Smith, et al., 2009). Focus groups can provide a rich means for understanding a phenomenon
since the dynamic group interaction encourages participants to clarify and enhance
interpretations and researchers to check their understanding in real-time (Bradbury-Jones,
Sambrook & Irvine, 2009). Regardless of format, developing rapport with participants up front is
vital to the collection of good data (Smith et al., 2009), and the process of establishing this interaction and trust was fully respected in this study.

Complementary data can be collected through review of participant diaries, field notes, participant observation, and review of physical artifacts such as newspaper or journal articles, strategic plans, press releases or internal memos, and committee charges or meeting minutes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Overall IPA researchers must have a clear rationale for the methodologies they employ and maintain detailed notes on how they implemented the process. For this study, the researcher only accepted artifacts that had been made publicly available in either hard copy or electronic format by the college, the state system of public higher education, the state or local government, or trusted and reliable media outlets as determined by each participant. No internal memos, electronic mail, or personal or privileged communications were requested or entertained.

Analytic methods. The essence of data analysis in IPA is the double hermeneutic which describes the researcher’s attempts to understand and make sense of how each participant experienced a phenomenon and how they made sense of this experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Connelly, 2010; Smith et al., 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2014). The process is inductive since participants’ words are the starting point for analysis, rather than theory or preconceived ideas about how a phenomenon should be experienced (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). The process is also iterative in that it involves multiple layers of analysis—lines in a transcript, chunks of data, or the entire body of data (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

The data analysis process in IPA is more than simple categorization and involves ongoing interaction between researchers and their texts (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Turner and Coyle (as cited in Brocki & Wearden, 2006) cautioned researchers to allow themes to emerge from the
transcripts, not from theory, preconceptions, or one’s personal practice. The inclusion of verbatim quotes is suggested in IPA as a means of grounding interpretation with textual examples (Smith et al., 2009). Movement away from individual voice during the search for common themes has been cited as a methodological challenge (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Wagstaff et al., 2014). Yet there is agreement that if researchers maintain a strong reflective practice, it is possible to stay true to the individual voice while identifying patterns across cases (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

**Presentation of findings.** Findings for an IPA study are typically presented in written format using an academic style of writing. Data analysis continues throughout the writing phase (Callary et al., 2015; Jeong & Othman, 2016; Smith et al., 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2014). The analysis and argument may deepen during this phase, and researchers may discover new ideas, new queries, or areas for review of additional literature as well (Smith et al., 2009).

The final written report should be as accessible and engaging as possible (Smith et al., 2009). The narrative should characterize the dialogue between participants and researchers (Smith et al., 2009). The written presentation of findings should contain significant chunks of precise transcript extracts followed by detailed analysis and discussion (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). These transcript extracts provide the most direct access to each participant’s lived experience and offer evidence to support interpretations and delineation of themes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

In this methodological context, the general format of this section includes an overview of findings followed by a series of subsections, addressing each super-ordinate theme and related themes categorized within, and it concludes with a table of themes inserted after the narrative portion (Smith et al., 2009). The discussion section links findings to implications for practice.
and/or research; it also provides researchers an opportunity to evaluate the overall study process (Smith et al., 2009). The final format of this section evolved throughout the writing process (Jeong & Othman, 2016).

Participants

Eight community college academic deans from publicly-funded institutions engaged in guided pathways implementation were recruited as participants for this study. Academic deans who had been employed in their positions for a minimum of two years and who played a role in guided pathways implementation were the target population. Participants were selected through a process of purposive sampling to ensure that they had the relevant experience with the guided pathways approach and the requisite time in the position of academic dean to meet the study’s criteria (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007). As necessary, snowball sampling was also utilized to amplify the researcher’s professional network. Participants were recruited through the researcher’s professional network within New England and across the country.

The primary data collection tool was semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each participant. A review of publicly available artifacts provided by each participant was also included, to the extent possible. To gain contextual understanding of external drivers, these artifacts included statewide higher education policy statements and legislation regarding the guided pathways approach and related performance accountability and funding mechanisms tied to retention and completion. To gain contextual understanding of campus-level drivers, artifacts also included campus-based mission or vision statements, presidential or executive-level memos, and/or committee charges relative to guided pathways implementation.

For this study, the researcher completed eight in-depth interviews. Sample sizes for IPA studies are generally small since the researcher is seeking to develop an in-depth understanding
of participant experience with a phenomenon, not to generalize findings (Connelly, 2010; Ryan et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2014). Smith et al. (2009) recommended between three to six participants (p. 51). Wagstaff et al. (2014) interviewed between three to 17 participants in each of eight studies. A review of recent NEU dissertations using IPA methodology revealed sample sizes ranging from six to 14 participants (Benites, 2014; Doyle, 2017; Eng, 2017; McGee, 2015; O’Shea, 2016). A target range of six to 10 interviews was deemed appropriate based upon a review of the IPA literature and the capacity of the researcher’s professional network.

**Procedures**

After defending the thesis proposal, the researcher received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to collect the data (See Appendix A). This approval ensured that data collection, analysis, and final reporting protected the confidentiality and integrity of study participants. In November 2016, the researcher successfully completed the National Institute for Health (NIH) web-based training titled “Protecting Human Research Participants.” (See Appendix B).

Once approved, participant recruitment was conducted through the researcher’s professional network in New England and across the country. A recruitment email provided the necessary details regarding the proposed study and encouraged prospective participants to reply with questions or concerns (See Appendix C). Given that participants were approached directly through contact information (an email address) that was publicly available on college websites, the researcher was not required to seek IRB approval at each individual community college (K. Skophammer, personal communication, November 8, 2016). Where necessary, the researcher consulted with the NEU IRB Coordinator on necessary approvals.
Once participants were identified, the researcher confirmed the date and time for each interview by e-mail. This communication included an electronic copy of the informed consent document which provided detailed information regarding the purpose of the research study and what to anticipate during the interview (See Appendix D). Seven interviews were conducted in-person. One interview was conducted via Skype due to scheduling challenges that precluded the researcher from traveling during that period. Given the travel distance to each site, introductory interviews were combined with the study interviews. As such, each participant’s interview lasted between 75-90 minutes to allow adequate opportunity to gather the requisite background information, review the informed consent document, and develop good rapport before conducting the study interview. All participants signed the informed consent which also included permission to use a digital voice recorder during the interview.

Lewin’s theory of planned change guided the development of an interview protocol consisting of eleven questions (See Appendix E). Initial questions interrogated how each participant defined the parameters of his or her field, the specific group(s) in which they held membership and the role(s) they played within these groups. These descriptions established a foundation for the next band of questions exploring group dynamics. That segment was designed to elicit general comments regarding group(s) standards and norms and more specific comments regarding the psychosocial factors that may influence change processes. The final segment addressed the processes through which participants engaged as middle managers in a cycle of learning as depicted by Lewin’s (1948) concept of action research. Additional questions probed if/how they contributed to changing group norms through activities characterized as unfreezing, moving, or refreezing. Before completing the interview, participants had an opportunity to add to, clarify, or revise comments.
Data Storage and Protection

After each interview, the digital recording was uploaded to a password-protected account at Rev.com. This resulted in detailed and accurate textual transcriptions within 24 hours. The researcher reviewed these documents to remove identifying information such as names of people, colleges, cities or towns, etc. As a means of *member reflection* (Tracy, 2010), transcriptions were shared with participants so that they had the opportunity to clarify, edit, or add additional detail as needed. Each participant was assigned a number and a pseudonym; revised transcriptions were stored in a password-protected DropBox folder by number only. Related artifacts were held in a separate hard copy folder stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office or in a password-protected DropBox folder separate from the transcriptions to maintain participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis required multiple iterations of review and notation—interview by interview and then, across all interviews. Smith et al. (2009) defined six distinct stages of analysis (see Figure 3). The researcher adhered to the following data analysis process.
Steps | Description
--- | ---
Step One: Reading & re-reading | Initially, researchers are deeply immersed in the data. Careful reading and review of each interview transcript multiple times is recommended. Researchers make notes of sections of the interview which are most personally impactful then reflect upon reasons for this impact. Researchers are encouraged to bracket these thoughts to maintain interpretative focus on the participant. This level of engagement with the data allows researchers to notice how the interview progressed from introductory and general comments in the beginning to deeper and more reflective experiential commentary as the interview continued leading to concluding comments and suggestions. The progression should demonstrate good rapport and trust development with participants.

Step Two: Initial noting | This phase of the analysis is considered the most laborious. The goal is a detailed and thoughtful analysis of language use and interpretation of meaning. This interpretation may happen at the level of individual word selection; at the level of metaphor; or at the level of a specific passage. There are no prescriptive rules for initial noting, but three potential categories are suggested for consideration: descriptive (face value); linguistic (word use); and conceptual (getting at participant understanding/meaning-making) comments. Additionally, strategies for textual “deconstruction” can assist researchers to derive more potential interpretations of the data.

Step Three: Developing emergent themes | In this stage, researchers identify connections and relationships among initial notes within various chunks of data with an overall intention of identifying what was of critical importance in various portions of a transcript. These connections and relationships, defined as themes, reflect a combination of participants’ words and researchers’ interpretations.

Step Four: Searching for connections across emergent themes | Now researchers begin to make connections among emergent themes, and to chart or map how themes relate to one another. There are several strategies for identifying and clustering developing themes into super-ordinate themes. These include abstraction, or assigning a name to a cluster of related themes; subsumption, or raising an emergent theme to the level of a super-ordinate theme and perhaps clustering other themes thereunder; polarization, or identifying opposing themes; contextualization, or identifying themes associated with a particular event or phenomenon; numeration, or clustering themes by the frequency with which they are identified in text; and function, or clustering themes by the purpose researchers believe they serve within the transcript (Smith et al., 2009, pp.92-100)

Step Five: Moving to the next case | Once the analysis of an individual transcript is completed, the researcher proceeds to the next one by repeating steps 1 through 4. Experience with previous transcripts will undoubtedly influence their interpretations. Thus, consciousness of this effect and intentional efforts to bracket it are suggested, so novel elements in each case can be experienced again.

Step Six: Looking for patterns across cases | In this final step, researchers must look across all cases seeking intersections, patterns and shared super-ordinate themes. Individual differences among cases should be highlighted, thus maintaining an emphasis on the idiographic perspective. This last stage of analysis serves as the foundation from which researchers make connections to existing theory in the field.

*Figure 3: Steps in IPA Data Analysis Process. Adapted from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research, by J. A. Smith, P. Flowers, and M. Larkin, 2009, pp. 79-107.*
Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

Ethical Considerations

The maintenance of strict ethical standards through all phases of research is critical to the success of this research (Ryan et al., 2007; Tracy, 2010). The researcher only engaged voluntary participants through her professional network. It is of utmost importance that participants are comfortable and confident that they can engage in mutual dialogue without fear of reprisal. To fulfill this requirement, upon receiving initial participant consent, the researcher reviewed the written consent form with participants prior to seeking their signature and ask them to sign the document. The form addressed (a) reasons for this study, (b) what the participant was asked to do, (c) when and where the interview would take place, (d) what the participant could expect during the interview, (e) how the data will be used, including potential benefits to the participant, (f) practices to ensure confidentiality, and (g) rights as a participant. Interviews then were scheduled and conducted at a mutually convenient time; they were recorded using a digital voice recorder. All participants were provided an opportunity to review their transcripts and to expand upon, revise, or edit written accounts.

Strict confidentiality was maintained. First, each participant was assigned a number and a pseudonym. After each interview, the researcher uploaded the digital recording to a password-protected account at Rev.com. Upon receipt of the transcript, the researcher removed all names, references, and other identifiers, and the documents were stored in a password-protected DropBox folder by number only. During data analysis, these transcripts were uploaded to a password-protected NVivo account. Hard copy records were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office.

To maintain professional integrity, the researcher only accepted artifacts that had been made publicly available in either hard copy or electronic format by the college, the state system
of public higher education, the state or local government, or trusted and reliable media outlets as
determined by each participant. The researcher did not request or entertain internal memos,
electronic mail, or personal or privileged communications. Digital artifacts were retained in a
separate password-protected DropBox folder. All hard copy artifacts were stored in a locked
cabinet in the researcher’s home office.

Credibility

The credibility of a study refers to its believability or trustworthiness (Tracy, 2010;
Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are several recommended techniques for achieving credibility
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ryan et al., 2007). In this study, prolonged engagement, triangulation,
and member checking were the strategies used to bolster credibility.

Prolonged engagement assumes that the researcher invests adequate time in developing
rapport and trust with participants as well as a depth of understanding of their unique life and
professional contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since participants were at a distance, the
researcher integrated the introductory interview with the study interview. Initial interviews thus
lasted between 75-90 minutes to allow adequate opportunity to gather background information,
answer participant questions, and develop good rapport before conducting the study interview.
The introductory interviews were conducted by Skype or telephone in advance.

Triangulation refers to the use of more than one data source or more than one
interpreter/researcher and arriving at comparable conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Tracy
(2010) advocated a related methodology called crystallization, a procedure by which more than
one data source is employed to construct a more intricate account of a phenomenon. In this
study, data from semi-structured interviews and from the review of multiple artifacts were
analyzed. Taken together, these strategies allowed the development of thicker, detailed descriptions (Tracy, 2010).

Member checking refers to the process by which the researcher tests his or her interpretations, assumptions, and conclusions with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Tracy (2010) argued that a process of member reflection in which participants have multiple opportunities to interact with and respond to their original comments or the interpretations and findings is highly relevant for qualitative interpretive research. For this study, participants were engaged after the interview to both check and reflect upon their experiences; to contribute additional information; and to share perceptions of draft transcriptions and/or interpretations.

**Transferability**

In qualitative research, transferability is considered the degree to which written accounts and conclusions are thorough enough to allow for their application with similar target populations in different settings, with different actors and different circumstances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Geertz (1973) argued that *thick description* was used not only to recount specific events or interactions, but also to make sense of and derive meaning from these experiences. The stages of IPA analysis necessitate working with and through these descriptions in multiple iterations—participant by participant, interview by interview. Detailed accounts for each participant indeed preserved the idiographic focus. The texts were deeply examined for themes, patterns, and intersections across participant accounts. Close attention to detail and consistent member checking and researcher reflection through the interpretation and writing phases ensured a higher degree of transferability. However, the researcher acknowledges that findings from this study will have limited transferability given its small sample size and idiographic focus. Limitations are more fully addressed in the final section of this chapter.
**Internal Audit**

An internal audit contributes to the validity of an IPA study (Smith et al., 2009). The audit ensures that both the process and the resulting product have been examined against quality criteria for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail requires the researcher to maintain detailed notes on research design, data collection, and analyses as well as on personal thoughts and feelings through all phases of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The objective is to demonstrate through an independent assessment that the interpretation derived is reasonable, based upon the evidence provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Detailed audit trails include: (a) raw data; (b) data reduction and analysis; (c) data reconstruction and synthesis; (d) process notes; (e) intentions and dispositions, and (f) instrument development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 382-384). These categories served as an organizational framework for the detailed research notebook that was maintained for this study. All records including the research proposal, digital voice recordings, interview transcripts, related artifacts, and process notes were retained in a secure manner. The researcher kept a separate research journal for reflective memos that chronicle the evolution of her analysis and the process by which personal biases that surfaced during the research were acknowledged and addressed. These memos informed and enhanced the data analysis process (Groenewald, 2008).

**Self-Reflexivity and Transparency**

Research interests often emanate from challenges encountered in one’s professional practice (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). The researcher has served as an academic dean at a community college between 2003, active through the time this study was conducted. Then, she had been engaged in a cross-functional team tasked with guided pathways implementation. She
is deeply involved in this problem of practice. Hence, she recognized it was important for her to critically examine how this experience, combined with personal assumptions, potential biases, and other aspects of her worldview may have influence this inquiry. Briscoe (2005) suggested that there are three interconnected aspects of positionality: background or demography; beliefs, goals, and values, or ideology; and finally, how one defines and positions the other. The researcher identifies as White, middle-class, married, college-educated, professional, and female. These aspects of personal demography shape her perspective and influence how she describes herself, her ideology, and those she considers “other”.

**Being White.** Helms (2008) argued that to understand race issues, White people must first accept that there is a *White culture*. Katz (2003) delineated societal expressions of White culture including emphases on individualism, action orientation, the Protestant work ethic, and adherence to timeframes. The researcher places significant value on personal achievement and the recognition that accompanies a job well done; meeting deadlines; and assuming responsibility for herself personally and professionally. She describes herself as serious and hard-working and willing to go beyond expectations to make good things happen for students. If her expectations are not met, she assumes personal responsibility for not working hard enough or smart enough. Some colleagues describe her as a perfectionist. She believes she should be able to accomplish what she sets out to do. Thus, with guided pathways implementation, the researcher heeded the external mandate for change and participated on a cross-functional implementation team with every intention of successfully implementing the change model. She worked diligently with faculty to define milestones and to develop strong academic maps. Yet institutional progress was slow and uneven. She has felt frustrated by this reality, which leads to one way she defines the other.
In this circumstance, the researcher defines and positions the other as those who do not share her passion. These are the individuals or departments that routinely enumerate reasons why it is not possible to implement guided pathways. They may blame students for their failure rather than being more introspective and critical of processes and policies that present obstacles. These naysayers seem complacent and unwilling to change, and it is often difficult for the researcher to fully hear their concerns. Yet, to objectively examine the lived experience of her respondents, the researcher must be conscious of her reaction to this dynamic and the perspectives of others, develop mechanisms to manage it, and commit to listening, recording, and interpreting all experiences without judgment.

**Being a middle-class, married, college-educated professional.** As a member of the middle-class and a married person with a stable network of family and friends, the researcher’s physiological, safety, and love/belonging needs have been met abundantly (Maslow, 1943). Her parents were Depression-era children. They were raised in modest circumstances and worked to ensure their children would have greater wealth, abundance, and opportunities than them. There was never a question that this researcher would attend college, and expectations for her success were high. She and her husband have been married many years. Their children, extended family, and friends have been a constant source of love, connection, and support.

This steady foundation provides the researcher with a strong sense of self-efficacy. For the better part of her adult and professional life, she has been afforded the privilege of focusing on what Maslow (1943) termed esteem needs, those elements that contribute to a sense of being useful and necessary in the world. Her pursuit of advanced graduate education and professional growth provide some evidence of this. Maslow (1943) warned, however, that “thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness and of helplessness. . . . [and] give[s] rise to
basic discouragement” (p. 382). Her intense focus on achievement fuels her frustration with what she perceives as sluggish institutional progress since it feels like a reflection on her contribution. When she feels discouraged, she again attributes this perceived failure to the naysayers.

As she approached her research, the researcher acknowledged this dynamic and remembered that the goal in pursuing qualitative research is to better understand underlying phenomena and gain new perspectives. She was careful to guard against skewing results by selecting individuals or institutions that would tell her what she wanted to hear. She strived to develop a defensible rationale for how participants were selected, how the interview protocol was designed, and how data was analyzed and coded.

**Being female.** Carol Gilligan (1977) challenged prevailing concepts of moral development by introducing the notion of a *different voice*, thus raising consciousness of the relational world in which many of the women she studied lived and made ethical decisions. This notion of being cognizant of how one’s decisions impact those around you is analogous to the delicate balance the researcher feels between choosing to drive systemic change or opting to allow it to unfold sluggishly. She is not suggesting that she must ultimately make ethical decisions relative to guided pathways implementation. Yet, when frustrated by slow progress, she thinks before she acts and weighs the impact that her reaction might have on working relationships with colleagues.

In many ways, this different voice regulates and moderates the researcher’s intense achievement motivation. It allows her researcher to step back and consider the cost of driving toward success. She believes in working cross-functionally and hesitates to take action that would undermine other people’s trust or willingness to collaborate. Yet, it can feel as if the
choice is between two untenable options—doing something or doing nothing—and that calls into question how she defines the other again.

To this point, the other has been defined as the individuals or departments that challenge change. Yet, why must mid-level administrators and faculty members cajole one another to change in the first place? If legislators, appointed state officials, and executive leaders have successfully set the vision, made sense of the needed change, and established clear goals (Eddy, 2003), the researcher and her colleagues should be able to move forward. But, it is not always this straightforward. Without full understanding of the variables contributing to this perceived indecisiveness, she might assume these leaders are out of touch with the needs of students and those on the front line.

Briscoe (2005) contended that “the boundaries and the relative demographic positioning of the researcher versus the other are difficult or perhaps impossible to discern in actual cases” (p. 38). As the researcher conducted interviews and analyzed data, she paid keen attention to how respondents defined their others. This revealed how they made sense of their social context, who they perceived as holding privileged or marginalized positions, and how that influenced interpretation of their experience over time and in different contexts.

**Positionality summary.** Using Briscoe’s (2005) dimensions of positionality, the researcher has attempted to identify and describe her perspective and biases in relation to the proposed research. As a scholar-practitioner, she is deeply engaged in this problem of practice. Such personal involvement can cause the researcher to reach conclusions without sufficient evidence (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). By intentionally monitoring her positionality, she has strived to maintain the objectivity needed to accurately represent the lived experience of participants. This was, to the extent possible, accomplished through regular review of this
statement accompanied by reflective exercises that challenged her to revisit and expose changing biases and assumptions. It is never possible to completely bracket out these influences; however, the researcher did indeed seek to apply Gadamer’s concept of openness and commitment to maintain a regular, intentional, and strong reflective practice throughout each stage of the process (Nystrom & Dahlberg, 2001).

Limitations

The identified weaknesses of any research study are those factors that may impact results, generalizability, and transferability, also known as its limitations (Creswell, 2015). These weaknesses may be predicated upon methodological limits of the theoretical framework, research technique, definitions of key terms, data analysis strategies, or concerns regarding process like the availability of appropriate subjects (Creswell, 2015).

One potential limitation of this study is IPA’s idiographic focus and small sample size (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). The researcher examined how eight individual community college academic deans made sense of their experience as middle managers during a planned change. Findings do reflect the subjective experiences of this group of academic deans. This may or may not be emblematic of their peers’ experiences in different colleges or with variants of the guided pathways approach.

Generalizability may be further constrained by the proposed sampling technique (Creswell, 2015). As noted previously, participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they had the relevant experience with the guided pathways approach and the requisite time in the position of community college academic dean. The researcher’s professional network within New England and across the country served as the recruitment field. Thus, the selection of study participants has limitations by institutional type and by the geographic boundaries of the
researcher’s network. As such, certain experiences may be over or under-represented and others may be completely overlooked or unanswered.

Data collection methods may have limited generalizability (Creswell, 2015). The researcher conducted eight individual semi-structured interviews with academic deans and to examine artifacts related to guided pathways implementation. Data collected through longer term participant observation and/or focus groups might have provide a more comprehensive perspective. However, given geographic considerations, longer term participant observation would have been nearly impossible to schedule. Next, since academic deans from various community colleges were interviewed rather than multiple academic deans at one institution, convening focus groups was not possible due to geographic distribution and participant confidentiality.

Finally, the study is limited by the researcher’s perspective. The hallmark of an IPA study is the double hermeneutic defined as the simultaneous role of the researcher attempting to see and understand a phenomenon from the participant’s perspective while also attempting to see and understand the participant’s meaning-making process (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher’s subjective interpretation represents just a single interpretation. Other researchers with different life experiences might engage the double hermeneutic with different results.

**Summary**

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine how community college academic deans at institutions implementing a guided pathways approach make sense of their experiences as middle managers during planned change. This inquiry was is shaped by the constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm. Thus, a qualitative research approach using IPA was utilized. As a strategy for inquiry, IPA is particularly valuable given the significant process and perspective
transformation a guided pathways approach requires. The researcher consistently considered the recruitment and protection of participants, strategies for data analysis, and procedures necessary to insure a quality study. While the study may be limited by its small sample size and idiographic focus, it has poignantly revealed the experiences of community college academic deans as they navigate the complexities of planned change.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how community college academic deans made sense of their experience as middle managers during planned organizational change at institutions implementing guided pathways. Eight community college academic deans (or the equivalent position with a different title) from five community colleges in the Northeast participated in this study. Each participant had served in his or her position for a minimum of two years and was employed at a publicly funded institution.

The analysis of interview data revealed four superordinate themes and 13 subthemes.

Table 2

Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deans’ roles &amp; responsibilities</td>
<td>• Managing from the middle</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Leading and managing</td>
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<td>• Keeping faculty in the loop</td>
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<td>• Doing more with less</td>
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<td>Mindset</td>
<td>• Accepting the pace of change</td>
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<td>• Being flexible</td>
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<td>• Taking pride in accomplishments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Building a support network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of the change</td>
<td>• Taking a hierarchical approach</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Seeking cross-functional involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Defining the scale of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive leader sensemaking &amp; sensegiving</td>
<td>• Developing a shared sense of urgency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Connecting with strategic plan</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4 indicates how the researcher determined the superordinate and sub-themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deans’ Roles &amp; Responsibilities</th>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>Dorothy</th>
<th>Jamie</th>
<th>Bill</th>
<th>Jennifer</th>
<th>Amanda</th>
<th>Michael</th>
<th>Patrick</th>
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<tr>
<td>Managing from the middle</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading and managing</td>
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<td>Keeping faculty in the loop</td>
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<td>Doing more with less</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accepting the pace of change</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td>Being flexible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking pride in accomplishment</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building a support network</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<th>Nature of the Change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Taking a hierarchical approach</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeking cross-functional involvement</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defining the scale of change</td>
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<th>Executive Leader Sense making &amp; Sense-giving</th>
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<tr>
<td>Developing a shared sense of urgency</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting w. strategic plan</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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*Figure 4: Summary of Participant Experiences*

This chapter is organized by each superordinate theme with the corresponding subthemes addressed therein.
Deans’ Roles and Responsibilities

Each of the participants at the time of this study was serving, or had recently served, as a community college academic dean or its equivalent. Their duties and responsibilities are defined within the unique context of their respective institutions and the programs or disciplines they were overseeing. Through these interviews, several notable subthemes referring to more ubiquitous and somewhat intuitive roles and responsibilities emerged. These included: Managing from the middle; Leading and managing; Keeping faculty in the loop; and Doing more with less.

In addressing how they would describe being a community college academic dean to someone who has no experience and limited knowledge of the job, participants were introspective and eloquent. They each needed time to gather their thoughts before responding. It was as if they had been so busy doing the job for two or more years that they had not recently considered what it meant to “be” an academic dean. A sense of intense busyness was a common thread across all eight interviews.

The academic deans’ responses reflected a wide-ranging set of responsibilities like setting the agenda, accomplishing the strategic plan, and dealing with a diverse student body. The more noteworthy findings, however, were revealed through the thoughtful accounts that emerged once they stepped back to consider the overall experience. Patrick, for example, provided a global definition, declaring that he played “the middle role of coordinating people and places and activities to support faculty and students and learning in their content areas.” Jamie commented on how easily one could get lost in the administrative tasks and emphasized the importance of the “human aspects of the job.” The collective experiences of these participants informed the development of subthemes within the superordinate theme of Academic deans’ roles and responsibilities.
Managing from the Middle

Managing from the middle refers to the simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approach deans employ as they implement directives from executive leaders while supporting faculty-driven efforts on the ground. While all participants confirmed that being a middle manager was a suitable analogy for their work, they each experienced managing from the middle in different ways and at different levels of intensity. Mary provided a succinct description, acknowledging how the agendas of the chief academic officer and faculty influenced her work:

Middle managers to me are ones who lead in the middle. We have to service our faculty. I'm helping them and facilitating their work. And helping my boss and facilitating his work. I report to someone that has an agenda, and what my boss feels needs to get done, so it's translating that and helping faculty help me achieve it.

While apt, this description was devoid of reference to her own agenda as academic dean. This might suggest that Mary was being less than forthcoming about her own intentions or that she might not have felt empowered to have a personal agenda. Though, in context of the entire interview, it became clear that this statement truly reflected Mary’s experience of managing from the middle. She was serving as an intermediary between the executive level and the tactical level, and an interpreter or meaning-maker for her boss and for faculty.

Michael emphasized the significance of the department chair’s role, which is an equivalent position to academic dean but includes teaching responsibilities, in the overall management structure at his college. He found the middle manager concept to be an appropriate descriptor for his role, pointing out that, “It means you're not amongst the college leadership, but you do have people reporting to you and you are a very important aspect. Probably the most important aspect of the management of the institution.” This comment provided evidence that
Michael felt strong support from those he considered to be among the college leadership. Illustrative of his influential role within the management structure, Michael co-led the implementation of co-requisite remediation, a challenging aspect of guided pathways. He appreciated the hands-off approach assumed by his executive leaders and the trust and confidence they placed in him “to set it up properly.” Michael expressed that he felt empowered to make strategic decisions from the middle of the organization. In fact, he stated that prescriptive involvement from executive leaders “would have been upsetting to me because I felt confident that this was the best way.”

Patrick acknowledged the challenges and rewards associated with managing from the middle in an institution that employs many tenured faculty members with 20 or more years of professional experience. He observed that, “Not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Figuring out how we can move forward and make progress, but again also being respectful of some traditions or just some sound practices and activities that take place” was one of his responsibilities. His respect for faculty expertise and institutional tradition was balanced with a desire to achieve common understanding and to move forward with change initiatives, all which demonstrated his instinctive understanding of the demands of the role.

Several participants recognized the difficult position academic deans are often forced to assume as a buffer or simply stuck in the middle on certain issues. Bill asserted: “We are not the CEOs or the executives. We're not necessarily the policy makers and we are squashed in between them and the line level employees.” Jennifer added: “You have the competing interests of the executive staff, their decisions, the board of trustees, their decisions, and you're sort of the buffer that's sort of delivering it to the line staff who are doing the teaching and learning.” Amanda voiced similar concerns, expressing a sense of powerlessness described by many department
chairs with whom she worked; the chair position was equivalent position to academic dean but included teaching responsibilities. While Dorothy acknowledged that the term middle manager applied to her role, she struggled to recall any recent experiences for which it was a salient descriptor. Collectively, these participants squarely accepted the inevitability of being placed in this type of difficult positions from time to time. More notably, they each expressed confidence in their own capacity to understand more than one perspective and to facilitate mutual resolutions, largely due to the strong relationships they maintained with faculty.

Jamie’s depiction of managing from the middle implied a pervasive sense of tension as if she needed to physically absorb the jolts of planned change herself and to prevent opposing sides from harming one another. She commented that deans play “that difficult buffer role between the college leadership and the unionized faculty. . . . I call that being a human shock absorber.” She used strong language to characterize pervasive opposition to guided pathways on her campus, noting that certain constituencies “killed any language associated with” the movement. Her choice of descriptors—advocate, fierce, and bold—insinuated an almost warrior-like stance and ongoing struggle or conflict. Yet, with her focus on student welfare, Jamie asserted that her “ability to articulate and describe and represent both sides to each other and pull them toward a mutually agreeable perspective about student success is what middle management is all about.” Jamie’s intestinal fortitude in the face of such strong resistance underscored the indispensability of clear communication and strong brokering skills when managing from the middle. Taken together, these vignettes captured the contradictory aspects of managing from the middle. They also exemplified an esprit de corps among these participants who embraced the inherent opportunities and challenges associated with their roles with seriousness, grace, and good humor.
Leading and Managing

Leading and managing reflects the day-to-day reality of what deans do from leading implementation of large-scale change initiatives to managing administrative details associated with course scheduling or faculty assignments. Often the term academic dean conjures up images of high-ranking academic officials engaged in esoteric debates behind ivy-covered walls. While community college academic deans are certainly equipped for scholarly deliberation, their day-to-day lives are an intricate mosaic of activities that can be categorized as setting strategic direction, coaching, planning and logistics, and attending to administrative tasks. Academic deans are workhorses within their institutions.

Mary had originally supervised an assistant dean responsible for much of the regular interaction with faculty. When that position was eliminated, Mary took on what she considered to be the more traditional role of a dean. Her descriptive account of being a community college academic dean captured the multiple facets of the position. She stated:

Setting the agenda and trying to work with faculty to determine where they want to go. I think that you're straddling between the guiding from the side like you do as a department chair. I don't see an academic dean as an authoritative position because the faculty really guides you and it's what they do. . . . It's making sure the trains are running. it's also looking forward to set an agenda and making sure there are the resources that faculty can do what they need to do. In the times of decreasing enrollment, seeing what we can do to keep enrollments and to keep moving forward. . . . Looking at curriculum, what needs to be changed. Working with faculty to help them see what needs to be changed sometimes. Mary defined a complex role that included: leader, or “looking forward to set an agenda;” manager, or “keeping the trains running;” and support, or “making sure there are the resources
faculty need”. Jamie cautioned that one could easily get lost in managerial tasks and remarked that, “the human elements of the role, leadership, inspiration, advocacy, conduit for information, an influencer in both directions, managing up and down, is what it’s all about.” Mary and Jamie accepted the administrative duties as a necessary part of the role. However, they stressed that direct interaction with faculty and advocacy on their behalf were the aspects of the job that fueled their passion and commitment. Both participants demonstrated that good communication with faculty, willingness to handle all aspects of the job, and commitment to the cause are the hallmarks of successful academic deans who lead and manage from the middle.

For some participants, the tension between leading and managing was palpable. Amanda indicated that juggling responsibilities, especially teaching, was challenging. While she was quick to offer that teaching always came first, she added: “But then you’ve got all this other stuff that needs to happen” like assigning faculty to courses and implementing decisions made by executive leaders. Jennifer declared: “The job is to be a manager. Manage aspects of it in terms of staffing, course development, program development, it’s really a middle management position in a unionized environment, which makes it a little bit different than some.” For Jennifer, contractual provisions that guided the appointment of adjunct faculty had, at times, prevented her from hiring those she perceived to be the best-qualified. Both participants described contradictions that seemed to pit decisions in the best interest of students against decisions based upon administrative obligations.

Bill and Patrick proffered straightforward accounts that implicitly incorporated leading and managing activities. Bill likened his role to that of a school principal. He identified faculty oversight and evaluation, management of student issues, and policy direction as key components of the position. Patrick depicted his role as “coordinating people and places and activities to
support faculty and students and learning in their content areas.” Meanwhile, Michael and Dorothy concentrated on specific aspects of the role. Michael emphasized dealing with a diverse student body and communicating regularly with adjunct faculty. Dorothy focused on the strategic plan and “identifying what the activities and the objectives are within my division that support the strategic plan and the strategic mission of the college.” While not remarkable in terms of amplifying the tension between leading and managing, these varied accounts demonstrated the intricacies of the position. Community college academic deans appear to be in a constant state of doing. On any given day, they juggle multiple priorities. Responses from Bill, Patrick, Michael, and Dorothy revealed the thoughtful competence of professionals who appreciate their roles as administrative managers and strategic leaders and execute all duties conscientiously.

**Keeping Faculty in the Loop**

*Keeping faculty in the loop* addresses the processes by which deans establish good working relationships with faculty, keep faculty informed, advocate on their behalf, and in so doing, build confidence and trust in their intentions as deans. This theme emerged through a series of questions that probed what concerns participants had when first appointed as deans; what happens during a planned change; and what their greatest contributions were during planned change. Participants acknowledged the value of good communication and diligence in efforts to achieve buy-in from faculty. Several participants emphasized the importance of building trust by showing respect for tradition, listening well, and advocating for faculty. Others underscored the value of taking time to communicate, providing rationale for change, and remaining humble in every interaction.

As a newly appointed dean, Patrick expressed a desire to “learn the people.” He arrived on campus during an intensely contentious period. In fact, some colleagues had advised against
him accepting the position given this turmoil. Patrick was confident that the blend of his professional skills and personality could be helpful to that complex situation. He stated that his priority was to “get a sense of the culture of the institution and the faculty. I certainly wanted to make sure that I kind of earned their trust.” Entering the dean role, Jamie, meanwhile, continued the collaborative and positive leadership style that earned her the faculty trust as department chair. She “maintained those relationships by staying humble and doing a lot of listening and being a pretty fierce advocate.” This demonstrable respect for faculty coupled with strong self-awareness and confidence in their personal qualities and professional abilities enabled both Patrick and Jamie to establish constructive working relationships rapidly. Their tacit commitment to personal integrity and clear understanding of how trust works became invaluable as planned change initiatives emerged.

Clear, concise, and constant communication is critical during planned change initiatives. Dorothy described the importance of engaging faculty to discuss the benefits and challenges of changes under consideration. When a previous executive leader proposed scheduling all classes three days weekly, Dorothy stated,

The ability of my being able to pull together my faculty and say, "Okay, what do you think about this?" . . . they just pushed back and talked about students’ scheduling issues and how they structure their work week and their school week and blah, blah, blah. I was able to bring that back and just shut that down.

This anecdote was significant at multiple levels. First, the fact that the faculty were willing to convene on this issue revealed their trust that their input would be taken seriously. Next, it demonstrated Dorothy’s respectful and collaborative working relationship with faculty. Finally, it illustrated the power of good communication to inform and improve planned change efforts.
Doing More with Less

Doing more with less addresses the way deans deal with current fiscal exigencies caused by declining enrollments and decreasing governmental support for public higher education. Over the last several years, these financial pressures have impacted community colleges across the country including those in the Northeast. While only four participants addressed this subtheme directly, it is important for all academic deans to consider during planned change since faculty morale commonly suffers from working in under-resourced environments. Jamie noted, “I try to be that dean that I wanted as a faculty member, the champion, the advocate, the individual that would energize and inspire fatigued faculty.”

One consequence of these fiscal constraints has been an increasing emphasis on cost-benefit analyses for low-enrolled programs. As Jennifer observed:

We never had a structured program of program review and now we're on a very structured set where there's some financial looking at programs. They're looking at programs financially. I'm not sure that all the faculty understand that totally and that really stresses them out and that's your job to sort of translate that.

This kind of economic analysis often places academic deans squarely in the middle between faculty and college fiscal officers, and sometimes, trustees, who are demanding increased return on investment for every dollar spent. While Jennifer understood the need for careful fiscal management at the macro-level, she expressed frustration that fiscal administrators were unable or unwilling to recognize the multiple considerations academic deans factor into cancelling a course for low enrollment or closing a low-enrolled program with strong labor market demand. Having come to her college from a non-profit background, Jennifer was accustomed to working in resource-poor environments. Coupled with her ability to understand the perspectives of faculty
and fiscal officers, Jennifer displayed strong middle management proficiency as she interpreted the motives underlying the fiscal scrutiny for faculty.

Patrick expressed an unanticipated sense of pride and accomplishment in “do[ing] great things on a shoestring.” He noted that few people outside public higher education understood just how under-resourced community colleges were in his state. He derived a deep sense of satisfaction in being able to get things done despite the lack of resources. Mary prioritized making resources available, so faculty could do what they needed to do. In times of declining enrollment, she also worked closely with faculty and enrollment specialists on creative strategies to build enrollments. All four participants employed constructive attitudes and adaptive approaches to working with and on behalf of faculty and their students, and in sustaining programs during difficult financial circumstances.

Conclusion

A panoply of intuitive roles and responsibilities emerged through this examination. From intermediary to meaning-maker to empowered decision maker, the academic deans interviewed were actively influencing the direction of their community colleges as they drove planned change initiatives from the middle of the organization. They approached their work with respect for the professional experience that informs faculty perspective on effective teaching and learning. They expressed humbleness and showed deference for traditions that had been integral to shaping their college’s unique niche.

Yet, they were also strong and determined leaders with a singular focus on expanding opportunities and improving outcomes for all students. These academic deans employed productive approaches to working with and on behalf of faculty, students, and their programs, notwithstanding resistance to change or fiscal constraints. Collectively, they understood and
accepted the inevitability of being placed in difficult and perhaps, adversarial situations from time to time. Yet, they expressed confidence in their capacity to understand multiple perspectives and to facilitate mutual resolutions largely due to their strong relationships with faculty.

Community college academic deans are in a constant state of doing. On any given day, they are juggling multiple priorities and executing their duties and responsibilities with diligence and care. These intuitive roles and responsibilities revealed a meta-awareness of what they must do to be effectual. In the next section, accompanying attitudes or attributes are considered.

Mindset

Mindset can be defined as the attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions held by an individual person. Mindsets can be categorized as either established and somewhat fixed, or flexible and poised for growth. During these interviews, it was evident that mindset influences an individual’s approach to his or her professional roles and responsibilities. Rich conversations emerged about being an academic dean, leading planned change as a middle manager, and identifying successes and failures, and how these encouraged participants to carefully consider not only what happened, but how their personal attributes may have impacted those outcomes. Four subthemes emerged: Accepting the pace of change; Being flexible; Taking pride in accomplishment; and Building one’s own support network.

Accepting the Pace of Change

In a time when community colleges across the country are facing increasing competition, intense fiscal challenges, and steep enrollment declines, all eight participants were cognizant of the time-sensitive mandate to expand access and improve student outcomes. Yet several participants admitted that a slower, more incremental approach to change was their chosen strategy. Mary explained:
You work with the willing and you fix what you can. [Our chief academic officer] says he's an incrementalist, so am I. Sometimes you can't take the direct path, you have to kind of go around to get there. It may take you longer, but you eventually get there.

She shared several anecdotes illustrating how she had convened faculty working groups to develop creative solutions. Then, she worked closely with these teams to implement their ideas, even though it took three or more years to come to fruition in some cases. While Mary acknowledged the slow pace of change, she focused more on the ways the faculty arrived at the creative solutions. Jennifer had a similar experience, noting that it was her priority to get faculty and staff on board because without their buy-in, she argued that “you have people doing resistance work.” Patrick, meanwhile, contended that “thick-skinned patience” was a necessary personality trait for an academic dean. With keen awareness of organizational dynamics, these academic deans calibrated the appropriate pace of change for their circumstances and then, they worked with it.

Bill’s previous experience at for-profit and private institutions provided a unique lens, perhaps, with a bias for action, through which he judged his institution. He admitted that his “biggest struggle [was] accepting the sluggishness at which things move sometimes.” He attributed this slow pace of change to factors to being beyond his direct control, citing both the intrinsic culture of public higher education institutions with heavy union influence and shared academic governance, or what he described as “overshared.”

In sharp contrast, both Michael and Amanda eschewed an incremental approach to guided pathways implementation. Michael contended that doing it gradually might have been more difficult, and so, they “ripped off the band-aid” and implemented co-requisite remediation at scale. After the first full semester, the college realized dramatic improvement in student
success rates in entry-level mathematics and English courses. Amanda reasoned that the quicker the institution began implementing guided pathways, the better they would be positioned to define their own approach rather than being forced to answer to a statewide mandate.

While Bill’s most oft repeated challenge was the slow pace of change, his overall demeanor was optimistic and upbeat. This was a quality he shared with Mary, Jennifer, and Patrick even though he was far less tolerant of the incremental approach. Meanwhile, Michael and Amanda took risks on full-scale implementation in a single semester, were energized by the results, and seemed optimistic and upbeat about their continued success. The collective willingness of these six academic deans to accept the pace of change appropriate for their institutions was indicative of a positive and constructive approach for addressing the opportunities and challenges they encountered during planned change.

**Being Flexible**

*Being flexible* addresses how people cope with the inevitable challenges associated with the implementation of planned change. Challenges include, but may not be limited to, shifting institutional priorities; having responsibility without authority; experiencing setbacks; and attending to tedious minutiae. Many perceive academic deans as managers and assume an accompanying level of authority and control. Yet, several participants demonstrated how often being flexible and not controlling was key to their success.

Bill emphasized how the strategic plan did—and did not—drive institutional objectives as he described the way “priorities shift on an hourly basis” based upon external drivers. In one example, the abrupt closure of a small private college compelled his President to ask him to develop a specialized science program for which the institution had no prior experience or appropriate laboratory facilities. In another example, a large capital/equipment grant award
completely changed the renovation plan for a campus building. With a smile and a laugh, Bill quipped, “...and so then best laid plans, everything changes.” These reflections illustrated his readiness to provide a critical linking function as he changed directions personally, interpreted the change for others, and facilitated the activities required to get a new program established or to revisit the program plan for a renovation.

Mary, Patrick, and Michael acknowledged the conundrum of having considerable responsibility, but little authority over the people and often, they lacked financial resources to complete a change initiative. In characterizing her work with faculty and curriculum, Mary reported that she sets the agenda and tries to work with faculty to determine where they want to go relative to that agenda. Yet, she was quick to concede that the faculty often guide her, commenting: “It's very important I lead them. I am the boss of them but I'm not.” Patrick spoke about this same challenge, noting that the lack of authority often makes the job frustrating for some individuals. Michael’s account of what transpires during planned change revealed the necessity of attention to every minute detail, even those outside of his purview in academic affairs. He described how he addressed “a million little challenges” with scheduling by convening “a million tiny meetings” with the registrar; he accepted that “it was [him] keeping an eye on it all the time.”

These four participants demonstrated how often and in what ways they must assume responsibility without full authority or pivot in response to shifting circumstances. Their narratives established that the role of the academic dean is dynamic and that being flexible is not an uncommon expectation. Patrick noted that this kind of flexibility makes the job untenable for some individuals. The potential for dissonance is a significant consideration since attitude shapes how one perceives and approaches opportunities and challenges.
Taking Pride in Accomplishment

Taking pride in accomplishment refers to one’s ability to derive satisfaction and a sense of well-being from his or her professional contributions. Given the overall workload and the intrinsic stresses of the academic dean’s position, it was somewhat surprising that every participant voiced a sense of profound fulfillment in helping their institutions move forward. It took a variety of forms and was often expressed with great humility, but it was omnipresent.

For some, personal pride was derived from accomplishing certain objectives. The stunning success of the first semester of co-requisite remediation was front and center for Michael. He eloquently explained the transformed student experience in gateway mathematics courses and had student success data at his fingertips. He credited much of the collegewide collaboration and willingness to change to the positive working environment at his institution. When pressed about his personal contribution, he recognized that “having a person who is positively in favor of this, on the ground, is critically important” and acknowledged with humble pride that he was that person. Patrick commented that pausing to reflect allowed him to appreciate how much he had been able to accomplish over an academic year. He derived great satisfaction from his ability to make the most of the limited resources available to do good work for students and faculty.

Others drew great satisfaction from their personal competence in moving the change agenda forward. Amanda expressed pride in her role as a cheerleader and an envoy, having had the opportunity to visit best-practice institutions. Jennifer placed high value on her project management skills and on her ability to help faculty see the larger context for change. Both Jamie and Dorothy emphasized their skill for developing high quality and respectful working relationships with faculty. Bill underscored his entrepreneurial experience and can-do attitude.
Mary, meanwhile, noted her high achievement motivation and optimistic outlook among the strengths from which she drew personal fulfillment.

Taking pride in one’s accomplishments is significant for several reasons. The academic dean’s job is complex and challenging. Planned change is difficult and progress can be slow. Yet, change leaders need a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction to sustain and energize ongoing efforts. As Patrick noted, “You just have to find the gratification in the work. . .. You can't expect the recognition. . .. Even if the work is appreciated, the recognition isn't as overt as it is for other groups on campus.” These academic deans demonstrated how they find that gratification in their own work.

**Building a Support Network**

*Building a support network* encompasses a range of strategies employed by academic deans to grow professionally, improve their effectiveness, and seek support and guidance as issues arise. Most of the study participants entered their positions with many questions and gaps in their knowledge of the institution and the overall community college system. None described a comprehensive on-boarding process, formalized professional mentoring program, or any substantive professional development. They plunged into their roles and figured it out.

Both Jennifer and Michael benefitted from an informal mentoring relationship with the departing academic dean. Jennifer was groomed for the role by a dean who was retiring. She confirmed, “I definitely was trained, the dean that left me, left, retired, really did a lot of training. [She] had kind of set me up to take this role.” For Michael, the incumbent returned to a faculty role within the same department for which Michael became chair. This provided him with easy access to an experienced mentor when questions arose and assured a smooth transition process. This mentoring offered Jennifer and Michael a more methodical and just-in-time approach to
learning the ropes. While there is a delicate balance to be maintained when attempting to codify and scale such relationships, demonstrable benefit may be derived when these are done thoughtfully.

Jamie admitted that when she first became academic dean, she knew little about the decision-making process on her campus. Further, she had almost no context for the challenges facing community colleges in the region or across the country because her “institution didn’t have a lot of conversations about what was going on in the external environment.” This prompted her to enroll in a doctoral program and to seek the advice and support of the chief academic officer who “was extraordinarily helpful in training, attending to the detail, as well as providing context.” The need to better understand the context beyond the walls of her institution was fundamental for Jamie. She was proactive in seeking out her own professional mentor and simultaneously enrolling in a doctoral program. She built a support network that was wide and deep and that bolstered her drive to learn.

The parallel roles and responsibilities and collegiality among academic deans often provided participants with a much-needed information source and respite. Bill spoke at length about the rapport among the academic deans at his college, many of whom had been recently appointed, stating: “There's a lot of picking up the phone, emails, knocking on doors of ‘hey, I need your opinion, what do you do?’ So, we do a lot of that bouncing off each other.” Jennifer relied upon her academic dean colleagues for the same type of support. Dorothy—a long tenured dean who had experienced several turnovers within the academic dean team—expressed concern about uniformity among the deans’ respective approaches to contractual obligations. For pragmatic reasons, she indicated that she had recently suggested that they “go back to those
meetings [among deans] because we're losing some of that consistency. We're doing a few [contractual] things differently. For the most part, it hasn't been catastrophic, but it could be.”

Academic deans encounter new and different opportunities and circumstances every day. More than one participant noted that no two days are alike. Being able to identify strengths, gaps in knowledge, and the areas for which assistance is needed characterizes an individual that is self-reliant. Through these interviews, this trait emerged as an asset. Taking personal responsibility for building one’s professional support network is characteristic of an individual who is open to learning from others, a prerequisite at this level of academic leadership. These skills and attitudes are invaluable professional tools for community college academic deans.

Conclusion

Clearly, mindset matters, and these participants revealed in what ways and why. From accepting the actual pace of change, to pivoting and resetting priorities in response to external conditions, to assuming responsibility without actual authority, they provided concrete examples of what it means to work with circumstances they could not change. With wisdom and optimism, participants revealed how they developed strategies to change what they could and illustrated how they discerned the difference between acceptance and taking on a transformative role.

Next, they demonstrated self-confidence and resourcefulness. The deans’ self-confidence was revealed by the poise and humility with which they acknowledged their contributions and accomplishments. Their resourcefulness was evidenced by the proactive strategies they employed to seek advice and guidance from peers or to gain more formalized knowledge and skills from respected mentors or advanced graduate education. Taken together, these attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions indicated that they adopted productive approaches to the opportunities
and challenges of the job. Further, the deans revealed a metacognition for the mindset necessary to be effective in their roles as community college academic deans.

**Nature of the Change**

*Nature of the change* refers to the approach taken to planned change by the system, the institution, or the dean. Interview questions probed how strategic priorities were identified and communicated at each institution; how guided pathways changes impacted the deans’ work and that of faculty and staff; and what successes or disappointments were experienced. Through the resultant conversations, it became clear that the approach taken often included a blend of tactics reflecting both the executive leadership style and the unique character of each institution.

Subthemes included: *Taking a hierarchical approach; Seeking cross-functional involvement;* and *Defining the scale of change.*

**Taking a Hierarchical Approach**

*Taking a hierarchical approach* addresses the way in which a planned change is communicated to the college community by policymakers or executive leaders. Michael contended that guided pathways “definitely wasn't a statewide mandate,” but he confirmed that the chancellor of the statewide system felt strongly about its potential for improved student success. Through a series of best-practice visits coupled with statewide and campus-based meetings, administrators, faculty and staff members were introduced to key elements and documented successes from peer institutions across the country. These activities stimulated the enthusiasm and action on his campus. Amanda replied that her institution made the decision to move forward quickly once the concept of guided pathways was introduced, so they could chart their own course before statewide directives were issued. This rapid and systemic approach to guided pathways implementation indicated that executive leaders and policy makers had
skillfully set the stage by helping faculty and staff to understand the mandate for change as well as the steps to be taken.

Several participants noted that some planned change initiatives were communicated in a top-down manner from their executive leadership team but were facilitated more collegially. Dorothy commented: “When there are sort of top down decisions being made, there is a time period at the very beginning where the chief academic officer really tries to engage the deans to explain the vision for this particular thing, the importance.” Patrick underscored the level of autonomy he had in determining the best implementation strategy. Mary highlighted the value she placed on faculty leadership during change implementation and her commitment to honoring that leadership by staying away from most of the associated faculty-led meetings. These comments suggested that collaborative or shared forms of leadership can be effectively coupled with a hierarchical approach.

For others, guided pathways implementation was announced as an institutional strategy by the executive leadership team. As Bill reported:

So, there wasn’t a brain trust at all levels that said, “Where are we going to go as an institution?” It is still the president and the president's cabinet who determine the direction of the school and then it's handed down and said, “Y'all figure out how to make this [happen].”

Once announced, it became Bill’s job as dean to determine how best to encourage faculty participation and move the plan forward. Jennifer added that the communication style of the executive leadership team at her institution had slowly morphed to being more hierarchical as several new executive leaders took the reins from long-standing incumbents. She recognized that the current challenges facing her college likely necessitated this kind of approach but admitted
that the transition had been difficult personally, remarking: “It's not just about bringing in an idea. It's about bringing people along.” Bill and Jennifer depicted the tensions and difficulties they faced as middle managers, suggesting that they were responsible for gaining cross-functional buy-in and facilitating the change process.

Both Jamie and Dorothy shared their thoughts on the efficacy of a top-down approach. Jamie contended that it could be interpreted as disrespectful of faculty, many of whom were already beleaguered due to enrollment concerns, resource constraints, and initiative fatigue resulting from multiple simultaneous changes. Dorothy argued that without authentic collaboration and mutual respect, a “my way or the highway, that kind of structure” could never be successful. These comments underscored their sensitivity to organizational dynamics and their awareness of more suitable ways to contextualize change messages with faculty.

Regardless of the approach executive leaders took to introducing planned change, they relied heavily upon the academic deans to accurately translate its intent to faculty and staff members and to facilitate the change process. In some instances, the participants described a mutual process of engagement in which the President or chief academic officer actively sought their input or advice, and through which questions and concerns were addressed. Others simply took control and determined how best to execute upon the directive on their own. This point is significant for executive leaders since accurate messaging reinforces a sense of transparency, encourages better cooperation, and helps to allay potential concerns about proposed changes upfront. In the next section, the level and type of cross-functional involvement in planned change will be examined.
Seeking Cross-Functional Involvement

Seeking cross-functional involvement is best defined as an intentional strategy by which members of different areas of the college (i.e. academic affairs, administrative services; student services) come together as a team to design, implement, and evaluate new or revised programs or processes. Its purpose is to better assure the effectiveness of the design, the success of the implementation, and responsiveness to system glitches. While all participants declared strong support for this type of collaboration, only two offered descriptive accounts of cross-functional team engagement. Often cross-functional involvement was conflated with collaboration, a less deliberate approach through which people choose to work together.

Bill applauded the work of the two-year scheduling team. Comprised of two academic deans, the vice-president of academic affairs, the vice-president of student affairs, the registrar, two academic advisors, and a representative from computer network services, this team identified potential obstacles holistically. The team prioritized the purchase of a sophisticated software system to enable production of the two-year schedule and multi-term course registration. Once agreed upon, this priority was also added to the tactical plan that informed the annual budget process. Mary declared that a team can be far more effective when working collaboratively. She described the process by which she and her chief academic officer convened working groups to design academic maps, noting the intentional inclusion of people she considered “the naysayers” along with everyone that might use the maps regularly as well as those who would willingly agree to serve.

Michael suggested that guided pathways had compelled different personnel and departments on his campus to work together. Although his college formally convened a guided pathways committee, he described a series of more unidirectional working relationships in which
he took the lead to meet with admissions, or advising, or the registrar. This approach seemed inefficient and quite burdensome. Further, it signaled that institutional buy-in was still being developed. More importantly it underscored the role middle managers play in gaining cooperation during planned change. Jennifer spoke wistfully of earlier cross-functional approaches under the former executive leadership team that engaged committees to work with ideas. She likened this process to community organizing and restated her commitment to gaining buy-in from faculty and staff. This anecdote underscored the key role middle managers play, that of interpreter or sense-maker.

Surprisingly, given the success of guided pathways implementation on her campus, Amanda admitted that one of the biggest challenges was getting people to work together. You can't sit in your corner and do your little thing you always used to do before that worked for you. You've got to now get out of that corner and start working with all these other people. And some people embrace that and some people are still struggling with that a little bit. They don't like to change. This is how we've done it. Well, we're going to do it this way. So, it's like big pushback.

Amanda conjectured that the academic team was further ahead in their consideration of guided pathways than the student service team. She voiced strong support for a recent reorganization that placed advising under the academic affairs umbrella and asserted that “the next step has to be that onboarding, advising, that all needs to come together.” This institution achieved strong success rapidly. Yet this comment piqued curiosity as to what might have been accomplished if the approach to change had been intentionally cross-functional from the start.

Given the breadth and depth of the system and process changes required, Amanda characterized guided pathways implementation as a “huge magnitude change.” This type of
planned change necessitates collegewide involvement and commitment. All participants recognized the value of collaboration and inclusivity during the change process. However, those who focused on cross-functional involvement described an intentional collegewide team building process with careful consideration given to membership composition and diversity of opinion. This represents an important distinction regarding a process that could be enabled more quickly with the support of executive leaders setting clear expectations at the start. While there is no question that academic deans are proficient at working independently, as Mary noted, “We’re not an island. We have to have everybody else buying in and sometimes that’s difficult”.

**Defining the Scale of Change**

*Defining the scale of change* examines the intensity level at which colleges implement planned change and essentially considers comprehensive, full scale change as contrasted with an incremental approach. Questions that probed what happens during a guided pathways implementation included related successes and disappointments, and the deans’ contributions and challenges; these revealed a multidimensional approach that was not easily categorized as one or the other. One contributing factor may have been that there was no common definition among the colleges for what constituted a guided pathways implementation. For many participants, it was defined as the development of academic maps and some tweaking of curriculum to build common first semester course sequences among programs within the same meta-major. For others, implementation encompassed those tasks plus substantial changes to processes within admissions, program marketing, advising, registration, and developmental education as well. For the purposes of this discussion, the scale of implementation at different institutions was interpreted from cues provided in participant responses.
Michael asserted that the full-scale implementation of co-requisite remediation in the first semester was instrumental to program success. The idea of running a cautious pilot and, essentially, maintaining parallel systems for developmental education was perceived as more difficult and confusing for students. It was clear that full-scale implementation required thoughtful planning and regular communication. Michael described a Lewinian type of discomfiting phase in which the objective was to expose the problem, and to help others understand why the change was beneficial and how it would impact their programs or the services. He underscored the value of sharing evidence to back up the change recommendations and reiterated that everyone must be involved. He was adamant that planned change of this scale could not be accomplished in isolation.

For Amanda, having the conceptual framework of guided pathways made “the process of change and communicating that change a lot easier.” It was clear that having a champion like her that could instill a sense of motivation and enthusiasm across campus was another essential ingredient to the success of their institution’s full-scale implementation of co-requisite remediation. Yet, she admitted that not everyone came on board immediately, stating:

When you're trying to work towards change, you kind of focus on those that are on board. You share with them the data and you go, yeah, look at this and look what we can do. And they're like, yeah, let's do it. . . . So then you get this little group of people doing some stuff and eventually the other people say, oh, what are they doing over there? Instead of trying to force everybody. And I think that's kind of what's happening here. It started small and working on these things. But then we really trumpet the successes.

Bill echoed her experience with the early adopters but noted that he had experienced a far greater struggle with constraints imposed by the faculty union contract. As a result, he adopted a more
incremental approach. Much like Amanda, his institution used opportunities throughout the year to showcase faculty innovation: “We're offering a wide variety of innovative ideas, so everybody doesn't have to do the same one. I think that was probably the biggest positive was, everybody doesn't have to do the same thing.”

Mary, the avowed incrementalist, concurred that she was working with the willing and kept everyone else informed. She described change as an iterative process and expressed honest concern about achieving certain aspects of guided pathways, commenting that “trying to change that paradigm about what advising really is, has been challenging. I don't think we're still there. I'm not sure we're ever ‘gonna get there.” Yet she reiterated that inclusivity was far more important than speed during planned change.

While Michael argued that everyone must be involved in full-scale implementation of guided pathways, most academic deans work with the early adopters to gain the foothold necessary to demonstrate success and encourage increased involvement. Few described an intentional sense-making process by executive leaders that set the stage for a full-scale change. Further, the definition of guided pathways implementation was not consistent across institutions. As such, implementation meant different activities on different campuses. It is important for policymakers and college executive leaders to understand this phenomenon, so they can work collaboratively with campus middle leadership to define clear and realistic expectations and develop inclusive and participatory methods.

**Conclusion**

Through this examination, it became evident that the nature of change at these institutions simultaneously reflected the leadership style of policymakers and campus-based executives as well as the unique character of each institution. Regardless of the selected approach, academic
deans were heavily relied upon to communicate the message and to accurately interpret its intent for faculty and staff. Accurate messaging and regular dialogue was shown to be critical in gaining trust and buy-in from faculty and staff, especially in the early stages of a planned change.

Given the breadth and depth of the system and process changes required, a guided pathways implementation seemed to, across the interviews, indicate a strategy of intentional campus-wide involvement. While all participants underscored the value of collaborating with colleagues, only two described deliberate processes for convening a cross-functional team that represents each major area of the institution. The nuanced distinction between collaboration and cross-functional is significant and could be enabled more quickly with support from policymakers and executive leaders.

Finally, regardless of the institution’s desire for comprehensive change, most academic deans interviewed for this study were working with the early adopters to gain the foothold necessary to demonstrate success and encourage increased involvement. Given widely varying interpretations of what constitutes a guided pathways implementation, it is important for policymakers and college executive leaders to work closely with the academic deans and other campus leaders to define clear and realistic expectations. In the next section, executive-level sense-making and sense-giving are considered.

**Executive Leader Sense-Making/Sense-Giving**

*Executive level sense-making/sense-giving* emerged as the fourth superordinate theme. In general, this concept refers to the ways in which executive leaders at either the institution or system level encourage followers toward common goals by helping them to understand the imperative for change; providing a specific call to action; and helping them to envision how to move forward. Through questions focused on what it is like to work in their respective
institutions; how strategic priorities are identified and communicated; and what happens during a guided pathways implementation, participants provided detailed descriptions of strategies and activities employed by policymakers and executive leaders. In addition, they offered additional tactics they utilized to expand upon executive sense-making/sense-giving as part of an ongoing process of keeping faculty and staff members informed and engaged. The two subthemes were:

*Developing a shared sense of urgency* and *Connecting with strategic plan.*

**Developing a Shared Sense of Urgency**

Developing a shared sense of urgency refers to setting a context and a call to action by demonstrating how the confluence of external factors—for example, changing student demographics, mounting student debt, or low college completion rates—coupled with flagging institutional success metrics and thus demands for institutional change. Both Amanda and Michael credited strong state-level efforts led by their chancellors as a significant factor in developing the urgency and enthusiasm that contributed to their successes. Amanda described a series of statewide meetings, guided pathways training seminars, and best-practice visits that laid the foundation for why and how this change could be accomplished. Specifically, Amanda noted how the statewide summer symposium for faculty and staff kickstarted enthusiasm across the system. She remarked: “So yeah you get in that environment and it's contagious. Like I want to be part of this. And it's very dynamic.” Michael added that the simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approach used to engage campus constituencies helped to cement institutional commitment quickly. These comments seemed to conflict with their experiences with cross-functional involvement noted earlier.

Mary and Dorothy attributed the strong and effective communication skills of the chief academic officer for establishing a sense of urgency on campus. Dorothy was unaware of any
faculty members who were disgruntled by guided pathways implementation. She indicated that the college used many meeting opportunities to introduce these ideas and concepts and to discuss implementation, always tying it back to improved student retention. Involvement in these meetings was not limited to faculty and staff in academic affairs but was a cross-institutional effort. She credited the efforts of the president and especially the chief academic officer for the strong institutional buy-in, stating: “The ground was set, people bought into that.” Mary added that she could not lead without learning on her own. When guided pathways was introduced, she read as much as she could and shared material with faculty and staff in her area. These accounts provided strong support for executive-level sensemaking/sense-giving during planned change.

Some participants noted less clarity with respect to guided pathways. Jennifer commented that the term pathways was used frequently on her campus, pointing out that a recent reorganization resulted in the development of pathways (or meta-majors) with a series of related programs under the supervision of an academic administrator. This reorganization resulted in a cascading sequence of linked activities that included the development of pathway sheets or maps, a review of individual programs, and a restructuring of advising linked to each pathway. While this description seemed linear and logical, she attributed much of the confusion to the top-down way the pathways reorganization was announced. Bill described a similar experience and simply attributed the confusion to the fact that executive leaders failed to set the context for the change. Jamie contended that lack of context was the root cause of the faculty resistance she experienced as well, noting that her” particular institution didn't have a lot of conversations about what was going on in the external environment”.

Context matters. It not only helps people understand the circumstances and events that contributed to a decision but also elucidates the selected strategy. Absent context, faculty and
staff members are at minimum confused, if not downright resistant to change. As Jamie lamented, the conserving nature of organizational culture will always trump a proposed strategy when no context is set for change. More importantly, a shared sense of urgency generates a level of enthusiasm and desire to be part of the solution as Amanda so eloquently noted.

**Linking with the Strategic Plan**

*Linking with the strategic plan* addresses if and how planned change efforts associated with guided pathways emanated from or at minimum were linked to the college’s strategic plan. Participant responses reflected that their respective institutions recognized that the strategic plan should drive campus priorities. If not already linked, participants were working to strengthen connections between their tactical plans for guided pathways and the overall strategic plan.

On Dorothy’s campus, it was widely understood that the strategic plan was driving institutional priorities. She interpreted her primary responsibility as an academic dean as accomplishing the strategic plan. During the interview, she made several references to the plan and to the inclusive process by which it was developed. She also described a new budgetary process tied to the strategic plan and reinforced that new initiatives needed to align with the mission. Jamie described the strategic plan at her institution as “crystal clear,” and Jennifer, meanwhile, confirmed that the tactical plan for academics included guided pathways implementation.

Patrick described his institution’s strategic plan as “strategic doing.” The plan is organized around several priorities and comprised of task forces that meet regularly to determine what needs to be done to accomplish plan objectives. While he did not specifically address if and how guided pathways was linked, he described the method as a “fairly robust strategic planning process.” Mary noted that her President’s utilization of an appreciative inquiry
approach to drive planning was a sign that he was focused on positive change and on working together with faculty and staff. Nevertheless, she emphasized that the process of change was still choppy; implementation was still a work in progress.

According to the regional accrediting association, an institution’s strategic plan should reflect its best attempt to discern its strengths, opportunities, and threats and describe a strategy for meeting its mission. Major areas—academics, enrollment, financial and other areas—should have linked tactical plans. Guided pathways implementation should be reflected not only in the academic plan, but across all areas. Participants’ responses reflected the realities of their circumstances. While there appeared to be broad commitment to link planned change efforts with the strategic plan, it is likely to be a continuous work in progress.

**Conclusion**

These conversations confirmed that what policymakers and executive leaders say and do matters. Their words and actions help people understand the circumstances and events that contributed to a decision and they clarify why certain strategies were selected. Well-chosen words can help build enthusiasm and generate broad participation in change activities. It seems evident that executive leaders understand the critical importance of linking change messages with the strategic plan and that they are obviously working to assure this alignment. The data has revealed that through deliberate and thoughtful sense-making/sense-giving activities, executive leaders can support academic deans in their efforts to help faculty and staff understand the need for change and to envision the way forward.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how academic deans at community colleges implementing guided pathways made sense of their experiences as middle
managers during planned change. The research question was: How do community college academic deans make sense of their lived experience as middle managers during planned change? The researcher sought to understand how change happens by examining the lived experiences and conditions under which academic deans facilitate comprehensive planned change.

Findings confirmed that academic deans are well-positioned for their roles and responsibilities as change leaders from the middle of the organization. Next, findings confirmed the generative potential for academic deans to build positive rapport with faculty and staff and to gain their support for a change vision through a positive mindset. Finally, the findings revealed that policymakers and executive leaders can significantly influence the success of deans’ efforts through their deliberate approach to change and by clear communication regarding the context and purpose for the change.

This inquiry revealed that academic deans carry out an array of intuitive roles and responsibilities in their day-to-day work. These included: Managing from the middle; Leading and managing; Keeping faculty in the loop; and Doing more with less. The chief reason these findings are significant is that these activities are not necessarily explicitly defined in position descriptions, but they appear to be instinctive responses to the circumstances in which academic deans operate. From intermediary to meaning-maker to empowered decision maker, these academic deans are actively influencing the direction of their community colleges as they drive planned change initiatives from the middle of the organization.

Community college academic deans also work diligently to gain faculty trust and to advocate on their behalf. They demonstrate deep respect for the professional experience that informs faculty perspective on effective teaching and learning. They are humble and show
deference for traditions that have been integral to shaping their college’s unique niche. Yet, they are able leaders with a singular focus on student success. The academic deans displayed productive approaches to working with and on behalf of faculty, students, and programmatic approaches despite challenging external factors and fiscal constraints. The data analysis revealed that they understood and accepted the inevitability of being placed in difficult situations on occasion. However, they consistently expressed confidence in their capacity to understand multiple perspectives and to facilitate mutual resolutions based upon their collegial working relationships.

Findings also confirmed the generative potential present when academic deans employed a positive mindset as they worked to build trust with faculty and staff and gain their support for a change vision. The primary reason that a positive mindset is important is that it frames a constructive approach to addressing the opportunities and challenges of the job. The participants’ optimistic attitudes toward accepting the actual pace of change, to pivoting and resetting priorities in response to external conditions, and to assuming responsibility without actual authority provided concrete examples of how positive mindset works. In many interviews, the researcher was reminded of the oft-cited Serenity Prayer which advocates acceptance of circumstances that cannot be changed; strength to change those conditions that can be influenced; and wisdom to discern the difference.

The academic deans also demonstrated self-confidence and resourcefulness. Self-confidence was revealed by the poise and humility with which they acknowledged their contributions and accomplishments. Their resourcefulness was evidenced by the proactive strategies they employed to seek advice and guidance from peers or to gain more formalized knowledge and skills from respected mentors or through advanced graduate education.
Finally, the findings revealed that policymakers and executive leaders can significantly influence the success of deans’ efforts through their deliberate approach to change and by engaging in clear communication regarding the context and purpose. The primary reason that the nature of change and sense-making/sense-giving are significant is that they set a strong foundation for academic deans as middle managers to help faculty and staff understand the need for change and to envision the way forward. Given the breadth and depth of the system and the process of changes required, a guided pathways implementation dictates a deliberate strategy of campus-wide involvement. While all participants underscored the value of collaborating with colleagues, only two described intentional processes for convening a cross-functional team that represented each major area of the institution. The nuanced distinction between collaboration and cross-functional approaches emerged as significant and could be enabled more quickly with support from policymakers and executive leaders.

These conversations confirmed that what policymakers and executive leaders say matters. Their voice helps people understand the circumstances and events that contribute to a decision when leadership clarifies why certain strategies have been selected. Well-chosen words can help build enthusiasm and generate broad participation in change activities. It seemed evident that executive leaders acknowledged the critical importance of linking change messages with the strategic plan and, in most of the examples from this study, they were working to assure this. However, regardless of the approach to change and sense-making/sense-giving activities, the academic deans were heavily relied upon to communicate the message and to accurately interpret its intent for faculty and staff.
Trustworthiness

The researcher employed three strategies to achieve trustworthy findings: prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking. Prolonged engagement assumes that the researcher invests adequate time in developing rapport and trust with participants as well as a depth of understanding for their unique contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants received the informed consent document in advance, so they would have adequate time to review the study’s purpose and to seek clarifications before the interview. Since participants were at a distance, the researcher integrated the introductory interview with the study interview. As such, interviews lasted between 75-90 minutes to allow adequate opportunity to gather demographic data, answer participant questions, and develop rapport before conducting the study interview.

Triangulation refers to the use of more than one data source or interpreter to generate interpretations in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, data from semi-structured interviews and from review of guided pathways artifacts like academic maps and related website content were utilized. These artifacts allowed the researcher to better understand context and implementation, and in some cases, to develop thicker, more detailed descriptions (Tracy, 2010).

Member checking refers to the process by which the researcher tests his or her interpretations, assumptions, and conclusions with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, participants were provided with an opportunity to review and revise their transcript after the interview, to reflect upon their experiences, and to contribute additional information.

If requested, the researcher could produce an audit trail. This would include the survey instrument, the raw data in both audio and written form, reflective memos on process, the sequence of analytical memos and transcript notations developed for each individual participant,
the comprehensive participants’ response table, the thematic transcript excerpts compiled for each superordinate theme and accompanying subthemes, and all guided pathways artifacts collected for each site.

In the final chapter, the researcher discusses findings with reference to Lewin’s theory of planned change, the study’s theoretical framework. This discussion will include an analysis of how findings are situated within the current literature. In addition, the implications for practice and suggested areas of future research will be considered.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

The purpose of this research study was to examine how community college academic deans made sense of their experience as middle managers during planned organizational change at institutions implementing guided pathways. Lewin’s theory of planned change was selected as the theoretical framework since appreciation for context, individual and group dynamics, and the psychological forces undergirding responses to change are essential tools for middle managers engaged in change initiatives. A qualitative research approach using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized. IPA researchers examine how individuals make sense of significant events in their personal or professional lives (Smith et al., 2009). Implementing guided pathways can be considered a significant event in the life of a college or university and in the professional lives of its faculty, staff, and students. Therefore, IPA was an appropriate methodology to examine how community college academic deans experienced their role as middle managers during guided pathways implementation.

Based upon the analysis of participants’ responses, four superordinate themes and 13 subthemes were identified. These included: 1) Deans roles and responsibilities with four subthemes (a) Managing from the middle, (b) Leading and managing, (c) Keeping faculty in the loop, and (d) Doing more with less; 2) Mindset with four subthemes: (a) Accepting the pace of change, (b) Being flexible, (c) Taking pride in accomplishment, and (d) Building a support network; 3) Nature of the change with three subthemes: (a) taking a hierarchical approach, (b) seeking cross-functional involvement, and (c) defining the scale of change; and 4) Executive leader sense-making/sense-giving with two subthemes: (a) Developing a shared sense of urgency and (b) Connecting with the strategic plan.
This chapter begins with an analysis of how the study’s findings related to the selected theoretical framework and how they are situated within the current literature. Next, implications of these findings for practice within the community college setting are presented. In the final section, suggested areas of future research are discussed.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Deans’ Roles and Responsibilities**

Each of the participants in this study was serving or had recently served as a community college academic dean or its equivalent. In this study, the term academic dean referred to a managerial position within the academic affairs division that is primarily responsible for the overall leadership and management of instruction and services for credit programs. While participants’ duties and responsibilities were defined within the unique context of their respective colleges and the disciplines or programs they oversaw, several notable subthemes referring to more ubiquitous and intuitive roles and responsibilities emerged. Findings related to the theoretical framework and the literature review are discussed in this section.

One unifying characteristic of the participants’ experience of their roles and responsibilities was the degree to which they demonstrated insightful understanding of the change process and could identify probable forces within their respective institutions working counter to the implementation of guided pathways. This awareness illustrated a key aspect of Lewin’s theory of planned change—field theory. Lewin asserted that one must understand existing circumstances in their entirety before considering potential change processes (Burnes & Cooke, 2013; Lewin, 1951b).

Participants offered several examples of ways they intentionally engaged faculty in organizational change by setting strategic direction and developing implementation strategy.
They acknowledged the iterative nature of this process and underscored the value of regular communication and diligence in achieving faculty and staff buy-in. This finding aligned with Lewin’s conceptualization of change as a process characterized by broad participation and learning as opposed to top-down edicts (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). Further, it aligned with Lewin’s action research strategy—a “structured, participative and iterative process” (Burnes & Cooke, 2013) for identifying, evaluating, and implementing change options.

The participants were not always positioned to control or facilitate decision-making processes relative to planned change. However, their responses demonstrated a keen awareness of how to mitigate the impact of potentially adverse forces by attending to the social and psychological needs of faculty and staff. For example, several participants contended that showing respect for faculty and remaining humble were essential to gaining faculty trust and participation in change initiatives (Cho & Poister, 2014; Hoppes & Holley, 2014). Lewin contended that cognizance of group dynamics was fundamental to learning that resulted in change in motivation and ultimately, to change in group thinking (Burnes & Cooke, 2013; Lewin, 1951b).

Overall, the findings relative to the deans’ roles and responsibilities generally supported and clarified previous research on the middle management perspective and on academic deans, sense-making/sense-giving, and adaptive leadership. All eight participants confirmed that being a middle manager was a suitable analogy for their role. However, they each experienced managing from the middle in different ways and at different levels of intensity. One common experience shared by all participants was serving as an intermediary or interpreter between the executive and tactical levels. Balogun (2003) contended that interpretation was a primary task for middle managers.
Participants described many one-on-one interactions and/or group meetings in which they promoted and explained executive level vision and strategy. These meetings required thoughtful planning to parse messages appropriately for faculty and staff. At the same time, participants also shared strategies for helping executive leaders to better understand faculty and staff viewpoints. This finding corroborated Rouleau’s (2005) argument that successful middle managers draw upon their understanding of organizational dynamics to contextualize change messages for various audiences. Taken together these interpretive activities illustrated the simultaneous and reciprocal nature of sense-making and sense-giving during planned change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kezar, 2013; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau, 2005).

Participants also confirmed that their work environments can be fraught with ambiguity and stress (A. Floyd, 2012; Montez et al., 2003; Pepper & Giles, 2015; Wild et al., 2003). They utilized powerful images to depict the powerlessness associated with having considerable responsibility while often being stuck in the middle relative to decision-making. Many of their descriptors concretized Marshall’s (2012) observation that academic middle managers can become “caught between competing imperatives, institutional dynamics and institutional structures” (p. 513).

In an interesting juxtaposition, one participant expressed a strong sense of empowerment to make strategic decisions on behalf of the college. His sense of agency was derived from the confidence that executive leaders placed in him and colleagues to design and implement corequisite remediation—an often-disputed aspect of guided pathways. This finding illustrated a basic tenet of Mayer et al.’s (1995) model for organizational trust—risk-taking in relationship—or the willingness of a trustor (in this case, executive leaders) to accept vulnerability or risk (ceding control to a middle manager) to achieve beneficial outcomes (pp. 724-726).
This participant’s experience also provided an exemplar of how academic deans apply principles of adaptive leadership in the exercise of their duties and responsibilities. Adaptive leadership encourages inventive approaches to chronic organizational problems. Heifetz (1994) defined adaptive problems as those that demand new ways of thinking and learning as contrasted with technical problems that are more routine in nature. In higher education, adaptive problems often challenge implicit assumptions, beliefs, and norms, and they require change to the institution’s deep structure. Accelerating progress and improving student success in mathematics is an example of an adaptive problem in community colleges.

For this participant, eliminating developmental mathematics and providing just-in-time remediation within the first college-level mathematics course challenged implicit assumptions about how students learn and succeed. It also changed the deep structure of the college as a long-established sequence of developmental course offerings was abruptly eliminated and some adjunct faculty members no longer qualified to teach. By presenting compelling evidence and meeting with many people many times, the participant evidenced that intentionally uncovering implicit assumptions and examining their validity facilitated successful change efforts (Zenios et al., 2004). Based upon student success data, this inventive approach was a positive and transformational change for this institution.

Next, findings corroborated Balogun’s (2003) contention that middle managers simultaneously take on four roles during change implementation—“undertaking personal change, keeping the business going during the transition, implementing the changes needed, and helping others through change” (p. 75). All participants largely accepted change and its personal impact as an established fact within their roles. Several participants remarked on the challenge of juggling the multiple priorities associated with their contemporaneous strategic, administrative,
and support roles. Yet all participants stressed that direct interaction with and support for faculty and staff was the chief responsibility of the role. Whether this support was depicted as regular and transparent communication, respect for faculty expertise and institutional tradition, or willingness to listen first, participants demonstrated that helping faculty and staff understand and engage constructively with change was of the greatest importance. These findings confirmed the argument that the role of a middle leader is essentially relational, and that true authority is developed through the quality of the relationship built with followers (Branson et al., 2016).

Further, by describing how they established good working relationships with faculty and staff, kept them informed, or advocated on their behalf, participants revealed the strategies they utilized to establish confidence and trust in their intentions as deans. Thus, the findings further substantiated the relevance of intentionality with respect to communication and trust-building. Salih and Doll (2013) asserted that clear, consistent, and personal communication from middle managers facilitated employee commitment to change. Several participants shared examples demonstrating how good and regular communication resulted in strong faculty engagement and commitment to not simply accept change, but to work with executive leaders to inform and improve planned change efforts. Gaining such cross-functional involvement and support for a change vision is critical to systemic change efforts (Elrod & Kezar, 2016).

Further, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) contended that middle managers are “language-based workers” that not only understand how to use language well but also know how to set the stage for change and influence stakeholders effectively. Several participants identified listening, humility, and/or respect for institutional culture as approaches for setting the stage for working with faculty and staff, and ultimately, for leading them through change. These deliberate efforts
to build confidence and trust provided supporting evidence that academic deans who demonstrate caring behaviors build a productive foundation for working with faculty and staff (Ray, 2011).

Participants recognized that low morale among faculty was a serious consequence of the current fiscal climate in community colleges in the Northeast. Two participants addressed faculty morale by providing strong, steady, and visible advocacy on their behalf. They used terms like champion, advocate, energize, and inspire to describe their efforts to maintain a positive culture in the face of resource constraints. These terms also serve as proxies for strategies they employed to engender trust and confirmed previous research on trust. Dirks and Ferrin (2001) identified direct supervisors—in this case, academic deans—as important referents of trust. Dovey (2009) claimed that change leaders must develop a social context that nurtures relationships to gain trust. Ray (2011) found that the deans’ emphasis on building good relationships with and among faculty members influences their perception of the work environment and can influence their involvement in strategic activities.

One participant offered a thoughtful account of how she helped faculty and staff better understand the external context for the college’s fiscal constraints and the internal rationale for more intensive scrutiny on low enrolled programs and courses. By placing the academic program review process and associated actions of executive leaders in context, she assisted faculty and staff to make sense of these challenging conditions. This finding confirmed the argument that in the absence of adequate leader sense-giving, other organizational members with appropriate expertise will step in to fill a perceived void in communication (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

Another expressed a deep sense of pride and satisfaction in getting things done, despite challenging fiscal circumstances. The literature review for this study did not specifically address this phenomenon. However, one way to interpret this finding is to draw a parallel between
satisfaction and grit. The concept of grit is defined as a character trait or attitude that values persistence and commitment to long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007). The concept of grit has been used to describe why some individuals succeed while others fail, holding constant sociodemographic characteristics that might explain those differences (Cross, 2014). Recent research in sports psychology has shown that some experiences of pride are associated with grit, but only when the accomplishment is directly related to one’s personal determination and exertions (Gilchrist, Fond, Herbison, & Sabiston, 2018). This concept is revisited in the section on implications for further research.

**Mindset**

Mindset can be defined as the attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions held by an individual. Mindsets can be categorized as either established and somewhat fixed, or flexible, and poised for growth. During these interviews, it was evident that mindset influenced individuals’ approaches to professional roles and responsibilities. The four subthemes related to this theme are: *Accepting the pace of change; Being flexible; Taking pride in accomplishment; and Building one’s own support network.*

Mindset is most directly associated with Lewin’s construct of group dynamics. Psychological research demonstrated that the goals individuals set for themselves were strongly influenced by the values and norms of the group to which they belonged or aspired to join (Lewin, 1948b). Thus, Lewin’s research focused on the social, cultural, political, intellectual, or other forces that influenced decisions and actions of group members, or *group dynamics* (Burnes, 2004a).

Branson et al. (2016) demonstrated that middle leadership in higher education is often exercised through relational influence, rather than positional power. Research has also shown
that middle managers are “language-based workers” (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) who serve as interpreters and sellers of change (Rouleau, 2005; Birken et al., 2012). In this capacity, the importance of social interactions with group members, especially informal communications that help constituents make sense of and negotiate the change process, has been demonstrated (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Thus, it stands to reason that academic deans who are successful in developing relationships with and selling change to faculty and staff members may be more likely to influence their subordinates’ decisions and actions. Further, deans who employ positive and productive approaches to the opportunities and challenges they encounter may be better positioned to alter group thought and behavior—proxies for group mindset—constructively and to assist members in meaningful examination of issues and planning for change (Burnes, 2004a).

While participants largely reported success with influencing group dynamics, several individuals remarked about the slow pace of institutional change. Some participants attributed this to the culture of higher education and its shared governance structure. Others simply declared that making incremental improvements over time was the best strategy for ensuring long term sustainability. Conversely, two participants argued for rapid change implementation to avert the potential for external change mandates from the state-level leadership to predetermine their policies and procedures.

Overall participants accepted the pace of change appropriate to their institutions. This finding supported observations made by Locke and Guglielmino (2006) that different subcultures (i.e. faculty, professional staff, support staff) within a college or university respond to change in different ways. They urged that understanding the various subcultures and their unique assumptions and beliefs was critical to a successful change initiative. They also advocated
allowing for the time needed for subculture change to happen. Locke and Guglielmino (2006) recommended several strategies for facilitating purposeful change initiatives that included planning multiple opportunities for various subcultures to come together to discuss changes and build a stronger collective understanding coupled with providing safe spaces for various subcultures to share concerns and questions. All participants described such efforts to engage faculty and staff in dialogue and planning for change.

Next, participants revealed the coping strategies they employed to manage the inevitable challenges associated with the implementation of planned change. As noted previously, these challenges included having responsibility without authority; experiencing setbacks; shifting institutional priorities; and attending to tedious minutiae. Findings for this subtheme validated much of the extant literature on the challenges and stresses of being an academic dean (Feldman, 2008; Gallos, 2002; Montez et al., 2003; Watba & Farmer, 2006).

Several participants alluded to having responsibility with little positional authority, an aspect of the position that can make the dean’s job intolerable for some. Gallos (2002) framed this dilemma as a clash between cultures—one that respects academic freedom and faculty autonomy and another that values collegiality and consensus. One participant concretized this dilemma well by asserting that she was at once the boss of faculty—and not.

Collectively participants identified many other challenges including new program development; resource development; relations with students, faculty and senior administrators; contract administration; and fiscal constraints. Their flexible attitudes and productive approaches to dealing with such stresses were noteworthy and revealed some intuitive skills and practices that served them well. This finding validated the assertion of Wepner et al. (2014) that deans utilize interpersonal and negotiating skills in virtually every aspect of their work. Further, their
constructive responses inspired trust and more positive group dynamics within their divisions. Ray (2011) advocated that deans must attend to building a “people-centered environment” (p. 665). Findings from this study substantiated the value of such flexible approaches.

Overall participants derived great satisfaction and a sense of well-being from their professional contributions. Given the stressors and challenges associated with the job, it was surprising and encouraging that participants found personal fulfillment in roles and activities that previous research has shown to be beneficial for organizational change. Most participants identified specific strategies they employed to build a positive and trusting work culture which contributed to achieving a more productive work environment and facilitated better change outcomes. The contributions of the academic dean or middle manager in such culture development is well-documented in the literature (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Branson et al., 2016; Bystydzienki et al., 2017; Ray, 2011). One participant commented on the value of his entrepreneurial experience; another referenced her high achievement motivation. These findings corroborated previous research that demonstrated that academic middle managers can also play a critical role in fostering entrepreneurial activity and organizational learning (Beresford & Michels, 2014; Cleverly-Thompson, 2016; Costanzo & Tzoumpa, 2008).

Next, participants revealed several strategies they employed to grow professionally, improve their effectiveness, and/or seek support as needed. Most participants entered their roles with little to no formal on-boarding. There was no mention of formal on-the-job training or other professional development supports. Three benefitted from informal mentoring relationships with trusted colleagues. Others sought the advice and support of other academic deans. One enrolled in a doctoral program. Wepner et al. (2014) recommended that current and aspiring deans have opportunities for professional development focused on working well with others and on
developing approaches to dealing effectively with various constituents. A. Floyd (2016) argued that many factors are driving change in higher education and academic leadership and as such and that there is a need for more focused attention to leadership development for academic middle managers. The literature review for this study did not explicitly address professional preparation and ongoing support for academic deans. This will be addressed under implications for practice.

Nature of the Change

The Nature of the change referred to the approach taken to planned change by the system, the institution, or in some cases, the academic dean. It became clear that these approaches were often a blend of tactics reflecting executive leadership style and the unique character of each institution. Subthemes included: Taking a hierarchical approach; Seeking cross-functional involvement; and Defining the scale of change. Findings for this theme generally supported earlier research on the value of shared leadership and cross-functional involvement but demonstrated less connection with the literature on executive level sense-making/sense-giving.

While participants rarely controlled the organizational approach to planned change, they were important intermediaries in facilitating change processes (Balogun, 2003). The academic deans’ deliberate efforts to develop structured and participative engagement from faculty and staff contributed to more effectual change efforts. This finding validated Lewin’s focus on the social, cultural, political, intellectual, and/or other such forces that influenced decisions and actions of group members, or group dynamics (Burnes, 2004b).

While guided pathways can be considered a contemporary evidence-based exemplar of comprehensive reform leading to improved student outcomes in higher education, no participants characterized its implementation as a mandate within their state or institution. In fact, one
participant firmly asserted that it was not a statewide mandate, although he acknowledged that the chancellor was strongly encouraging its implementation by sponsoring best-practice visits and training for faculty and administrators. Others described guided pathways as an announced process but fell short of describing it as a directive. While the literature placed considerable emphasis on the role of the President or executive leader role in sense-making/sense-giving for campus constituents (Eddy, 2003, 2010; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hamilton, 2016), none of the participants described a planned strategy involving their executive leaders beyond initial ideation. Most participants described a process by which guided pathways implementation was identified as a campus strategy and then, handed off to academic deans and other campus middle leaders for sense-making/sense-giving and implementation. This finding supported several studies that highlighted the contributions of mid-level project managers and/or deans in facilitating and sustaining change in colleges or universities (Elrod & Kezar, 2016; Klempin & Karp, 2015).

Next, all participants recognized the value of broad participation in change processes. So, it was surprising that few described intentional processes to convene cross-functional teams to lead guided pathways implementation. In one example, a participant took the lead on implementation by collaborating with colleagues across campus, but much of his work involved unidirectional meetings with various areas. Others described processes housed within one area of the college, typically the academic area. Cross-functional involvement can be characterized as an intentional strategy by which members of different areas of the college come together as a team to design, implement, and evaluate a program or process. Gaining such cross-functional buy-in and shared leadership from constituents representing different levels of responsibility and control is vital to systemic and sustained institutional change (Elrod & Kezar, 2016).
It was notable that only two participants experienced a full-scale implementation of guided pathways. Most participants described incremental processes by which they addressed one or more of the elements of guided pathways. While there were compelling reasons for both approaches, it became evident that institutions adopt the scale of change which aligns best with their capacity at the time (i.e. consider Lewin’s field theory). Theorists have suggested that while colleges and universities may be viewed as open systems, their actual functional objective is more conserving and autopoietic in nature—that is, seeking to “change [enough] only to be able to remain unchanged” (Lenartowicz, 2015, p. 959).

While opting for a slower pace of change may be considered change resistance, one participant cautioned that culture always trumps strategy. She advocated for taking the time necessary to set the stage after experiencing vehement opposition to guided pathways at her institution. Kezar (2005) cautioned that radical change processes may cause more harm than good and could essentially paralyze an organization. Kezar et al. (2015) proposed a framework to help cross-functional teams structure change conversations, confront assumptions and engage in cooperative processes to define reforms; set goals; identify needed supports; and outline a framework for working together. While it may take longer, engaging in such “courageous conversations” (Shugart, 2013, p. 14) has been acknowledged as an important step in realizing deep change.

**Executive Leader Sense-Making & Sense-Giving**

Executive leader sense-making/sense-giving refers to the ways executive leaders at the state or local level encouraged followers toward guided pathways by helping them to understand the context and strategy for change and aiding their efforts to move forward. The two subthemes were: *Developing a shared sense of urgency* and *Connecting with the strategic plan*. 
Executive-level sense-making/sense-giving connects with Lewin’s concept of action research. Lewin considered change to be a learning process by which group members developed a shared sense of urgency and commitment to collective action to address common concerns (Burnes, 2004b). This learning process is characterized by a cycle of problem definition, research, careful planning, and ideation leading to action; it then proceeds with an assessment of impact, leading to more research and planning, refined action, and further evaluation (Lewin, 1948a). He believed that changes imposed upon a group would have limited impact and defined three phases in the change cycle. The first, a motivational phase, compelled group members to become uncomfortable with current conditions and develop collective urgency for change (Lewin, 1951b). Effective executive level sense-making/sense-giving can function as the stimulus that jumpstarts a planned change effort.

Strong evidence suggests that colleges and universities engaged in transformational change are more successful in meeting their goals when sense-making opportunities are purposefully designed as part of a change process (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). The emphasis participants placed upon intentional involvement of campus change agents in conversation and reflection is consistent with the concept of deliberation and discussion that Kezar (2011) identified as essential for realizing deep and sustained change.

Two participants described efforts by their system chancellor to define the problem and to provide a new perspective on student success through best practice visits and training workshops. These group learning opportunities were effective in generating a contagious enthusiasm for change across the system. They were not perceived as edicts, but rather as learning opportunities. Two other participants described dialogues with their chief academic officer that laid the groundwork such that no faculty were disgruntled by guided pathways
implementation. In both cases, executive leader efforts to jumpstart change processes were followed by campus-wide participation in implementation.

Next, several participants addressed if and how guided pathways implementation was linked to their institution’s strategic plan. The link between planned change and the strategic plan was not explored in the literature review for this study. However, accrediting organizations prioritize strategic planning and all participants acknowledged the significance of the linkage. One participant demonstrated the dynamic nature of his institution’s strategic plan by explaining that it had been revised several times since its publication with guided pathways goals incorporated in the most recent revision. There is ample evidence that strategic planning—while time-consuming and resource intensive—can assist organizations to think creatively about the future and build capacity for organizational success (Elbanna, Andrews, & Pollanen, 2016; Hu, Kapucu, & O’Bryne, 2014; Reid, Brown, Mc Nerney, & Perri, 2014). A planned change of the scope and scale of a guided pathways implementation should be reflected in the strategic plan.

This discussion has demonstrated that Lewin’s theory of planned change is an appropriate theoretical framework from which to analyze the experience of community college academic deans as middle managers during planned change. Findings validated previous research and provided contemporary community college exemplars on the challenges of change; adaptive and shared leadership; the middle management perspective and the role of academic deans; sense-making/sense-giving and organizational trust. While the study did not provide strong substantiation for the argument that guided pathways implementation was perceived as a mandate for postsecondary reform, participants recognized its value as an evidence-based exemplar for improving student success. In the final section, implications for practice and for future research are addressed.
Conclusion

The research question for this study was: How do community college academic deans make sense of their lived experience as middle managers during planned change? In the opening chapter, an argument was posed that despite voluminous research on organizational change and change management in business, higher education, and the public sector (Burke, 2014; Kezar, 2014b; Kuipers et al., 2014), there remains much to be learned about implementing and sustaining change and about the roles of specific actors beyond presidents or executive leaders. The study focused on the processual role of academic deans given their intermediary positioning within their institutions. Lewin’s theory of planned change served as the theoretical framework with its emphasis on understanding the field (or organization) as a single unit; group dynamics; and participatory cycles of planning, implementation and evaluation. The study was situated within three interconnected bodies of literature: change in higher education; the middle management perspective and academic deans; and psychosocial factors that influence change implementation. Findings confirmed that the role community college academic deans play as middle managers during planned change is critical to the success of the effort. More importantly, the findings revealed in what ways and how participants engaged faculty and promoted and sustained change efforts.

Study participants described similar and somewhat intuitive roles and responsibilities that enabled them to work successfully with faculty during planned change. These roles and responsibilities are best conceptualized as strategic and tactical activities employed to navigate group dynamics. First, the deans’ role as interpreter cannot be emphasized strongly enough. The notion that community college academic deans are constantly communicating and translating messages in multiple directions was appropriate and widely confirmed by study participants.
Participants also embraced the “middleness” of their roles and described rather fluid processes by which they simultaneously navigated change from the top down and the bottom up. One participant was animated in describing how often she represented faculty perspective to her chief academic officer and in doing so, influenced resultant policy decisions. Participants expressed sensitivity to faculty morale and placed high value on strong and regular communication and advocacy on their behalf. These findings validated the argument that academic deans, as middle managers, understand and are positioned to facilitate organizational change in multiple directions—with executive leaders, with faculty and staff members, and with peers across the institution.

Next the findings revealed a relatively consistent set of attitudes that characterized participants’ approach to their work as accepting, flexible, and proud. A positive mindset matters since research has demonstrated that academic deans can contribute significantly to the development of a constructive and more cooperative work culture (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Branson et al., 2016; Bystydzinski et al., 2017; Ray, 2011). Further, when study participants faced challenges and needed professional advice or guidance, they demonstrated strong self-efficacy in seeking professional mentors, turning to peers for support, and/or pursuing advanced graduate education. To the extent that positive mindset and self-efficacy contributed to stronger organizational trust and to more effectual sense-making/sense-giving, these findings provided insight into the power and potential of human interaction to bring about deep and sustaining change.

Further, findings demonstrated that the nature of the change must be aligned with an institution’s context, readiness, and capacity for change. Participants described a variety of approaches to guided pathways implementation from incremental to full-scale and top-down to
bottom-up. However, the insight that culture always trumps strategy best framed lessons learned. Regardless of the nature of the change, it is important to be aware of and sensitive to the psychological and social environment of the organization and to prioritize cross-functional collaboration in realizing planned organizational change. The application of Lewin’s theory of planned change as the study’s theoretical framework was validated, especially with respect to group dynamics and action research. Findings also corroborated the contention that psychosocial factors can influence change implementation.

While Eddy (2003) argued that executive leaders must encourage and inspire followers toward common goals by helping them understand the imperative for change and envision the way forward, study findings revealed that sense-making/sense-giving activities were often tacitly delegated to middle managers—the academic deans—during guided pathways implementation. It was also clear that guided pathways as a concept was interpreted differently on each campus and as such, what constituted successful implementation varied widely. This may have resulted from disparity in institutional readiness as noted in the previous section or from a lack of consistency in sense-making/sense-giving from state and/or campus level executive leaders. Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) contended that, in the absence of leader sense-giving, other stakeholders, like academic deans, will address the need. Participants in this study described how they tackled the sense-making/sense-giving work necessary to develop collective urgency and make explicit the connections between guided pathways and the strategic plan.

Overall, this study informed and expanded current research on change in higher education, the middle management perspective and the role of academic deans, and factors that influence change processes, especially organizational trust and sense-making/sense-giving. It also brought much-needed practitioner voice to the extant literature on community college
academic deans and their experiences during planned change. A successful and vibrant
community college sector is particularly relevant at this moment since the most pervasive gap in
the national workforce is for individuals prepared for middle-skills jobs (National Skills
Coalition, 2017). Occupations that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-
year degree and are often the focus of community college programs and represent a strength for
these institutions. In the next section, implications for practice and for further research will be
addressed.

Implications for Practice

After spending 14 years as a community college academic dean, this study provided the
researcher with a distinct opportunity to listen carefully and engage authentically in dialogue
with well-respected peers from community colleges across the region. Their thoughtful insights,
proud accomplishments, and persistent challenges validated the researcher’s personal experience
and at the same time, expanded her understanding of the role exponentially. From intermediary
to meaning-maker, to empowered decision maker, these academic deans were actively
influencing the direction of their community colleges as they drove planned change initiatives
from the middle of the organization. Yet their contributions went unnoticed at times. To increase
recognition of and support for current and future community college academic deans, these
recommendations for practice are offered.

Strengthen Recruitment, Screening, Interviewing and Selection Processes

Among the most compelling findings from this study were the superordinate themes
relating to deans’ roles and responsibilities, and mindset. The primary reason these themes were
noteworthy is that they described rather intangible but nevertheless, highly relevant skills,
abilities and attitudes that serve an academic dean well in the throes of day-to-day operations.
Responsibilities like *Managing from the middle* or *Doing more with less* are not likely to appear in position descriptions next to bullets like “act as an educational leader and administrative officer to promote/support teaching/learning” or “guide faculty to integrate appropriate technology into the curriculum”. Attitudinal characteristics like *Accepting the pace of change* or *Building one’s own support network* might be couched in language that advocates “advancing a collegial atmosphere of campus collaboration” or “provide flexible, responsive and high-quality service to all, be they students, community or staff”. Yet these and other subthemes within the first two superordinate themes concretized the actual experience of seasoned academic deans and to the extent possible, should be used to inform, educate and prepare future candidates for the position.

Thus, the first recommendation encourages community college executive leaders, especially chief academic officers, to work with their human resource departments and incumbent academic deans to review and consider revising current position descriptions. The intention of this exercise would be to incorporate language that reflects the functions performed and language that describes the more intuitive roles and responsibilities and mindset that characterizes the role.

The next recommendation—and this likely reaches beyond the academic dean position—is for human resource departments to provide more support and training for search committee members as they review applicant credentials; develop interview questions and analyze applicant responses post-interview. These individuals are on the frontline when it comes to vetting potential candidates. In the researcher’s experience there is often minimal upfront discussion about job responsibilities or the skills, abilities, and qualities of a successful candidate. Screening committee questions typically probe whether a candidate has experience with a set of technical
or job-specific skills rather than eliciting relational or attitudinal characteristics. Further there is
often little training provided to committee members to assist them in recognizing implicit bias or
other factors that may influence the selection process. Macan (2009) argued that the employment
interview is a popular component of the employee selection process and deserving of further
research. Likewise, search committee members merit far greater support and training as they
embark upon the interview and selection process particularly for such critical positions.

Tailor Professional Preparation and Support Systems for Academic Deans

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2013), there is a critical
leadership gap for qualified applicants at the level of CEO and other senior administrative
positions at community colleges across the country. This crisis prompted AACC to delineate
core competencies for new and established community college leaders that can be integrated into
graduate education, leadership programs and formal coaching and mentoring relationships.
While this work was targeted largely at executive level positions, AACC (2013) also
acknowledged that “members of the community college community can lead from all levels but
must be empowered to do so” (p. 5).

Findings from this study demonstrated that community college academic deans are
empowered to lead from the middle of the organization. While most participants had earned or
were pursuing advanced graduate degrees, few mentioned formal on-boarding programs or other
ongoing professional support within their respective institutions. However, A. Floyd (2016)
contended that personalized professional development programs tailored to the unique needs and
organizational culture of an institution should be designed to complement more generic
leadership development programs.
Thus, the next recommendation is to prioritize the design and development of campus-based professional development in consultation with academic deans, and other middle managers as appropriate, using the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders as a framework. Beyond seminars or workshops, activities might include professional and/or peer mentoring, job shadowing, campus projects, or structured consultations with cross-functional and/or affinity groups (McNair, Duree, & Ebbers, 2011). Based upon the findings of this study and previous research, academic deans would also benefit from professional development that assists them in developing strong relational and negotiating skills (Campbell, Syed, & Morris, 2010; Wepner et al., 2014). Such campus-based programming would not only support academic deans in their current positions but would also set a foundation for leadership succession planning (Luna, 2012).

**Remind Executive Leaders That Their Words and Actions Matter**

This study confirmed that what executive leaders say and do influences the success of planned change efforts. Eddy (2010) argued that the sense-making or “framing” college presidents provide sets a vision, defines steps in a process, or engages faculty and staff in dialogue to consider shared principles and explore beliefs and assumptions about current circumstances. Study participants valued the efforts of their presidents or chief academic officers in making sense of change. Thus, the next recommendation, and this may be considered a gentle reminder to policy makers and executive leaders, is to be intentional about planned change. Cejda and Leist (2013) identified deliberate planning for change as a common practice among innovative community colleges. This begins by taking the upfront time necessary to set the stage, engage faculty and staff in examining the issues, and helping them to understand and envision
the way forward. This step seems so obvious and yet, it is often be abridged or completely overlooked amid so many pressing priorities.

Next, it is essential to recognize and support the role that academic deans and other middle managers play in the change process. They are uniquely positioned to see and hear top down and bottom up perspectives from the field, and to inform and guide change efforts based upon their intuitive grasp of group dynamics. They collaborate effectively with various constituents across the institution and can undergird the work of cross-functional change teams. As study findings demonstrated, the trust executive leaders placed in academic deans as middle managers empowered them to lead change with confidence.

**Implications for Future Research**

As noted in the opening chapter, the American system of higher education has a mandate for change that realizes improved student access and outcomes, enhanced alignment with workforce needs, and increased fiscal efficiencies. Community colleges enroll nearly half of all undergraduates in the United States (Community College Research Center, 2018). Together with their role in economic and workforce development; open access mission; and affordability, community colleges represent a vital component of the system. Therefore, understanding how effective community colleges navigate change is important.

Research has demonstrated that successful community colleges recognize and support the leadership from executive and mid-level administrators during planned change (Cejda & Lesit, 2013). As this study illustrated, community college academic deans are uniquely positioned in the middle of the organization to influence and facilitate change processes from the top down and bottom up. Yet, there is little recent research on community college academic deans.
There is an overall need for expanded and better coordinated research on community college academic deans. While there was a sizable body of literature focused on the inherent challenges, stressors, and ambiguities associated with the academic dean role, there was relatively little that considered positive features and benefits, job satisfaction, or perseverance and grit, especially among community college academic deans. Some practitioners may not find this surprising, since moving into a dean position is often colloquially considered a move to the dark side. Additional qualitative research, using an appreciative inquiry or strengths-based approach, could produce richly detailed narratives to inform this perception and counterbalance the skew within the literature.

Next, research on pathways to the community college academic deanship would be beneficial for aspiring middle leaders and the executive leaders attempting to fill these positions. Research universities and other baccalaureate institutions often prefer candidates with traditional research/teaching experience and terminal degrees in their disciplines. But, this research revealed that participants followed many paths from human services clinician to academic scheduler to high school math teacher. Research on career trajectories could inform leadership development and graduate education programs and lead to expanded talent pipelines for future openings.

Finally, Lewin’s theory of planned change was a relevant theoretical framework for this inquiry. Its application should be considered and expanded in further educational research. Its acknowledgement of psychological and social influences and emphasis on group dynamics reflected the complexities of change within a large organization. Constructs related to action research and sustaining change reinforced the value of iterative, participatory processes. Perhaps most poignantly, this framework enabled deeper insights into the complex power and potential of human interaction to realize deep and sustaining change.
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Appendix A: Notification of IRB Action

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: February 26, 2018
Principal Investigator(s): Brian Bicknell
                                      Kathleen C. Rentsch
Department: Doctor of Education Program
                  College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
            Northeastern University
Title of Project: Driving from the Middle: The Role of Community College
                              Academic Deans during Periods of Planned Change
Participating Sites: Participating Site permission in file
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: FEBRUARY 25, 2019

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B: NIH Certificate of Completion: Protecting Human Research Participants

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Kathleen Rentsch successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 11/20/2016.

Certification Number: 2238225.
Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Letter/E-Mail

Subject line: Invitation to participate in research on community college academic deans

Date:

Dear colleague,

    My name is Kathy Rentsch. I am in the research phase of my doctoral studies at Northeastern University, and I am seeking study participants. My study explores how community college academic deans help make changes that lead to improved student success. Specifically, I am interested in interviewing you about your experience as a middle manager during the implementation of guided pathways at your college. The purpose of this study is to enhance support for academic deans and their strategic contribution to planned change that leads to improved student success.

    The interview will take approximately one hour or so and will be scheduled at a time and location that works for you. Follow-up interviews may be conducted by telephone or email and will last no more than an hour. In addition, I will ask you to provide publicly available information that can help me better understand the context for your guided pathways implementation. All interview material will be kept strictly confidential. The attached Informed Consent form provides additional detail for your review.

    If you would like to volunteer to participate, please email me at rentsch.k@husky.neu.edu and I will respond with further information about next steps. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to email me as well. Your participation is completely voluntary and would be very much appreciated. If you are not able to participate, but may know of a community college academic dean who might be interested in participating in this study, please forward this email on my behalf.

    If you do not email me at rentsch.k@husky.neu.edu to volunteer, you will not be contacted again regarding this research.

Thank you in advance for considering my invitation.

Kathleen C. Rentsch/Doctoral Student/Northeastern University

Attachment: Informed Consent Form
Appendix D: Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University:
College of Professional Studies, Graduate Department of Education

Name of Investigators:
Dr. Brian Bicknell, Principal Investigator; Kathleen C. Rentsch, Student Researcher

Title of Project:
Driving from the Middle: The Role of Community College Academic Deans during Periods of Planned Change

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to take part in the study because you are a community college academic dean with two or more years of experience and you are involved in implementing a guided pathways approach. The goal of this study is to understand the deans’ role better by examining their experience as middle managers during planned change.

Why is this study being done?

The study is being done is to examine how community college academic deans help to make changes that improve student success.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Take part in a short opening interview with the researcher.
- Take part in an interview about your experience as a middle manager during guided pathways implementation.
- Share publicly available documents that you feel are related to guided pathways design and implementation at your college.
- If needed, be available by e-mail for follow-up questions.
- Review and comment on a written copy of the interview.
Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

- The short opening interview will take place by telephone or Skype (15-20 minutes).
- The interview about your experience will be done in-person at a time and place of your choosing (60-75 minutes).
- Pulling together relevant documents (30 minutes).
- Follow up e-mail and review of the written copy of the interview (30 minutes).

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with you taking part in this study.

Will I benefit from being in this research?

There are no direct benefits from being involved in this research. However, the information learned from this study may help the field of higher education improve student success.

Who will see information about me?

Your part in this study will be completely confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of each participant and his/her college.

All written and recorded data will be maintained in a secure location at the home of the student researcher on a password protected computer. Hardcopy data will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office. All digital recordings of interviews will be maintained in password-protected files and destroyed once the study is completed.

If necessary to insure the validity of the research, an authorized individual may request access to this information. The researcher will only permit such access to people authorized by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with you taking part in this study. While the loss of confidentiality is always a possibility, strict confidentiality protocols will be enforced, and the likelihood of this occurring is minimal. No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services.
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact Kathleen C. Rentsch, the person mainly responsible for the research, at 508-314-2575 (voicemail is confidential), or by email at renzsch.k@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Brian Bicknell, Principal Investigator, at b.bicknell@northeastern.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

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.

Will I be paid for my participation?

As a token of appreciation, you will receive a $10 gift card to Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks when the study is completed.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There are no costs for you to participate.

Is there anything I else I need to know?

- For this study, an academic dean is defined as a manager in academic affairs that reports to a chief academic officer or vice president of academic affairs.
- You must be employed as an academic dean at a community college for a minimum of two years.

I agree to participate in this research.

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take partDate

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above Date

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to participant above and obtained consent Date

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introductory Script

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in my study. You were selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the role of community college academic deans and about guided pathways. My research project focuses on the experience of community college academic deans as middle managers during periods of planned change. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into how community college academic deans help to make changes across the institution that improve student success. Hopefully this will inform the preparation and ongoing professional development of academic deans and other middle managers, executive leaders, and guided pathways change planners as they work together to improve student success.

Because your responses are important, and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant, I will let them know that I may ask the question again as I start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment].

I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will eventually be destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects’ requirements at the university, you must sign the consent form I have with me. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. This is the same form I sent with my initial recruitment email. Let’s take a few minutes now to review it again [Review Informed Consent orally.] Please let me know if you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used. [Pause for 1-2 minutes while participant reviews/signs form].

This interview should last about 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions?

If not, then let’s begin. I will turn on the recorder now and ask your permission again to record our conversation today.

Background Information & Warm-Up

[This will either be completed by phone before research interview or immediately preceding the research interview.]

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be an academic dean?

Thank you. Now I would like to move on to my questions. One of the things I am interested in learning about is your role as an academic dean and middle manager and specifically about your experience with guided pathways implementation. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. Let’s get started!
1. How would you describe being a community college academic dean to someone who has no experience and limited knowledge of the job?
   - Can you relate a story that depicts your experience?
   - Tell me more about that.
   - How did that experience make you feel?

2. What were some of the questions or concerns you had when you first became an academic dean?
   - Can you relate a story about your early experience as a dean?
   - Tell me more about that.
   - How did that experience make you feel?

3. What does the term middle manager mean to you? In what ways, if any, might it apply to your role as a community college academic dean?
   - How does the term make you feel?
   - Can you provide an example or two of being in the middle as a dean?
   - How did that experience make you feel?

4. How would you describe what it is like to work at your college?
   - What are some adjectives that describe the culture or working environment?
   - Can you relate a story that depicts your experience?
   - Tell me more about that.
   - How did that experience make you feel?

5. What are the strategic priorities of your institution? How were the strategic priorities identified to you? To other members of the college community?
   - How did you feel about the process that led to identifying these priorities?
   - Can you relate a story about your experience with the process?
   - Tell me more about that.
   - How did that experience make you feel?

6. Your college is implementing a guided pathways approach. In what ways has this change impacted the way you do your job? Faculty, staff, or students?
   - How do you feel about that?
   - Can you relate a story that depicts your experience?
   - Tell me more about that.
   - How did that experience make you feel?
7. What happens during a guided pathways implementation? In your own words, how would you describe the change processes?

- What has that been like for you?
- What has helped you to be successful? Hindered you?
- Tell me more about that.
- How did that experience make you feel?

8. Would you describe a success story related to guided pathways implementation at your college?

- Why was this a positive experience?
- How did you contribute to the success? What have you learned?
- Tell me more about that.
- How did that make you feel?

9. Now tell me a story about a disappointment or failure experience.

- Why was this a disappointing experience?
- In what ways, did you attempt to contribute to a resolution? What have you learned?
- Tell me more about that…; How did that make you feel?

10. What do you feel have been your greatest contributions during this change? Your greatest challenges?

- Where do you seek support or assistance?
- Tell me more about that.
- How did that make you feel?

11. Is there something else you would like to add about your role as a community college academic dean or your role as a middle manager during planned change?