ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By

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For my father, who would have been proud to see me earn this degree
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.................................................................................................................................4
LIST OF TERMS...............................................................................................................................................8
ABSTRACT......................................................................................................................................................9
CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................................................10
   Statement of the Problem......................................................................................................................15
   Purpose Statement ..............................................................................................................................16
   Significance of the Study......................................................................................................................17
   Limitations of the Study......................................................................................................................18

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE ..................................................................................................................19
   Organizational Learning....................................................................................................................19
   Types of Organizational Learning....................................................................................................22
   Stages of Organizational Learning...................................................................................................23
   Facilitators of Organizational Learning............................................................................................25
      Stimuli for Learning......................................................................................................................25
      Psychological Safety ....................................................................................................................26
      Structure .....................................................................................................................................27
      Skill ...........................................................................................................................................27
      Leadership ..................................................................................................................................29
   Factors Inhibiting Organizational Learning.....................................................................................30
      Lack of Psychological Safety ..........................................................................................................31
      Improper Structure and Communication Issues .............................................................................32
      Defensive Routines.........................................................................................................................33
      The Nature of Knowledge.................................................................................................................34
   The Community College Setting.......................................................................................................34
   Summary..............................................................................................................................................39

3 METHODOLOGY ....................................................................................................................................41
   Qualitative Research..........................................................................................................................41
   Theoretical Perspective.......................................................................................................................42
   Research Design.................................................................................................................................43
   Population and Setting.......................................................................................................................45
      Participants...................................................................................................................................46
      Access and Entry.............................................................................................................................47
   Data Collection..................................................................................................................................48
   Data Analysis.....................................................................................................................................51
4 RESULTS .............................................................................................................................................58

Stimuli for Learning ..........................................................................................................................58
  Mission ..............................................................................................................................................59
  Meeting Student Needs .....................................................................................................................61
  Reputation ..........................................................................................................................................62
  Senior Administration’s Encouragement .........................................................................................63
  External Stimuli .................................................................................................................................64

Knowledge Sources ..........................................................................................................................64
  External Sources ...............................................................................................................................65
  Internal Sources ...............................................................................................................................66

Learning Processes ...........................................................................................................................70

Dissemination of Knowledge/Learning throughout the Organization .............................................72

Other Influences on Organizational Learning .................................................................................73
  Tolerance for Failed Initiatives and Experimentation ......................................................................73
  Support from Senior Administrators ...............................................................................................75
  Availability of Numerous Discussion Forums ...............................................................................76
  Organizational Structure ..................................................................................................................77
  Relationships .....................................................................................................................................78
  High-quality Faculty .......................................................................................................................79
  Leadership .........................................................................................................................................80
  Big Picture/Systems Thinking ..........................................................................................................82

Positioning Analysis ..........................................................................................................................84
  Sarah .................................................................................................................................................84
  Jane .....................................................................................................................................................85
  Frank ..................................................................................................................................................86
  Lorna ..................................................................................................................................................86
  Yvonne ...............................................................................................................................................87
  Mike ...................................................................................................................................................87
  The Researcher ..................................................................................................................................87

Summary ...............................................................................................................................................88

5 CONCLUSION .....................................................................................................................................91

Stages and Types of Organizational Learning ....................................................................................91

Influences on Organizational Learning ...............................................................................................93
  Morally Appealing Mission ...............................................................................................................93
  Trust ...................................................................................................................................................94
  Communication .................................................................................................................................96
  Leadership .........................................................................................................................................96
  Big Picture/Systems Thinking ..........................................................................................................97

Theoretical Implications .......................................................................................................................99

Recommendations for Further Study ...............................................................................................102
APPENDIX

A  INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL ..........................................................104
B  INTERVIEW CHECKLIST AND LAY SUMMARY ..........................................................106
C  SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT .....................................................................................107
D  INTERVIEW GUIDE ...........................................................................................................109
E  SAMPLE USE OF STANZAS AS ANALYTICAL STEP .......................................................110
F  SAMPLE USE OF LABOV AND WALETZKEY’S NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK ..........112
G  PILOT STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE ..........................................................114

LIST OF REFERENCES .............................................................................................................127

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .......................................................................................................133
LIST OF TERMS

**Espoused theories** refer to underlying assumptions and values that individuals claim guide their actions but in reality this is not often the case (Argyris, 1978).

**Learning organization** refers to a setting where high learning capacity is evident and exploited.

**Organizational culture** refers to the shared basic, tacit assumptions held by people in a setting about how things are or ought to be. These assumptions determine their perceptions, thoughts, feelings and to an extent, their overt behavior (Schein, 1997).

**Organizational learning** refers to the study of if and how organizations learn and to a process where errors are detected and corrected, insights and knowledge are generated, reflection of past events and practice inform future practice, and behavior is changed through the process of information gathering and meaning making. Insights and knowledge may begin with the individual but must move via groups to the organization at large to fit this construct (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Kezar, 2005; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine, 1999).

**Organizational learning capacity** refers to the level of effectiveness and efficiency demonstrated when making the changes needed to adjust to the actual or potential changes in the internal or external environment (Dibella & Nevis, 1998).

**Organizational memory** refers to how an institution retains what it has learned and discards what is deemed to be of no value (Huber, 1991).

**Theories-in-use or mental models** refer to underlying assumptions or master programs that guide the actions of individuals. (Argyris, 1978; Senge, 1990).

**Transformational leadership** refers to a form of behavior where persons of influence focus on individuals’ potential to satisfy needs of self-fulfillment in the process of organizational performance (Burns, 1978).
My study examined organizational learning in a community college, how learning took place and what influenced it. There were indicators of high capacity for learning at the school. There was evidence of effectiveness in knowledge generation, dissemination and utilization. Organizational learning at the college was influenced largely by its mission, the level of trust, ample and effective communication channels, leadership, and a capacity for big picture/systems thinking. My qualitative study included six members of faculty and staff who joined me to produce the data through multiple interviews. Narrative analysis was used to examine the data. One administrative and one non-administrative employee were chosen from each of the Associate of Arts, Associates of Science and Student Services Divisions for my study. Additional studies are recommended to further understand the quality of other learning processes at the college.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in America are facing numerous challenges that, in some cases, threaten their very survival (Guskin & Marcy, 2003; Kezar, 2005a). Guskin and Marcy (2003) argue that the primary problems are financial in nature, and are long-term rather than short-term. Guskin and Marcy (2003) suggest that the financial problems can be traced to an eroding tax base and a rapid rise in health costs. They contend that major structural changes in the sector will be needed for continued success. Traditional higher education institutions need to undergo transformation that is aimed at increasing affordability, efficiency, and responsiveness to students or they may lose clients to other providers (Eckel, Hill, & Green, 1998; Kezar, 2001). Higher education institutions must also respond to threats to their survival, such as, public pressure for educational and financial accountability; the need to contain costs to ensure continued access; the impact of technology; and the proliferation of competing delivery modes such as, distance education, corporate universities, and transnational delivery (Eckel, Green & Hill, 2001).

Community colleges are facing many of the same challenges that impact the entire higher education sector. The mission of community colleges is expanding (Ayers, 2005) and the demand for services are at an all time high (Boggs, 2004). Increased need for service is fuelled by Baby Boomers whose children have reached college age, an increased demand for community college education among immigrants, and the increase in the number of high school graduates who now attend college (Boggs, 2004). There are around 1200 regionally accredited community colleges, which represent the largest sector in higher education (Boggs, 2004). Boggs (2004) reports that forty-five percent or 6.5 million of all undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges. He added that when non-credit courses are included, the number served per year
increases to 11.5 million students. The president and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges, George Boggs, summarized the challenges when he said,

In the past three years, student enrollment has escalated, and college leaders have struggled to meet demand in the face of steep state budget cuts, limited facilities, faculty turnover, rising technology costs, and increasing numbers of students who need remedial work before they can take college-level classes (p. 8).

Some researchers argue that community colleges are currently operating in a post-modern setting that features fragmentation within, and a constantly changing external environment (Ayers, 2005; Bergquist, 1998). In recent decades, organizations in other sectors have had to deal with change. Different strategies and approaches have been utilized with varying success. These include reengineering, knowledge management, learning organizations, and total quality management (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth, & Smith, 1999). Higher education has also tried strategies to enhance organizational performance such as strategic planning, benchmarking, Total Quality Management, and business process reengineering (Birnbaum, 2000). Birnbaum refers to these efforts as management fads. The lens and practice of organizational learning has been proffered as a tool for analyzing and improving institutional performance and as a mechanism for studying if and how organizations learn. Kezar (2005) holds that organizational learning is not a fad but is rooted in years of continuous research.

While there is not a widely accepted definition of organizational learning, a synthesis of the works by leading writers on the subject reveals certain themes. Organizational learning involves reflecting on past action and considering anticipated challenges. Ultimately it results in change to practices or routines (Argyris, 1993; Ellström, 2003). Argyris (1993) stresses that only when new action has taken place has learning occurred. Organizational learning may begin with an individual or the collective output of a group but it must spread beyond that initial unit or individual to be considered truly organizational in nature (Dibella & Nevis, 1998; Vera &
Organizational learning includes taking initiatives and trying experimentation that will lead to new knowledge that will then be disseminated throughout the organization (Silins & Mulford, 2002). The more significant and sustainable forms of organizational learning require that members of the organization examine the basic underlying assumptions or mental models related to the organization and its functions, and utilize what is discovered to guide action (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990).

Learning is not restricted to special organizations but is widely found across the spectrum of organizational types (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). Senge et al. (1999) agree with this sentiment and state, “All organizations learn – in the sense of adapting as the world around them changes. But some organizations are faster and more effective learners. The key is to see learning as inseparable from work” (p. 24). They contrast this integration with work, and the continuous nature of learning with training, which, they suggest, is typically episodic and takes place outside of the normal work context.

The capacity for organizational learning varies among institutional settings and is dependent on the presence or absence of factors that facilitate or inhibit the process (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). Some of the factors that promote organizational learning in educational institutions are decentralization (as opposed to hierarchy); trust between employees and managers; new information systems; incentives and rewards; a culture of people who are interested in learning; open communications; information sharing; staff development and training; and the existence of inquiry units (Kezar (2005). Learning in an organization takes place when individuals and groups are committed to experimenting with finding better ways of doing things. There are also factors that restrain organizational learning. When errors due to innovation and experimentation are severely punished in organizations, a psychological environment that discourages innovations
and restrains organizational learning occurs (Schein, 1993a). Organizations that are not
structured to facilitate communication and reward group productivity will find it difficult to learn
at a high rate (Senge, 1999).

The concept of organizational learning originated in the business sector but is increasingly
applied in other sectors, such as K-12 education. The success of organizational learning that is
directed at institutional improvements has been observed in companies including Ford Motor
Company’s Electrical and Fuel Handling Division, Royal Dutch/Shell group of companies,
Harley-Davidson, British Petroleum, and Xerox (Senge, et al., 1999). At Ford, the division made
$150 million dollars in 1996 after losing $50 million just five years earlier. They attributed their
success to the development of learning capacity (Senge, et al., 1999). Similar stories of the
impact of organizational learning are also beginning in education. In a large-scale study in the K-
12 education sector in Australia, Mulford and Silins (2003) found that organizational learning
had a positive impact on schools’ central function, teaching and learning, and it facilitated
desired student achievement. Results such as these hold promise for the effective use of
organizational learning in other organizational settings, such as higher education.

Organizational learning has the potential for sustaining organizational effectiveness
because it results in the development of a learning culture (Silins & Mulford, 2002). Schein
(2004) identifies ten features of a learning culture, namely, (a) a proactivity assumption, (b)
commitment to learning to learn, (c) positive assumptions about human nature, (d) the
assumption that the environment can be dominated, (e) commitment to truth through pragmatism
and inquiry, (f) an orientation toward the future, (g) a commitment to full and open task-relevant
communication, (h) a commitment to diversity, (i) a commitment to systemic thinking, and (j) a
commitment to cultural analysis for understanding and improving the world.
Efforts directed towards improving organizational performance are most effective when the approach has been tested in the particular setting and adjustments have been made for the context (Birnbaum, 1988; Evers, 2000; Kezar, 2005). Organizations in manufacturing and retail, professions and non-profits, are sufficiently different such that they merit the development of unique models to deal with change (Kezar, 2001). Non-profit organizations, for instance, typically do not go through the stages of maturity often associated with most profit-driven organizations (Kezar, 2001). To understand the nature and effectiveness of organizational learning in for-profit businesses Dibella & Nevis (1998) developed an assessment tool; however, they found it necessary to make modifications to the instrument when assessing organizational learning in health care and in education.

As a sector, higher education possesses features that distinguish it from other sectors. These distinctions must be taken into account when examining issues of organizational behavior and performance among such institutions (Kezar, 2001). From a synthesis of the literature, Kezar (2001) identifies these features as interdependence, status as an institution, loosely coupled systems, organized anarchical decision making, and shared governance. These distinguishing features result in a culture that determines how those operations conduct their affairs (Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001). Bergquist classified cultures within the academy as collegial, managerial, developmental, and negotiating culture, while Birnbaum when examining decision making in higher education institutions categorized them as collegial, political, bureaucratic, and anarchical.

As a sub-sector, community colleges possess certain characteristics that further distinguish them. In comparison to other types of higher education institutions, community colleges tend to be more bureaucratic in their decision-making (Kezar, 2001). She argues that community
colleges are becoming more market-driven and entrepreneurial while maintaining some aspects of traditional higher education. Levin (1997) agrees and suggests that the four cultures found on community college campuses are traditional culture (academic), service culture, hierarchical culture, and the business culture. Levin (2005) later contends that community college missions are now geared primarily at satisfying the needs of the economic community.

Much of the research to date on organizational learning comes from the field of business, where the concept originated. Contributions to the field from Senge (1990), Senge, et al. (1999), Argyris (1993) and Dibella and Nevis (1998) typify the focus on large for-profit corporations. The K-12 sector has also embraced the concept to some extent, as evidenced by the increase in studies of organizational learning in that environment. Large-scale studies utilizing qualitative (Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1998) and quantitative methods (Silins & Mulford, 2002) conducted in the K-12 sector yielded a greater understanding of the concept and its effects in those settings. Higher education has been slow to embrace the potential utility of organizational learning for improving organizational effectiveness (Kezar, 2005). Community colleges do not differ much from the rest of higher education in this regard. A search through multiple databases for studies involving organizational learning in community colleges yields very little research. However, the selection of organizational learning as the theme for the Fall 2005 issue of *New Directions for Higher Education* signals its emergence as a significant topic in the sector.

**Statement of the Problem**

Community colleges are faced with the challenge of adapting to an environment that demands a response to, change in student demand and preparedness, sources and availability of funds and evolving missions and culture (Boggs, 2004). How these challenges are met could determine the survival of these institutions (Guskin, 2003).
In the search for greater efficiency and effectiveness, higher education has employed numerous strategies, drawn primarily from the business sector. Many of these strategies have been short-lived and yielded little success (Birnbaum, 2000). Organizational learning is an approach to the conduct of organizational activities centered around action that is based largely on reflection of past events (Argyris, 1978). Organizational learning has been employed in fields such as business and education with some degree of success. Higher education, and community colleges in particular have made limited use of the approach (Kezar, 2005). Approaches to improving organizations are best studied in their specific settings (Evers, 2000). Community colleges exhibit distinct cultures that merit the examination of the phenomena in that specified setting.

Researchers have examined organizational learning in various settings and have surmised that the phenomenon is best studied in the setting in which it will be applied (Dibella & Nevis, 1978). There has been little theoretical explanation proposed about how organizations learn in the distinctive setting of higher education institutions in general and in the community colleges in particular. An understanding of how a particular community college learns as an organization as well as the factors that promote or inhibit this learning will prove beneficial to those who seek to improve the performance of such organizations. The findings from the study are likely to provide a greater understanding of organizational learning within a community college setting. The proposed sample will be drawn from varying levels in the organization rather than the senior leader-centered studies as has been observed in the business sector.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of organizational learning and how it is facilitated or inhibited at the identified community college. Narrative analysis was used to
analyze information gained in interviews from a sample of participants drawn from among the faculty and staff. The questions investigated were:

How do members of a college community construct organizational learning?

**Sub-questions:**

1. How do members of a college community describe facilitators of organizational learning?

2. How do members of a college community describe inhibitors of organizational learning?

**Significance of the Study**

My study will contribute to the development of organizational learning theory in general, and particularly as it occurs in the community college environment. Issues such as the stimulus, agent, nature and influences on organizational learning are still contested in the literature. Additionally, the findings will provide insight into how organizational learning is manifested in the community college.

Research specifically about organizational learning in community colleges is scant. Studies that have been conducted in business and the K-12 education sector give insight into organizational learning. However, researchers have suggested that organizational behavior is best studied in relation to the particular context in which it will apply. Dibella and Nevis (1998) identified factors associated with organizational learning yet they caution that those variables may differ across industries.

In light of the challenges faced by community colleges which are brought on by increased demands for accountability, efficiency and demand for services, the use of organizational learning as a tool for analysis and improvement may become vital for administrators, faculty, and staff of these institutions. My study will enable community college faculty and staff to
understand how their own organizations learn and the role that a learning culture plays in sustaining continuous improvement efforts.

**Limitations of the Study**

1. While the insights that may emerge from this study are likely to provide a greater understanding of the subject matter, because each site is unique and each individual constructs reality differently, generalizations are eschewed (Morrow, 2005).

2. Given that individuals, organizations, and organizational behavior are dynamic and temporal, these findings may be different in another time frame.

3. Caution must be exercised when comparing the results of this study to other studies on organizational learning because the definition of the term organizational learning is disputed in literature.

4. The results of the data relied heavily on the interviewees’ knowledge of the situation and their willingness to share their views, as well as the interviewer’s skill in the interview process. The findings in this study were shaped by the nature of the interviewer – interviewee interaction. Differing levels of rapport between researcher and participants could result in varying production of interview data.

5. The discussions in the interview were limited to the concept of organizational learning and its influences, not other constructs in organizational behavior.

6. The study utilized participants who were at middle levels in the organization. Individuals at other levels in the organization may view the same phenomena differently.

7. The results of this study represent the socially constructed view of the researcher, not the participants, although the participants were also co-authors of his construction of reality.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this study, the researcher proposes to investigate the nature of organizational learning in community colleges and the factors that facilitate or impede it. This chapter provides a review of the literature on organizational learning and the relevant aspects of the community college environment. The following sub-sections comprise the review of research on organizational learning, types and stages of organizational learning, factors promoting and inhibiting organizational learning, and an overview of the research on the community college organizational environment.

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is the detection and correction of error (Argyris, 1993). Learning is thought to have occurred when the outcome of intended action matches that intention. Organizational learning, as Argyris asserted, is based upon the successful application of strategies, not simply upon the discovery of a problem or invention of a new solution. Errors must be attributed to strategies and assumptions, and new strategies must be chosen and tested for success. When individuals note the success of particular strategies, they use them in situations again in the future and thus learning can be said to have taken place (Argyris, 1993; Schein, 1993a). Argyris’ description of the process implies action and review. Rowe and Boyle (2005) provide a more comprehensive interpretation. They described organizational learning as an iterative process of action and reflection that results in the modification of an organization’s actions.

Vera and Crossan (2004) suggest that organizational learning is “the process of change in thought and action – both individual and shared – embedded in and affected by the institutions of the organization” p. 224. Ellström (2003) describes organizational learning as “changes in
organizational practices (including routines and procedures, structures, technologies, systems, etc.) that are mediated through the kind of human thought, action, and interaction that is commonly called learning, but is also referred to as knowledge creation, inquiry or problem solving” (24).

Franz’s (2003) definition illuminates the organization’s need to become capable of surviving under changing or unstable environmental conditions through purposeful and intentional learning which transforms the ability of the organization to face the future successfully. Ellström (2003) describes organizational learning as intentional but points out that it is possible that only after reflection, or as a reconstruction used to justify action to oneself or others, that those intentions are discovered. Dibella and Nevis (1998) define organizational learning as “the capacity or processes within an organization to maintain or improve performances based on experience” (p.28). They maintain the view that all organizations learn, but it is the efficiency and effectiveness of that learning that often distinguishes it from one organization from another.

From the preceding discussion, there seems to be some agreement that a change in the chosen activities of an organization, brought about by internal or external stimuli, are hallmarks of organizational learning. Two further themes indicate that organizational learning is intentional in nature and leads to improvement. Huber’s (1991) definition supports some of these assertions while calling others into question. Huber states, “An entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of potential behaviors is changed” (p. 89). To support his definition he suggests that learning does not need to be conscious or intentional; it may not necessarily lead to increased effectiveness, as bad habits may be learned; and while it may impact thought and viewpoints, it does not necessarily change behavior.
There is an additional question of agency. Who learns? Is it the individual or the organization? Ellström (2003) suggests that individual learning is necessary though not sufficient for organizational learning to occur. The individual mediates between the stimuli from the organization’s environment that creates the need for change, and the actual changes in organizational practices. Argyris (1978) contends that actions needed to produce learning are not taken by organizations but by individuals acting as agents of the organization. The learning becomes organizational when it is embedded into organizational memory and becomes a part of the shared theory-in-use that will determine how workers act in the future. Vera and Crossan (2004) indicate that the change in thought and action that characterizes organizational learning is both individual and shared. They posit that organizational learning takes place at three levels, individual, group and organizational. Senge (1990) identified five disciplines necessary for organizational learning and he makes a distinction between learning at different levels. One of the disciplines, personal mastery, operates at the level of the individual, while others such as team learning and shared vision, operate at the level of the group.

Other researchers focus on the collective aspect of organizational learning, in some cases at the exclusion of the individual. Researchers posit that while collective learning involves individual learning it is more than the sum of individual learning (Leithwood et al. 1998, Lam & Punch, 2001). Dibella and Nevis (1998) argue that organizational learning is not about learning as individuals, but learning as groups. They claim that the learning that occurs in an individual is different from the patterned learning that occurs in groups; patterns that may continue even after individual members of the group have left (Lam & Punch, 2001). Group property, they believe, includes both what is learned and how it is learned. Others speak of the collective mind, which is external to individuals and discernable by patterns of group behavior (Lam and Punch, 2001;
Leithwood et al., 1998). Group members behavior are interdependent. In a process of mutual adaptation, group members may deal with change by altering their normal contribution to the group or recruiting others with skills that can contribute to dealing with the new situation. A synergistic effect is often produced (Lam & Punch, 2001). The focus on the collective processes is supported by writers who suggest that organizational learning is socially constructed (Kruse, 2003; Imants, 2003).

**Types of Organizational Learning**

Even when researchers agree that organizational learning does indeed take place, there are those who consider it significant to distinguish between the type and quality of that learning. Argyris (1978) contends that learning is the detection and correction of error and it is the process of determining the new strategy for action that distinguishes the quality of learning. He describes *single-loop learning* as responses by members of the organization to internal and external stimuli that maintain the central features of the organization’s theory-in-use. When a response to a given stimulus involves inquiry into organizational norms and strategies and the assumptions that support them, *double-loop learning* is said to have taken place. Argyris also identifies a third mode of learning, *deutero-learning* (second-order learning), which reflectively examines how learning takes place in the organization.

Ellström (2003) uses the terms adaptive learning and developmental learning to distinguish between types of learning. The terms relate to Argyris’ single and double-loop learning respectively. He makes this distinction when analyzing the character of the work/learning situation. He identifies the type of learning according to the level of control that the worker/learner has in determining the nature of the task, the methods or procedures to be used and the results to be achieved. Ellström states that at the adaptive learning sub-level of *reproductive learning*, the worker/learner has the desired tasks, methods and results determined
for him/her. Another adaptive sub-level of learning, *productive learning: type I* increases slightly in complexity in that the desired results are not given. At the level of developmental learning, there are also sub-levels. At the sub-level termed productive learning: type II, tasks are given but methods and results are not and at the highest stage of autonomy, creative learning, the tasks, methods and results are determined by the worker/learner. The range of organizational learning spans from routine (automatic) or reproductive learning that deals adequately with routine problems to creative learning wherein the worker/learner(s) must transform existing ideologies, routines, structures, and practices through reflection. Interestingly, while both Ellström and Argyris differentiate between levels of quality in the categories of learning, they both indicate that all types of learning are required in organizations because of the variety in organizational tasks.

**Stages of Organizational Learning**

Several writers have found it useful to analyze organizational learning through the identification of stages in the process. Huber (1991) identified four organizational learning processes as knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation, and organizational memory. Dibella and Nevis (1998) describe the process of organizational learning as a cycle that includes the acquisition, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge. They argue that this organizational cycle is in all organizations but there is variance in the manner and degree to which they are carried out from organization to organization.

Crossan, Lane and White (1999) developed the *4I Framework of Organizational Learning*. The model demonstrates their position that organizational learning is a process that takes place at the individual, group and organizational levels. *Intuiting* occurs in an individual’s mind at a subconscious level and is the start of the process. At the next level, *interpreting* involves sharing the conscious elements of the individual learning at the group level. *Integrating* navigates to the
level of the whole organization after collective understanding at the group level is changed. The learning is then incorporated across the organization by embedding it in its systems, structures, routines, and practices. This stage is institutionalizing. The model also addresses learning flow. Feed-forward learning flow refers to the degree to which individual learning converts into learning at the group level, then organizational level and feed-back learning flow refers to the degree that organizationally embedded learning affects individual and group learning.

As mentioned earlier, Dibella and Nevis (1998) suggest that the product of the organizational learning process may stay with the organization even after the departure of those initially involved in the learning. Others maintain that organizational learning has only truly taken place when the strategies, routines, and practices have been affected on a long-term basis (Argyris, 1978; Vera & Crossan, 2004). What is retained is the focus of some researchers who investigate organizational memory. Kruse (2003) suggests that knowledge acquisition, retention, and retrieval are key features in the discussion of organizational memory. She also mentions that how memory is put in the service of achieving organizational goals is central to the discussion. Organizational knowledge may be retained as written manuals, policies, files, and records or through individuals in the form of organizational cultural patterns, values, and beliefs.

Knowledge is retained selectively. When and how knowledge is retrieved, is based in part on how it is stored and the recognition by organizational members of its utility in a given situation. If lasting structures in which to house the information learned are not created, lessons learned from the past may not be available should such situations arise again. Lam (2002) declares that the product of the organizational learning process should be transformed into official records such as administrative policy manuals to ensure relative permanency.
The literature on type and quality of organizational learning makes a distinction between learning that results from the examination of underlying assumptions and that which does not. The former is generally viewed as superior and leading to more sustainable actions. Research on stages of organizational learning has explored how information is created, disseminated and retained in organizations. Efficiency and effectiveness in these processes distinguish the learning capability of organizations.

**Facilitators of Organizational Learning**

Organizational learning takes place in all organizations, though there may be variance in type and degree (Dibella and Nevis, Leithwood, et al., 1998). This variance is due to influences, which occur both inside and outside organizations. Some influences advance organizational learning and others inhibit it. In this section, factors that facilitate organizational learning such as motivations or stimuli for learning, psychological safety, structure, skill, and leadership are described. The following overview is drawn primarily from national and international studies in the K-12 sector including administration external to the school, and the business sector.

**Stimuli for Learning**

Stimuli for learning can be internal or external to the organization. When the stimulus comes from within the organization, it may originate within individuals or from collective processes of the organization. Senge et al., (1999) identifies aspiration as facilitating organizational learning. This aspiration is related to two learning disciplines, personal mastery and building shared vision (Senge, 1990). Personal mastery involves individuals determining what they truly aspire to while making an honest assessment of their current reality. Management of this *creative tension* can help build learning capacity. Dibella and Nevis (1998) describe this as the performance gap and indicate that in the examination of organizational learning, the
perception of this gap must be a shared one. The process of building a shared vision also often leads to a motivation for organizational learning (Senge, 1990).

External stimuli for organizational learning may be sought by the organization or imposed from outside. In the world of business in particular, the extent to which organizations scan their environment for best practices and opportunities is a facilitator of organizational learning (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). The practice of benchmarking and networking also serve as external stimuli for learning (Fischer, 2003). In education, organizations also voluntarily look to their environment for ideas but the mandate to learn is often made at the supervising level outside of the school (Leithwood, et al., 1998).

**Psychological Safety**

Even when individuals or groups in organizations are motivated to learn, a psychologically safe environment must be created for such learning to be pursued (Schein, 1993a). This safety is largely determined by the organizational culture. Culture is identified as a factor that could facilitate organizational learning (Lam, 2002; Leithwood, 1998). Dibella and Nevis (1998) suggest that how learning takes place in an organization is largely determined by the organization’s culture. They found that a climate of openness is among the factors that facilitate organizational learning. Organizational learning requires tolerance within the organization to take risks, to experiment, and to experience possible mistakes (Goh & Richards, 1997; Mulford & Silins, 2003; McGill & Slocum 1993). Dibella and Nevis (1998) identify a similar factor but termed it organizational curiosity. They also found that organizational learning is facilitated when multiple advocates for ideas are encouraged at all levels of the organization and there is operational variety – openness to varied ways in doing things. Key requirements for a psychologically safe environment for organizational learning include (a) opportunities for training and practice, (b) support and encouragement to overcome fears associated with making
errors, (c) coaching and rewards for efforts in the right direction, (d) norms that legitimize the making of errors, and (e) norms that reward innovative thinking and experimentation (Schein, 1993a).

**Structure**

Organizations can optimize learning when work is structured to allow the generation and sharing of knowledge and experience (Fischer, 2003) and when human resource practices that encourage this sharing are pursued (McGill & Slocum, 1993). Opportunities for teamwork and group problem solving facilitate organizational learning and there should also be a means of transferring the knowledge (Goh & Richards, 1997; McGill & Slocum, 1993). Studies in the field of education indicate that if work is structured to allow time for interaction, then the likelihood of organizational learning increases (Collinson & Cook, 2004; Leithwood et al., 1998; Lam & Punch 2001).

As working and learning in groups is advocated, reward systems must be adjusted to recognize the resulting collective productivity (Goh & Richards, 1997; McGill & Slocum 1993; Senge et al., 1999). The propensity for organizational learning is enhanced with increased complexity of tasks and the degree of autonomy that workers have in determining the tasks, methods and appropriate results (Fischer, 2003; Ellström, 2003). The practice of giving immediate feedback is also associated with facilitating organizational learning (Fischer, 2003; Ellström, 2003). Organizational learning is also widely linked with provision of adequate learning resources and ongoing professional development (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Dibella & Nevis, 1998; Ellström, 2003; Leithwood, et. al, 1998).

**Skill**

One cause for variability in organizational learning capacity is the skills available to the organization. A critical factor that facilitates organizational learning is the ability of individuals
to understand the interdependence of actions inside and outside the organization (Dibella & Nevis, 1998; Senge, 1990; Tannenbaum, 1997). Senge (1990) utilized the term *systems thinking* to describe this. Researchers have suggested that a central aspect of organizational learning is the ability to examine, and change if necessary, the underlying taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and assumptions that guide people’s actions in organizations. Senge (1990) called these mental models and suggest that they are often unknown to the people who hold them, hence making them even more difficult to change. He suggests that balancing of inquiry into the positions of others and advocating your own, are skills that promote the identification of mental models, which in turn may lead to organizational learning. He also identifies the ability to *dialogue* as facilitating shared learning. Isaacs (1999) identifies the four basic components of dialogue as listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing. Schein (1993b) concludes that dialogue is a first step in organizational learning because the evolution of new shared mental models that cut across the subcultures of the organization require a change in the cultural rules about communication and interaction; this change is made possible through dialogue.

Argyris & Schön (1978) identified two master programs or theories-in-use that people employ to guide their actions both within and outside organizations, namely, Model I and Model II. Model I inhibits organizational learning and will be examined in that section of the review but Model II promotes it and will be examined now. Model II theory-in-use is guided by the values of valid information, informed choice, and the monitoring of the execution of that choice in order to detect and correct error. While both models feature advocating, evaluating, and attribution as their most prominent behaviors, Model II is distinguished by the search for valid information through the use of action strategies that show how the actors who are involved reach their
evaluations or attributions. Within this model, actors inquire into the evaluations and attributions of others and encourage others to reciprocate. Embarrassment and threat, avoided at all costs drives under Model I thinking, are engaged as opposed to being by-passed and concealed. The ability to balance inquiry and advocacy, unearth mental models, and to view organizational events in a systemic way are skills that occur in organizations when purposely developed.

Leadership

Schein (1993b) reported that, “organizational learning is not possible unless some learning first takes place in the executive subculture. I do not see how learning at that or any other level of the organization can take place unless the executive subculture first recognizes itself as a subculture in need of analysis” (p. 50). Senge (1990) recognizes the importance of leaders in facilitating organizational learning. He points out that they are expected to play non-traditional roles such as designers (of learning practices), stewards, and teachers in order to help the organization develop their capacity to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – key tenets of organizational learning.

Leaders are critical to the creation of a climate conducive to collaboration and experimentation (Goh & Richards, 1997). They largely determine the level of psychological safety. Dibella and Nevis (1998) claim that leadership is just one of the factors that facilitates organizational learning. Frydman, Wilson and Wyer (2000) identified characteristics of leaders of organizational learning. Such leaders are pragmatic visionaries, values-centered, master strategists and tacticians, skilled at the devolution of power, stewards of learning, learners themselves and are willing to take different paths to their goal of developing a learning culture.

Transformational leadership has been found to be associated with organizational learning in schools. Leithwood et al., (1998) found evidence that transformational leadership positively impacted organizational learning in a study that drew its sample from elementary and secondary
schools. Burns (1978) stated that “the transforming leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower” (p.4). This, he says, results in “a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents.” (p.4) Transformational leadership practices call leaders to work with others and to enable others to perform. This can be contrasted with leadership practices that focus on power and control (Silins & Mulford, 2002).

Leithwood et al. (1998) identified eight dimensions of transformation leadership that foster organizational learning. The dimensions include (a) identifies and articulates a vision, (b) fosters the acceptance of group goals, (c) conveys high performance expectations, (d) provides appropriate models, (e) provides individual support, (f) provides intellectual stimulation, (g) builds a productive school culture and (h) helps structure the school to enhance participation in decision making. They also found that school culture and the district (supervising body) were found to have the greatest influences on organizational learning processes. Transformational leadership practices were also found to be an indicator of organizational learning capacity in an Australian K-12 study (Silins & Mulford, 2002). Transactional leadership is often viewed as the opposite to transformational leadership and unfavorable to organizational learning. Transactional leaders tend to approach followers with a strategy of exchanging one thing for another (Burns, 1978). Vera & Crossan (2004), however, found transactional leadership to be facilitative to feedback learning when environments are stable and firms are performing well. Transactional learning will positively benefit feedback and feed-forward learning when firms are in stages of growth and maturity (Vera & Crossan, 2004)

**Factors Inhibiting Organizational Learning**

Successful organizational learning depends on removing restraints to organizational learning as well as promoting factors that encourage it. In a study of reasons why teachers do not
share information, Collinson and Cook (2004), argued that removing restraints is likely to yield more immediate success than trying to enable motivating factors, because motivating factors involve teachers’ norms, values, and beliefs and require lengthier strategies to make meaningful impact. Factors identified that promote organizational learning are on a continuum, and as such, the lack of those factors often constitute restraints to learning. For example, a lack of psychological safety, stimuli, or skill will impede learning. Specific aspects of these factors as well as others will be examined in this review of inhibitors to organizational learning.

**Lack of Psychological Safety**

Many people in organizations do not take the risk associated with learning because of past organizational responses to mistakes and failure (Rowe & Boyle, 2005; Schein, 1993a). Schein suggests that this is related to learned anxiety and emotional conditioning. Schein argues that while emotional conditioning which determines behavior is associated with rewards and punishment, the avoidance behavior learned through punishment is more stable than behavior learned through reward. Avoidance behavior also discourages trial and error learning. Schein also posits that an understanding of what he terms Anxiety 1 and Anxiety 2 helps in examining such behavior. He defines Anxiety 1 as the feelings that arise when individuals are unwilling or unable to learn something new because it appears difficult or disruptive. Anxiety 2 is defined as the feelings of fear, shame or guilt associated with not learning anything new. He suggests that Anxiety 2 must be greater than Anxiety 1 in order to minimize Anxiety 1 as an inhibitor to learning. Risk taking and experimentation are essential to organizational learning and hence the inability to reduce Anxiety 1 greatly affects psychological safety. As noted earlier, leaders play a very important role in determining the climate for organizational learning.

Fear concerning the impact of social comparison can also impede organizational learning practices. In a study conducted among seven school districts, Rusch (2005) found that the fear of
competition between schools served as a restraint to district administrators’ facilitation of organizational learning. Fear was related to the avoidance of possible embarrassment for some school administrators. The significance of embarrassment avoidance will be discussed in the section on defensive routines.

**Improper Structure and Communication Issues**

The flow of information is critical to learning organizations (Senge, 1990). Knowledge must be moved across organizational borders in order to build a collective organizational intelligence (Senge et al., 1999). Collinson and Cook (2004) found that the factors restraining the dissemination of information in the studied schools related primarily to how the school day was structured and to the amount of time available for teachers to interact. Rowe and Boyle (2005) found that communication patterns based on a hierarchical structure that did not require accountability of staff members for their individual or group communication practices also inhibited learning. This was further exacerbated by the failure of those involved to recognize those patterns. Schein (1997) identifies three cultures existing in many large business organizations: operator, executive, and engineering. These cultures are associated with production, finance and strategy, and research and design, respectively. He suggests that these cultures are rooted in distinct backgrounds, particularly education and training, which those members of the respective cultures share. This results in a unique social language, although they may all be speaking in the same native tongue. This makes communication difficult and inhibits learning.

The failure to reward group productivity is another constraint to organizational learning. Senge et al. (1999) found that even when organizations espoused the importance of collective learning, rewards and accountability systems were still individually based.
Defensive Routines

Organizational defensive routines are described by Argyris (1994) as “all the policies, practices, and actions that prevent human beings from having to experience embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevent them from examining the nature of that embarrassment or threat” (p. 81). Argyris posits that this defensive reasoning results from the master program, Model I theory-in-use. People operating with the Model I theory-in-use will seek to (a) achieve their intended purpose, (b) maximize winning and minimize losing, (c) suppress negative feelings and behave according to what they consider to be rational. These values will lead individuals to “craft their positions, evaluations and attributions in ways that inhibit inquiry into them and tests of them with others’ logic” (52). These strategies typically result in defensiveness, misunderstanding, and self-fulfilling and self-sealing processes. Argyris suggests that individuals utilizing the Model I theory-in-use cannot help but bring it with them to organizations and that most people in organizations operate from a Model I framework. The prevalence of Model I in organizations results in what he termed organizational limited-learning systems. Interestingly, Argyris found Model I theory-in-use to be existent in cultures as varied as in North America, Europe, South America, Africa, and the Far East. This theory-in-use was also evident across age groups (as young as twelve), socio-economic status, educational levels, gender or ethnic identity.

These routines are evident across a range of organizational types such as business, government, and education. Argyris (1993) identifies some of these routines as outright lying and deception, conducting meetings in a manner that discourages reexamination and rethinking, referring undesired proposed innovations to other groups with the hope of them losing momentum along the way and manipulating meeting agendas and minutes. Face-saving is a routine that requires collusion on the part of the parties involved. The person allowing the other
to save face typically makes a statement that is untrue while the person who will avoid the embarrassment colludes by acting as if the statement is true.

The Nature of Knowledge

Another constraint to organizational learning is the nature of knowledge. Nonaka (1991) categorizes knowledge as tacit or explicit. Knowledge that is formal and systematic and hence easily communicated is said to be explicit. While referring to the work of Polanyi (1969), he states that knowledge, and skills based in knowledge that individuals possess but is not easily expressed, is termed tacit knowledge. He gives an example of a baker who may be highly skilled at his craft but unable to transfer all the knowledge needed about how to produce a certain product, to a given standard, even though he may convey much of the needed information in a detailed recipe. Tacit knowledge is also rooted in mental models, beliefs and perspectives that are themselves taken-for-granted and hence difficult to surface. Tacit knowledge is integral in organizational functions and is difficult to transfer, thus hindering organizational learning.

The Community College Setting

The community college is an American institution whose historical roots trace back to principles of access and skills development, advocated by former American president and educator Thomas Jefferson (Boone, 1997). Subsequent initiatives by President Andrew Jackson, that later affected funding, and the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 helped focus attention on technical skills, and are landmarks in the institution’s historical landscape (Boone, 1997). Junior colleges emerged around the turn of the 20th century, often as an extension of the high school system, with the aim of preparing students for college and providing up to the first two years of the college curriculum (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The term community college did not actually become popular until its use in the President’s Commission on Higher Education in 1947 (Boone, 1997).
The typical community college mission goals are usually grouped as, the preparation of students for academic transfer, vocational-technical education, continuing education, and developmental education, and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Bragg, 2001). Missions of community colleges are expanding and becoming increasingly comprehensive (Bragg, 2001). Levin (2005) argues that the community college has strayed from its earlier mission of meeting the needs of the entire community to a more narrow focus that addresses the needs of the economic sector. The ability to respond rapidly to workforce training needs is considered to be a strength of community colleges (Boone, 1997; Boggs, 2004). Levin, however, contends that the shift to an economic focus has resulted in an increased emphasis on training and development, away from liberal arts and transfer curricula.

The community college environment and culture is influenced by the traditions of the entire higher education sector and increasingly by the business sector. Schein (2004) defines culture as:

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17)

An institution’s culture determines how its members deal with external forces and internal pressures (Smart, Kuh & Tierney, 1997). A large organization may have an overarching culture but subcultures will likely form around work units or occupational communities and may exert very powerful influences on how people behave in organizations (Schein, 2004). Higher education institutions typically feature more than one institutional culture, though there is usually a dominant one (Bergquist, 1992, Levin, 1997). Subcultures within a community college view aspects of organizational life differently (Ayers, 2005). Kezar (2001) found among higher
educational institutions, there were broadly held values, as well as values associated with subgroups.

In examining higher education, Bergquist (1992) identified four cultures of the academy as collegial, managerial, developmental, and negotiating. The collegial culture is characterized by values surrounding faculty disciplines, faculty research and scholarship, rationality and quasi-political faculty governance processes, and the placement of highest priority on the generation, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge in the institution’s mission. The managerial culture is characterized by clear organizational structure, clearly defined goals and accountability for achieving those goals. The developmental culture is characterized by high value on the personal and professional growth and development of all members of the institutional community, including students. The negotiating culture is characterized by the distribution of organizational resources according to equitable and egalitarian policies. Within this culture, confrontation and fair bargaining between stakeholders such as administration, faculty, and staff is expected and welcomed. Bergquist’s classifications correlate closely with Birnbaum’s (1988) who described higher education institutions as collegial, bureaucratic, anarchical, and political in nature. The main exception is the anarchical institution which focuses on the value of gaining consensus in a context that is not very rational, organized or clearly structured.

While much of the foregoing discussion focused on all of higher education, including community colleges, Levin (1997) specifically examines the culture of community colleges. He views community college culture from two perspectives. First, it fulfils a functional purpose, affecting official structure and modes of operation for dealing with the organization’s challenge. Second, organizations are themselves cultures, “constructed through the symbols and behaviors of organizational members, and not necessarily rational, purposeful, or even functional” (p.16).
He also suggests that there are multiple cultures within community colleges that are a by-product of the college community members’ differing understanding and interpretation of organizational life. He identified four cultures of the community college as traditional, service, hierarchical, and business.

The traditional culture is characterized by a focus on the intellectual and cognitive development of students and access to educational opportunities for university transfer or employment purposes. This culture, he contends, is modeled after that found in many universities and features such aspects as peer judgment and scholarship and focuses on the interests and values of faculty. Decisions in this culture regarding issues such as governance, instructional organization and programming are centered around academic students, academic faculty and academic life. Furthermore, academic faculty are viewed as having a greater position of influence and significance than their occupational and vocational colleagues. Academic faculty dominate this culture and focus attention on curriculum and instruction from the academic perspective, largely at the exclusion of other aspects of organizational life (Levin, 1997).

The service culture in community colleges is characterized by a focus on the improvement of the clientele, the students. This culture may view improvement as evident in university transfer rates, institutional student retention rates, social equity or quality of learning. Members of the college community, who view meeting students’ developmental needs as of foremost importance, typically support and sustain this culture. They view the college’s mission in social service terms with the aim of improving the lives of individuals and consequently, society as a whole. Administrators in this culture include the immediate community as part of their service area and expand the mission of the institution to meet identified needs. Student services personnel and some faculty drive this culture in community colleges.
The hierarchical culture in community colleges focuses around leadership and particularly the role of president or chief executive officer. The culture evolved from early conceptions of the community college serving as a vehicle for social transformation and the achievement of democratic values such as equality and individuality mobility through education. This view portrayed the community college as having a moral purpose whereby the leader was seen as responsible for ensuring that this purpose is achieved. This culture also adheres to rational systems of organization. Thus, the culture, coupled moral and bureaucratic components. The resulting culture positions the president as embodying the moral purpose of the institution and hence responsible for articulating mission, vision, and values, and as having firm control of a rational organization. This culture may result in administratively dominated institutions and even autocratic presidents (Levin, 1997).

The impetus for developing the business culture in community colleges came partly from external demands for competitiveness, workforce training and the adoption of entrepreneurial approach to conducting their affairs. The training function, in particular, brought the community college in close contact with for-profit business operations which led to colleges embracing operational styles associated with the business world. Efficiency, innovativeness, customer service and paying attention to employee relations are features of the business culture in community colleges. There is extreme sensitivity to the market in decision making and college growth is focused on more programs, buildings, and increasing the number of students. Characteristics of this culture are its flexibility and speed in getting the educational product to the market. Traditional higher education decision making models such as faculty committees or senates are not valued.
There are other indications that higher education is increasingly influenced by the business sector culture. Birnbaum (2000) has described the introduction and subsequent abandonment of *academic management fads* that originate in government or business and adopted by higher education institutions. Higher education has utilized popular innovations such as Planning Programming Budgeting Systems (PPBS), Management by Objectives (MBO), Strategic Planning (SP), Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Reengineering (BPE), and Benchmarking. The pressure brought on higher education institutions to become more effective and efficient has led to the diffusing of these strategies into the sector, though most times, with limited success. Another argument for the pervasiveness of the business culture in higher education comes from Levin (2005). He contends that the primary focus of community colleges is to meet the needs of the business community. Much effort is focused on providing graduates who are appropriately trained for industry or by providing relevant training for individuals who are already employed. In addition to the mission shift, community colleges are also adopting business-oriented institutional values. Levin contends that community colleges are shifting from a culture of “soft managerialism” based on collegiality and professional consensus to one of “hard managerialism” based on contractual relations and autocratic control. Community colleges are also moving toward a market-driven and entrepreneurial orientation in response to contextual factors such as technological advances, distance education, and cost constraints (Kezar, 2001).

**Summary**

This chapter began with a review of organizational learning as well as factors that facilitate or inhibit its advancement in organizations. Aspects of the community college environment as they relate to this study were also examined. Literature on organizational learning is rich in terms of the theoretical positions, however it is weaker in the area of empirical studies. Writers from the field of education have based their work on empirical studies, while writers from
management and organizational studies have mixed their anecdotal experiences with well-designed studies. Organizational behavior researchers have taken a lead in developing theories in the field, though not always based on planned investigative studies.

While multiple cultures may exist in community colleges, an organization is often defined by a dominant culture. Culture dictates how things are done on the campus and it is determined by what members of the community deem to be of value. Traditional academic values, associated with higher education, and entrepreneurial, market-driven values, associated with the business sector, are two of the primary influences on community college culture. The value of seeking to develop individuals for their own good is also influential. This combination results in a unique organizational culture that may cause differences in the nature of organizational learning, and the factors that facilitate or inhibit it, in community colleges as opposed to other sectors. This study will provide an evidence-based understanding of how one group of community college faculty and staff view the factors that promote and inhibit organizational learning in their institution.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to provide a greater understanding of how organizational learning is manifested in a community college setting. The research questions were

How do members of a college community construct organizational learning?

Sub-questions

1. How do members of a college community describe facilitators of organizational learning?

2. How do members of a college community describe inhibitors of organizational learning?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how this study was conducted. The chapter begins with a discussion on qualitative research, the theoretical perspective for the study and the methodology, followed by a discussion of the participants and setting. The chapter concludes with a description of the data collection, data analysis and an examination of issues surrounding validity, and researcher subjectivity.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research design is typically utilized when little is known about a problem or when a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon is required (Creswell, 2005). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) offer the following definition,

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to self. … qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3)

Qualitative research is broadly characterized by (a) an investigation in natural settings rather than those that are contrived; (b) a focus on participant’s perspectives; (c) the researcher as
the data gathering instrument; (d) extended firsthand engagement; (e) an emphasis on the centrality of meaning; (f) sensitivity to wholeness and complexity; (g) subjectivity; (h) emergent design; (i) inductive data analysis; and (j) reflexivity (Hatch, 2002). As the research instrument, the researcher engages with other participants to render the results of the study (Glesne, 1999). This approach is appropriate because it may illustrate the contribution of organizational learning to the community college setting.

**Theoretical Perspective**

The questions in this study were addressed from the social constructionist perspective, that is epistemologically rooted in constructionism. This perspective holds that the world is socially constructed, complex, and ever-changing (Glesne, 1999). Berger and Luckman (1966) point out that conversation plays a central role in the determining, maintaining and changing of reality. Language is the primary mechanism through which reality is constructed socially during human activities (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Researchers in this paradigm join with participants in constructing a view of the world around them. This assumption of joint pursuit of understanding brings with it certain implications. Gergen (2002) states, “The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are socially derived products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people” (p. 7).

Each participant in the research activity brings with them experiences and understandings that will “clash” at the point of contact to produce new meaning. The meaning does not simply reside within the interviewee, it is constructed at the time of the interaction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Gergen’s statement also draws attention to the socializing nature of human interaction within a given context. The context provides a boundary for shared, socially constructed meanings. The individual’s identity in the context is constructed and re-constructed in relation to others (Gergen, 2002).
The complexity of meaning-making in the social construction interview situation is magnified when considering that participants in an interview may speak from different subjectivities and voices during the course of one conversation, and that their view of the interviewer during the encounter may also change and impact what is produced (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). For example, during an interview, an individual may shift from speaking as a loyal employee to a prospective pensioner concerned about the future. These positions taken at varying points in the conversation may impact the perspective of the interviewee and the meaning produced.

To engage in producing meaning, the researcher spends extended time in the environment or in contact with the study participants (Glesne, 1999). The researcher collaborates with research participants in constructing the subjective reality being examined; that relationship is central to the research process (Hatch, 2002; Ponterotto, 2005). From this perspective, researchers may engage a limited number of participants for an extended period of time in the search of multiple meanings. The extended exposure to research participants results in the values and lived experiences of the researcher having a great impact on the co-construction of meaning. These values should be acknowledged and described, as constructivists view attempts to eliminate researcher values entirely as futile (Ponterotto, 2005). There is no search for a single generalizable “truth” but the rigor of the study is measured more by adherence to methodology and thick description (Ponterotto, 2005).

Research Design

Narrative compilation through interviews and their subsequent analysis formed the core of this research study. Narrative research designs feature the collection of stories about the lives of individuals, the production of narratives that chronicle their experiences and an exploration of
the meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2005). Freeman (2004) contends that narratives pervade life, and human life is itself, narratively structured (Freeman, 2004). He states:

Human action consists of events that are, essentially, “episodes in the making” –that is, events that will become episodes, retroactively, by virtue of their interrelationship with other events, both antecedent and subsequent, as well as with those “ endings” that will ultimately serve to transfigure them into the stuff of narrative. In a distinct sense, one often does not know “what is happening” until the moment is past, until it can be located within some broader constellation of events, read for its significance in some larger whole (p. 64).

Labov and Waletzkey (1967) posit that narratives are essentially stories with a chronological aspect that possess a particular basic structure. The structure, according to them, includes an orientation clause, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda and each has its specific function in the narrative. Chandler, Lalonde, & Teucher (2004) on the other hand, report many conceptions of narratives that do not include such structures. Analytic insight from narratives can be gained not only from what is said but more so, how it is structured by the teller. The temporal order of events determines the plot, and in turn the power of the narrative, even more than its truth or falsity (Czarniawska, 1997). Riessman (1993) surmised that “most scholars treat narratives as discrete units, with clear beginnings and endings, as detachable from the surrounding discourse rather than as situated events” (p. 17). A pilot study was conducted which aided research design choices and the development of interview questions (Appendix G).

The analysis of the narratives also included studying how participants position themselves when relating about their activities in the organization. Bamberg (2004) describes an analysis of positioning where individuals are seen as not merely choosing positions based on available discourses or master narratives but as being involved in the construction of positions during conversation. He suggests three levels of Positioning Analysis. At Positioning Analysis Level I the design of characters in the story are examined to determine the “identity claims” or positioning of the teller. Level II is concerned with the interactional means for building the story.
At Level III a view is sought of how speakers and audiences establish particular notions of selves. Participants in talk take positions in relation to the discourses in which they are positioned. The community college environment exhibits multiple cultures (Levin, 1997) and how individuals position themselves may lead to their action or inaction.

Narrative design was chosen for this study, because, through the interview process, accounts were elicited about how learning takes place in the organization. I anticipated that in obtaining information about communication flow, experimentation norms and quality of interactions in the organization, and stories about the generation of solutions to problems and challenges, the narratives necessary for analysis would be produced. According to Czarniawska (1998) some of the ways that narratives enter organizational studies is through organizational research that is written as “stories from the field”, collections of organizational stories, and research that views organizational life as story making.

Population and Setting

The setting for this study was a community college in the southeastern United States. The assertion that all organizations learn (Dibella & Nevis, 1998) suggests that any community college could be selected for this study. Learning capacity, however, differs among organizations (Senge, et al., 1999) and hence it was beneficial to study a community college that has moved along that path, or at least expressed interest in developing that capacity. From this perspective, I pursued an extreme case sample as opposed to a typical sample, from among sampling strategies outlined by Creswell (2005). Information from the school’s website, such as mission and values statements and strategic plans, statements by the President and the reputation of the institution were used to gauge their level of commitment to organizational learning.

In selecting the site, I utilized resources such as recommendations from experts in the field as well as publications that highlight efforts of community colleges at improvement. Advice was
sought from Dr. Dale Campbell, UF Professor and convener of the annual Community College Futures Assembly and Dr. Larry Tyree, former Director of the National Alliance for Community and Technical Colleges. I also contacted Dr. Gerardo de los Santos, President and CEO of the League for Innovation in Community Colleges for his recommendations of institutions. I perused the Learning Abstracts, a publication of the League for Innovation in Community Colleges, that describes notable initiatives undertaken by community colleges and other similar publications.

Participants

Given the aim of exploring organizational learning in a community college setting, I employed purposeful sampling to identify six participants for this study. Multiple interviews were conducted with each individual to produce the meaning possible with prolonged contact. A pool of candidates was sought with the aid of officers of the institution. In some cases I asked for referral from individuals who were initially referred to me. In so doing, there was no one at the institution who knew who all of the study participants were. This improved the probability of anonymity.

In quantitative studies, generalization is often a goal, which leads to a need for random samples. Qualitative researchers typically and purposely select participants with the potential for giving rich data that would lead to a deep understanding of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2005). In selecting participants for this study, I was guided by strategies for selecting research sites and participants that have been outlined by Creswell (2005), based in part on recommendations of other methodologists. I employed, to some extent, maximum variation sampling. This type of sampling cuts across some range of variation (Creswell, 2005). In this study, this took the form of selecting faculty and administrators from the college preparation division, workforce training division and student services. Two participants were selected from each area. In each area one participant had supervisory responsibility and the other did not.
I also sought variation in the sample according to gender and length of service as both of these variables may influence viewpoints. As recent hires may not have experienced enough to contribute to the study, only employees with at least two years of service were considered. Experience with decision-making and problem solving at the institution was also considered when selecting participants.

There were four women and two men in the study. Both men were among the members of administration in the study. One member of the study was at the College for more than twenty years while another was there for just three. The other four participants ranged between seven and ten years. There were four Anglo-Americans in the study and two from other ethnic groups.

Access and Entry

Access in qualitative research studies is a process that goes beyond initial consent to conduct the study, to insuring that the desired individuals are willing to participate throughout the study and that the required documentation or observation points are made available (Glesne, 1999). Gatekeepers, the individuals from whom a researcher obtains consent, must be identified and convinced of the importance and relevance of the study (Glesne, 1999). In an effort to establish personal contact at the chosen institution, I enlisted the support of my committee members who were familiar with community college leaders in the area under consideration. I was able to establish contact with a senior official who referred me to others in the organization. I believe that the support of that individual was critical in the level of cooperation shown. In some cases, a chain was formed that led to further referrals. After initial contact, all communications were directly with the participants. Having the support of a key senior administrative leader and access to someone who could act as liaison officer was critical to the selection of the research site. Hatch (2002) concludes that ultimately the participants are the
gatekeepers because their degree of involvement will determine what is produced in the interview.

Establishing rapport is another critical factor that contributes to sustaining access. The term rapport speaks to the effectiveness of field relations (Glesne, 1999). She describes rapport as a “distance-reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism that primarily serves the interest of the researcher” (p. 96). In seeking to establish rapport in the selected research setting I paid close attention to norms and other indicators of culture, and adjusted enough to make the participants comfortable, while trying to ensure that I do not seem less than authentic. Following suggestions from Glesne (1999), I was mindful of the difference between building rapport and establishing friendships. Pseudonyms were utilized to ensure the anonymity of the participants and the research site with the hope that it would increased participants’ willingness to participate fully.

**Data Collection**

The primary source of data for this study was the participants’ accounts of their experiences and their views concerning the relevant topics as elicited through interviews. Relevant organizational documents were collected but given the preeminence of the story as told by participants, they were used primarily for contextual purposes and to aid in the development of rapport, building conversation and obtaining responses to interview questions.

Prior to engaging in fieldwork, permission was sought and granted from the University’s Internal Review Board to conduct the study (Appendix A). Participants were read a lay summary prior to beginning the interviews (Appendix B). A checklist was also utilized to ensure that all necessary steps were taken before, during and after the interview (Appendix B). Participants were given the opportunity to read and sign the approved informed consent form (Appendix C).
Interviews were the main source of data for this study. I adopted the approach of Holstein and Gubrium (2003) where “the interview is being reconceptualized as an occasion for purposefully animated participants to construct (their emphasis) versions of reality interactionally rather than merely purveying data” (p. 14). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions (Appendix D). Less structure tends to give participants more control during the interview (Riessman, 1993), thus encouraging free and open expression within the scope of the research. Where narratives are sought, giving the participants latitude to tell things based on their experience is critical.

While working within the confines of Institutional Review Board requirements for the submission of primary questions, I sought to engage participants in interviews that approximated conversations. Stage and Mattson (2003) suggest that, “conversations are based on common understanding and are marked by a lack of explicit purpose, avoidance of repetition, balanced turn taking, use of abbreviation, occurrences of pauses, expressed interest, and curious ignorance by both parties” (p. 99). The general approach advocated by the aforementioned authors was followed and I think it enhanced the co-construction of the data. Other strategies that Stage and Mattson suggest are (a) pause to reflect and prepare, (b) pay attention to context and (c) balance turn taking through reciprocal participation, and they were integrated in the interviews of this study. These were followed to a degree (see Limitations).

In this study, multiple rounds of interviews were conducted with each participant. I moved along a path from grand-tour or contextual questions to more detail-oriented mini-tour questions (Spradley, 1979). Multiple interviews with preliminary analysis in between allowed me to offer participants the opportunity to reflect on themes emerging from earlier interviews during later interviews. The invitation to interviewees to reflect on what is produced is consistent with the
shift in the perception among some researchers of interviewees as subjects to interviewees as co-participants or collaborators (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). The existence of varying backgrounds and experiences of all research participants is important to be aware of, given that, “interview participants interpret their experiences through socially constructed roles that have been created based on assumed identities within specific groups and disciplines” (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005, p. 691). These experiences help determine the “borders” which must at times be negotiated in the social constructionist interview (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). Multiple interviews may give the researcher enough opportunity to help participants challenge the concept of the passive interviewee that is currently more typical of interview experiences. The number of interviews was guided by the degree to which additional insight was produced at each round of interviews. Most participants were interviewed three times with the exception of one who was interviewed four times. The final interview was typically shorter than earlier ones and involved member checking.

Six participants were selected for this study. After the first round of interviews, data was roughly transcribed and preliminarily analyzed. This analysis served to inform the second round of interviews. A similar process followed subsequent interviews. Each interview took approximately one hour.

I utilized practical advice from Creswell (2005) while conducting the interviews, namely, (a) take brief notes during the interview; (b) obtain permission and audio tape the interview; (c) locate a quiet and suitable place for the interview; (d) have a general plan for the interview while leaving room to be flexible; (e) use probes or follow-up questions to obtain additional information; and (f) be courteous and professional throughout and particularly at the end of the
interview. All interviews were conducted in the offices of the participants and that proved to be a good venue with very little interruption and the assurance of privacy.

Conducting multiple rounds of interviews aided in the building of rapport, and I believe, the production of more insightful data by participants. All interviews were one-on-one. Creswell (2005) notes that one-on-one interviews are best suited for participants who are articulate and comfortable sharing the desired information. All participants fitted that description, though the level of rapport established varied among individuals and this likely impacted how much each participant was were willing to share with me.

Data Analysis

I used narrative analysis, as outlined by Riessman (1993), and positioning analysis as outlined by Bamberg (2004), to analyze the data. Riessman (1993) describes the three major steps in the narrative research process as telling, transcribing and analyzing. Telling involves the careful attention to data collection through interviews as outlined above. Transcribing involves converting the interviewee’s words to text but in narrative work, decisions are made at this stage that are largely analytical in nature (Riessman, 1993). These decisions include determining when a narrative begins and ends and whether the re-transcription of the data should be done according to a particular framework.

Two possible strategies for data reduction and interpretation are reduction to core narratives and analysis of poetic structures (Riessman, 1993). The core narrative is derived from a longer portion of the text and may be constructed around a framework such as Labov and Waletzkey’s (1967), briefly outlined earlier. Care should be taken to analyze the narrative for structure and not simply for content (Riessman, 1993). The steps for analysis in this study were as follows:
1. Produced a rough transcription of the interview data. This transcription focused on capturing all the spoken words and other easily notable features of the conversation such as laughter and very long pauses.

2. Conducted inductive data analysis on this data with the primary purpose being to inform the generation of questions for the ensuing round of interviews and to begin the search for themes. The data was analyzed to produce open codes. This step was an important opportunity for the researcher to become familiar with the data as seen on the written page. The search for themes was also critical because components of the answer to the research questions began to emerge from the themes.

3. Conducted further rounds of interviews as outlined above, with preliminary analysis taking place after each around and more importantly, prior to the succeeding round of interviews.

4. Produced in-depth re-transcription of the portions of the interview data deemed central to the study. In these transcriptions, closer attention was paid to pauses, voice inflections, non-verbal sounds and any other interaction between the interviewer and the participants in order to gain the greatest representation of meaning. At this stage the data was organized into stanzas using phrases and pauses to determine the length of the line (Gee, 1999). Stanzas were labeled according to their topic or theme (Appendix E). This proved to be a very useful analytical step.

5. Reviewed the interview talk with particular attention to narratives.

6. Checked data for suitability of Labov’s or other framework and applied where possible (Appendix F). Labov and Waletzkey (1967) suggest that all narratives comprise an abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation and resolution and that there is much meaning to be found in the way the narrative is structured. In this study, particular attention was paid to evaluative statements. In some cases, statements that seemed evaluative in nature were identified even when other components of the narrative were not easily determined.

7. Searched for interpretive insights in the structure of the narratives. At this stage, positional analysis was utilized to determine how individuals place themselves within existing discourses in the institution, and how existing discourses shaped the talk of the individuals (Bamberg, 2004). The result of the positional analysis was examined to see how it relates to how people act or fail to act in situations that could produce organizational learning.

8. Searched for themes within and across narratives. This step brought focus to how individuals view themselves and their own situation and how those views relate to organizational learning in the institution. It also identified the recurrence of themes among the views of individuals sharing different perspectives across the campus.
9. Produced the narrative report. The report was structured along thematic lines and included counter-narratives to the most frequently articulated views. In representing the findings care was taken to ensure that the context in which the meaning was produced was conveyed in order to allow the reader great insight as to why the particular talk was produced.

Validity and Reliability

Rigor is required to ensure the worth and utility of research (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). The judgment of the validity of a research project lies ultimately with the audience; hence, researchers must follow the guidelines of the traditions of the particular perspective and paradigm and document the process in order to gain the confidence of the audience. In seeking a distinction between more objectively obtained data, some qualitative researchers tend to speak of the trustworthiness of the data when the issue of validity is raised (Glesne, 1999). With reference to Lincoln and Guba’s work, Creswell (2005) suggests that prolonged engagement at the research site, alertness to researcher biases, member checking, external audit, and identifying and reporting limitations enhance the trustworthiness of the data and the validity of the research product. Morse et al. (2002) warn that many strategies for insuring validity, such as member checking and external audit, end up as post-hoc evaluation whether by design or by practice. This post-hoc evaluation, they argue, usually is too late to affect the study. They advocate strategies that focus on research design and adjustments during the research process. They suggest that the investigator needs to be responsive to the effects of choices in the research process and their interaction with the actual research situation. They state:

Lack of responsiveness of the investigator may be due to lack of knowledge, overly adhering to instructions rather than listening to data, the inability to abstract, synthesize or move beyond the technicalities of data coding, working deductively (implicitly or explicitly) from previously held assumptions or a theoretical framework, or following instructions in a rote fashion rather than using them strategically in decision making. (p. 12)

Morse et al. (2002) advocates methodological coherence – suitability of components of the method to the research questions, appropriate sampling, and collecting and analyzing data
concurrently among strategies to improve validity. In reviewing, the contributions of other authors on validity, Morrow (2005) pointed to fairness or solicitation of multiple constructions as well as various levels of authenticity as needed for validity of researched based in constructivism. Continuing advice to constructivists, she suggests that validity should also be assessed by the extent to which participant meanings are understood and the level of mutual construction of meaning between researcher and participants.

Particular attention was paid to member checking given its significance as a means to validity in social constructionist studies. Participants were given the opportunity to check interview data for accuracy and to comment on the emerging themes that I identified from the interviews. Participants were also offered the opportunity to be involved in further data analysis steps such as coding and theme identification but while some were enthusiastic at the prospect, their schedules did not allow. Feedback at member checking indicated a high degree of satisfaction with accuracy and identification of themes.

In this study, I brought an awareness of the issues outlined above and employed the following strategies to ensure validity.

1. Ensured prolonged engagement with participants through multiple interviews with key informants.
2. Conducted a peer and supervisor review of methods, procedures, and findings throughout the study.
3. Conducted member checking to determine the accuracy of initial transcripts and participants’ views on how they have been represented in later summaries
4. Triangulated data through the use of multiple interviews with each participant and through multiple perspectives that contributed to the collective story.
5. Provided rich, thick description.
7. Ensured appropriate sampling.
8. Collected and analyzed data concurrently.
9. Provided a clear statement regarding researcher bias.
10. Adhered to methodological standards.

Subjectivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is often the research instrument (Burck, 2005). The researcher conducts interviews, makes observations, and reviews documentation in pursuit of answers to the research questions. Disclosure of information about the researcher, assists the audience in understanding decisions taken while conducting the research and aids them in determining the confidence they will have in the findings.

My competence to conduct this study was based largely on in-depth study of the methodology and experience as a researcher in graduate research methods courses and extensive reading of relevant literature. I had experience in interviewing, which is the primary data collection method for the study. I conducted a pilot study for the dissertation, which yielded lessons that guided this study (Appendix G).

A constant awareness of the role of subjectivity in this research approach was vital. Subjectivity, once viewed only as an element to be eliminated or reduced in research, is now seen as holding some benefits (Glesne, 1999). It makes you aware of who you are as a researcher – your needs, interests, beliefs, attitudes, and values. This awareness also allows the researcher to monitor ways that their own subjectivity may distort the research. Glesne (1999) indicates that being attuned to your emotions helps in knowing when your subjectivities are engaged. This realization presents an opportunity to look into your assumptions as opposed to trying to suppress your feelings.
My approach to research is constructivist. I believe that meaning is situated and that the varied experiences of individuals result in them deriving different meaning from the same phenomena. I think that is particularly true in the study of organizational behavior. There are some activities in organizations that are widely accepted as described in particular ways, and as having particular features, but even in those cases, the ability of the individual to derive meaning is critical. In investigating organizational behavior I am not motivated by a search for “truth”. However, I am interested in understanding the underlying assumptions that drive individual behaviors which may be, and often is, different from the values that individuals espouse. In the research process, I took care to analyze the meaning that is produced in the data collecting situation and not what I think that participants “really mean”. Given the issue of hard-to-surface assumptions and values, I believe that investigation into organizational behavior must always be prolonged, whether through interviews, observations or some combination of both, in order to help the participants describe the deepest meanings possible.

My training in leadership and management roles both helped and hindered my capacity to investigate educational organizations such as community colleges. Through my training and experience, I have become aware of some of the issues facing organizations, which has guided me to this investigation. On the other hand, my experience may have caused me to hold certain assumptions, of which I might not have been aware. Preparation for leadership is largely about finding what works and preparing to practice it. For me, “what works” includes tendencies towards servant leadership, participatory leadership style, a focus on continuous improvement and the practice of reflection on the individual, group and organizational levels. I hope that my awareness of these views helped me to “bracket” them.
I selected this topic for investigation because of my long-held interest in organizational performance, with particular focus on community colleges. I have worked for 12 years in a community college in my native Caribbean country and have held mid and upper level faculty and administrative positions. I am keenly interested in leadership and organizational culture. I have held leadership positions as a student, in the community and in the workplace. Additionally, I have read extensively in this area. My tendency towards being active in organizations probably results from being raised in a Christian household and being taught to make a difference in any situation to which my life may lead. These experiences have left me with certain views about what is good for organizations, what effective leadership is, the need for continuous improvement, and the importance of treating everyone with respect and dignity. I took care to ensure that my views did attract me toward a particular type of participant or cause me to listen for a particular viewpoint in the interview process. Informants who can assist in answering the research questions were sought regardless of my initial impression of their points of view. In short, I tried to listen to what was shared rather than super-impose my own values. I utilized memos to help “bracket” my views. The use of memos-to-self assists the researcher in reflecting and examining his/her own feelings (Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
The purpose of this study was to describe organizational learning processes at a community college and what factors influenced it as perceived by selected members of the college community. Participants were interviewed and the data analyzed using narrative analysis, resulting in the identification of themes. Lakeside Community College was chosen for this study partially because of its reputation for innovativeness, an indicator of a high capacity for learning. Many of the findings supported the reputation. The findings showed that the stimulus for organizational learning was strong and that it was influenced by internal and external factors. The generation of knowledge that led to their organizational learning was an active process at Lakeside that also drew on external and internal sources. There were ample mechanisms promoting the spread of information and desired practices in the organization. Other factors such as leadership and the availability of high-quality faculty positively influenced organizational learning.

The findings of the study presented in this chapter are a form of a narrative report, a collective narrative of the participants that highlights the themes. Where counter narratives were produced, they are also presented in the relative segments of the findings. At the end of the chapter, a summary of the findings in light of the specific research question and sub-questions is presented.

**Stimuli for Learning**

Results of the study indicated that there were numerous stimuli for learning at Lakeside Community College. Identifying the particular stimuli was necessary to understand why Lakeside Community College was driven to learning and organizational improvement. The mission of the college was mentioned most often as a stimulus and it seemed to have an
overarching impact. Meeting students’ needs is closely associated with mission but is discussed under a separate heading because of its prominence within participants’ comments. Other stimuli included maintaining reputation, encouragement from senior administration and external stimuli. A discussion of these stimuli follows.

Mission

The study participants indicated that Lakeside Community College was driven towards learning, improvement and innovation. One of the primary stimuli is the mission. Lakeside’s mission is “Adding value to the lives of our students and enriching our community.”

Participants’ comments suggested a strong belief that the mission is the right one for the institution. Of the mission, Sarah said, “I’d say that this is our core, that’s our centerpiece and everything stems, comes from that.”

The institution’s mission seemed to be at the forefront of individuals’ minds as they conducted their everyday affairs, rather than some document that was tucked away in the recesses of the minds of the members of the organization. According to participants, they frequently referred to the mission when seeking guidance in decision making. Sarah stressed the centrality of the mission in this way:

I think at the moment people look at it in the context of the college mission and they say, “Ok, let’s start with that. Let’s put aside everything personal and look at it. Is it meeting student needs?” Bottom line, that’s the question. Then it’s easier for people to look at things objectively. Rather than, “Do we want it? Is it good for us?” “Is it good for the students?” And I think that question tends to give a lot of clarity to a lot of things that are done.

The data showed that there seemed to be a high degree of congruence between institutional goals and values, and personal goals and values of the participants. Some of the goals and values identified were not necessarily associated with this institution alone but with what was seen as the more broad and generic mission of community colleges. Values such as taking students from
where they are and commitment to access are typically associated with community colleges and participants indicated their presence at Lakeside. The nexus between institutional goals and the personal goals and values of Lakeside team members seems to lead to a zealous pursuit of the college’s mission and a drive to learn in order to help achieve that end. Frank commented:

so I had this opportunity to start working in the community college system and that’s when I began to learn about it. Became pretty much immediately enamored with the concept of the second chance idea, the open door policy, all those things were very attractive to me. Seemed to fit well with my way of thinking.

The match between institutional and personal values seemed to influence Frank’s overall assessment of the workplace. He continued,

Lakeside is a pretty nice place to work. You feel as though you’re part of something good. You’re not just working for somebody. As I said, I feel like I’m working for the good of the institution, I’m part of this.

Most participants commented that the community college students themselves, as opposed to students in other parts of the college system, proved to be a powerful driver of the faculty’s and staff’s desire to innovate and learn. They described the community college students as more mature, purpose-driven, responsible and bringing more to the classroom settings by virtue of their lives’ experiences. While recalling the beginning of their work at a community college, several participants expressed that they were surprised at the breadth of the institution’s mission, the rich mix of students and the degree to which they felt they were making a difference in the lives of individuals. Jane liked the students and said that the “the students were there because they’d chosen to be there” and that “they were interested in what they were doing.” Yvonne expressed a similar affinity for community college students especially when considered relative to other students with whom she had experience. She said:

and comparing the two I actually liked teaching at the community college better. So I kind of focused on it. I liked the mix of students, the different ages, the different goals. I really enjoyed them better than the strict 18-year old college freshman when they’re in a major university.
Sarah’s drive towards working to achieve the institution’s mission came out of a sense of obligation. Lakeside College community members viewed their mission to improve lives as extending to the entire community not simply those who came to the campus for courses. Sarah took the view that individuals such as herself who have benefited from education are obligated to help others. She said:

Because we are the more fortunate. We are in a position to, to be (excellent?). We’re in a position to and it’s our responsibility as individuals and as professionals in the community, in the college community to address that population, their needs too.

Meeting Student Needs

Participants also reported that meeting student needs was a driving force in the organization. They viewed learning as an efforts to meet students’ needs. Many of the campus activities were focused on identifying student needs and determining the changes in organizational practices needed to meet those needs. Participants discussed a recent Title III grant and ongoing measurement initiatives as stimuli for organizational learning. Sarah said “surveys and research work that we have here within the College … suggest that some changes need to be brought about.” Mike described several initiatives in Student Services over recent years, such as the introduction of legal services and evening services that were a result of efforts to meet identified student needs. Mike described the College’s effort to meet student needs.

because in this setting we really do take students and people where they are and help them get to where they want to be. We accommodate their needs, whether its scheduling, whether its, whether they go full-time or part-time, … we’re more responsive to their learning styles than perhaps the SUS system and four year schools are.

This sentiment is clearly supported by Lorna’s expression of the sentiment that, “Well, I think most things that we do here are guided by a real desire to serve people.”
Reputation

Another stimulus for learning that participants articulated was the desire to maintain the institution’s reputation for innovativeness. There appears to be a common discourse on campus focused on Lakeside’s reputation as an innovative institution. At the center of the discourse is the Lakeside’s involvement as a founding member of the League for Innovations in Community Colleges. They have been recognized numerous times for innovative practices. Participants reported a strong desire of the institution to maintain that reputation. Mike said, “We’re one of 19 community colleges that are part of the League for Innovation. We’re very proud of that and the fact that we’re proud of how that affects the culture here.” Illuminating the consistency of views on this topic at Lakeside, Yvonne reported, “We have a reputation and we are one of the great innovators in the League … we kind of have a reputation to maintain, so that drives some of it.”

When asked about the stimuli for learning and innovation at Lakeside, Lorna identified reputation as one stimulus, though she thought there were others that were nobler. She said:

I also think that there’s prestige associated with being part of the League of Innovation. And I think there’s sort of bragging rights, “Look at our faculty who are doing this, this, this and this.” So I think that those things drive it and those are less than… Those aren’t the best reasons of course.

In addition to the national reputation, most participants described Lakeside as keen on maintaining its reputation as one of the leading state community colleges. The prospect of reporting evidence of this leadership at state conferences and publications drove community college members to create initiatives that were worth telling about. Yvonne spoke to the prevailing organizational attitude when she said, “…and we’re real proud of being like one of the first in the state to do something. So I think that does probably drive some of our innovation.” Jane and Sarah demonstrated this attitude in separate comments. Sarah bragged about the range
and quality of services offered to students when she said, “…because the kinds of things we do at the community college level, you won’t find them (everywhere) one, max two (community colleges) in the entire state. In her particular area of instruction, Jane pointed out:

We really are way ahead of a lot of the other community colleges in the state as far as making sure that we are turning out students that are ready to meet the global marketplace as opposed to just their own areas of residence.

**Senior Administration’s Encouragement**

Participants also indicated that senior administrators were integral in stimulating and facilitating organizational learning. Through interaction with participants it became evident that there was a discourse at Lakeside surrounding innovation. This discourse was driven in large part by senior administrators. In addition to supporting conference attendance, providing forums for the discussion of new ideas, and adapting the organizational structure to facilitate learning, the leadership of the college articulated the value of learning and innovation at Lakeside. Yvonne viewed the administration’s attitude to improve and innovate as “really positive”. She said, “They are always looking for ways to improve and innovate.” Jane explained that some of their drive for innovation came out of necessity because of resources. She commented, “As our numbers (students) have grown and our facilities aren’t growing, we’ve been asked to come up with new and innovative ways of handling more students with the same amount of time.”

The overall attitude toward innovation at Lakeside seemed to be rooted in the institution’s history and culture but this was also a priority of the current leadership. Mike stated that “the culture of the institution even when the doors opened in the 1960’s was one of innovation and creativity.” Much of the current enthusiasm for innovation was attributed to the President who made it a priority and his willingness to use resources to support it. Speaking of this input Mike said, “The current president, of course is also very focused on change and improvement so and that top down works its way through the institution.” The President’s establishment of a senior
office charged with leading innovation at the institution soon after his arrival, signaled to members of the college community the important role that innovation would play during his tenure.

Jane described the energy towards improvement and innovation in this way, “I thinks it’s a blend, that we’ve got a President who is interested in that and we’ve got faculty and staff that share that interest and so that comes together to be a driving force.”

External Stimuli

The results pointed to the presence of some external stimuli driving the institution’s focus. In some instances, the college purposely looked outside and for others it was required to do so. Participants shared that Lakeside was constantly scanning the environment for new ideas that could further the institution’s mission, or for information that could guide an idea in the early stages of development. Information about what other schools were doing also served as a catalyst for learning at the institution and as a source for new initiatives. Some participants voiced the administration in general, and the President and Vice-President for Academic Affairs in particular, as encouraging them to become aware of new trends and practices in other colleges.

Lakeside was also constrained to make changes to the practices, procedures and routines of the organization because of the requirements of outside agencies. In some cases, state and federal agencies as well as institution and program accrediting bodies determined changes that should be made within the organization. Lorna stated:

My previous experience showed me that many things that go on here, I know, are driven by outside agency requirements and for us to be able to get accreditation or funding and I think that that’s part of the drive for innovation.

Knowledge Sources

The initiatives which result in practice-based organizational changes, that is, organizational learning, begin with some source. Given the high drive for learning in the organization,
participants identified several sources for new ideas and initiatives. These sources were external and internal. The search for knowledge sources and solutions stems from the desire to improve.

Frank captured the sentiment in this way:

There’s this atmosphere, as I said, has existed from the college’s inception that its good to look around. You got to be open to the possibilities just because, and I’m, I guess I should back up a little and say that its not that everyone is, we’re not just looking to change all the time. And there is sometimes the attitude that if ain’t broke don’t fix it. Things are going well, reasonably well. But, as I said, there has been this atmosphere that even when things are going well, they can go better because we haven’t arrived yet.

**External Sources**

Several external knowledge sources were cited. Conferences were most frequent. The participants identified information from formal conference presentations as well as networking opportunities at such meetings as useful knowledge sources. Faculty presentations during the faculty-search processes were also cited as a supply of new ideas. Individuals who engaged in something of interest to the college were regularly brought in to share their experience and insight. These presentations were a source of new practices. The presentations were made in varying forums such as, faculty colloquiums and Coordinating Council meeting. Additionally, proceedings from events hosted by the League for Innovation were also useful for initiating new practices. Sarah talked about the practice of looking outside at Lakeside and said:

We have a lot of people who are visionaries, who go outside and look at what they see and if they find a model that seems to be working there they’ll bring it in, and say, “There is something that worked. Why don’t we try it out?”

Jane spoke of the continuous encouragement to look around by one of the senior administrators.

when our vice president has a project that she wants us to be working on like the weekend college program that we’re getting ready to bring up. She has all of us on the phone calling, looking at websites and finding people, other groups that look like us and then getting them on the phone and asking questions about what worked, what didn’t work. What kinds of results they’re having, if they could do it all over again, what would they do differently.
Lakeside Community College members also exposed themselves to the relevant literature concerning their field. The academic vice-president sent a weekly e-mail message to faculty and this frequently included links to articles that had implications for practice at Lakeside. Lorna summed up the general attitude to sourcing new information at Lakeside Community College in this way:

It seems as though it’s just a network of wherever anybody gets any information or finds out how other people are doing things or comes up with an idea that’s a little bit different and then pursues it, that seems to me how mainly that happens here.

**Internal Sources**

Of equal importance to organizational learning at Lakeside Community College was the knowledge generated internally. Forums for discussion at Lakeside generated ideas as the campus community grappled with issues of concern. Brain-storming sessions were common in these forums, as solution to problems were sought or as the institution sought to take advantage of opportunities. The ideas generated in such settings were enhanced by the cross-functional nature of some forums. Additionally, the practice of promoting and transferring individual to different functional areas resulted in the availability of many individuals in the organization who had wide experience in many aspects of the operation. The wide experience of such individuals in the organization enriched discussions. They could easily see how functions inter-related and better predict what solutions were viable.

Lakeside’s culture allowed for, and encouraged the generation of ideas from a variety of internal sources. Mike attributed a number of initiatives in his area to contributions from throughout the organization. He said, “a lot of the stuff we’ve added here has percolated straight up either from the student body or staff members or other staff members at the institution…. They’ve grown out of the environment here.”
Lakeside also gathered information in a systematic fashion that led to changes in practices at the institution. Participants referred to surveying students extensively as part of a Title III project that in some cases yielded results that were not expected. Administrators used that data to make changes to relevant policies. Faculty surveys were also a significant source of feedback on services provided by the institution. Faculty and staff in various departments rated the performance of other departments and this information was used to guide improvement efforts. Lorna reported:

There are surveys that go out, evaluations that go out that people are asked to complete that assess how different units, different areas are serving the campus and so they look for each individual to assess the institution as a whole.

Participants mentioned several means of gathering feedback about various aspects of the operation. Lorna mentioned unit assessment surveys, student assessment of the institution, and faculty assessment of College services as sources of information that led to the development of new practices at Lakeside. She also described the significance of information provided by the academic information technology unit as well as information generated through trial-and-error in the classroom.

Participants also emphasized the importance of evidence related to performance. Mike reported that in addition to measures related to student and teacher performance, there were reports that evaluated events and projects, and student organizations and their advisors. Even the athletics teams were measured by their wins and losses in addition to the academic performance of the student athletes.

Frank captured the institutionalized nature of the information gathering in the following statement and gave an example of how it impacted one aspect of his work.

I think we’ve always had the attitude but I think now we’re doing something about it. What’s that called? I think the term they use is “culture of evidence.” We do have a system in place. Institutionally we have an area of institutional research. That has probably existed
within the college but getting access to it has not always been very easy. … We have Crystal Reports now, which is a, I guess I call it software, a mechanism to capture, to take all this data and create reports and make it available to the people who need to see it so that we can determine those sorts of things, what is being effective, what you know, what has been effective or how effective have the things we’ve been doing been as well as, since we already have this culture of trying to do things better, because we know, we don’t have all of our students being successful… Sometimes you don’t even realize, I mean a little thing that occurred or that I became aware of the other day was the retention rate in one of the classes or courses that we teach, which typically I would not have thought would have had that high of a dropout rate, then suddenly realizing that it is and then looking for reasons and then hopefully now trying to resolve that issue. But again, the system Crystal Reports enables us to be able to do that sort of thing.

The President and senior administration encouraged the giving of feedback throughout the institution. Participants reported that campus forums typically allowed for two-way communication. They also spoke about the President’s invitation for questions and comments at faculty convocations at the beginning of the year when hundreds of faculty members were present, as an example of the President’s commitment to the open forum. Jane commented:

There are not many things we do, in fact I can’t think of anything that I’ve been to that is a one-way information being given. Even our President when he pulls everybody together like at the beginning of the year when he finds out what the budget is going to look like, even then he does open forum. To where he presents the information but open forum allows anybody to ask him any question right then and there. And sometimes you’d be very surprised at the questions faculty will ask a president in an open forum. Sometimes they put him really on the spot and hold his feet to the fire. But no, two way communication is definitely something that takes place.

Other administrators followed the President’s lead and sought feedback at every opportunity. One participant, however, questioned the genuineness of the requests for feedback. She felt that although feedback was requested, the administration really wanted to hear a certain type of feedback that reinforced what they were doing. Of the entire process she said, “I don’t have a sense that there’s any kind of institutional follow-up, of gathering of assessments. Even though I know, we do post-assessments. We do assessments post-projects. I don’t have a sense that much happens with that.”
The President also encouraged the giving of feedback and raising issues in less formal settings. He personally solicited feedback from students in the form of periodic coffee chats. These events were designed to allow students direct contact with the President in a very casual setting.

While all participants reported that there were ample opportunities to give input on campus, the two faculty members in the study questioned the usefulness of the exercise at times. They had concerns about what happens with their input and that of others similar to them after it is made. Interestingly, they voiced their concern at two different levels. Lorna felt confident about the impact of comments or feedback made at the departmental level while she was skeptical about input made at the college level. Conversely, Yvonne had little confidence that input made at the departmental level would be acted upon but felt that college-wide mechanism offered much more hope in that regard. Describing her frustrations about making input at the departmental level Yvonne said:

And I’ll still give my opinion but I also have no, no delusions that anything is going to come from it. Because things that I’ve said have always been ignored in the past and I think everybody notices the same thing.

Continuing to speak of the department she said, “In our little area, I think nobody is very comfortable criticizing. Do a lot of talking among ourselves but I really don’t think that anybody is… We’ll ask some questions but never push it.” She contrasted her department with the Senate where she said the people are “incredibly comfortable” making input to conversations related to the work and operation of the institution. She added, “They critique, they question, they put the President on the spot, they put anybody on the spot.”

Lorna expressed doubt about the genuine desire for input in decision-making and policy-shaping or whether it was primarily a cosmetic exercise. She commented, “(when) the initiative
is going forward, they view the feedback not as something that is going to shape the project but just as a release valve to, “Yes, well listen to you” but then nothing’s going to change.

**Learning Processes**

Numerous processes on campus that promoted learning were reported. Many of the standard discussion forums on campus were reported as sessions where learning took place. Some participants found off-campus retreats to be very useful learning sites as opportunities for reflection were provided at these sessions. They also cited the greater tendency for open conversations in those settings and how they contributed towards learning. Sarah conveyed her experience at a departmental retreat as very gratifying and spoke of the challenging yet fruitful conversations that took place. She commented:

or even in the context of certain professional discussions that can come out and if they’re at point where, unless you address it nothing’s going to move. If it’s bringing about certain emotions that have to be addressed it is better to address it and I’m glad that we all did. I know even though there were times when it got, it was hot, but just trying to stay through it and follow up with some of the things that we learned from it, I think brought about a different energy and makes us more productive, it makes us stronger as a team.

Jane also felt that the types of in-depth discussion needed for learning were taking place within the organization. When asked she said, “I say today that they dig deep into problem areas. We get into some real discussions, especially when we get away and we do the retreat types of activities.”

Sarah provided an example of the learning conversational skills evident among some members of the organization. In this example she demonstrated the skill of balancing advocacy and inquiry and in particular the willingness to invite others to inquire about her feelings. She commented:

and expressed it more in terms of, “I felt this way. These are the responses that came up and I wondered why it was coming up and I wanted to express it to you but I also want to understand and these are some ways that I feel that that could be dealt with.” And so we were able to have an honest discussion about it.
Most participants felt that individuals on campus were able to have the conversations needed to enhance organizational learning. They reported an appropriate level of skill in raising difficult issues and engaging in discussions on them. Mike described one such strategy as well as the alternative.

So I think if it is couched as an idea or as a suggestion it’s going to go…. You know somebody who is agitated in their complaint about something is going to make somebody defensive and then people end up justifying themselves rather than listening to suggestions.

Mike also spoke about the individual skill level needed in communication even in a supportive culture. He commented, “Even though I think the campus environment and climate can favorably influence that to some degree…. Just because you’re in the culture doesn’t mean you have the skill set to communicate effectively and non-confrontationally.”

An integral part of the organizational learning process at Lakeside Community College was the use of pilots to try out new practices. A pilot typically involves a scaled-down version of an initiative where fewer resources are committed. The pilot itself has minimal organizational impact, which is particularly important if it fails. Pilots involved the utilization of some resources and it offered a more accurate prediction of the success of an initiative than projections based on “gut feeling” or the experiences of others. During and after the pilot phase of an initiative attention was paid to feedback and results and that determined whether the initiative would continue at a greater scale. Jane made this comment about pilots at Lakeside.

We just have this process to where we do what we call pilots (Chuckles). And when we are piloting something we recognize the fact that it may not always work and you would find a lot of pilots. We’ve piloted different ways to load faculty, they haven’t worked. Some of them were extremely expensive. We come back we regroup. So you would find the word pilot used a lot at Lakeside. And that’s kind of how we denote that something is strictly an experiment and that there’s nothing magic about experiments.

Collaborative efforts on campus also aided in the organizational learning process. Lakeside utilized cross-functional teams regularly in creating solutions to problems and in guiding the
execution of resulting practices. Varying perspectives, experiences and skill-sets among the individuals who participated in such sessions increased the richness of discussions. Their perspectives helped to foster multiple ideas in which the possible systemic effect of initiatives could be projected.

**Dissemination of Knowledge/Learning throughout the Organization**

Lakeside Community College actively promoted the sharing of information and practices throughout the organization. Various forums were utilized to present to faculty members practices that were successful in a particular unit or classroom. Faculty made presentations at “best practice” sessions about strategies that they had tried and found to be useful. Informal sessions such as “brown bag lunches” were also arranged to allow faculty to share information and experiences. The College’s Professional Day activity was also identified as a forum where “there’s an opportunity to present something like that (innovative practice).” Forums such as those just described were also used to disseminate knowledge gained from various sources including conference attendance, classroom experience and reading of relevant literature. Jane offered this comment to describe how information is spread at Lakeside Community College.

We several times a year have sessions to where we share best practices. So peers from throughout the college are selected because we know they’re doing something that’s different, new and innovative and they’re asked to share that. We have faculty colloquiums, once a quarter at least, where we share new practices or bring in speakers that are doing something that’s innovative so there is a lot of opportunities for faculty to get excited about something and then there is always the support there for when they do get excited.

As with the generation of knowledge, collaborations across campus also proved critical in spreading knowledge and practices across campus. Collaborative efforts, both interdepartmental and intradepartmental, brought individuals together for specific purposes but often, serendipitously, proved to be an ideal site for the exchange of ideas and sharing of practices beyond the initial focus of the session. The formal and the informal interaction, such as “catching
up” in those settings provided an opportunity for members of the college community to find out about new practices in various departments.

Many examples of departments or units learning from each other were presented. Through the course of everyday interaction individuals in departments learned what others were doing and adapted them to their department when they thought it would be beneficial. Mike provided an account of such learning and its reciprocal nature.

One, and its not that this is particularly novel, but we purchased, shortly, five years ago, we purchased software, computers and a large printer that can print poster size paper in color…. But anyhow, we made that expenditure because we understood that communication on this type of campus is challenging. An 8 1/2 X 11 black and white flyers, even on brightly colored paper is just completely lost in the blizzard on the bulletin boards. So we bought ten A-frames that hold 24 X 36 inch posters. We bought the software and equipment to make our own posters and we employed a graphic design student intern from our graphic design program, so now we have (holds flyer) this is an 8 1/2 – 11 example of what we printed last week in 24 X 36. But we can add logos, we do, I mean this is effective but we’re a lot more complex than even that little example there. But we began doing that and pretty quickly other folks including our campus’ own marketing group said, “Wow! Good idea. Where did you get this stuff?” We told them, you know. “What have you liked? What’s been the problems?” And then they went and they purchased a piece of equipment that is probably next generation, even better than ours. So they’re able to do that. They in turn started putting some feather banners on campus, which are these posts that stick in the ground …. Y ou know and the text usually goes vertically, and you know it might say “event today”, or whatever. They began using some of those and we said, “Oh, great idea.” So we got some in our colors and in our, you know, and that happened.

**Other Influences on Organizational Learning**

Thus far, stimuli for organizational learning, sources of knowledge and means of knowledge and practice transmittal have been examined. The discussion now turns to factors that do not fit in the above mentioned categories but through their presence or absence influence the learning capacity of an organization. These factors may be categorized as environmental.

**Tolerance for Failed Initiatives and Experimentation**

The findings of the study indicate strong support for experimentation and a high tolerance for failure at Lakeside Community College. Administrators encouraged faculty to try new
approaches in the classroom. Staff and faculty were supported in the development of any initiative that might benefit students and further the mission of the institution. Furthermore, when new initiatives were launched, whether by official pilot projects or otherwise, there was clear communication that failure was a part of the learning process and was to be tolerated in the process of improving the institution. Yvonne felt that the atmosphere at Lakeside allowed faculty to present new initiatives aimed at improvement even if prior attempts failed. When asked about it she said,

No, I think we have a great attitude to that. I really do because, we’ve had so many failed ideas and people keep coming up with more (laughs) KD (laughs) **LR:** No, I’m serious, I really mean it, now that I think about it. Its like, well we’ll try this and if it doesn’t work we’ll try something else and if it doesn’t work we’ll try something else and there is really not much finger pointing like “So and so said this would be the answer to our problems, what an idiot he was.” We don’t really do that, we just like, we tried and maybe we needed to fix some part of it or maybe just toss it all out or whatever. Sometimes maybe we don’t identify quickly enough that an idea is failing but there’s really no, no reason to ever penalize.

Mike expressed a similar sentiment when he said: “…I don’t see people having heavy duty regrets about their failed experiments, you don’t see people publicly criticized or rolling their eyes over something that was a failed effort.”

Lorna’s view on the attitude towards experimentation was different than the views of others. She agreed that experimentation and innovation were encouraged at Lakeside but differed in her view of “the end” of a failed experiment. She felt that failed experiments “died quiet deaths” never to be mentioned again. She suggested that in such instances the opportunity is lost for learning from error. She related, “My sense is the attitude towards the failed experiment, here, it’s kind of, “Let’s just ignore it. Let’s pretend it didn’t happen.””

Lorna then related an episode that helped lead her to the view she currently holds. She told of a well-intentioned program that was put in place for faculty. The program was not suitable for
many faculty members and was eventually discontinued. She concluded her narrative with her evaluation of how such situations are dealt with at Lakeside.

and then it just, no ever said anything more about it. It just went away. And I realized, and then I saw it happen again and again and again. Things are going in a wrong direction, people finally say something about it, get fed up enough about it. Administration never really apologizes (chuckles), never explains it. It just stops.

Support from Senior Administrators

The research findings showed that the senior administration of Lakeside Community College supported activities leading to organizational learning. Administrators regularly advocated being innovative, seeking new knowledge, giving feedback and the sharing of information among members of the college community. Several participants spoke to these points.

As a member of faculty, Lorna felt confident that the support would be there for her and other faculty who were innovative in their work. She said:

And that’s part of why many projects for innovations get advanced here is that the institution is...relatively eager to support faculty in their outside endeavors recognizing the way that it can benefit the institution...those sorts of interests outside the classroom or people wanting to do things a little differently.

She added:

They take chances on people here I think and sort of say, “Well that sounds interesting, where will you go with it?” It seems they will often open up avenues, offer people support where they can and then people turn around and end up with an initiative that really benefits the college.

Lorna also commented in a very personal way when she said, “But I do have a sense that people want to support me in what I do and want to help me to do what I do even better.” Jane expressed a similar sentiment when she said, “So there is a lot of opportunities for faculty to get excited about something and then there is always the support there for when they get excited.”
Availability of Numerous Discussion Forums

The administration was also responsible for setting up various forums that facilitated sharing information in the college community and adapting the organizational structure to ensure that discussion forums included the holders of posts that were needed to ensure optimal effectiveness. They ensured that the “right people” were at the discussion table. As noted earlier, there were numerous opportunities for the sharing of ideas around campus. These include Senate meetings, Senate sub-committee meetings, departmental and unit meetings, best-practice sessions, brown-bag lunches, e-mail exchanges, faculty and staff retreats, and administrative meetings such as Coordinating Council and Academic Heads meetings.

Participants viewed the College Senate as one of the most significant discussion forums on campus as it gave faculty and staff an opportunity to be involved in the “shared governance” of the campus. Participants described the Senate as being effective, respected by senior administration and structured in a way to receive input from those faculty and staff members who wish to give it. Through the Senate, relevant members of the college were able to affect the changes in routines and practices on campus. Yvonne spoke to its representative structure when she said, “We have I think two or three members from each area on campus. It’s a commitment that people take real seriously.” She added, “And you have committees (of the Senate) that actually do what they’re suppose to do.”

While participants spoke of the Senate’s effectiveness, some also thought that it slowed the rate of change on some occasions. Jane said, “I would say, yes, they are extremely open. Maybe sometimes so open that we’re slowed in getting business done because there is so much listening taking place.”

Yvonne, who has been personally involved with the Senate supported Jane’s statement. She commented:
On the negative side, sometimes things, innovations or change or new ideas are put off for a while because we (the Senate) say, “Well, we don’t know, we have to think about that.” The Senate says, “Give us another month, let us form a committee, let us look into it” and it just sort of slows the whole process down.

Organizational Structure

According to participants, there have been purposeful steps taken relating to the structure of the organization that have had a positive effect on how learning takes place in the organization. The high quality of discussion on campus has benefited from decisions taken by administration to ensure interaction between particular groups or officers. Human resources policies that featured cross-training and cross-function promotions also contributed to individuals having a greater sense of the whole institution.

Both heads of academic departments who were involved in the study emphasized the impact of the reorganization of the academic department from two divisions with two different leaders to one unit under the Vice-president of Academic Affairs. Previously, the liberal arts division and the technical division had distinct heads where the department chairs or directors reported. Under the new structure, collaboration, sharing of resources and mutual understanding all increased, which has facilitated organizational learning. When asked about this impact Frank replied:

Yes, emphatically, because this has definitely fostered (3.0) interchange and communication, much more so and I think for the better certainly, between the two different areas. So its definitely… I mean knowing what they need… Because we serve one another, really. As I said, its been very positive.

Jane had this to say about the new structure.

Back a few years ago when the President made a transition where he brought all the departments, academic departments under one vice-president…we used to…we were actually divided out to two divisions. And he eliminated the two division concept a couple years ago to where we all sit now at the same table and I think that has truly promoted a lot more collaboration…as a result we have fewer layers and we all get together and talk a lot more as a result of that.
A noteworthy initiative of the administration to promote interaction, which has been in place for many years, is the physical location of faculty members in interdisciplinary work spaces. Faculty work areas are located in various buildings across campus. Each unit may house between six and ten faculty offices and the individuals assigned to those offices may come from a range of disciplines as opposed to the more typical arrangement where academic departments’ faculty are grouped together. Each unit also includes a common lounge area which further facilitates faculty engaging each other in discussions. Most participants praised the concept and design of the interdisciplinary units, even when they did not actually work in that type environment, as was the case with one department chair and one faculty member. Frank, who worked in such a unit reported:

The structure of our buildings was intended, and the way that we’re housed in interdisciplinary units, to have a continual exchange of ideas and a mixing of people so that you know, hopefully its to move forward…. Having had the opportunity to interact and have exchange with faculty from so many varying disciplines, as I said it’s just a very wholesome thing…. And I think that enhances the ability to be able to change.

Lorna’s reflection on her experience in an interdisciplinary unit was not as positive. She stated, “It’s a lovely idea (hint of sarcasm detected) and I will also say that I think it works in some units.” She later added, “It’s a wonderful idea about the interdisciplinary units but it has not worked beautifully for me.” She reported much better working relationships with her disciplinary peers who were spread across the campus.

**Relationships**

An important feature that favors communication, and as a result organizational learning at Lakeside is the positive relationships between various individuals on campus. While identifying this feature, participants attributed the development of these relationships to several reasons. Low turnover among the staff meant that there were many longtime employees at Lakeside who had opportunities through the years to build relationships. Frank pointed out that “people that
come to Lakeside (to work) generally tend to stay.” Due to the relatively small size of the population in the area in which the campus is situated many individuals are known to each other as spouses, siblings, neighbors and friends away from campus and the college benefits from those relationships in the workplace.

Mike spoke of the relative casual nature of interaction at Lakeside when compared to a four-year institution at which he had worked. He said:

but here I’m a lot more in a position to say, “Hey Jim”, rather than Dr. Johnson. And again it’s not that we’re so small here that you can attribute it all to that. I think some of it is the culture here.

The administration’s practice of promoting and transferring employees across functional areas meant that numerous employees not only understood several functions on campus but also knew employees in several functional areas. The tendency to approach issues using inter-departmental groups also brought individuals together and facilitated the building of relationships.

How members of the college community related to each other was also affected by the strong commitment to the institution’s mission and priorities across campus. College faculty and staff were willing to set aside any personal differences and work together with whomever to help achieve organizational objectives. The building of relationships resulted in a high degree of trust and comfort among many individuals as they worked together on campus.

High-quality Faculty

Participants felt that the faculty at Lakeside Community College was a very talented group. They attributed this in large part to the presence of a major and reputed university in the same area. Trailing spouses of professors at the university and graduates who desired to remain in the area contributed greatly to a strong applicant pool whenever faculty jobs were advertised. The high quality of faculty and the zeal they brought to the campus facilitated the creative and
innovative spirit at Lakeside. Lorna compared them to the faculty at another community college where she had recently worked and found Lakeside’s faculty to be far superior. She said, “I think that the faculty here are just, they’re smart creative people.” She commented further about some faculty members. “These are people who are scholars which I think is rare to find at the community college.”

Mike emphasized the availability of quality faculty and said, “I think we’ve had the good fortune of having an amazing candidate pool for this institution and part of that is our proximity (to)... a very well educated and open-minded town.” He also believed that the pool allowed greater latitude in choosing faculty based on a range of attributes. He said:

Some of them are spouses of people at the University, so we have this incredible pool of candidates. So that allows us to choose people who are not only proficient in their discipline but also have the attitude we like.

Leadership

The findings from the interviews pointed out that leadership at various levels within the institution was a contributing factor to organizational learning. The President of Lakeside Community College was the source of several new initiatives. One respondent involved in senior-level discussions pointed out that the “presidential” initiatives came about as a result of input from various college forums. The president was also described as facilitating new ideas to the campus. Coordinating Council Meeting, which is convened monthly by the President, often took the form of brainstorming sessions on various issues or a presentation by an invited guest on a topic related to a new initiative being considered or under way. In this way, the President contributed to the generation of new knowledge, its refinement and adaptation, and its dissemination throughout the organization.

Jane credited the President with starting many initiatives and creating the structure and atmosphere to sustain learning. She commented that he “tried to reinforce an environment of
shared governance” and that in the interest of better communication he “brought all the academic
departments under one vice-president. When asked about the stimulus for innovation on campus,
she commented that:

I think our President had a lot to do with it. I really do. He started that department when he
got here. He developed several initiatives that he was extremely interested in, one of them
was the internationalization of our college, our faculty and students. Another one was our
partnerships within the community to make sure that everybody has the same, um, same
opportunities to go to school and to learn and to advance through careers.

Mike commented about the impact of senior leadership on activities in the organization.
He mentioned the focus of the previous president on improvement and innovation. He also said,
“The current president of course is also very focused on change and improvement so that to
down works its way through the institution.” Similarly Sarah said, “…and the moment the
leadership takes an interest something then it trickles down to all the departments because every
department is charged to do something about it, address it.”

Yvonne like all other participants mentioned the initiatives or priorities articulated by the
president regularly. She said, “I don’t want to sound like a Pollyanna and say he’s wonderful, but
he’s impressed me a lot. He is willing to take risks.” She added, “I think he is very
driven for improvement.”

Frank pointed to the role that the President plays in setting the tone for the openness that
pervades the campus. He said, “And then of course there are, the President leaves his door open.
There’s an atmosphere, as I said, here, of an openness and its not… Anybody can feel free to go
and talk to anybody and interact.”

The interviews also revealed that the Vice-President of Academic Affairs played a
significant role in facilitating organizational learning. The Vice-President joined with the
president in encouraging innovation and curiosity about new practices throughout the institution.
The Vice President supported the introduction of new knowledge in the organization by
disseminating articles in her weekly email update that was distributed to all faculty. She invited feedback and if needed, further investigation was conducted on the ideas presented in those articles.

Jane spoke extensively of the impact of the Academic Vice-President. She felt that a lot of her effectiveness was related to her personal attributes and style as a leader. She commented:

And all of that has to do with the Vice-President we now have. She comes from an amazing background and she has a business degree as well and she also knows how to facilitate in her role as opposed to directing and managing and it just opened a lot of conversation that takes place.

She continued:

She has made all the difference in the world in our jobs in the last two years... She doesn’t micro-manage and she’s just brilliant! She really has in the last couple of years been a primary reason that a lot of these collaborative types of efforts are going on.

Other respondents in the study had varying experiences with leaders of their units in the institution. Mike pointed out that even in a institution where there is generally good leadership practices, they are not necessarily distributed throughout the organization. He said, “Just because you’re in that culture doesn’t mean you have the skill set to communicate effectively and non-confrontationally.”

Yvonne, as discussed earlier, was very impressed with the leadership of the President but had a nearly opposite view concerning the leader of her unit. She suggested that her unit lacked a leader who could “see the forest from the trees” and who could “put pieces together and see what change is needed.

**Big Picture/Systems Thinking**

An analysis of the interviews revealed that there was a strong appreciation of how various activities at Lakeside fit into the “big picture”. Participants’ comments suggested that there was unity of purpose at Lakeside. The strong, universal commitment to the institution’s mission
seemed to be a key contributing factor in this regard. The mission was not simply the institution’s mission, it was “our” mission. The feeling of responsibility for servicing students’ needs seemed to go beyond the activities of the immediate unit to whether needs were being met in the College as a whole. Individuals were asked to comment on services outside of their functional area and given opportunity to serve on committees related to activities outside of their primary assignment. Mike compared his experience at Lakeside with that at a four-year university where he had worked and said, “I have an opportunity to have broader interests in the educational process and to have perhaps a better comprehension of the big picture because of my involvement that’s a little broader.”

The sense of commitment to one main goal also seemed to manifest itself in the lack of competition between units. Participants described units as striving for effectiveness as opposed to simply being better than their internal unit peer. Frank’s comment seemed to represent the views of other participants.

but as I’ve said I’ve found that some of institutions I’ve worked in the past it wasn’t subjugated enough. You felt like you had to be in competition for students, for attention, for money, for everything. And I think we do a very good job of that here, not being in competition. You know, they’re not my students they’re our students. You know students…We work in conjunction, I mean we have, the math department is providing prerequisites for the chemistry and biology and business. And we all need to work in this together. We all have a part to play in the whole scheme of things.

Mike also spoke of this lack of competition on campus when he spoke of sharing ideas and best practices around campus. He said,

people don’t try and keep it for themselves because they want to make sure they got credit for it, you see what I’m saying. People are more excited about sharing a good idea or a good best practice than they are about being at all competitive about it.

There was ample evidence of units helping other units as opposed to hoarding resources with a view to improving one’s own unit at the expense of others. In discussing this practice at
Lakeside Jane used a well-developed narrative that was telling of a relevant experience. The final portions are given below including the evaluative final sentence.

So there we were between departments “divi-ing” up what we had available and departments that were actually willing to say, “I don’t need that as badly as somebody else does, I’ll give up my turn, my round.” And I just think that’s a real different type of culture when you’re willing to look at things as a whole instead of as individuals.

Positioning Analysis

As participants produced their views during the interviews, it was often possible to glean the position they took as individuals and how they positioned others in conversation about organizational life at Lakeside Community College. The interviews did not involve dialogue between two members of the college community where offering, acceptance or rejection of positions would be evident; hence that aspect of the analysis was not available. However, the way in which participants positioned themselves and others spoke directly to whether they saw themselves or others as facilitating or inhibiting organizational learning. Some positional claims were explicit and involved their self-analysis, however some were more subtle and required analysis of the participants’ statements at various points. Their positions, presented here, reflect those most often taken by the participants. Unlike roles which are more static, individuals may claim various positions during the course of an interview.

Sarah

Sarah positioned herself as having a high sense of moral obligation to help those she considered less fortunate than herself. She positioned many community college students as being in need of the help that she and the college were able to provide. She felt that because she benefited from educational opportunities, that she needed to give to others. This sense of obligation provided the stimulus for her to assist in organizational learning in an effort to better meet the needs of students.
But what interested me in working in a community college was the ability to work at the grassroots level. To work with people, and I always liked working with the student population. That was a dream of mine to work with students anyway and to me community colleges represented grassroots.

Sarah also positioned herself as having the necessary skill to have learning conversations, and as the one with the courage to initiate troubling conversations. She viewed herself as being able to inquire into the feelings and assumptions of others and open herself to similar inquiry. This is an important concept in organizational learning. She gave an account of a difficult conversation, a portion of which is reproduced here:

and I put the question to him in the context of some of the conversation he was having and he was glad that I asked and I was glad that I asked because I could express, you know, underlying feelings that I was having and he was able to explain and I said I wish more people talked like this and we communicated.

Jane

Jane positioned herself and others in her area as skilled in certain processes that could benefit organizational learning. She commented that working in business and industry required more work to be done in teams and hence individuals from such backgrounds were poised for collaboration. She positioned others from departments who had a background that was more grounded in academic pursuits as lacking certain skills due to what she perceived as the norms of isolation associated with teaching. She stated:

I think that the biggest thing I see is that for the most part [is] those of us who have come in from a business background, no matter whether its just general business or its construction or it’s a medical field, all have more experience with administrative types of skill sets. We’re more used to working in teams because typically as a faculty member, you don’t typically work in a team.

Jane also positioned herself as a facilitative leader, one who would enable others to be creative in performing their duties. In claiming this position she viewed herself as supporting risk-taking and experimentation which are both critical to organizational learning. In addition to
the positions claimed for her, Jane positioned her supervisor, the VP of Academic Affairs as having the skills needed to facilitate organizational learning. She commented:

And all of that has to do with the vice-president we now have. She comes from an amazing background. She comes from an academic background and she has a business degree as well and she also knows how to facilitate in her role as opposed to directing and managing and it just has opened a lot of conversation that takes place.

**Frank**

Frank positioned himself as a loyal “company man” who strongly believed in the mission of the institution and the need for it to be central to all activities of the organization. He felt that there was a close match between the organization’s mission and his personal values. He also claimed the position of a servant-leader within the organization, seeking to serve students and co-workers alike. He said, “My philosophy of leadership is really, I’m a servant. I have a servant attitude and I think the best leaders are those who have that attitude.” These position claims impacted his role in organizational learning as he had the motivation to improve based on his commitment to the mission and he was also willing to engage in collaborative work.

**Lorna**

Lorna positioned herself as having the ability to understand what was happening in the organization and described some of her colleagues as lacking that ability. She saw herself as knowing why certain things had to be done even when others at her level might not have understood. In organizational learning terms, she positioned herself as a systems thinker who saw the impact of actions beyond the immediately obvious effect. She said:

However, they didn’t think about what this would mean within the institution and how this could affect our department in the way that other departments were looking at us, the way administration was looking at us and part of that is that most faculty, I don’t think really think like that. …. They just seemed not to look at the ramifications of a decision they were making beyond just our own sort of narrow sphere. So that was a frustration for me.
These claims became obvious upon analysis, however, she made more explicit claims of faculty in her discipline as dedicated professionals who were focused on improvement and on faculty in general as smart and creative.

**Yvonne**

Yvonne positioned herself as being able to understand how things worked within her department and as an “instrument of change” within the unit. Most of her positioning, however, seemed to be based upon the claims that she made for others. She positioned the President of Lakeside as a hard-working, risk-taker who was largely responsible for the learning and innovations taking place throughout the college. Conversely she positioned her department head as insecure, lacking the ability to “put the pieces together” and as not wanting feedback. Her portrayal suggested his limited capacity for involvement in effective organizational learning. This positioning is consistent with her view that most of the changes in the department were driven by the changes in the industry or by mandates from senior administrators not by the efforts of the department head.

**Mike**

Mike positioned himself as having a firm grasp of the “big picture”. This claim is related to his perception of his “broad involvement” at the college and the impact of his diverse educational background on his ability to see the “big picture”. He also positioned himself as a creative, problem solver who embraced change. All these claims are aligned with high learning capacity.

**The Researcher**

As the researcher in this framework it is appropriate that I examine my own position as I joined with participants in the construction of their data. At various points I varied between *emic* and *etic* stances (Pike, 1967). Having had more than ten years experience at a community college
I was able to engage them in an emic way as an insider. There are certain experiences common to most community colleges and as I shared my experiences this allowed participants to see me as understanding their point of view and I believe, to share even more. Contrastingly, at other points in the interviews I positioned myself as an outsider, adopting a more etic stance. From this position, while I had community college experience I did not have experience at that community college and hence I had to learn from the experiences of those who were inside the setting. I also stood outside as the researcher, having control of the “big picture” of the research project and bringing knowledge of the theory and terms associated with the area of study. The following quote represents an occasion that I connected with a participant as an insider to the community college experience.

Yeah, you did and you answered mine because that has been my experience as well. Very similar to yours. In a faculty position and then just taking on more and more administrative stuff and then even being seen as part of the administration  **Lorna:** Yeah, right.  **KD:** without officially being there.  **Lorna:** right, right  **KD:** Till eventually I became a dean so then I was officially part of it but it happened long before, just making yourself available. And I was concerned over the same thing as you because yes, I was involved and really felt I made significant impact but there were a lot of people who I thought were just as talented, had as much to say, had as much thought power or whatever and energy but just didn’t somehow feel that (.5) obligation or that (1.0) feeling invited, I don’t know. No one was stopping them but somehow they didn’t feel invited and um…

**Summary**

The results of this study were presented as whole in order to present the interrelated and story-like nature of the analysis. In this section the results will be summarized as they relate to the research questions and sub-questions.

How do members of a college community construct organizational learning?

This question speaks to how organizational learning takes place and sought to assess the quality of learning processes. There was ample evidence of learning processes at Lakeside Community College. There were opportunities for corporate discussion of issues and searching
for solutions. Groups were able to use information that was received from outside and from internal information sources such as from surveys that suggested a need to make changes to the routines and practices of the organization. There was evidence of creative learning as some discussion forums resulted in defining problems, opportunities and the proposal of appropriate responses. Evidence that would distinguish single-loop and double-loop learning was not as clear. While error was detected and corrected, the degree to which underlying assumptions were examined in that process was not absolutely evident from this study. Recommendations to rectify this in future research will be offered in chapter five. The level of reflection on past events for the purpose of informing future practice seemed lacking. The participant who most explicitly addressed lessons learned from past events felt that this was a weak area in the institution as particularly projects that failed “just died” without examining what went wrong.

Lakeside displayed solid processes to spread knowledge and new practices within the organization. Numerous opportunities for interaction through various discussion forums greatly facilitated this aspect of organizational learning. There was also evidence of new practices being utilized and becoming a part of the organization’s routines.

In sum, the study indicated that the stages of organizational learning - knowledge generation, dissemination and utilization – were all well attended to at Lakeside though the quality of some learning processes could not be properly assessed in this study.

Sub-questions

1. How do members of a college community describe facilitators of organizational learning?

The study was particularly useful in addressing this question in the study. Lakeside’s high capacity for learning meant that participants were able to speak more about what made learning possible than the things that inhibited learning. They reported numerous stimuli for learning such
as commitment to the mission, desire to meet students’ needs, encouragement from senior administration, a desire to maintain the institution’s reputation for innovativeness and external stimuli. The means for generating or acquiring knowledge that would precede learning was also evident at Lakeside. There were adequate forums for discussing issues at the college and there was support for attendance at conferences where many new ideas were obtained. Forums also proved to be an excellent means for spreading ideas and innovations throughout the institution. The spread of new ideas occurred through both formal and informal means.

Participants also described numerous organizational environmental features that facilitated organizational learning at Lakeside Community College. These features included a high tolerance for failed initiatives, supportive senior administrators, availability of discussion forums, facilitative organizational structures, positive relationships, high quality faculty and sound leadership. Finally, the ability of members of the organization to see the “big picture” and appreciate how things inter-relate also facilitated organizational learning.

2. How do members of a college community describe inhibitors of organizational learning?

Given the high learning capacity at Lakeside, there was not as much talk about what factors inhibited organizational learning at the college. Some participants did provide some insights that surfaced as counter-narratives to the prevailing views of the others. Two participants cited a possible obstacle to frank sharing in the problem identification process. They indicated that identifying a problem usually meant having responsibility for seeing it through to solution. Another participant felt that learning opportunities were lost when failed projects were not examined to determine what went wrong.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

A comparison of the theoretical stages of organizational learning with the results of this study, showed that there was clearly a high capacity for organizational learning at Lakeside Community College. The collective narrative of participants in this study showed that there was evidence of an individual awareness of the “big picture”, tolerance for mistakes during learning, a trusting and collaborative climate, a shared and monitored mission, and ongoing professional development at Lakeside (Silins & Mulford, 2002; Tannenbaum, 1997). In a summary of literature, and practices essential to organizational learning, Goh and Richards (1997) identified five characteristics including clarity of purpose and mission, leadership commitment and empowerment, experimentation and rewards, transfer of knowledge and teamwork and group problem solving. These characteristics were also present in the environment and practices at Lakeside.

In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the findings about the nature of Lakeside’s organizational learning and discuss the linkages between these findings and the research literature. Included will be implications of the findings for other community colleges. The overarching themes including the morally appealing mission, trust, communication, leadership, and big picture/systems thinking will comprise this section. I will discuss the theoretical implications of this study and conclude this chapter with recommendations for further study.

Stages and Types of Organizational Learning

A review of the nature of organizational learning reveals that there are key stages in the process including how knowledge is acquired or generated, disseminated throughout the organization, and utilized and retained (Huber, 1991; Crossan, Lane & White, 1999; Dibella and Nevis, 1998 and Kruse, 2003).
At Lakeside, internal and external sources were used to ensure that adequate knowledge was generated. The leadership of the institution encouraged the acquisition of external information by funding participants to attend conferences, purchasing subscriptions to literature and hosting speakers on campus who could speak informatively about initiatives under consideration. Discussion forums were held where knowledge acquired externally was shared. Internal knowledge was generated through verbal interchange. Participants reported that they felt there were adequate opportunities to share experiences and to engage in discussions leading to knowledge creation.

Access to information needed for organizational learning is not unique to Lakeside. Even schools with low budgets for travel can access online resources to catalyze conversation about trends and innovations. Providing forums for discussion on campus simply needs planning. Underlying such initiatives requires that the institution place a value on such activities and that the senior leadership signify its importance. Lakeside’s senior leadership clearly placed a value on accessing information.

Some theoretical frameworks applied in varying degrees to the type of organizational learning at Lakeside Community College. For example, the detection and correction of error is fundamental to organizational learning (Argyris, 1978). There was ample evidence to show that Lakeside engaged in the collection of feedback data that could aid the detection of error, although one participant questioned the use of the data in the decision-making process. That participant felt that learning opportunities were lost because failed programs were allowed to fade from the consciousness of the organization’s members rather than be analyzed to see what went wrong. Other participants did not express the same sentiment but neither did they emphasize processes in the organization that focused on reflection on past activities.
Influences on Organizational Learning

Morally Appealing Mission

One significant impetus for organizational learning at Lakeside Community College and potentially for all community colleges was its morally appealing mission. Lakeside’s mission was stated as “Adding value to the lives of our students and enriching our community.” There was wide consensus that the mission was the right one for individual participants and for the campus as a whole. This particular mission/vision statement was well known to participants and seemed significant in their eyes but the real force seemed to be in the meaning derived from it.

Drawing examples from physical science, Wheatley (1999) found that seemingly chaotic systems are in fact organized around “strange attractors”. She posits that in organizations, meaning is the most powerful force of attraction. Meaning then, provides the answer to the question, “Why we do what we do?” At Lakeside, the central theme seems to surround meeting students’ needs and student development. These themes appeared to be the “attractors” which powered the drive among faculty and staff to continuously learn and improve the organization in service of the students.

By adhering to its mission, the institution aimed to make a difference in students’ lives. Many participants specifically described the differences that they perceived between community college students and the typical 18-22 year old at a four-year university. In comparison, they claimed that community college students attended school by choice, had more by way of life experiences, and felt a greater need to succeed at this point in their lives. Participants seemed to feel that helping such individuals was more gratifying and self-fulfilling than teaching young university students who were attending school as part of a long-designed path. Participants found deep meaning in what they did and that same purpose that brought personal gratification was also embodied in the mission and values of the institution.
Throughout this study it became apparent that there is a strong shared vision at Lakeside Community College. Senge (1990) describes the phenomenon in this way. “A shared vision is a vision that many people are truly committed to, because it reflects their own personal vision.” (p. 206) Most participants articulated the values and goals that are important to them - a personal vision - and found congruence between their own mission and that of the institution. Personal vision leads to shared vision which is necessary for a learning organization (Senge, 1990). He also found that shared vision uplifts people’s aspiration and cultivates risk taking and experimentation in an organization; both of which were evident at Lakeside Community College.

Community colleges are often seen as the “second chance” institution for non-traditional students, though indicators suggest that more traditional college students are opting for the community college as an entry point to higher education, due to escalating costs (Boggs, 2004). The opportunity to do work that makes a difference in the lives of individuals was an important stimulus for organizational learning at Lakeside and given the right conditions could be the same elsewhere.

Trust

Another positive influence on organizational learning at Lakeside Community College was the atmosphere of trust that seemed to pervade the campus. Many factors contributed to this influence. For example, the President’s promotion and practice of open communication was a key component. Most of the participants felt that communication structures were open and that one’s own voice could be heard through forums and individual contact with leaders. This access, combined with the belief that members of the campus community, including the leadership, were aligned with the institution’s mission fostered an atmosphere of trust.

Positive relationships between individuals and functional areas on campus also contributed to the atmosphere of trust. The relationships were developed both serendipitously and through
purposeful action by the college’s administration over the years. Given the relative small size of
the city in which the college is located and the high average length of service, there had been
opportunities for employees to get to know one another both during on and off campus
interactions. Those interactions mostly resulted in a positive impact on work relationships.
College practices such as the regular use of interdisciplinary and inter-functional committees,
and promotion across functional areas also helped bring persons into contact with each other.
Distributing faculty across campus in interdisciplinary workspaces also meant that relationships
were developed between department peers and location peers. A learning culture requires high
trust or at a minimum high functional familiarity (Schein, 2004). The leadership of an
organization is instrumental in both. Leaders must operate under the assumption that employees
can be trusted and they must create sufficient opportunities for interaction between
interdependent people and units to foster familiarity (Schein, 2004).

Another aspect contributing to trust was a sense of a psychologically safety in the
environment. Some elements of such an environment are support and encouragement to
overcome the fear and shame associated with making errors, norms that legitimize the making of
errors, and norms that reward innovative thinking and experimentation (Schein, 1993a). There
was congruence between these elements and the atmosphere at Lakeside Community College. At
Lakeside, innovation and experimentation were encouraged verbally and through the provision
of needed resources. Participants were united in describing Lakeside as an organization where
some failure was expected as a part of the learning process. Community members seemed
comfortable in making several attempts at initiatives thought to be of benefit to the institution.
No participant reported negative repercussions for failed experiments or initiatives on campus.
Comfort in experimenting and risk taking are essential elements in developing a facilitative atmosphere for organizational learning (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Senge, 1990).

**Communication**

Participants agreed that there was good communication flow and opportunity for input and exchange on issues related to the work of the institution. All stages of organizational learning were positively affected by effective communication. Organizational learning was stimulated by effective communication of the mission and vision for the institution by senior leaders of the institution. Their willingness to support innovation and learning also seemed to be clearly understood by the participants. Discussion forums were ample and adequate for the generation of knowledge internally. The atmosphere at most forums seemed to be open and rich.

There were also systems for disseminating new ideas gained externally from conferences and similar experiences or from internal deliberation and experimentation. The successful diffusion of innovative practices across an organization depends in part on the permeability of organizational boundaries and the information infrastructure (Senge, et al., 1999). Lakeside was structured to bring together the people needed for discussion, regardless of their functional area. The discussion forums themselves were integral to getting information across the institution. This was achieved through the stated objectives of meetings as well as the informal interaction of meeting participants. The fact that meetings often involved individuals from differing functional areas also helped in the formal and informal spread of information.

**Leadership**

All the stages of organizational learning can be influenced by the leadership of the organization. Effective organizational learning requires involved, learning leaders (Dibella & Nevis, 1998; Schein, 2004). A high capacity for learning at Lakeside Community College can be traced to the particular choices and actions of the administration. They stimulated the desire to
learn and adapt by bringing an awareness to the organization about what similar schools were doing and by asserting that Lakeside needed to be among the best.

Lakeside’s leaders encouraged and supported the generation of knowledge at the institution. Organizational learning is facilitated when individuals seek information about practices outside their own unit or institution and when curiosity about current practices and possible innovations is encouraged (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). Lakeside’s leaders urged faculty and staff to look outside of the institution to find the best practices in the field that were suited for adoption at the institution. In addition, they facilitated the creation of discussion forums in which knowledge was generated internally. Many forums were interdepartmental or interdisciplinary in nature, thus enriching the discussion. They also created opportunities for faculty members to share innovative practices thus communicating a high value on innovativeness in the institution.

Lakeside’s senior administration emphasized the importance of feedback. In addition to personally seeking feedback and exemplifying open communication, they systematized the use of survey instruments to collect opinions from the entire college community on various aspects of the operation. Assessment was built into projects and other activities as a means of determining effectiveness and providing information for improvement. While feedback implies reflection, there was no clear evidence from the data that the administration led team members in reflective activities that examined assumptions underlying actions in the organization.

**Big Picture/Systems Thinking**

When Senge (1990) postulated the five disciplines of the learning organization he suggested that the fifth one, systems thinking, was the most important as it brought all the others together. While not fully developed, there was evidence of capacity for systems thinking at Lakeside Community College. Systems thinking requires an appreciation of “wholeness” of an
organization, a sense of how things interrelate, and mechanisms for feedback within the system. Human resource policies at Lakeside featured cross-functional promotion and cooperation that resulted in a cadre of individuals across the institution familiar with how other areas worked and hence were able to understand systemic interrelations. These individuals could use that understanding within their units as well as in any cross-functional discussion forums of which they were a part. Effective discussion forums at the highest levels, such as Coordinating Council and Academic Heads Meeting, brought various units together and increased the understanding of how things interrelated at Lakeside.

Based on the views of participants, employees of Lakeside seemed to have a strong sense of the organization as a whole. Individuals seemed to be committed to the mission and goals of the organization above unit or individual goals. In the academic units, people spoke of “our students” and seemed to recognize a joint responsibility for all the students at Lakeside. This can also be attributed to the sense of the mission being right for the institution and general commitment followed as a result. This sense of joint responsibility for achieving the institution’s mission probably accounted for the high levels of collaboration and the lack of the type of competition between units that yielded negative effects.

Lakeside practices systems thinking to some extent and certainly seems poised to improve their capacity in this arena if there is investment in developing the skills of systems thinking. While there was a level of skill in this discipline, comparison with the work of leading researchers suggest that it is not optimized at Lakeside. For example, concepts such as understanding the varying distances between cause and effect, identifying processes of change as opposed to snapshots, and leverage for example, must be purposely developed.
Theoretical Implications

Argyris (1978) focuses on the detection and correction of error in organizations. He suggests that the quality of learning depends on the extent to which the assumptions underlying action are examined. He called the learning that includes such examination double-loop learning. Without it, only single-loop learning could occur. Based on the experiences of participants within different units at Lakeside as well as experiences at other institutions, it is clear that learning capacity varies from unit to unit and among institutions. Argyris’ classification is useful in characterizing the quality of learning although whether all action in an organization will require an examination of underlying assumptions may be questioned.

Argyris’ approach seems to be based around problem-solving; organizations looking back at past action with a view towards informing future practice. Community colleges and other organizations are necessarily proactive in order to be competitive in today’s marketplace; hence a theory that projects forward is needed. Furthermore, some participants in the study described conversations pertaining to seizing opportunities in addition to responding to perceived problems. Argyris’ ideas are still useful however, because the assumptions underlying projections must also be unearthed in order to make high-quality decisions. A theory that addresses how quality projections are made must include the role of vision and mission in focusing and guiding those projections.

Ellström (2003) also addressed the quality of learning within organizations and classified them as adaptive and developmental learning. His distinctions of learning in organizations relate to the degree of control individuals have in determining the tasks, methods and results related to their work. This approach allows for both problem-solving and learning associated with seizing opportunities. The experience of participants at Lakeside required and evidenced such a flexible framework.
Dibella and Nevis (1998) developed a framework for understanding how organizations learn and for determining their learning capacity. While they designed it for applications across organizational types, their application of the framework has led them to believe that there are types of organizations that possess enough unique features to merit minor modifications to the framework. They gave an example of modifications to healthcare organizations based on their particular characteristics. Similar to healthcare systems, community colleges possess features that may require adjustments in the framework in order to best assess their learning capacity. As with healthcare, they are service providers, not manufacturers or retailers and as a result the measurement must focus on the process of delivering the service. The provision of a service does not easily allow for research and development apart from the actual delivery of the service. Innovations are often piloted with the clientele.

Several adjustments made for healthcare systems seem applicable to community colleges. They are both service providers with long-standing institutional purposes that are morally appealing. Given the importance of mission demonstrated in this study, mission and vision should be addressed explicitly among the learning facilitators. Another learning facilitator identified within healthcare systems that is applicable to community colleges is learning confidence. This facilitator refers to learning from past experiences, experience in trying new things and the conviction that learning is possible. Results of the study do not suggest that this is a significant attribute of learning at Lakeside Community College but it is possible that the investigation’s structure may have inhibited revelations in this area. Results from healthcare systems caused the researchers to re-label their learning facilitator - climate of openness, to trusting relationships. This present study presents a strong case for similar labeling in community colleges. Trusting relationships refer to both the ties individual have with each other in the work
setting and to the associated psychological safety that would increase open discussion about mistakes and unproven ideas.

Community colleges have numerous subcultures and can be classified in various ways based on what they hold as important and how they operate (Berquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1988; Levin, 1997). Results of the study indicate a match between Lakeside and several cultural types. Lakeside’s values and modes of operation were most congruent with the developmental culture and the service culture (Berquist, 1992; Levin, 1997). These cultures focused on meeting the developmental needs of students, employees of the institution and the surrounding community serviced by the college. Participants frequently mentioned meeting student needs as the major priority of the institution. The prevailing view among participants was that this type focus was right for the institution and this positively stimulated learning and also improved collaborative efforts as a result of the unity of purpose.

There were indicators of other cultures on campus, though not as strong as the developmental and service culture. Two notable cultures present at Lakeside were hierarchical and negotiating. The hierarchical culture focused around the president of the institution and respect for that individual as embodying the moral purpose of the institution and having the right to articulate its mission, vision and values (Levin, 1997). The results indicated that the president of Lakeside had such status in the eyes of the college community. The presence of this culture on campus facilitates organizational learning provided that the leader articulates values such as focus on mission, open communication, focus on improvement for the benefit of the students and willingness to experiment and innovate; this was clearly the case at Lakeside. The central role of the College Senate in activities of the college indicates the presence of the negotiating culture on campus (Berquist, 1992).
Recommendations for Further Study

1. The results revealed insight into the nature and quality of organizational learning at a community college. However, understanding the nature and quality of interaction and learning calls, essentially, for a cultural study. I believe that a micro-ethnography would be appropriate. Such a study would require prolonged contact in the field and should involve observations in addition to interviews. Participants should be interviewed as they attend large and small meetings in their normal setting. The observational data would be used to inform questions to be asked of participants as researchers seek to unearth underlying assumptions to their actions and the differences between their espoused theories and theories-in-use. Argyris (1993) used such an approach with much success while investigating organizational learning.

2. This study utilized a sample from different functional areas and varying levels in the organizational hierarchy. There were some differences in views based on participant’s level in the organization. There appeared to be stronger support for the leadership of the College among those closer to the top. While this is expected to some degree, a study aimed at determining the degree to which momentum from the top is lost and at what point would be useful. A study that included more individuals from both academic units would be useful as there were subtle indicators that the views that individuals held were related to their area of work.

3. A study based on length of service could prove useful as most counter narratives came from the faculty member with less than five years of service and the member with over 15 years seemed extremely committed to the institution, a “corporation type man” as he put it. More participants could be sought from among faculty with few years of service and those with many years of service.

4. Participants in the study did not produce as many “classically” structured narratives as anticipated. This may have been due in part to their recounting of their views, as required by the study, as opposed to their experiences. Designers of future similar studies should consider this when planning the use of a narrative analytical framework such as that of Labov and Waletzkey (1967).

5. The dominant discourse was the primacy of students’ needs and support for the Administration, in particular Lakeside Community College’s President, in determining the way forward for the institution. When the question of innovations was raised during the study, most participants referred to three priority areas/initiatives established by the President, though ironically, most were only able to name two. These features are certainly of benefit to the institution but I wondered if the discourse was so dominating and bound in tradition that there was little opportunity for questioning the organization’s direction and practices at Lakeside. Only one participant questioned the appropriateness of any of the President’s priorities. Future research could examine how the discourse was developed and if it plays a role of silencing discordant voices. The higher quality modes of organizational learning require the capacity to inquire into the views of others and the assumptions that support those views (Argyris, 1978; Senge, 1990).
6. The findings of this study revealed that most practices associated with facilitating organizational learning were in place at Lakeside Community College. An area worthy of further investigation is the practice of reflection at the institution and the role it plays in learning. The point of interest is not whether or not reflection is taking place, but the quality of that reflection. Changes in behavior can take place without changing the underlying assumptions behind those behaviors but such change is typically not sustainable (Argyris, 1978). A study that focuses on how reflection is practiced could reveal whether conversations about past practices go beyond the surface and examine the theories-in-use that support the particular action. In essence, such a study could help determine how much of the higher level double-loop learning is taking place in a particular setting.

7. Two components that were mentioned in the literature but not attended to in a significant way in this study were organizational memory and the level of on-going professional development. On-going professional development facilitates organizational learning and thus merits more attention than given in this study (Leithwood, et al., 1998; Mulford & Silins, 2003). Future study could address the extent to which new practices are institutionalized and retained in the organization and the impact of professional development.

8. Many administrators in higher education institutions value comparing their institutions with peer institutions. Findings from this study combined with further work in the area can be used to adapt an organizational learning framework, such as Dibella and Nevis’ (1998) for use in community college settings. The framework, developed around learning orientations and what facilitates or inhibits learning in an organization, could assist organizations in an assessment of their learning capability.
APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board
FWA00005790

DATE:     June 9, 2006

TO:       Karl Dawson
           2701 NW 23rd Blvd, P128
           Gainesville, FL 32605

FROM:     Ira S. Fischler, Chair
           University of Florida
           Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT:  Approval of Protocol #2006-U-0512

TITLE:    Organizational Learning in a Community College

SPONSOR:  None

I am pleased to advise you that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board has recommended approval of this protocol. Based on its review, the UFIRB determined that this research presents no more than minimal risk to participants. Given your protocol, it is essential that you obtain signed documentation of informed consent from each participant. Enclosed is the dated, IRB-approved informed consent to be used when recruiting participants for the research.

It is essential that each of your participants sign a copy of your approved informed consent that bears the IRB approval stamp and expiration date.

If you wish to make any changes to this protocol, including the need to increase the number of participants authorized, you must disclose your plans before you implement them so that the Board can assess their impact on your protocol. In addition, you must report to the Board any unexpected complications that affect your participants.

If you have not completed this protocol by June 1, 2007, please telephone our office (392-0433), and we will discuss the renewal process with you. It is important that you keep your Department Chair informed about the status of this research protocol.
1. **TITLE OF PROTOCOL:** Organizational learning in a community college

2. **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(s):** Karl Dawson, M.A., Ph. D candidate, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, Home address 2701 NW 23rd Blvd, P128, Gainesville, Fl. 32605, tel. 352-264-1213, kadawson@ufl.edu

3. **SUPERVISOR (IF PI IS STUDENT):** Dr. Linda Behar-Horenstein, 1202 Norman Hall, (352) 392-0731 ext. 230, Lsbhoren@ufl.edu, fax: (352) 846-2697

4. **DATES OF PROPOSED PROTOCOL:** From May 21, 2006 To May 20, 2007

5. **SOURCE OF FUNDING FOR THE PROTOCOL:** (A copy of your grant proposal must be included with this protocol if DHHS funding is involved.)

6. **SCIENTIFIC PURPOSE OF THE INVESTIGATION:** To explore the form and influences on organizational learning in a community college.

7. **DESCRIBE THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN NON-TECHNICAL LANGUAGE.** The researcher will conduct interviews with the participants, drawn from among faculty and staff of the community college. The interviews will be audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methodologies. Multiple interviews of approximately one hour duration will be conducted as required by the study. An upper limit of five interviews per participant is envisaged.

8. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND ANTICIPATED RISK.** I perceive minimal risk associated with participating in this study. I do not expect benefits to accrue directly to the participants. The names of individuals, institutions or colleagues of the participants will not appear in any report associated with this study. Pseudonyms will be used in reporting results.

9. **DESCRIBE HOW PARTICIPANT(S) WILL BE RECRUITED, THE NUMBER AND AGE OF THE PARTICIPANTS, AND PROPOSED COMPENSATION (if any):** Participants will be selected with the aid of school administration and on a voluntary basis. Six participants over the age of 18 will be sought from among faculty and staff. The contact person at the school will be asked to assist in identifying a pool of possible participants and the researcher will contact members of the pool and select the participants himself. This will decrease the chance of participants being identified. No compensation is proposed.

10. **DESCRIBE THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS. INCLUDE A COPY OF THE INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT** The nature of the study will be described and informed consent sought before involving anyone in this study. Proposed informed consent form is attached.
OL Interview Checklist
- Introduction and thank you
- Brief subjectivity statement
- Lay summary
- Site and participant selection
- Benefits and risks to researcher and participants
- Study Plan - # of interviews length and purpose of each
- Research methodology, social constructionism and participant participation
- Permission to tape
- Signing of informed consent
- Conduct interview
- Thanks and next appointment if necessary

Lay Summary
This study seeks to explore organizational learning in a community college. Organizational learning has been studied in business and other organizations but not much work has been done in community colleges. In this study, I use the term organizational learning to refer to the study of if and how organizations learn and to a process where errors are detected and corrected, insights and knowledge are generated, reflection of past events and practice inform future practice, and behavior is changed through the process of information gathering and meaning making. Insights and knowledge may begin with the individual but must move via groups to the organization at large to fit this construct. My focus in this study is to record and analyze how members of a community college community construct their views of processes in the college that affect organizational learning.
Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Organizational learning in a community college

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to examine organizational learning in a community college setting.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked to participate in up to five interviews with the researcher. The interviews will focus on your views on aspects of organizational life in the school relative to the study. Topic areas may include communication, experimentation, modes of interaction and organizational structure. Interviews will be scheduled at times agreeable to you and the researcher. Interviews will be audio taped for later transcription by the researcher.

Time required:

1 hour per interview

Risks and Benefits:

I do not perceive that there are risks associated with your participation in this study nor will I provide compensation. The researcher will gain experience, meet a degree requirement and contribute to the understanding of the phenomena and you may become more aware of certain processes in your organization.

Compensation:

There will be no monetary compensation for participating in this research nor are there penalties for non-participation.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your interview will be taped and later transcribed by the researcher who will erase the tape upon completion of transcription. During this time the tape and transcript will be kept securely by the researcher. Your name will not appear on the transcript, nor will the name of you institution or colleagues. Your name will not be used in any report associated with this study.
Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating or for refusing to answer any particular question.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

*Karl Dawson, 2701 NW 23rd Blvd. Apt. P128, Gainesville, Fl. 32605. Tel. 352-264-1213, cell 352-283-1350. kadawson@ufl.edu*

Dr. Linda Behar-Horenstein, 1202 Norman Hall, (352) 392-0731 ext. 230, Lsbhoren@ufl.edu, fax: (352) 846-2697

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; ph 392-0433.

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description. By signing this document, I also give permission for the results of this study to be submitted for academic purposes, including publication in academic journals.

Participant: _________________________________ Date: _________________

Principal Investigator: _______________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How long have you worked in community colleges and in what areas?

2. What do you find most rewarding about your work?

3. What do you think is the most important work of your community college? What should you be doing more of or less of?

4. Please give me your view of the prevailing attitude in the organization towards improvement. What do you think drives the attitude?

5. How would you rate the climate for collaborative work at your school? Among (a) peers, (b) supervisors, and (c) direct reports

6. Please tell me about the efforts at your school to identify ineffective practices and choose new ones.

7. What forums are there for discussing issues related to the work on campus?

8. Can you recall any instance when you identified a problem or solution to a problem on campus and you did not bring it to the attention of a supervisor or someone who could possibly act on it? Why?

9. How do you view the attitude of this organization towards experimentation and innovation? Towards failed experiments?

10. When lessons are learned through reflection or experimentation, are they put into practice?

11. Describe how new practices come to your campus. Can you recall and share with me the origination and development of an idea or innovation that was eventually widely adopted?
Sample of the use of stanzas as an analytical step

Working things out at retreat

in the context of the retreat that we had

we got we you know

we talked about a lot of things

with each other

that were of concern to us

and sorted out some of the things.

Improved energy, trust and communication

And I think just doing that,

I felt that the energy level went up.

And I think the trust level,

communication,

all of that has definitely improved.

Colleagues trust me

And I feel we have a trust

in terms of,

“do I know she’ll do a good job”,

“do I know she’s responsible”,

“do I know she’s dependable”,

110
“do I know if I ask her something,
she’ll get back to me with the information”.

**Evaluation system**

We evaluate other.

We have peer appraisal,

peer performance appraisal every year

and we give it to 16 or to about 20 of our colleagues all across campus.

And they evaluate us on our communication,

leadership skills,

management skills,

on a lot of different measures.
Sample narrative with Labov and Waletzkey’s framework applied

Abstract

So two examples,

one is my own department.

Orientation

We had an economics position that was empty.

We were going through the hiring process.

Complicating action

The person that we selected didn’t take it

so we were getting ready to go back out again

but at the same time

we didn’t have an open position

in our health information management area

and the program had more than doubled in size.

We only had one faculty member

who also was the administrator of that area

and just an impossible situation for that person.

Resolution

And economics offered up their faculty line

and gave it to health information management

so that they could hire a faculty member

and they’re teaching doubles over in economics to off-set that loss
Evaluation

but they gave up something

because somewhere in the department

they saw a greater need.
APPENDIX G
PILOT STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Pilot Study of Organizational Learning in a Community College

Introduction

Higher education institutions are facing challenges of finance and capacity that are enduring in nature (Guskin & Marcy, 2003). In response to such efforts, organizations renew efforts to increase their effectiveness. The study of how organizations learn hold promise for improving how organizations reflect on their practices and for improving said practices (Kezar, 2005). Learning is not restricted to special organizations but is widely found across the spectrum of organizational types (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth, & Smith (1999) agree with this sentiment and state, “All organizations learn – in the sense of adapting as the world around them changes. But some organizations are faster and more effective learners” (p. 24). Learning capacity depends on the existence of facilitating factors for learning in the organization (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). This study seeks to explore community colleges as organizational learning environments and asks specifically,

What is the nature of organizational learning as viewed by selected members of a specified community college, and what do selected members of a community college view as promoting or inhibiting organizational learning in that setting?

Review of literature

The study of how organizations learn originated in the business sector but is increasingly applied across various sectors, including education. Organization learning is the study of how organizations learn as well as the processes involved in this learning (Kezar, 2005). Studies from K-12 education are emerging from both quantitative and
qualitative perspectives (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1998). Higher education has been slow to embrace organizational learning as a means of evaluating learning processes or as a strategy for increased effectiveness (Kezar, 2005).

Huber (1991) suggests that “an entity learns if, through its processing of information, its range of potential behavior is changed” (p.89). Learning is also described as the successful application of new strategies (Argyris, 1993). When new strategies work, they will be called upon again in the future and the assumptions that support them will be maintained (Schein, 1993a). Rowe and Boyle (2005) describe organizational learning as an iterative process of action and reflection that results in the modification of an organization’s actions.

The quality of learning is also discussed in the literature, the most noted being the distinction between single loop and double loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). They describe single loop learning in organizations as change that takes place without a challenge to existing assumptions while the more difficult-to-achieve double loop learning takes place when existing assumptions or taken-for-granted-beliefs are surfaced and challenged. Double loop learning requires skills such as the ability to dialogue (Schein, 1993b). Dialogue is critical to learning in organizations because of its potential to inquire into existing assumptions and create new, shared mental models (Shein, 1993b). Isaacs (1999) outlines the stages of dialogue as listening, respecting, suspending and voicing.

Variation in the capacity of organizations to learn can be attributed largely to whether facilitators or inhibitors of organizational learning exist in the organization’s internal or external environment (Dibella & Nevis, 1998). Facilitators of organizational
learning include the presence of stimuli for learning, psychological safety, accommodating structure, skill and leadership (Dibella & Nevis, 1998; Schein, 1993b; Senge, 1990). Most of these variables in organizations are on a continuum and their absence serves to inhibit organizational learning (Dibella & Nevis, 1998).

The stimulus for learning may be external, such as the demands of a supervising district office on a school (Leithwood, et al., 1998) or may come from within the organizations (Senge, et al., 1999). As people within organizations realize the future they desire and match it against their current reality, this leads to the creative tension that can fuel organizational learning (Senge, 1990). Individual aspirations must connect with that of others in the organization to create shared vision, which Senge (1990) describes as the focus and energy of learning.

Organizational learning requires a climate of trust and collaboration where experimentation is welcomed and the errors associated with experimentation are tolerated (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Schein, 1993a). Rowe and Boyle (2005) found that emotional conditioning and anxiety associated with past punitive reactions to failed experimentation were among constraints to organizational learning during change at a health services facility. A trusting and collaborative climate was determined to be the first requirement for organizational learning in a large K-12 study in Australia (Mulford & Silins, 2003).

Organizational learning in schools requires that time and space be structured to allow colleagues to interact and share (Collinson & Cook, 2004). Group processes constitute a significant part of organizational learning, hence organizational reward systems should change to considering group output as opposed to current systems which focus almost exclusively on the individual (Senge, et al., 1999). Decentralized as opposed
to hierarchical organizational structures are more conducive to organizational learning (Kezar, 2001). The leadership of the organization affects many of the influences on organizational learning mentioned above. Leaders stimulate, provide structure and rewards and greatly influence the climate of the organization. Transformational leadership approaches facilitate organizational learning (Silins and Mulford, 2002).

Varying cultures are typically found in higher education institutions (Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1988; Levin, 1997). Being positioned within a particular sub-culture will often determine how individuals interpret organizational events (Ayers, 2005). Levin (1997) identifies four subcultures typically found on community college campuses. The traditional culture focuses on students’ intellectual and cognitive development. It mimics that found among faculty on university campus in many ways and is found mostly among “academic” faculty who are preparing students for university transfer. The service culture focuses on the improvement of the students as evidenced by not only university transfer rates but also retention, social equity and student personal growth. The hierarchical culture is centered primarily on presidential leadership and combines an emphasis on the moral purpose of the institution, as articulated by the president, and rational/bureaucratic control of the organization. The business culture arose from demands for accountability from external sources and the evolution of the community college as a force in the economy through the provision of workforce training. This culture values efficiency, innovativeness and speed in responding to demands of the service area.

**Subjectivity statement**

My approach to this research is constructivist. I believe that meaning is situated and that the varied experiences of individuals cause them to derive different meaning
from the same phenomena. I think that is particularly true in the study of organizational behavior. In investigating organizational behavior I am not motivated by a search for “truth” that is known to all but I am interested in understanding the underlying assumptions that drives individual behaviors which may be, and often is, different from the values and assumptions that individuals espouse. Given the issue of hard-to-surface assumptions and values, I believe that investigation into organizational behavior must always be prolonged, whether through interviews, observations or some combination of both, in order to help the participants unearth the deepest meanings possible.

I believe that my training for leadership and management roles both helps and hinders my capacity to investigate educational organizations such as community colleges. Through my training and experience, I have become aware of some the issues facing organizations, and that has helped in guiding me to some areas in need of investigation. On the other hand, my experience has caused me to bring certain assumptions to the research table of which I may not always be aware. Preparation for leadership is largely about finding what works and preparing to practice it. For me, “what works” includes tendencies towards servant leadership, participatory leadership style, focus on continuous improvement and the practice of reflection at the individual, group and organizational levels. I hope that my awareness of these views helped me to “bracket” them.

I selected this topic investigation because of my long-held interest in organizational performance, with particular focus on community colleges. I worked for 12 years in a community college in mid and upper level faculty and administrative positions. I had been keenly interested in leadership and organizational culture, having held leadership positions as a student, in the community and in the workplace. My
tendency towards being active in organizations probably results from being raised in a Christian household and being taught to make a difference in any situation that life may lead to. These experiences have left me with certain views about what is good for organizations, what is effective leadership, the need for continuous improvement, and the importance of treating everyone with respect and dignity. As an Afro-Caribbean male, not raised in the culture that I am studying, I tried to monitor the perspective I brought to the investigation. I took care to ensure that my views did attract me toward a particular type of participant or cause me to listen for a particular viewpoint in the interview process. The use of memos-to-self in the research process assists the researcher in reflection and examining his/her own feelings (Glesne, 1999).

Participants and context

Sampling for this study was done using maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2005). This type sampling is utilized when participants that vary on particular characteristics are desired (Creswell, 2005). Various sub-cultures exist within community colleges. These subcultures may interpret events differently. In this study, participants were sought, one each from among student services staff and among the faculty. The actual participants were selected through professional networking bearing the requirements above in mind.

The site for the study was a large community college in the southeast United States. A review of information available on the institution’s website reveals priority on innovation and collaboration in achieving the institution’s mission. While the examination of the material relating to the college did not explicitly mention organizational learning, their emphasis on innovation and collaboration show institutional
concern for concepts associated with organizational learning. Participant Sue works in the student services division and has served the institution for 10 years including the past five years in her current role. Beth has been on full-time faculty for two years after working previously as an adjunct faculty member. They are both Caucasian females between 45 to 55 years old. They both articulate that meeting the needs of students is the raison d’être of the institution.

**Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected via documents and interviews during the spring, 2006. Documents were selected from among various publications made by the school on its website. These documents were selected to build the context for the study and to provide information of possible use by the researcher during interviews.

The primary type of data used for analysis in this study was that obtained via interviews that were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted in the work settings of the participants, in one case an office and in the other a teaching laboratory. The theoretical perspective of the study is constructionist, so while other data may build context, how individuals construct the meaning of their experiences during the interview process was of paramount importance. In the constructionist interview both interviewer and interviewee and their accumulated experiences converge to produce the interview data (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

The interview was semi-structured and utilized open-ended questions. Open-ended questions offers a greater likelihood of individuals explaining their actions or views (Creswell, 2005). Follow-up probes were utilized to allow continuation along paths opened by participants when answering the initial questions. Probes may include verbal
requests for more information or explanation as well maintaining silence after a response thus making the interviewee feel obliged to continue (Glesne, 1999). Additionally, I pursued a conversational style of interview because of its potential to allow participants to share more (Stage and Mattson, 2003).

**Data Analysis**

Documents gathered in the study were reviewed for relevant themes. The interviews were first open-coded, which were then used to identify themes in the data. Narratives were then identified from data surrounding the identified themes (example in appendix A). Narratives were examined and attention was paid to their structure as outlined by Labov (1967). Of particular interest was how participants positioned themselves and others during the course of the interview. Positioning analysis is concerned with how subjects construct themselves by the positions they take in their narratives as they relate to normative discourses (Bamberg, 2004). In one instance, I analyzed the opposing views of both participants on a particular topic as narratives and counter-narratives produced through their roles and experience (Solis, 2004).

**Preliminary Findings**

Various themes were revealed after preliminary analysis of both interviews. For this brief analysis, I will focus on one theme from a particular interview and one theme that was found across interviews, though interpreted quite differently by each participant. In addition to the initial meaning derived from the themes, I examined how participants positioned themselves and others within the narratives, in pursuit of answers to the research questions.
It’s a whole different ballgame – no voice, no power

Sue, the student services professional, suggested that the structure for discussions and information sharing that could lead to organizational learning were present in the institution but that the capacity for involvement in the process was not evenly distributed throughout the organization. She positioned herself and her colleagues in her area as lacking voice and power, especially when compared to the faculty. It appears that long-standing patterns of disproportionate distribution of power within the institution remain in spite of changes in nomenclature. This was evident when she said, “They call it the college senate now but if you ever attended a meeting, it’s still the faculty senate. Giant innovations will come through in student services will flick by (clicks finger) in a wink of an eye and if it has anything to do with faculty they’ll discuss it till you just want to die and go home.” Sue emphasizes this further when she uses the phrase, “it’s a whole different ballgame (in student services)” as both abstract and coda in some of her narratives.

Sue feels that her input from her role, though sometimes sought, is not taken seriously within the organization. She related, “I have been advocating for us to have a student computer….and I really don’t think it matters whether I bring that to someone’s attention or not.” While positioning herself and others in similar roles as lacking voice and power, Sue also took the position in her narratives as being an advocate for the students and knowing “what students want”. The implications of these combined positions seem to be that the needs of the students do not always reach the administrators who are responsible for many of the “top-down” policies.
Organizational learning is greatly facilitated by the open sharing of ideas (Cook & Collinson, 2004; Dibella & Nevis, 1998). When members of an organization feel that their input makes no difference, it diminishes their motivation to continue to make contributions through the channels already tried.

**Good old faculty – bad old faculty**

Both participants mentioned long-serving employees on several occasions, though Beth brought them into the discussion far more frequently. Long-term employees were presented in contrasting ways by the participants, with potentially varying effects on organizational learning. These points of view could be described as narratives and counter narratives about long-term employees (Solis, 2004). This contesting of the identity of long-term employees is rooted in the discourses of each employee. Sue, herself an employee of over ten years, found that the relationships she had developed with other members of staff over time were conducive to creating the type atmosphere in which organizational learning would thrive. With these colleagues she felt “very comfortable sharing her views” even though she also positioned these individuals as partners in powerlessness and whose views may not make “a darn bit of difference”. Mulford and Silins (2003) identified a trusting and collaborative effort as a critical first step for organizational learning and Sue has found this among some colleagues, but it seems unlikely that the learning would move beyond the level of the select group to bring about the change associated with learning.

Beth, in contrast, positioned herself as having “a different view” on many issues. Her difference was mostly in relation to the views and actions of long-term employees. Beth took a position in her narratives as acting in a way that facilitated organizational
learning, based on what is known about facilitators of the process. She is willing to share even when others are not willing to accept what she offers. She stated this typical scenario: “Oh, I happened to notice that our educational session was a whole lot of information on your area. Would you like to see it?” Oh no! That’s threatening.”

Organizational learning also requires reflecting on past action and the skill to inquire into the positions of others while reciprocating by allowing inquiry into your own views (Argyris, 1993; Senge 1990). Beth aligns herself with “newer” faculty members and suggests that their youth and background in the “business world” have produced skills and approaches that will ultimately benefit organizational learning. She relayed, “We’re not afraid to say, “I don’t know.” We’re not afraid to say, “Well have you thought of this?”” According to Beth, many long-time faculty are not like that and in fact, feel threatened by newer faculty and withdraw into “silos” where they are safe from inquiry, suggestions and calls to change. They are supported by the administration who think, “They are so wonderful” due to their loyalty and past contributions and as result they feel no motivation to change.

Archival Material

Documents that were sourced for this study were taken from the institution’s website. The website is comprehensive, and information on the institution’s mission; official values and goals; the role of the College Senate and other committees; and copies of manual are among the available documents. The documents were reviewed for themes relevant to the research questions. Information on the institution’s mission and values, forums and processes for problem solving and strategic thinking were deemed particularly important.
Documents, to an extent, reflect the reality of the context within which they were created but once in use, those documents become a part of that reality and influences future constructions of reality in that setting (Cortazzi, 2002). Documents such as those reviewed present the official position of the institution or how it would like to be viewed. A governance structure that facilitates discussion and input, as well as the inclusion of innovativeness and improvement in its mission and goals would suggest fertile ground for organizational learning, though analysis of interview data suggests that this end is not always achieved.

A theme identified in the interview data was differences between divisions on campus. One participant positioned faculty in general as “the most powerful group on campus”, while the other, a member of faculty, suggested that academic faculty were more highly regarded than those involved in technology and applied science programs. Interestingly, the official description of college committees seem to reflect and/or influence this viewpoint.

The Curriculum Committee… has two subcommittees: one for the Liberal Arts and Sciences with an emphasis is on systematic analysis leading to innovative curricula that meet college goals and accreditation standards; and one for Technology and Applied Sciences to disseminate curriculum and program changes throughout the division and college and advise the division about the effect of college policies upon these changes.

The goals for the Liberal Arts and Sciences seem much loftier, including “analysis leading to innovative curricula” and more aligned with “college goals” and external “accreditation standards”. The Technology and Applied Sciences sub-committee is left only to distribute information, seemingly established elsewhere, and advise on the resulting effect of college policy. Whether purposely, or unwittingly, this committee’s charge is written in a way to promote the level of discussion and inquiry that may lead to
a higher quality organizational learning in one subcommittee and not the other.

Statements like these enlighten analysis of the talk produced in interviews with members of the various divisions of the college.

**Concluding Comments**

Due to the size of the project, all aspects of the research questions could not be addressed in the analysis. Preliminary review of the data indicates that both individual felt that the organization was lacking in reflective or double loop learning. The analysis did reveal aspects of organizational life that participants found to be promoting or inhibiting organizational learning. Sue viewed the non-responsiveness of the organization to certain constituents as affecting their willingness to share and hence inhibiting organizational learning. Beth viewed long-standing employees as resistant to change and immune to administrative pressure to learn, hence impacting collaborative activities and learning. (Interestingly, my third interview, with a senior administrator, which was recently done and not included in this study, indicates a much more positive interpretation of organizational learning processes.)
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Karl Dawson was born in the Caribbean territory of the British Virgin Islands. He received his early education there and attended the University of the West Indies in Barbados and the Bahamas where he earned a bachelor’s degree in hotel management in 1990. Following that experience, Karl worked in the tourism industry for two years before joining the faculty at the then recently opened H. L. Stoutt Community College in the British Virgin Islands. At the college, he served as coordinator of hospitality studies and later as dean of technical, vocational and professional Studies. During this period he earned a Master’s of Arts in Education from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. In 2003 he embarked on doctoral studies at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Towards the end of his studies he was appointed as vice president at the H.L. Stoutt Community College. He was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy with a concentration in Higher Education Administration in May 2007.

As a scholar, his research interests include organizational behavior and leadership. He is also keen on utilizing his research skills to provide information that could assist in solving social problems in his native country.

Karl is very committed to his wife Lucia, and children, Kerrison, Karla and Kylah. A dedicated Christian, he spends much of his time away from work and family on church activities. He is also an avid sports fan and particularly proud to be a part of the Gator Nation.