Internal Communication within an Institution of Higher Education During the COVID-19 Crisis: A Case Study

Jonathan Boone Clemmons

University of New Orleans, jbclemmo@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation-Restricted is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Dissertation-Restricted in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Dissertation-Restricted has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
Internal Communication within an Institution of Higher Education
During the COVID-19 Crisis: A Case Study

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Administration

by

Jonathan Boone Clemmons
B.S. Oklahoma State University, 2008
M.A.G Oklahoma State University, 2010
August 2022
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends. Without your support this study would not have been possible. Thank you for your understanding during the late nights and early mornings, the missed events and gatherings. I look forward to making up for lost time and I owe you all my deepest gratitude.
Acknowledgment

The COVID-19 pandemic was an extremely difficult time for everyone, all aspects of life were disrupted. I would like to acknowledge the participants of this study for taking the time to reflect of this difficult period. I would like to thank my husband and partner, Cory Cart, without his love and support I would not have been able to complete my doctorate. I would also like to thank my mom, dad, stepmom, sister, and the rest of my family for supporting me and sharing in my educational vision. Next, I would like to remember Mr. Roger Fent, former faculty at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College and my first college advisor. His words of encouragement drove me in my times of doubt. I would also like to thank my first advisor at the University of New Orleans, Dr. Alonzo Flowers III. He inspired and pushed me think beyond my own lived experience. I would also like to thank my doctoral committee, Dr. Chris Broadhurst, Dr. Brian Beabout, Dr. Cathy Rogers, and Dr. William Wainwright. The support and insights they were able to offer were instrumental and helped guide me through this process. I would like to specifically thank Dr. Chris Broadhurst for all his support, he pushed and supported me throughout my doctoral coursework and dissertation. Finally, I would like to thank my friends. Thank you for being a sounding board and reminding me why I started this journey in the first place. It truly takes a village, and I am thankful to everyone who helped make this dream a reality.
# Table of Contents

List of Tables .................................................................................................................... ix

Abstract .................................................................................................................................. x

Chapter One ............................................................................................................................. 1

Background and Research Questions ..................................................................................... 1

Problem Statement .................................................................................................................... 4

Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................................... 5

Research Question .................................................................................................................... 6

Implications ................................................................................................................................. 7

Definition of Terms ................................................................................................................... 8

Chapter Two ............................................................................................................................... 11

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework ................................................................. 11

Literature Review ....................................................................................................................... 11

Internal Communication ......................................................................................................... 12

Communication as a cornerstone of leadership ........................................................................ 13

Formal and informal communication ......................................................................................... 15

Channels of internal communication ......................................................................................... 18

Elements of quality internal communication ........................................................................... 20

Products of internal communication .......................................................................................... 22

Internal communication and change ......................................................................................... 24

Communication within Higher Education ................................................................................. 26

Communication and the professional bureaucracy ................................................................... 26

Loosely coupled systems .......................................................................................................... 28

Internal communication in higher education .......................................................................... 30

Change in higher education ...................................................................................................... 33

Crisis communication in higher education .............................................................................. 36
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion</th>
<th>37</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theoretical Framework</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Member Exchange</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Organizational Support</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Member Exchange</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Social Exchange Network</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Three</strong></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological Assumptions and General Methods</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Selection</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment Plan</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling and Participant Selection</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis Procedures</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Identity</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Implications</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Four</strong></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False Sense of Preparedness</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID vs. Other Crisis</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Start of the Pandemic &amp; Campus Lockdown</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rigid Organizational Communication Structure</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Flow</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
General Communication Strategy ............................................................................................................. 80
Return to Campus Guide ............................................................................................................................ 82
Opportunities to Dialogue with the Administration .................................................................................. 85

Communication Disconnection with Colleagues ..................................................................................... 87
Informal Communication .......................................................................................................................... 88
Disconnection .......................................................................................................................................... 90

Saga of Distrust ......................................................................................................................................... 91
Perceived Organizational Support Among Faculty and Staff ................................................................. 93

Chapter Five ............................................................................................................................................. 96

Discussion and Implications ................................................................................................................... 96

Discussion .............................................................................................................................................. 96

Overestimation of Flexibility in Online Transition .................................................................................... 97
Organizational Memory ............................................................................................................................. 99
Mental Health Impacts ............................................................................................................................... 102
Addressing the Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 104

Connection to the Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 107

Implications for Practice .......................................................................................................................... 109

Limitations and Future Research ........................................................................................................... 113

Future Research ..................................................................................................................................... 114

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 115

References .............................................................................................................................................. 118

Appendices ............................................................................................................................................. 138

Appendix A. Demographic Questionnaire ................................................................................................. 138
Appendix B. Interview Protocol for Administrators ................................................................................ 141
Appendix C. Interview Protocol for Faculty ............................................................................................. 143
List of Tables

Table 1. Participant categories and provided pseudonyms ........................................................................... 59
Table 2. Themes.................................................................................................................................................. 60
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the role internal communication played in shaping perceptions among stakeholders during a major crisis event happening on a university campus. The main question that this study sought to answer was: how did formal and informal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic affect the perception and adoption of changes related to the pandemic? This case study utilized interviews and document analysis to understand both the change process and its accompanying communication. Workplace Social Network Exchange was the guiding theoretical framework utilized to fully understand the professional lives of participants. Four major themes were identified in this study; these themes highlight the perception of preparedness for the crisis, the rigid structure for communication, the disconnection associated with technology while working remotely, and the organizational saga around communication. The implications of this study provide actionable considerations for future crisis events. Practitioners in higher education should consider updating their crisis plans to reflect the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. Plans should include protocols for conducting regular drills to assess the campus’s readiness for moving to remote operations. Additionally, planning activities should include considerations for fostering informal communication during remote operations to lessen feelings of disconnection among faculty and staff. This study contributes to literature focused on crisis management, communication, and organizational theory in higher education. As one of the few studies on internal communication within higher education during a crisis event, this study begins to build a foundation for future research.

Keywords: COVID-19, Crisis Communication, Crisis Communication Plan, Formal Communication, Higher Education, Informal Communication, Internal Communication, Organizational Saga, Public Relations, Workplace Social Exchange Network, WSEN
Chapter One

Background and Research Questions

Effective communication focuses on transparency and is based on trust (Berger, 2014; Grunig, 2001; Men, 2014a). The aims of effective communication are not conformity or obedience; instead, it engages and empowers followers (Men, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). An organization’s culture is primarily built around the messages the organization communicates, and the culture tells members what behavior is acceptable (Adel Ismail, 2007; Kitchen & Daly, 2002; Lund, 2003; Men & Jiang, 2016; Tierney, 1988). If an organization is not open and transparent, a culture of cynicism and distrust will be created, and employees will begin to disengage (Choi, 2011; Frahm, 2011; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Welch, 2012).

Operating in today’s organizations, a leader has two communication networks through which they can send their messages: external communication and internal communication. Internal communication can be further broken down into two networks, formal and informal communication networks (Berger, 2008). Internal stakeholders of an organization generally utilize both formal and informal communication networks to understand their organizations and changes happening in their organization (Berger, 2008; P. Williams, 2008). Formal communication consists of messages sent from the leaders of the organization using official pathways, such as organizational email, memos, speeches, newsletters and other channels owned or controlled by the organization. At the same time, informal communication is less deliberate. It takes place at all levels of the organization, often communicated on the “grapevine” or in the form of rumors and gossip (Crampton, Hodge, & Mishra, 1998; Kezar, 2013).

Within higher education, formal messages are generally sent in the form of official emails sent through list serves, memos, newsletters, policy statements, or other university controlled channels (Berger, 2008; Kezar, 2013). Formal internal communication from leaders to followers helps to shape the structure and culture of an organization and is a significant driver in employee engagement and retention (Behling & McFillen, 1996; Berger, 2008; DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000; Dumdum, Lowe, &
Avolio, 2013; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). While formal communication is linear in its flow, generally flowing vertically from the top of the organizational chart, informal communication is omnidirectional and can originate from anywhere within the organization (Berger, 2008). Informal communication and its network are not easily controlled by managers, employees, and internal stakeholders generally regard informal communication as more trustworthy than formal communication (Crampton et al., 1998; Davis, 1953; Young, 2018).

Engaging employees was found to be one of the top five most significant challenges faced in a survey of 656 CEOs from around the world (Wah, 1999). As the importance of both internal communication and employee engagement have emerged, the effect communication has on engagement has become more established in the literature (Argenti, 1996; Downs & Adrian, 2012; Shuck & Wollard, 2009). In addition to affecting employee engagement, internal communication also affects turnover and retention among employees. One study found that 80% of employees felt their organization’s communication with them influenced their decision to stay with or leave their organization (Burton, 2006). In addition to increasing costs due to a lack of effectiveness, disengaged employees negatively impact the quality of their final product, producing lower quality work outcomes (Attridge, 2009). In higher education, employee disengagement can lead to poor customer service for students, increased processing times, and increased tuition due to increased labor costs (Attridge, 2009; Rath & Conchie, 2008).

In addition to being a cornerstone of leadership, communication is also the main driver of change within organizations, with institutions of higher education being no exception (Corbo, Reinholz, Dancy, Deetz, & Finkelstein, 2016; Kezar, 2013; Mintzberg, 1979; Rogers, 2003). Effective communication can be just as important as good leadership in the change process. When leaders undertake change without effectively communicating the reason for the change and soliciting feedback, followers lose trust and
feel alienated, leading them to question the change and be slow to adopt the change (Kezar, 2013; Rogers, 2003).

The majority of scholarly work on internal communication takes place within the disciplines of public relations and management and is focused almost exclusively on private sector organizations. These organizations differ from institutions of higher education in that they are very mechanistic, and communication and decisions flow from the top down (Mintzberg, 1979; G. Morgan, 2007). In contrast, institutions of higher education operate with a level of duality in the decision and communication pipelines (Brown II, 2000). The collegial faculty structure creates a “professional bureaucracy” that tends to operate in a very grassroots bottom-up structure, using the faculty senate as its main arena for making decisions and disseminating communication (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 349). The staff operates in a more mechanical fashion resembling private sector organizations with decisions flowing from upper-level administrators down to the frontline staff (Mintzberg, 1979). It is precisely this duality that challenges university leaders; if a leader fails to strike the correct balance between the two structures, one side of the organization may feel alienated (Brown II, 2000).

In addition to functioning as a professional bureaucracy, institutions of higher education often operate as loosely coupled systems, where departments and offices on campus are attached to the organization, but they retain their own identity (Gizir & Simsek, 2005; Weick, 1976). The addition of loose coupling to the structure of the professional bureaucracy further complicates our understanding of how information flows within the organization and obscures the potential applicability of private sector communication studies on institutions of higher education.

Another critical aspect of institutions of higher education is that they are in a continuous change cycle, not unlike organizations in the private sector (Mintzberg, 1979; Morgan, 2007; Rogers, 2003). The organization is ever-evolving, working to meet the demands of its stakeholders while operating in times of uncertain resources (Morgan, 2007). Institutions of higher education are in a constant state of
change, being pulled from multiple directions (Kezar, 2013). While organizations have learned to change and adapt, the change process does not always go as planned. An understanding of the formal and informal communication networks within a university will begin to yield information on their role in shaping the organizational culture and the norms of the organization.

**Problem Statement**

An analysis of scholarly literature on the topic of managerial communication, another name for internal communication, found that publications in this area of research have nearly doubled from 2004 to 2013 (Bell & Roebuck, 2015). The rapid growth in this body of scholarly literature exhibits the importance placed on learning how communication affects organizations and employees. While large organizations in the private sector began creating communication departments in the 1990s, indicating a growing understanding of the importance of communication, institutions of higher education have not followed suit. In many universities, internal communication is a siloed function of both the office of human resources and the public relations department. Among leaders, the importance of internal communication varies, with some seeing the importance while others relegate the planning and execution staff who may or may not have any formal communication training (Berger, 2008; Broom & Sha, 2013).

While it is difficult to discern the exact level of importance placed on internal communication at most institutions of higher education, one university exhibits that some institutions are beginning to focus on internal communication. Duke University recognized the importance of internal communication and established a working group focused on identifying steps to better facilitate the flow of information from the office of communication to their target audiences (Minia et al., 2015). Data from the study, self-published in a subsequent report, conducted by the Duke working group found that only 27% of employees in a communication role at Duke felt very equipped to provide effective communications for their school (Minia et al., 2015). While Duke’s study did not directly measure the
level of engagement among employees, based on the fact that 72% of respondents said that increasing employee engagement was their number one priority when conducting internal communication, Duke likely faced challenges with employee engagement similar to organizations in the private sector (Minia et al., 2015).

The vast majority of literature investigating the connections between internal communication and employee engagement is conducted in the private sector, for-profit organizations (Goodman, Hahn, Logmann, Yan, & Carli, 2017; Towers Perrin, 2003, 2009; Wah, 1999). While transferability between private sector organizations and education likely exists, it is also likely that the complex bureaucratic structure of educational organizations will cause variations that are not yet fully understood. The bureaucratic structure, along with siloing between departments and shared governance within institutions of higher education, often impedes change. (Clark, 1983; Kezar, 2011) While institutions of higher education are drivers of external change in society, internally, they are very slow to adapt and change (Clark, 1983; Hesburgh, 1971). Even though these institutions are reluctant to change, as the organizations have grown, change has become ongoing and more challenging to manage (Frahm, 2011; Kezar, 2011, 2013). While on-going change is needed in higher education, accountability is also being demanded by all stakeholders. Student debt and tuition are both on the rise, and public scrutiny has led lawmakers to question both the structure and necessity of the higher education system. Without effective and accelerated rates of change in higher education, the future is unclear, but the status quo will no longer be viewed as sufficient.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate internal communication within an institution of higher education during a major crisis event. This case study specifically investigates the internal communication that happened as a result of a campus’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Investigating the impact both formal and informal communication has on members of the organization
and how they view and adopt the proposed changes in their organization, this study sought to understand how the current administration and leaders view the change taking place and the communication they are disseminating. The view of the leadership was then be compared to the opinions of the members affected by the change, helping to understand their feelings about the change, how the change has been presented to them, what they have heard from their peers about the change, and how they think the change will affect them.

This study utilized the theory of Workplace Social Exchange Network, which allows for an understanding of an employee’s feelings about internal communication that has taken place, how they view their position in the organization, their feelings about a change, and their adoption behavior to be understood by examining their social exchange relationship with their leader, their coworkers, and the organization (Cole, Schaninger, & Harris, 2002; Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Kahn, 1990). This theory also has well-established connections with organizational theory, communication, and change, which made it the ideal framework to guide this study.

**Research Question**

The research questions below were created to better understand the role internal communication plays in a significant crisis event on campus. These questions investigate the role of both formal and informal networks and how communication flowed through those networks. Additionally, the first question serves as the over-arching foundation of the study and provided rich data on the social exchange relationships that exists between a college’s administration and its staff as well as how internal communication functions in a large bureaucratic organization. The follow-up questions examined how the institution’s communication strategy affects the perceived value the institution places on its employees. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How did internal communication, both formal and informal, shape the employee’s feelings toward the university’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
• What role did both administrators with organizational power as well as members of both the professional and administrative bureaucracies play in the communication process during the change event?
• Was the formal communication a one-way monologue or a two-way dialogue, and how did this affect informal communication?

**Implications**

This case study builds on previous academic literature from the fields of management, leadership, communication, crisis planning, and change. It also builds on the more niche emerging topic of communication within institutions of higher education. Aside from Minia et al. (2015), the self-study conducted by Duke University, little other academic research exists investigating internal communication within higher education. It is also important to point out that the Duke University study was interested in the overarching state of internal communication within the entire organization. In contrast, this study focused on internal communication during an individual crisis event. By combining both internal communication and the crisis event, this study is more actionable for leaders at all levels of the organization. The results of this case study should cause leaders to consider their communication during change and crisis events causing administrators to examine them more closely and evaluate what can be improved before a future event occurs or new change is initiated.

The results of this study also help to clarify how the unique organizational structure of higher education affects internal communication differently than the organizational structures commonly seen in the private sector. While a handful of studies exist that investigate internal communication within governmental and public sector organizations, which would likely have a more bureaucratic structure, their structures do not fully reflect those in higher education (Gould-Williams, 2003; Horsley & Barker, 2002; Liu & Levenshus, 2010; Nyhan, 2000; Pandey & Garnett, 2006). This study sought to build on the
knowledge gained about internal communications within bureaucracies, explicitly focusing on loosely-coupled systems within the professional bureaucracy.

Given that formal communication is an organizational function that is often led by a dedicated team of professionals, it allows for ease of study, and therefore qualitative and quantitative literature exists. However, informal communication is much more challenging to understand as it occurs continuously and is not led or controlled by the organization (Crampton et al., 1998; Davis, 1953). While authors like Kezar (2013) discuss the importance of informal communication within the change process within an institution of higher education, it has not been investigated as part of a focused study. This study builds on the understanding of how informal communication operates in higher education and what role it plays in a crisis event. This knowledge provides insights for practitioners on being both proactive and reactive regarding informal communication. Additionally, this study aimed to provide a better understanding as to how administrators can steer or control messages on the informal network, or determine if any level of control is even possible.

**Definition of Terms**

1. *Asymmetrical Communication*- The sending of a message and not allowing a pathway for feedback from the message receiver back to the initiator. This communication commonly occurs when the leaders of an organization are focused on conformity and are not interested in deviation from their mandate (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

2. *Communication*- The act of sending a message from the one individual or group to another individual or group. Messages can be sent over any number of channels and can be both verbal and non-verbal (Berger, 2008; Berlo, 1960; Shannon, 1948).

3. *Communication Climate*- The organizational norm established by the totality of the communication within the organization, the management of the organization are the main creators. The
communication climate is an element of the organizational climate (Nordin, Sivapalan, Bhattacharyya, Ahmad, & Abdullah, 2014).

4. **Engagement**- The level of an individual’s investment in their work, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for their work (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003; Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2009).

5. **Formal Communication**- Messages that travel over official channels and pathways and generally flow from an organization’s leadership down to their employees (Berger, 2008).

6. **Informal Communication**- Messages that originate from within the organization that flow omnidirectionally. Generally referred to as rumors or the grapevine (Berger, 2008; Crampton et al., 1998; Davis, 1953).

7. **Internal Communication**- Communication that originates from inside an organization meant for members of the organization. Also known as corporate communication, internal marketing and branding, leadership communication, employee relations, internal public relations, management communication, internal marketing, and management public relations (Argenti, 1996; Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008)

8. **Major Change Event**- A significant event in the life on an organization, where a norm in structure, operating procedure, or output evolves or adapts due to some force within or on the organization (Kezar, 2013). Within higher education, examples of major change events could include the merging of two departments or schools, major changes to the general education curriculum, the creation of a university-wide strategic plan, the execution of a campus climate survey, the hiring process after the departure of a university president, or any other major event that affects multiple internal stakeholder groups.

9. **Symmetrical Communication**- The sending of a message and allowing the message receiver to provide feedback that the message initiator is open to receiving. This feedback normally initiates a
dialogue between the message initiator and the message receiver. This communication is rooted in trust and transparency (Grunig, 1992; Men, 2014c).
Chapter Two

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

Internal communication is the main vehicle within an institution of higher education for transmitting information about change initiatives (Corbo et al., 2016; Kezar, 2013; Mintzberg, 1979; Rogers, 2003). Without effective communication, changes fail and members of the organization become cynical of change and become distrustful of its leadership (Elving, 2005; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Whalen, 2011). A major component of how the members of an organization view this communication is based on the social exchanges that they have with their leader, co-workers, and the organization (Cole et al., 2002; Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Seers, 1989). To understand these social exchange relationships and the communication associated with them, this study utilized Workplace Social Exchange Network (WSEN). Three sub-theories, Leader Member Exchange (LMX), Team-Member Exchange (TMX), and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) inform WSEN. In addition to being connected to communication, the elements of WSEN have also been shown to have a connection to a member’s readiness for change and their level of resistance to a change taking place (Burnett, Chiaburu, Shapiro, & Li, 2015; Kahn, 1992; Portoghese et al., 2012; Van Dam, Oreg, & Schyns, 2008; Wittig, 2012).

Literature Review

Organizations can communicate internally, externally, and through their marketing (Gayeski, 2011). External communication focuses on communicating with the general public who are not members of the organization. This communication is generally known as public relations, government or community affairs, media relations, or investor relations (Gayeski, 2011). Similarly, marketing communication are generally aimed at individuals outside the organization, with some brand messaging aimed at organization members. Marketing communication happens through sales and advertising.
collateral, promotional material, trade shows, and through e-commerce tools online (Gayeski, 2011). This review focuses on internal communication, which takes place within every organization.

Internal communication is information sharing between members that takes place within an organization on both formal and informal channels (Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008). While internal communication happens continually within the organization, it is especially important and active during times of change (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Mills, 2010). During change, members often feel like they are losing control and do not understand what the future holds for them within the organization (Elving, 2005; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Effective formal internal communication that is symmetrical, trustworthy, and transparent can help to quell these feelings and prepare members for change (Choi, 2011; Elving, 2005; Kezar, 2013; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Institutions of higher education contain unique organizational structures that pose unique challenges to internal communication that are not seen in the private sector (Argenti, 1996; Broom & Sha, 2013; Munter, 2009).

**Internal Communication**

Internal communication is a specific type of communication differentiated in that it takes place inside an organization. This communication can be both formal and informal and takes place among an organization’s members (Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008). Through internal communication, employees receive information about their environment, the organization, their jobs, and each other (Men, 2014b; Yukl, 2006). This communication is a key source of meaning making for individuals and the group and, shapes the culture and structure of the organization over time (Berger, 2008).

Internal communication is known by a number of names, including: corporate communication, internal marketing and branding, leadership communication, employee relations, internal public relations, management communication, internal marketing, and management public relations (Argenti, 1996; Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008). Debate exists as to whether or not internal communication is a stand-alone field, related to but not directly under the fields of public relations, management, and
organizational studies. As additional scholars contribute to the research on internal communication, this delineation will likely become clearer.

The first academic works on internal organizational communication began in the 1920’s when Dale Carnegie taught business classes focused on how to treat communication in the workplace (Hay, 1974). This was followed by the Hawthorne studies from Harvard University conducted in 1927, which scholars denote as being the first study to bring to light employee communication and the importance of a communication plan (Hay, 1974). Scholarly work on internal communication continued, within business management studies in the 1930’s and 1940’s driven mainly in paternalism and the need to control employees. The concept of feedback and two-way communication first appears in literature in 1942, in a book entitled *Sharing Information with Employees* by Alexander R. Heron (Hay, 1974). As the fields of communication and management have evolved and refined, so too has the topic of internal communication. In more recent years, the topic has been growing in popularity, with one in-depth literature review finding that publications in this area of literature have nearly doubled from 2004 to 2013 (Bell & Roebuck, 2015).

**Communication as a cornerstone of leadership**

In their integrated definition of leadership, Winston and Patterson (2006) state that a leader is someone who selects, equips, and trains followers while conveying a vision for the future that resonates with followers. Yukl (2006) builds on the definition of leadership to include organizational components controlled by a leader, including organizational culture, climate, structure, communication, and power distribution. In addition to the relationship shared between leaders and the organization, it is crucial to understand the employee-organization relationship. Men (2014c) defines the employee-organization relationship as the “degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has rightful power and influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit themselves to
each other” (p. 261). The main connector between leaders, the organization, and employees is communication (Mast & Huck, 2008).

While communication is a common practice in everyday life, the process of communication is often taken for granted. One of the most respected simplistic communication models was developed in 1948 to describe how communication by telephone works (Broom & Sha, 2013). The original version of the Shannon-Weaver Model did not include feedback from the receiver to the sender (Broom & Sha, 2013). Berlo (1960) built on the ideas of Shannon (1948), simplifying the communication process and adding more depth to each step creating the SMCR Model of Communication. Berlo (1960) also failed to account for and include feedback in his model. An updated, simplified model containing elements of both the Shannon-Weaver Model and the SMCR Model, including feedback (response) (Munter, 2009). This model also brings channel choice and culture into the process of communication.

Though there are many potential models to explain communication, the key factors generally agreed upon among communication scholars are that a sender encodes a message, selects a channel, sends the message through the channel, the message is then received but must be decoded before it can be understood by the receiver; finally the receiver sends feedback to the sender (Berger, 2008; Broom & Sha, 2013; Ellsworth, 2000; Munter, 2009; Shannon, 1948). It should also be noted that most models include some form of interference, which disrupt or distort the message (Ellsworth, 2000; Shannon, 1948).

In this review the singular form of the word communication will be used to denote a social process involving personal interactions as opposed to the plural form which denotes the technological methodology through which messages are sent (Argenti & Forman, 2002; Kalla, 2005). This usage has become standard practice for the public relations industry (Argenti & Forman, 2002; Broom & Sha, 2013; Tkalac Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012).
Organizational communication can take several forms, and it is important to outline the various types and methods for communicating. The first distinction to highlight is the differences between formal and informal communication. Communication that is initiated by the organization to stakeholders or the general public is formal communication. Formal communication generally flows from the leaders through the organizational chart, cascading downward, until it reaches the frontline employees (Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). The majority of studies on organizational communication focus on formal communication and how it functions (Ellwardt, Labianca, & Wittek, 2012; Mills, 2010).

In the eyes of an employee, there are several levels where formal communication originates which mirrors their organizational chart, with the president at the top, followed by several layers of management, and finally ending with the direct supervisor (Argenti, 1996; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Generally, formal internal communication that is generated from high-level management intended for the whole of the organization is classified as organizational level communication (Broom & Sha, 2013). Depending on the channel selected, this communication level often rolls through each level in the organization, with the front-line employees being the final group of receivers (Argenti, 1996; Broom & Sha, 2013; Munter, 2009). This flow of organizational communication is referred to as information cascade (Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Messages sent out at the organizational level generally focus on themes of mission and vision (Berger, 2008).

Additionally, this level is where communication on policy and new initiatives also originate (Munter, 2009). This level’s communication also serves as a major keeper and generator of organizational knowledge (Berger, 2008; Broom & Sha, 2013). A major fault in the process of information cascade is that information from the top does not always reach the front-line employees as
the leaders intended. Middle managers often change the message, withhold information, or omit details completely (Proctor & Doukakis, 2003).

The recent emergence of internal communication as a formal organizational function has led to organizational differences between organizations, as to whose role encompasses internal communication; generally, the responsibility for internal communication resides with either human resources or some part of the marketing division (Berger, 2008; Broom & Sha, 2013; Gayeski, 2011; Gould-Williams, 2003; Lauzen, 1992). Often, several offices within an organization share the responsibility of creating pieces of internal communication, including human resources, public relations, and marketing offices (Dolphin, 2005; K. Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014; Neill & Jiang, 2017). As the body of research linking quality internal communication with employee engagement has grown, organizations have shifted to begin identifying a key individual or team to have oversight for the totality of their internal communication (Gayeski, 2011; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). The broader field of public relations has also been inconsistent with its treatment of internal communication, with some educational frameworks, including internal communication and others omitting it completely (Welch, 2015).

In contrast to formal communication that behaves in a very linear manner moving vertically, informal communication is much more grassroots. The informal communication network is often referred to as the grapevine, with messages that are sent over this network often being referred to as rumors or gossip (Crampton et al., 1998; Henderson, 1967; J. Mishra, 1990). It is important to clarify that gossip focuses on people, while rumors focus on issues of topical significance (Bordia, Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Difonzo, 2006; Kurland & Pelled, 2000). The importance of communication happening on the grapevine has historically been somewhat overlooked by scholars (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Mills, 2010). However, several studies have found that 65 to 70% of organizational communication happens on the grapevine informally (De Mare, 1989; Dunbar, 2004). Any individual within the organization can initiate a message on the informal network, and the formal systems within
the organization have little to no control over the communication (Berger, 2008; Crampton et al., 1998; Davis, 1953; Young, 2018). While society has often ascribed negative connotations to gossip and rumor dating back to biblical times, within an organization this informal communication is an important form of meaning making and is part of the social fabric of the organization (Bordia et al., 2006; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Mills, 2010).

Informal communication takes place non-stop within an organization, and its omnidirectional nature allows messages to flow faster than formal communication (Berger, 2008; Young, 2018). Additionally, several studies have found that employees place a much higher value on the communication they receive over informal networks (Crampton et al., 1998; Davis, 1953; Young, 2018). Informal communication within an organization is often utilized as a tool stakeholders can use when formal communication is insufficient or unclear (Bordia et al., 2006; Gray & Laidlaw, 2002; Hargie, Tourish, & Wilson, 2002; Kandlousi, Ali, & Abdollahi, 2010; Mills, 2010). Informal communication is generally shared between members of a workgroup who have developed a relationship (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Kurland & Pelled, 2000).

It is important to point out that even though employees place a higher value on informal communication and informal communication often makes up for gaps in formal communication, the information flowing through informal networks is not always quality or truthful. Kezar (2011, 2013) argues that informal communication within an institution of higher education is, on its own, not a major source of change. However, she notes its importance in the knowledge sharing process around a change. In a longitudinal study looking at informal communication in an organization that had been undergoing change for the past three to four years, Bordia et al. (2006) found that the greatest number of rumors were focused on job and working conditions. Predictions as to the future of the organization and the direction of the change were the second most frequent topic of rumors. While informal communication may seem unmanageable, several authors advocate for leaders to use informal communication to
understand their organizations and the behavior of their employees (Bordia et al., 2006; Frahm, 2011; Mills, 2010)

Channels of internal communication

As exhibited by both Shannon (1948) and Berlo (1960), one of the key pieces of the communication process is the channel by which the sender sends their message. In today’s organizations, leaders have a number of channels to select from, each having both positive and negative attributes (Berger, 2008, 2014; White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010). The three overarching categories of communication channels are: “written, oral-only, and blended” (Munter, 2009, pp. 27-35).

Written communication can consist of emails, letters, memos, websites, blogs, and some types of social media. Advantages of the written channel are: they are generally permanent and can be accessed later, they allow readers to understand the message at their own pace, they allow the sender to draft their message and edit it for clarity, and finally, they can be easily dispersed over a broad geographic area (Munter, 2009). The disadvantages of written communication include difficulty in accurately expressing emotion, lacks control over who is receiving the message, and the sender has no control over when the message will be read or if it will be read at all (Berger, 2008; Munter, 2009). Additionally, one study found that 46% of employees receiving written communications felt that they did not have enough time to read all of the information sent to them (Oliver, 2000).

Examples of oral-only communication include phone calls, voicemail, conference calls, and podcasts (Munter, 2009). Here the receiver has a window into the emotions of the sender and is not bound by small geographic regions (Munter, 2009). Additionally, this channel delivers its message quicker than some forms of written communication, and in most cases, oral communication lacks permanence and thus avoids becoming part of any permanent record (Broom & Sha, 2013). Compared to the written channel, oral communication is less precise because the message does not have to be sent right away, can be edited, and lacks detail (Broom & Sha, 2013; Markus, 1994; Munter, 2009).
A blended channel is the richest and allows message receivers the advantage of both verbal and non-verbal cues (Daft & Lengel, 1986). This channel type includes face-to-face conversations, presentations, meetings, video conferencing, online videos, and several other types of social media (Broom & Sha, 2013; Munter, 2009). The advantages of this channel are: happens in real-time, allows for the establishment of relationships, allows the sender to gauge the level of interest and understanding of the receiver, affords the sender the ability to react to cues from the receiver, and given that this channel generally happens in real-time, feedback and response can happen immediately with no lag (Argenti & Forman, 2002; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Kaur, Sharma, Kaur, & Sharma, 2015). This channel’s disadvantages are: requires senders and receivers to be together, cannot be spread over a large geographic area (though this is changing with technology), and blended messages are not as precise due to the lack of editing ability (Broom & Sha, 2013; Munter, 2009).

It is important to note that among blended channels, social media for internal organizational communication is the least understood with few conclusions contained in the studies that have been conducted (El Ouirdi, El Ouirdi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2015; Högberg, 2018; Kaur et al., 2015). Social media is an attractive medium for employees to utilize for informal communication as it is one of the only channels not owned and controlled by the management of the organization, where they can voice their thoughts (Balnave, Barnes, Macmillan, & Thornthwaite, 2014; Holland, Cooper, & Hecker, 2016). Most campuses do have profiles on various social media channels that they utilize to communicate formal messages to students and employees. These channels allow the institution to communicate with individuals on the platforms that they are already utilizing, meeting their stakeholders where they are on a channel, they are comfortable with. One recent study indicated that within an institution of higher education, over half of employees rely on social media to provide them with news and information on the institution (Minia et al., 2015). Conversely, several instances have highlighted how disgruntled
employees, who do not feel their organization is listening to them, have taken to social media to voice their complaints (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Wilkie, 2013).

Organizations who enact policies aimed at limiting the use of social media by their employees or who fire an employee based on social media activity have faced challenges from the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Opportunity Commission (Hemenway, 2013; Hickman, 2012; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Organizations should take a proactive approach to social media, using it as a tool to provide their employees with information and allowing them to provide feedback (Holland et al., 2016; Miles & Mangold, 2014). Organizations should approach the creation of social media policies carefully, working with legal counsel and human resources to craft policies that afford employees their right to use social media while limiting potential issues (Hemenway, 2013; Holland et al., 2016). As more research emerges on social media use in the workplace, organizations will have the ability better to facilitate communication with their employees on these channels. Currently, social media use by individuals is on the rise with more channels than ever before, and organizations need to focus on social media as a major potential source of communication (Holland et al., 2016; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Miles & Mangold, 2014).

While overarching, these three types of communication are not all-encompassing. Rather they capture all of the most relevant channels actively used in organizational life (Broom & Sha, 2013). However, as the SMCR Model shows, the senses of touch, smell, and taste can be equally as astute in decoding messages but are less engaged in professional life (Berlo, 1960). It takes a leader with exceptional forethought in communication and branding to actively engage in channels outside of written, oral-only, and blended communication.

**Elements of quality internal communication**

The best measure as to the quality and effectiveness of internal communication is the level of engagement among employees (Ruck & Welch, 2012). Not surprisingly, the first indicator of quality
internal communication is the presence of symmetry in the communication. Communication can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical, with the main differentiating factor being that asymmetrical communication does not allow for feedback, while symmetrical communication allows for feedback (Grunig, 1992; Men, 2014c). Additionally, some authors refer to symmetrical communication as dialogue and asymmetrical communication as a monologue, as these terms are more commonly understood (Al-Haddad, 2015; Boyce, 2003; Frahm, 2011). Symmetrical communication is often referred to as two-way communication and is seen as a way to empower the members of an organization and increase engagement (Grunig, 1992; Men, 2014c). Conversely, Berger (2014) outlines that asymmetrical communication is often used as a tool for conformity and paternalism. Asymmetrical communication is often seen as a type of organizational propaganda (El Zoghbi & Aoun, 2016; Ruck & Welch, 2012).

A second tenant of quality internal communication is transparency, which allows everyone inside the organization to fully understand both what is being communicated and why it is being communicated (Grunig, 2001). Organizations and leaders engaged in transparent communication often elicit feedback from its members, allowing employees to identify the information they need (Men, 2014a). Transparent communication also involves both a timeliness and a truthfulness component; employees should receive information from a trusted source when it is pertinent, and extended periods of time should not elapse between an event and subsequent communication on and around the details of the event (Grunig, 2001; Men, 2014a).

Being trustworthy is the third tenant of quality internal communication. If the organizational communication climate often allows participation, feedback, and empowers employees, it will create trust among members (J. Mishra & Morrissey, 1990; Nyhan, 2000; Smidts, Riel, & Pruyn, 2000). Furthermore, the information being communicated must be factual, and managers must entrust employees with information, as withholding information will breed distrust (Liu & Levenshus, 2010; J.
Mishra & Morrissey, 1990). The element of trust is one of the more difficult tenets of quality internal communication as it must be built over time and a betrayal of trust can negatively impact the member’s willingness to share knowledge with and trust the organization in the future (Adel Ismail, 2007; Ellsworth, 2000; Liu & Levenshus, 2010; J. Mishra & Morrissey, 1990).

In addition to being symmetrical, trustworthy, and transparent, internal communication should demonstrate management’s interests in employees, validating the employee’s commitment to the organization (Men, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Multiple studies have found face-to-face communication to be the most impactful, and organizations that maximize its use tend to have higher employee engagement (Berger, 2014; Men, 2014b, 2014c; White et al., 2010). Internal communication is also more effective when employees can see that the initiators of communication continually strive for improvement in their communication (Berger, 2014). It is also important that messaging be consistent across all channels within the organization as well (Argenti, 2009).

**Products of internal communication**

There are two main products of internal communication that can be realized: quality internal communication will drive employee engagement while poor quality internal communication will cause employee cynicism and disengagement (Choi, 2011; Frahm, 2011; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2015; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Men, 2012; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Welch, 2011). Many authors point to planning and the creation of opportunities for dialogue with employees as key starting places for improving an organization’s communication (Al - Haddad, 2015; Frahm, 2011; Grunig, 1992, 2001). Many organizations fail to provide their employees with the information they need, and they fail to understand the elements that comprise quality communication in the opinion of their employees (Frahm, 2011). If an organization can meet their employee’s definition of quality communication, provide them with the information they need when they need it, and allow them the opportunity to provide feedback, trust will be built, and the culture of the organization will begin to shift (Bommer,
Rich, & Rubin, 2005; M. Brown & Cregan, 2008; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997; Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000). Creating opportunities for dialogue is also extremely important during times of change because this is when employees experience a loss of control and extreme uncertainty about the future (Ellsworth, 2000; Rogers, 2003). By allowing members the opportunity to dialogue with the administration, they will begin to feel less uncertain about their future and the change process (Elving, 2005; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Whalen, 2011). Additionally, if the administration continues to be transparent, the members will begin to become more open and ready for change (Choi, 2011; Elving, 2005; Kezar, 2013; Wanberg & Banas, 2000).

Employee engagement is defined as a dynamic and changeable state of mind held by employees; this state of mind positively links employees with their organization, and in this state of mind employees are fulfilled by their organization and the work they perform (Karanges et al., 2015; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Men, 2012; Welch, 2011). One of the biggest drivers of employee engagement is internal communication and allowing employees to provide feedback (Gay, Mahoney, & Graves, 2005; Hargie & Tourish, 2009; Welch, 2012). Studies have shown that engaged employees, who receive effective internal communication, do not want to leave their organization, exhibit increased citizenship behaviors, and improve the overall bottom line of the organization (Burton, 2006; Towers Perrin, 2003; Watson Wyatt, 2003; Yates, 2006).

In contrast to the positive outcomes that can be realized from planning communication, creating two-way exchanges, and meeting employee expectations for communication, cynicism is the product of poor planning and communication neglect (Choi, 2011; Frahm, 2011; Karanges et al., 2015; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Welch, 2011). Cynical employees have negative attitude toward their employer, feel that their employer cannot be trusted, and are outwardly critical and state their distrust in their organization (Qian & Daniels, 2008). A key driver of cynicism is not providing employees with the information they need in a timely manner (Welch, 2012). Additionally, if employees feel that they are being misled or
that the organization’s leadership is not being genuine, employees will become increasingly cynical, and it becomes more difficult to regain trust (Whalen, 2011). As noted by Qian and Daniels (2008), the topic of cynicism in communication literature is still developing, and only a handful of studies have been published. However, studies in the broader field of organizational theory have shown that cynicism can become part of the organizational culture and saga if leaders do not take action to improve the environment (Bommer et al., 2005; M. Brown & Cregan, 2008; Reichers et al., 1997; Wanous et al., 2000). While detrimental, cynicism within an organization is reversible if leaders utilize effective leadership and communication practices to build trust in the organization’s leaders (Bommer et al., 2005; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Wanous et al., 2000; Wu, Neubert, & Yi, 2007). Additionally, positive experiences with previous change events within the organization also curb cynicism (Wanous et al., 2000).

**Internal communication and change**

Communication is one of the most important elements of the change process (Ellsworth, 2000; Kezar, 2011; Rogers, 2003). Without communication, organizational change cannot take place. The fact that 70% of organizational change initiatives fail, and many that succeed do not meet their target objectives, points to a breakdown in the change communication process (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Probst & Raisch, 2005; Styhre, 2002). Internal communication is the main vehicle within an institution of higher education for transmitting information about change initiatives (Corbo et al., 2016; Kezar, 2013; Mintzberg, 1979; Rogers, 2003). Harris and Nelson (2008) stated that internal communication is the essential variable to most change efforts within an organization. Throughout all eight of his metaphors explaining elements of organizations, G. Morgan (2007) highlights that successful organizations are ever-evolving and changing. While the pace and extent of the change may vary between organizations, it is the act of adaptation that allows for long-term success.
In his highly recognized work, *Diffusion on Innovations*, Rogers (2003) investigates how change takes place and moves through each step of the change process in detail. As indicated by the title, Rogers focuses on how the change process takes place through groups of individuals as they learn about and then accept or reject change. He defines diffusion as “the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system” (p. 5). In focusing on the group or organization’s members, Rogers illustrates how some individuals are more oriented toward adopting changes than others. This is based somewhat on personal characteristics but is more so influenced by the communication surrounding the change. Just as in the previous model, communication is involved in every variable and is one of the single largest determining factors as to the rate of adoption. Rogers also recognizes that, like individuals, organizations can also have varying resistance to change. When considering both the frames from Morgan (2007) along with Rogers (2003), it becomes clear that change and the communications surrounding it are highly important and can determine the success or failure of an organization.

During change events, leaders often do not fully communicate the impacts of the change with employees, which leads employees to feel like they lack control over their lives in the organization (Elving, 2005; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). This feeling of lacking control often drives employees to seek information on informal networks, and it breeds cynicism, as employees fear for their futures and their job security (Bordia et al., 2006; Elving, 2005; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). When considering undertaking a change, it is important that leaders involve employees in the decision-making process, in the communication, and in the implementation of the change (Bordia et al., 2006; Bryman, 2007; Choi, 2011). One difference between private sector organizations and institutions of higher education is the concept of shared governance. While this concept is supposed to allow members of the institution to share in the decisions being made, frequently it does not go far enough, and members are left feeling stressed and confused during times of change (Blaschke, Frost, & Hattke, 2014; Burke, 2014; McGrath, 2014).
Leaders within higher education must strive for a deeper level of involvement in decision-making beyond what shared governance allows, and they must navigate the unique structures present within higher education to successfully enact change in a trustworthy and transparent manner (Burke, 2014; Kitchen & Daly, 2002).

**Communication within Higher Education**

Institutions of higher education are drivers of societal change, yet scholars have found that internally these institutions are slow to enact changes (Clark, 1983; Hesburgh, 1971). As these institutions have grown and become more complex organizationally, change within them has evolved from being both latent and sporadic to an on-going and ever-present organizational function (Frahm, 2011; Huy, 2002; Kezar, 2011, 2013; Longenecker, Neubert, & Fink, 2007; Mehta, 2016). Rogers (2003), Kezar (2011), and Ellsworth (2000), three key authors on the topic of change theory, have explained that communication is one of the most important elements of the change process. Without communication, organizational change cannot take place. The majority of change initiatives within organizations fail to achieve their goals; one of the main factors in this failure is communication (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Probst & Raisch, 2005; Styhre, 2002). Internal communication is the main vehicle within an institution of higher education for transmitting information about change initiatives (Corbo et al., 2016; Kezar, 2013; Mintzberg, 1979; Rogers, 2003).

**Communication and the professional bureaucracy**

Etzioni (1964) and Mintzberg (1979) both theorized that there were two main types of bureaucracies, professional and mechanical (administrative). The professional bureaucracy is democratic in nature and consists of highly educated and/or skilled professionals who work independently from their colleagues but interact and regularly work with the client group they serve. These professionals also generally hold more allegiance to their profession than to their organization. Examples of professionals include teachers, doctors, professors, engineers, and attorneys. It should also be noted that
the standards of the professional bureaucracy originate outside of the organization from professional
groups and associations.

Conversely, the mechanical bureaucracy is hierarchical in nature, and decisions flow from the
top down. The mechanical bureaucracy focuses on policies and practices generated from inside the
organization. Mechanical bureaucracies rely on standardization, repetitive tasks, and transferable skills.
The employees within the mechanical bureaucracy are expected to conform to the organization and its
leadership.

Education is neither purely a professional nor mechanical bureaucracy; rather, it has both
structures represented in what Mintzberg (1979) calls parallel hierarchies. Under this framework, one
organization can have two hierarchies, which are linked by executive leadership. The professional
bureaucracy operates from the bottom up in a democratic fashion, while the administrative structure
operates from the top down. Both pieces of the structure rely on each other, as both are needed for the
organization to survive. Educational institutions are a prime example of organizations with parallel
structures, teachers, and professors make up the professional bureaucracy, and front office and
administrative staff make up the mechanical structure. Top leaders such as principals, presidents, and
provosts serve as the leaders to both structures simultaneously with decisions flowing from and through
them to each respective side of the structure.

While the importance of internal communication may not be clear after an initial examination of
the parallel bureaucratic structure, it is important to keep in mind that both structures rely on one another
and are operating and communicating simultaneously. “Frequently, he [the professional] abhors
administration, desiring only to be left alone to practice his profession. But that freedom is only gained
at the price of administrative effort-raising funds, resolving conflicts, buffering the demands of
outsiders” (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 363). This parallel structure can often lead to offices and departments
operating as loosely coupled systems. Loosely coupled systems exist where entities within one
organization preserve their own identity and possess some degree of physical or logical separation (Gizir & Simsek, 2005; Glassman, 1973; Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976).

**Loosely coupled systems**

The term loosely coupled systems first appeared in academic literature when Glassman (1973) applied the idea of organizations functioning like living organisms. This biological metaphor led to a discussion of the level of connectedness between cells, organs, organisms, and their environment. Glassman (1973) continued to discuss the degrees of connectedness between the parts and the whole, referring to this connection as coupling. Loose coupling, as outlined in this early work, referred to the ability on an individual piece of an organization to retain its identity while simultaneously being a part of and connected to other parts of the organization (Glassman, 1973). The concept of loosely coupled systems was quickly applied to and empirically grounded in educational organizations (Orton & Weick, 1990; Rubin, 1979; Weick, 1976).

While many authors have offered metaphors to describe loosely coupled systems, the easiest to understand this is the biological metaphor offered by Glassman (1973). Under this metaphor, the totality of the organization is the body (the university), which is made up of colleges (organs), which are made up of individual departments and offices (cells). Just as cells and organs are connected to the overall body, departments and colleges are connected to the university. While these parts are connected, they are clearly not homogeneous in their makeup or functions. Rather the cells that make up the heart each carry out differentiated tasks that are needed for the heart to operate. Each cell retains individual characteristics that help it to carry out its function. When all the cells perform their individual functions, the heart itself can operate.

Similarly, all of the departments within a school retain their own identities and carry out specific academic functions. Without each department functioning properly, it becomes difficult for the college to operate. Similarly, one could not expect to randomly remove a cell from the heart and place it
randomly into the brain and expect it to function normally. The same logic can also be applied at the college level, colleges each retain individual characteristics that differentiate them from other colleges, but all of the colleges are also part of the university culture and share certain characteristics.

It is important to point out that the presence of loosely coupled systems within institutions of higher education is neither positive or negative (Orton & Weick, 1990). Some authors, such as Rubin (1979), Murphy and Hallinger (1984), and Fusarelli (2002), have argued that loose coupling has negative connotations and suggests that leaders should seek to tighten the coupling within the organization. The term loosely coupled systems refers to a phenomenon that exists in organizations, and it is not accurate to attempt to ascribe an either-or philosophy, stating that an organization is either loosely or tightly coupled. Rather theorists such as Orton and Weick (1990), Rowan (2002), and Weick (1976) assert that some degree of loose coupling can be seen in any organization. Burke (2014) argues that coupling can be understood by examining how clearly defined the hierarchies are within the organization and what level of interdependence exists between departments. The lack of strongly defined hierarchies and the presence of little interdependence are indicators of loose coupling.

While some organizations will have more instances of loose coupling than others, the presence of loose coupling is not correlated with the quality of management. While some scholars ascribe negative connotations to loose coupling, little empirical evidence exists that shows benefits from the tightening of the coupling.

Most organizational scholars do not assert that singular theories can explain the function of an entire organization (Lund, 2003). Rather organizational theories can be layered onto one another to describe the full complexity of the organization. Thus an institution of higher education can possess the structure of a professional bureaucracy as outlined by Mintzberg (1979) and the individual pieces within that professional bureaucracy can be loosely coupled to one another with individual elements retaining
their individual characteristics while also being part of the larger organization, connected to its organizational structure and climate.

While the theory of loose coupling may seem abstract, its manifestation within the structure of an institution of higher education can have major impacts on communication. Formal internal communication is generally initiated at the top of the organization, and leaders allow their message to cascade down the hierarchy toward the front-line employees (Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). As the message cascades, potential gatekeepers in mid-level positions often exert influence over the message, altering the message, withholding information, or not delivering the message in a timely manner (Gayeski, 2011; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). As a result, employees begin to distrust formal communication and turn to informal sources (Frahm, 2011; Qian & Daniels, 2008).

Understanding that loose coupling exists at some level within every institution will allow leaders to look for solutions to bypass the use of information cascade where gatekeepers can exert influence (Gayeski, 2011; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). By avoiding gatekeepers, the leader will lower the impact that loosely coupled systems have on communication within the institution (Boyce, 2003).

**Internal communication in higher education**

What differentiates how institutions of higher education function from other organizations is their unique organizational structure, a professional bureaucracy where individual units are loosely coupled with one another (Mintzberg, 1979; Weick, 1976). It is this unique organizational structure that heavily influences how individuals within the institution communicate with one another (Henderson, 1967). Additionally, the unique structure is what causes these institutions to function differently than both organizations in the private sector and non-educational public sector organizations.

A large body of research on internal communication in for-profit organizations exists; however, few studies have investigated internal communication within institutions of higher education (Goodman et al., 2017; Towers Perrin, 2003, 2009; Wah, 1999). Gizir and Simsek (2005) investigated how the
faculty from five different departments within a Turkish university communicated. This study found that a faculty’s academic discipline affects the way they view communication and how they communicate. Faculty in the hard sciences viewed communication as a way to inform others about their works. In contrast, those in softer sciences had a broader definition of communication that included elements such as emotion and sharing.

Given that institutions are broken down by academic departments, the author outlines how these differences lead to the existence of subcultures on campus, creating loose coupling and impermeable interior organizational boundaries. Kok and McDonald (2017) investigated what elements differentiated high and low functioning academic departments and found multiple elements of communication that were at the heart of the differences. High functioning departments were found to have leaders that communicate more frequently, and their messages are more formal and structured than the messages from leaders in low performing departments. Additionally, the leaders of high functioning departments are hands-on, and their department members place a high degree of trust in their leader based on the leader’s transparency in their decision making. A final important element found by Kok and McDonald (2017) was that the leaders of high functioning departments have a clear vision for the future, that they clearly communicate through stated goals, and they employ change agents within the department when a change event is undertaken.

One element of communication connected to higher education that is more developed in literature is university branding. A university’s brand is how they differentiate themselves from other institutions and tell their story (Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012; Judson, Aurand, Gorchels, & Gordon, 2008). While most branding is a form of external communication aimed at attracting new students, institutions frequently include brand messaging within organizational communication (Joseph et al., 2012; Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens, 2016). Some authors argue that a university’s brand must be built internally before it can be released to external audiences (Gummesson, 1987; Judson et al., 2008;
Schiiffenbauer, 2001). Organizations use branding to build prestige, and higher prestige has been found to lead to increased satisfaction among the staff of institutions of higher education (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). As universities have taken a more customer-focused approach to integrate the brand into all parts of the organization, instances of internal brand promotion have increased. However, Judson et al. (2008) found that more effective internal brand communication is necessary to continue to attract the best students and keep alumni active.

The most comprehensive study on communication within an institution of higher education was carried out by Duke University in the form of a self-study (Minia et al., 2015). This study investigated the totality of internal communication within the institution. It sought to understand both the current state of internal communication within the institution and in what ways it could be improved. The first important finding in the study was that among those whose main role is some form of communication, only 17% list that internal communication is greater than or equal to more than 75% of their job responsibility; 57% of communicators responded that internal communication was less than 25% of their job responsibilities (Minia et al., 2015). Additionally, the study found that among communicators, only 27% felt “very equipped” to provide effective communication to their school, department, or unit, while the other 72% felt either “somewhat equipped” or some level of unequipped (Minia et al., 2015). The combination of these two findings are extremely important as they could potentially show that within higher education, the strategy and messaging for internal communication is decentralized and being carried out by individuals who also focus on marketing and human resources and lack the resources necessary to feel they are effective internal communicators. Based on the facts that Duke University placed a high enough value on the topic of internal communication to conduct and publish a self-study, and that they created a multi-track professional development program specifically designed to improve the communication skills of employees, called Duke ProComm, with courses like Internal
Communication 101, Duke University should be seen as a very high performing institution in regards to communication (Duke University, 2019). The results of this study paired with the fact that Duke University is a high performer in the field of communication speaks to the potentially weak climate of communication within institutions of higher education, but more research is necessary to fully understand the environment and the full nature of how internal communication functions in higher education.

Change in higher education

The main role of the change agent during change is knowledge sharing and dialogue, both synonyms for communication (Ellsworth, 2000; Kezar, 2013; Rogers, 2003). Without internal communication, change cannot take place. Several studies have investigated how internal communication functions within higher education, though none investigated how that communication was tied to change outcomes (Dennis et al., 2016; Gizir & Simsek, 2005; Joseph et al., 2012; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). This lack of specific literature examining how internal communication shapes the change process and the feelings toward an adoption rate of a change is problematic. Without this focused literature, leaders within higher education must continue to rely on their anecdotal experience versus having best practices rooted in academic literature to rely on.

The majority of modern change models are based on the work of Lewin (1951). In his model, Lewin conceptualized change as a clearly defined event in the organization’s life, where the organization would “unfreeze” from being in a state of no change. The organization would then undergo the change and then would “re-freeze,” locking itself back into a changeless state until the next change event arose. While this model worked well when conceived, some modern authors argue that the constant state of change in organizations of higher education today negate the “unfreeze” and “refreeze” elements of the model (Frahm, 2011; Kezar, 2011, 2013). Most modern authors agree that communication is the key to organizational change, whether they term it communication or use
synonyms such as dialogue or consensus building (Elving, 2005; Frahm, 2011; Kezar, 2011; G. Morgan, 2007; Rogers, 2003).

Change in educational institutions has been investigated, and the subsequent frameworks have also shown communication to be a key factor in the change process (Ellsworth, 2000; Kezar, 2011). In his conceptualization of the change process within higher education, Ellsworth (2000) modified an existing and widely-accepted communication model similar to the Shannon-Weaver Model. For his change model, he changed sender to change agent, message to innovation, and receiver to intended adopter. Beyond choosing to base his change model off of a communication model, Ellsworth (2000) also discussed the importance of symmetrical communication, transparency, trust, and allowing stakeholders to have a part in the change process within education organizations.

Several key differentiators exist in organizations of higher education that cause the change process to function differently from private sector organizations, these organizations generally lack clear goals and are made up of a series of segmented departments (Clark, 1979, 1983; Cross, Ernst, & Pasmore, 2013). The presence of the professional bureaucracy and shared governance in higher education has long been seen as an impediment to change (Clark, 1983; Kezar, 2011). The Hesburgh Paradox exhibits this by stating that higher education is a major driver of change in society, yet while they drive change externally, they are extremely slow to change and adapt internally (Clark, 1983; Hesburgh, 1971). As institutions of higher education have developed and matured, their internal structures have adapted to protect the organization from completely failing (Clark, 1983). While the organization as a whole changes slowly, some departments have evolved to embrace change (Clark, 1983).

More recently, there has been a movement within a number of institutions to limit the functions of shared governance in an attempt to make these institutions more efficient, changing the organizational structure to make them function more in line with private sector businesses (Bryman, 2007; Deem,
2010; Eckel, 2000; Fusarelli, 2002; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Marginson, 2000). These segmentations, coupled with the lack of goals, lead managers to act in their own best interest, pleasing their supervisors, as opposed to the best interest of the greater organization (Cross et al., 2013). While many employees within higher education value their autonomy, leaders must set clear goals for the organization, and they must build trust (Bryman, 2007; Frahm, 2011; Whalen, 2011). This trust-building is positively correlated with the readiness for change (the opposite being resistant to change) among employees, which is a key indicator as to whether employees will buy into change (Elving, 2005). During change leaders in higher education must communicate openly and keep uncertainty as low as possible, working within the culture of their organization to gain insights into the expectations and norms members place on the organization’s leaders and their communication (Bryman, 2007; Kezar, 2011; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Tierney, 1988).

One of the biggest challenges to implementing communication strategies to better inform employees and build trust is the siloed structure that exists within institutions of higher education (Gayeski, 2011; Rowan, 2002; Tierney, 1988). This siloed structure and loose coupling often prevent information from flowing freely on formal channels and can impede change initiatives (Boyce, 2003). Formal channels of communication are often full of gatekeepers who look for opportunities to exert their control over formal messages, creating a climate of distrust around both communication and change (Gayeski, 2011; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Without enough information on formal channels, employees turn to informal networks for information during times of change as a way to feel like they are in control of their life in the organization (Bordia et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2013; Hargie et al., 2002; Mills, 2010). Leaders in higher education should strive to fulfill their member’s expectations for communication, include employees in the change planning process, build trust through symmetrical communication, and build transparency into their decisions around change (Bommer et al., 2005; M. Brown & Cregan, 2008; Reichers et al., 1997; Wanous et al., 2000). Once these goals are realized,
institutions will be able to more successfully approach change initiatives to improve the lives of the members within higher education.

**Crisis communication in higher education**

Crisis events are unforeseen threats to the organization that, in addition to harming the stakeholders and disrupting its operations, can damage the reputation of the organization (Barton, 2001; Coombs, 2007). Institutions of higher education, like businesses in the private sector, have learned to disseminate key information during uncertain and unexpected events that threaten their stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; Hong & Kim, 2019). Crises often involve a physical threat such as severe weather, health crisis, violence, chemical release, or contaminated food, and often also involve a psychological threat where stakeholders face added stress because of the crisis (Coombs, 2007; Hong & Kim, 2019; Sturges, 1994).

Crisis management plans are developed by many organizations and seek to identify potential crisis events, how the organization would respond to the event, how stakeholders would behave during the crisis, how the organization would communicate during the crisis, and how the organization and its reputation will return to normal after the crisis (Aspiranti, Pelchar, McCleary, Bain, & Foster, 2011; Coombs, 2007; Sturges, 1994). Crisis management and communication literature offers multiple tactics that can be employed to lessen the impact of a crisis. However, many of these tactics are more aimed at lessening the impacts of a scandal as opposed to mitigating the impacts of a public health crisis (Arendt, Lafleche, & Limperopulos, 2017; Benoit, 1997; Varma, 2011).

Events such as the Virginia Tech campus shooting, the Texas A&M bonfire collapse, the Penn State scandal involving Jerry Sandusky, and the Ohio State scandal involving Dr. Richard Strauss highlight the need for crisis planning in higher education (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007; J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010). However, two studies specifically investigating crisis preparedness in higher education found that while the vast majority of institutions have written crisis plans, they only address a limited
number of potential crisis events and do not generally address situations outside of commonly experienced events. These commonly experienced events include suicides, hazing, strikes, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, lawsuits, administrative scandals, and racial discrimination (June, 2007; Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003).

J. Wang and Hutchins (2010) investigated Virginia Tech’s response to the 2007 campus shooting, and they found the campus’s crisis plan was inadequate and noted that it took the university two hours to send any communication about the event. A more recent event, the 2010 shooting in the library of the University of Texas in Austin, contrasts the response at Virginia Tech and shows that some campuses are taking crisis preparation more seriously. During this event, the University of Texas was able to immediately communicate with 43,000 students, faculty, and staff via text messages, the university website, and university social media channels. The crisis response team was able to keep people away from the library, preventing and fatalities (J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010).

Conclusion

Much of the current research focused on formal internal communication, and its effect on employee engagement is quantitative in design and utilizes survey instruments to assess the quality of communication and the level of engagement among employees (Berger, 2014; Karanges et al., 2015; Men, 2014b, 2014c; White et al., 2010; Yates, 2006). As shown by Lemon and Palenchar (2018), the field of internal communication must begin moving beyond only using quantitative methods, as many aspects of communication involve opinions and emotions that can be difficult to capture with a survey.

Additionally, the majority of this research takes place in the private sector, which lacks elements of the academic environment that could affect both communication and factors that influence engagement. It is important to build on the current foundation of literature about internal communication, to understand the similarities and differences of how communication functions in the academy with its loosely coupled systems, as opposed to organizations in the private sector. The
available literature that exists on the topic of internal communication in higher education seems to indicate that siloing and barriers to communication tied to the unique structure of institutions exist. However, it is unknown how these structures will affect internal communication around change. Change initiatives often fail, and the vast majority of change models point to communication as a key driver of successful change (Clark, 1983; Cross et al., 2013). However, there is currently very little academic literature that examines the role of internal communication during crisis events within institutions of higher education.

**Theoretical Framework**

While organizational structures between private sector organizations and institutions of higher education differ, the one constant between all organizations is that they are comprised of people (members) and these members are involved in social exchanges that drive many aspects of their behavior (Cole et al., 2002; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Kahn, 1990). These exchange relationships take place between the employee and their organization, leaders, and co-workers (Cole et al., 2002; Dansereau et al., 1975; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Seers, 1989). The main component involved in these social exchanges is communication (Kahn, 1992; Mehta, 2016; Portoghese et al., 2012). While individual theories have been developed to understand each of the three types of exchange relationships, looking simultaneously at all three exchange relationships allows the employee to be more fully understood (Cole et al., 2002; Raineri, Mejia-Morelos, Francoeur, & Paillé, 2016). WSEN was selected as the conceptual framework for this study because it holistically considers Leader Member Exchange (LMX), Team Member Exchange (TMX), and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) to fully understand employees, their behavior, and their communication (Cole et al., 2002).

WSEN and the theories that comprise it fall under the broader Social Exchange Theory, which is rooted in the discipline of sociology and was developed through the seminal works of Homans (1958), Gouldner (1960), Blau (1964), and Lévi-Strauss (1969). Blau (1964) differentiated between economic
and social exchanges, which differentiated Social Exchange Theory from previous theories. Blau (1964) went on to specify that social exchanges involved trust, gratitude, and feelings of personal obligation that went on for an unspecified amount of time. While Social Exchange Theory was originally conceptualized to understand the psychological differences between an individual acting in their own self-interest versus acting in a more complex way that was influenced by relationships, scholars began shifting the theory toward commerce (Homans, 1961; Neff, 2008).

LMX, aimed at understanding the relationship between an employee and their supervisor, was the first organizational theory to emerge from Social Exchange Theory. Though, at its inception, LMX scholars ignored social exchange research, opting to understand the supervisor-employee relationship strictly through dyads and the value to resources offered by each individual (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen, 1976; Graen & Cashman, 1975). One focus of early LMX research focused on understanding how and why employees performed above and beyond their job descriptions and how their dyadic relationship contributed to that behavior (Cole et al., 2002; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997). As LMX developed, scholars began to address the underlying social exchange relationships inherent in the theory, explaining its current positioning as a Social Exchange Theory (Cook & Whitmeyer, 1992; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Liden et al., 1997).

Some LMX scholars have questioned the role an employee’s relationship with their organization played in their work life. POS was conceived by Eisenberger et al. (1986) and sought to examine this relationship. As POS developed, scholars found that employees who feel appreciated and who feel that their organization cares about them are more committed to their organization and exhibit positive citizenship behaviors (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-Lamastro, 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993). The final social exchange relationship, TMX, was conceptualized by Seers (1989) and focused on how an employee’s relationship with their coworkers affects their behavior. Quality relationships under the TMX framework yield outcomes such as job satisfaction, job performance,

As research has validated the independent theories of LMX, POS, and TMX, Cole et al. (2002) conceived WSEN as a way to holistically understand employees and their workplace relationships. This conceptualization has since been built upon by Neff (2008), Raineri et al. (2016), and Schaninger (2002). While WSEN is a newer framework, the three sub-frameworks that comprise it have been well researched (Banks et al., 2014; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Jin & Zhong, 2014; Liao et al., 2013; Liden et al., 1997; Schermuly & Meyer, 2016; Sherony & Green, 2002; Shih & Wijaya, 2017; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). These exchanges are mainly comprised of communication, and thus this theory is well suited for examining the internal communication happening within an institution of higher education. WSEN allows for the formal communication to be examined through the exchanges of an employee and their direct supervisor and the greater organization. Additionally, WSEN allows for informal communication networks to be examined through co-worker and peer exchanges. In a work that pre-dated the formal conceptualization of WSEN by Cole et al. (2002), Sparrowe and Liden (1997) used the three exchange relationship areas with social network analysis to analyze the informal networks within an organization. This study found that an employee’s relationship and communication with both their supervisor and their co-workers influenced how they viewed their organization and greatly influenced their behavior within the organization. Other authors have also found connections between some or all of these social exchange relationships, communication and behavioral outcomes, which further underscores why WSEN was selected for this study (Kahn, 1992; Mehta, 2016; Portoghese et al., 2012; Shih & Wijaya, 2017; Vieira-Dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997).

In addition to being connected to communication, the elements of WSEN have also been shown to have a connection to a member’s readiness for change and their level of resistance to a change taking
place (Burnett et al., 2015; Kahn, 1992; Portoghese et al., 2012; Van Dam et al., 2008; Wittig, 2012). Notably, Portoghese et al. (2012) found that employees who received poor communication from their supervisor during a change event were more likely to foster negative perceptions of the change and these employees would only take action to support the change if threatened with consequences. The connection with cynicism toward change was another reason WSEN was selected. Cynicism has correlations with the level of informal communication an employee will be engaged in during a change event (Bordia et al., 2006; Choi, 2011; Hargie et al., 2002; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Welch, 2012). Cynicism around change can also impact the organization’s culture; as more employees become cynical toward the organization and change, this cynicism becomes part of the saga of the organization (Choi, 2011). To fully understand WSEN, it is important to have an understanding of each of its three sub-frameworks:

**Leader Member Exchange**

LMX theory was derived from Social Exchange Theory and Vertical Dyad Linkage Theory conceived by Dansereau et al. (1975) and subsequently built on by Dienesch and Liden (1986), Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), and Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, and Ferris (2012). Out of the three frameworks that comprise WSEN, LMX is the most highly researched (Cole et al., 2002). The main focus of this theory was to illustrate the relationship between leaders and individual followers, conceptualized as vertical dyads (Dansereau et al., 1975). These dyadic relationships are defined by the process and content exchanges throughout the working relationship of leaders and followers. The individual dyads between individual followers and the leader of a group or unit can be compared to better understand relational and communication patterns within the group (Dansereau et al., 1975).

Under the theory of LMX, a large part of the relationships captured in the dyads are formed and maintained based on communication. The presence of symmetrical communication should yield stronger dyad relationships, where asymmetrical communication would be represented by weaker relationships.
(Dansereau et al., 1975; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Given that asymmetrical communication is generally used by leaders in an effort to achieve compliance without questions, it makes sense that leaders who utilize it would have weaker relationships with their followers (Grunig, 1992; Men, 2014c). Additionally, change and communication research has shown building dialogue (symmetrical communication) into communication creates positive workplace outcomes and increases citizenship behaviors, strengthening the dyadic relationship (J. Mishra & Morrissey, 1990; Nyhan, 2000; Smidts et al., 2000).

LMX theory outlines that an employee or follower of a leader will fall into either the in-group or out-group based on the quality of communication and strength of the dyad between the leader and the follower. Typically in-group members are also more likely to take on additional responsibilities and are driven in part by the success of the organization (Dansereau et al., 1975). Leaders also generally take a more transformational approach with members of their in-group (H. Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005). Conversely, a relationship-centered around formal, asymmetric communication and defined strictly by job descriptions are indicative of out-group dyads (H. Wang et al., 2005). Out-group members have less of a connection with their leader and their organization, and the relationship is more transactional in nature (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

**Perceived Organizational Support**

POS was developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986) when the authors sought to understand how an employee’s relationship with their organization affected the level of commitment they held toward their organization. This framework examines how an organization interacts with its employees and how those interactions influence the employee’s feelings toward the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS is defined as the extent to which employees believe that their organization cares about them and the contributions they make (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Lee & Peccei, 2007; Shore & Wayne, 1993; Vieira-Dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018). High levels of POS
have been associated with positive workplace behaviors such as increased effort toward job responsibilities, reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover intention, and increased organizational commitment (Cole et al., 2002; Eisenberger et al., 1997; Palmer, Komaraju, Carter, & Karau, 2017; Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Shore & Tetrick, 1991).

One element that has been shown to affect the level of POS among employees is formal internal communication in the form of internal marketing (Vieira-Dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018; Zhou, Brown, & Dev, 2009; Zou & Cavusgil, 2002). Formal internal communication is one of the major forms of meaning making regarding an organization’s culture, and it guides the norms and everyday relations within the organization (Berger, 2008; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Mills, 2010).

Under the guiding framework of Social Exchange Theory, employees are bound to their organizations based on exchanges (Blau, 1964). Employees receive pay for their work, an economic exchange, but at some level, they are also bound by social exchanges with their organization (Shore & Wayne, 1993). Employees who are only bound to their organization based on an economic exchange have been found to be the least likely to exhibit citizenship behaviors toward the organization (Shore & Wayne, 1993). While those employees bound by social exchanges are more committed to their organizations and view their organizations as having higher levels of POS (Cole et al., 2002; Settoon et al., 1996; Shore & Wayne, 1993).

**Team Member Exchange**

Until the conception of TMX, there was no effective way under Social Exchange Theory to assess the relationships between an employee and their co-workers or team (Seers, 1989; Srivastava & Singh, 2015). The goal of TMX is to assess the level of reciprocity between an employee and members of their work team (direct co-workers), not focusing on individual relationships but rather the overall relationship with the collective team (Cole et al., 2002; Liao et al., 2013; Shih & Wijaya, 2017; Srivastava & Singh, 2015). Empirical evidence has shown that the relationship employees have with
their co-workers is equally as important as the relationships they have with their leaders and organization for predicting employee behaviors, feelings and attitudes (Anand, Vidyarthi, Liden, & Rousseau, 2010; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Liao et al., 2013). In her qualitative study on psychological conditions, focusing on personal engagement and disengagement in the workplace, Kahn (1990) found that an employee needs to stay connected with their fellow employees to stay engaged in the workplace.

Just as links exist between communication and both LMX and POS, so do links between TMX and informal communication in the form of rumor and gossip. As both gossip scholars and TMX scholars have noted, the more comfortable an employee is with their teammates, the more likely they will be to share information informally (Henttonen, Janhonen, & Johanson, 2013; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Mills, 2010; Morrison & Milliken, 2003; Shih & Wijaya, 2017; Tse & Dasborough, 2008). While TMX is the newest and lesser researched sub-theory under Social Exchange Theory, it holds the most connections to understanding how informal communication functions within the organization (Mills, 2010; Shih & Wijaya, 2017; Tse & Dasborough, 2008).

**Workplace Social Exchange Network**

WSEN is the main theoretical framework that guides this study, as it incorporates all three of the key social exchange relationships that an employee experiences in the workplace, LMX, POS, and TMX (Cole et al., 2002; Raineri et al., 2016). Individually, each of these social exchanges have been linked to communication, thus, to understand internal communication and how employees feel, understanding these relationships is extremely important (Dansereau et al., 1975; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Henttonen et al., 2013; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Mills, 2010; Vieira-Dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018; Zhou et al., 2009; Zou & Cavusgil, 2002). Additionally, higher levels of trust is an indicator of quality in each of the three areas of social exchange in the workplace; trust has been empirically linked to both commitment to the organization and quality in internal communication (Blau, 1964; Cole et al., 2002;
Dansereau et al., 1975; Liden et al., 1997; J. Mishra & Morrissey, 1990; Nyhan, 2000; Piercy, Cravens, Lane, & Vorhies, 2006).

Multiple authors have stressed that the culture and norms of the organization affect its communication (Bryman, 2007; Frahm, 2011; Kezar, 2011; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Tierney, 1988). It is clear that no one relationship area exists in isolation, rather individual employees have different levels of involvement and relationships that are interrelated (Cole et al., 2002; Raineri et al., 2016). This study sought to understand the employee’s feelings about internal communication during a change event, through examining different elements of and the interplay between the three relationship areas. An understanding of the social exchanges and the organizational culture yielded a richer and deeper understanding of how and why the change communication in the organization functions as it does. These relationships also helped to explain the employee’s deeper feelings about their role in the organization and how they feel the change event affects their future.

While other frameworks, such as Diffusion Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, Loosely Coupled Systems, and the Professional Bureaucracy were considered for this study, no other framework allowed for the assessment of a member’s feelings about formal and informal change communication. Other theories were either too niche in their focus or only allowed for a partial assessment of what was being examined. Additionally, WSEN’s established connections with organizational theory, communication, and change made it the ideal framework to guide this study.
Chapter Three
Methodology

The goal of this study was to investigate the role internal communication played in shaping the feelings towards a crisis event on a university campus. Case study methodology was utilized to provide thick, rich description within the bounded place and time surrounding this crisis event. This study investigated the role of communication in a university’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This major crisis event caused classes to move from in-person to online, campuses to close, and forced universities to evaluate how they could safely provide services. Interviews were the main method of data collection used, with a protocol adapted from other studies based on the theory of WSEN. Every precaution was taken to ensure internal validity, and this case has the potential to be transferable to other situations with similar details. This study sought to understand the role both formal and informal communication played in shaping the feelings and actions of campus community members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Epistemological Assumptions and General Methods

Internal communication has previously been investigated using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Hargie & Tourish, 2000, 2009; Mills, 2010; Welch, 2012; J. Williams, 2011). Many studies have utilized communication audits, which are generally mixed-methods utilizing a combination of surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups (Downs & Hazen, 1977; Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1977; Hargie & Tourish, 2000, 2009; Odiorne, 1954). However, these audits mostly focused on formal communication and lacked the ability to fully capture their participant's feelings regarding the totality of internal communication within the organization. Contemporary researchers have highlighted the importance of qualitative methods when investigating internal communication (Mills, 2010; Welch,
2012; Zwijze-Koning & de Jong, 2007), specifically advocating for the level of richness and depth that is captured in the data.

While multiple qualitative methodologies exist, this study was best suited to be conducted as a case study. This methodology captured the most depth and richness among all of the members of the campus community that are affected by the crisis event being studied. Additionally, this study focuses on a contemporary event that is out of the control of the investigator, making it an ideal case study topic (Yin, 2009). The research question at the heart of this study sought to understand cultural norms, community values, and the attitudes of those affected by a particularistic, major change/crisis event; these elements are best investigated through a case study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1988). Additionally, crisis events are happening with increasing frequency on campuses (J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010), though the communication surrounding these events are not well understood. This problem-centered, holistic approach to this issue is best investigated using a case study (Merriam, 1988; Shaw, 1978).

Bounded systems, having a clearly defined timeframe and place, are at the heart of qualitative case study research (Merriam, 2009). The institution and the time frame of the crisis event define the bounded system in this case. More specifically, the bounded timeframe mirrors that of the crisis event, initiating when leaders begin planning for the crisis and concluding after the campus had mostly returned to normal operations. The bounded place will be defined as the individual campus on which the significant change event is taking place.

The ability to provide thick, rich descriptions based on the experiences of participants and the heuristic nature of case studies make this methodology ideal for this study's research question (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1988). This study sought to illuminate the practitioner's understanding of the event being studied and potentially identify relationships that had not previously been identified (Helmstadter, 1970; Stake, 1981). Utilizing a case study allowed the researcher to approach this topic
inductively, allowing generalizations, variables, relationships, and concepts to emerge from the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Helms-Jadter, 1970; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1981).

**Site Selection**

The major change event that will be the focus of this case study is the campus’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic meets this study definition of a major change event, as this event modified the norm and structure within the organization, and it also caused a high level of disruption to the members of the organization. This crisis event affected institutions of higher education across the country, forcing universities to suspend services, move classes online, and fully close their campuses, save for essential personnel. Institutions had to consider how to keep their students, faculty, and staff safe while also assuring that learning could continue. The crisis event also lasted a significant amount of time, affecting most of the Spring 2020 semester and causing the first summer session of 2020 to move fully online. Additionally, communication was at the heart of how universities rolled out their responses to the event. Since campuses were closed and employees were practicing social distancing, there are records for most of the communication that took place during the event.

The site selected for this study is Gulf Coast University; a public four-year bachelor's granting institution that was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to its location in a dense urban area where COVID-19 could spread easily, Gulf Coast University had to take precautions that other more rural schools may have been slower to adopt or may not have had to adopt at all. Additionally, Gulf Coast University built a page on their website dedicated to communicating their response to COVID-19. On this page, they listed all of their individual pieces of formal communication; their updated plan to combat communicable diseases, their plan to maintain teaching during crisis events, and their plan for maintaining operations for university services provided by the university staff. These publicly available resources provided important data for this study, and they provided a level of
transparency that may not be available at other institutions. Gulf Coast University was also selected because it has both residential and commuter student populations, each with unique needs that must be met during a major change event. The faculty and staff at Gulf Coast University faced many of the challenges of traditional four-year colleges with large residential populations while also catering to working professionals and local students living at home with family.

The bounded time of this case is January 2020, when the university sent its first message on the crisis event, through July 2020, when the university’s administration completed the majority of its planning to resume in person learning and services for the fall 2020 semester. While the COVID-19 pandemic remained an on-going crisis that the university was working to mitigate after the bounded timeframe of this case, the spring and summer semesters of 2020 held the largest interruptions for the campus with the move to offer all services remotely. This period allowed for an investigation of the bulk of the COVID-19 planning, changes, and the internal communication associated with it. This timeframe also allowed participants to be retrospective about a recent event, removing potential issues that could arise from data collection on a currently evolving crisis situation. However, impacts related to this event will continue to be felt by the campus community for years after the event ended.

**Recruitment Plan**

The upper administration was the main gatekeepers for this study as they have the power to grant access to the institution for study. To gain access to the institution, the office of the university’s president was first contacted. Contacting the president’s office allowed the president and his team to consider participation in the study. It was important that the president’s office consult with the public relations director for the campus, as these two individuals were the main gatekeepers both to the university and to understanding the communication strategy around this change event.

After gaining access to the university through the upper administration, the leaders within the Faculty Senate were contacted. Having the support of the faculty’s governing body simplified the
process of finding faculty participants from each school on campus, as participants were drawn from the Faculty Senate. To understand the views and feelings of mid-level and lower-level staff, the directors of the individual office were contacted. Having the support of the president and other upper-level administrators made the process of securing participation among individual offices easier.

Sampling and Participant Selection

Throughout this study, purposive sampling was utilized. The initial interviews of this study focused on administrators to understand the planning and communication strategies that were employed in responding to COVID-19. Interviews with faculty and staff members followed the initial interviews with administrators.

The first group of participants included the upper-level university administrators who were in direct control of the decision-making process and managed the communication. These interviewees included the president of the university, the provost, and the communication director for the university. These interviews offered insights on the COVID-19 response team that assisted the president with decision-making and communication. This team was at the heart of the crisis response and offered important data that informed the subsequent interviews.

The next round of interviews included faculty members, the professional bureaucracy, and staff members, the administrative bureaucracy. To fully understand how the response to COVID-19 was communicated to faculty in different schools and how that communication influenced their feelings and actions, faculty members from each of the four colleges was interviewed. Due to the timing of the study, many faculty members were busy teaching and trying to catch up after two semesters of teaching online, which negatively impacted recruitment of faculty. Additionally, staff from offices whose services were in higher demand due to the response to COVID-19 were also included in this round. These interviewees included participants connected to the office that assists international students, the library, residential
Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

This study utilized two data collection methods, interviews and document analysis. Two rounds of interviews and one round of document analysis took place. Before any interviews were conducted, all publicly available communication from online sources were collected. As these documents and archival records were then analyzed, a timeline was created. This timeline continued to evolve throughout the study, and it served as a point of reference for the internal communication strategy. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing printed and digital documents where data is analyzed and interpreted to evoke meaning and gain understanding. The main purpose of this document analysis was to provide triangulation and provide base level knowledge on the university’s response and communication focused on COVID-19 (Eisner, 1991). Unlike the interviews, the data contained in documents are not altered by the presence or biases of the researcher (Merriam, 2009). The documents analyzed as part of this study were formal in nature and originated from the upper-level administration. Emergent themes from the document analysis informed the interview protocol when additional information was needed to understand why decisions were made and how certain pieces of communication impacted the participants.

Communication sources for document analysis in this study included emails, information posted on the university’s website, posts made on university controlled social media accounts, posts on the president’s official social media accounts, posts made on the social media accounts of the university's communication director, university policy and planning documents, and comments made on posts from social media. Screenshots of this information were taken to preserve the data. These screenshots were then organized based on the source of the information and the date the screenshot was taken. The
university’s social media channels were then reviewed, and COVID-19 related posts and comments were collected. Finally, the university president’s official social media channels were reviewed, and the COVID-19 related information was preserved. Throughout the rest of the study, the timeline was continually updated as new messages and actions emerged. This timeline aided in the creation of the final interview questions and served as a reference point when analyzing data from the interviews. As themes emerged from the data analysis, they were noted, and these themes were further conceptualized as the data analysis continued.

After access was granted to the research population, potential participants were contacted to gauge their interest in participating in the study. The interview participants were then sent the demographic questionnaire in Appendix A. This questionnaire provided important general background information about participants, creating a point of reference on each participant during data analysis. Interviews are important in qualitative research as they allow the researcher to dive deeper into personal and social issues than would be possible in a more social setting like a group interview or focus group (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Ritchie, 1997). These interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured, and took place over Zoom, inviting participants to be in a comfortable and safe environment for the interview (Powell & Single, 1996; Tynan & Drayton, 1988). While in-person interviews would have been preferred, the university’s policy at the time of data collection for this study did not allow for in-person interviews due to the health impacts of COVID-19.

Studies utilizing a qualitative case study methodology do not frequently use a survey style approach to interviews, asking each participant the same list of questions in the same order (Stake, 1995). Instead, they are more like guided conversations that are semi-structured in nature (Yin, 2009). This study utilized a semi-structured interview protocol, allowing the researcher the ability to add questions focused on specific details or topics that emerge during the course of the interviews (DiCicco - Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). This approach allowed participants to
give a more in-depth description of events, offer explanations, and provide linkages (Stake, 1995). It also allowed the researcher to probe certain topics that resonate with the participant to gain a deeper understanding, beyond what a strict list of questions would have allowed (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

Before each interview, participants were emailed a recording waiver and an informed consent document, notifying them that they can suspend their participation in the study at any point. At the beginning of each interview these documents were explained to the participants and they were allowed time to ask questions before being asked to sign and return the documents via email. Each interview was recorded using the record function in Zoom. The interview transcripts were then drafted from the recordings using the transcription software program otter.ai. After the transcription of each interview, the researcher reviewed the video recording from each interview to verify the accuracy of each transcript. Following transcription, data from each interview was coded using open coding.

The analysis that took place during open coding began to identify concepts and categories from the data (Grbich, 2012; Strauss, 1987). Following each interview, transcripts were printed and read once all the way through, the researcher noted important phrases in the margins. Each transcript was then reread and the important phrases were categorized using different colored highlighters. Memoing sessions followed each round of coding: In these sessions, the researcher made notes on specific connections, pieces of information, and insights from the data (Strauss, 1987). Once several interviews and the subsequent rounds of data analysis had taken place, initial codes began to emerge. An excel workbook was created with each code that had emerged being assigned an individual spreadsheet. The important phrases that made up each code were then added to individual rows of the code’s spreadsheet. Each additional interview and subsequent round of coding further added to the overall understanding of the research topic until the saturation of data was reached (Grbich, 2012; Strauss, 1987). Initially, thirty-five codes were identified; they were then condensed four overarching themes and eleven subthemes. Some transcripts from interviews early in the data collection process were reviewed an additional time.
once all of the data had been collected and the overarching themes had begun to develop. This second review yielded additional information that strengthened the themes and subthemes by providing additional details that added to the richness and depth.

During the initial interviews, participants were those who led the communication strategy for the university and had a role in creating the formal communication around the crisis event. The goal of these interviews was to better understand the formal communication strategy and approach at the top of the organization so that it could be compared with how the final receivers of the messages perceived the communication. It was also important to understand what pieces of communication were disseminated and over what channels they were sent. As the study progressed, attention was paid to how these pieces of communication flowed through the organization, finally arriving at the department level, and if any elements were altered as dissemination occurred. The interview protocol for the initial round of interviews with administrators is outlined in Appendix B.

The second round of interviews focused on the professional and administrative bureaucracies through interviews with university faculty and staff members. These interviews focused on understanding how the communication associated with the university’s response to COVID-19 affected the feelings and actions taken after receiving the communication. Faculty participants were asked what communication they received from the dean of their respective colleges and what pieces of feedback and informal communication they drafted based on formal messages they received. Appendix C details the interview protocol utilized for faculty members. Staff participants were associated with offices whose services were most in-demand or whose services were most affected by the institution's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the library, international student services, residential life, and student services. While the entire campus community was affected by the COVID-19, these individuals were arguably the most affected. These interviews provided a window into the direct effects of internal communication and its effects on operations within the university. These interviews also offered a window into the
participant's feelings based on the messages they received from the administration. This data allowed for comparison in the administration's goals versus how the messages were perceived and what actions were taken as a result. The protocol utilized for staff interviews can be found in Appendix D.

To mitigate potential bias as data was being collected and analyzed, the researcher practiced both bracketing and journaling (Hanson, 1994; Paterson & Groening, 1996; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Additionally, as noted, the researcher watched each video recording and verified that the transcripts were correctly transcribed.

**Researcher Identity**

The researcher has worked in both higher education and public relations agencies. All of the roles the researcher held in higher education were departmental roles. These roles often required working with faculty, staff, and students during times of change dictated by school or university level administrators. The researcher noted feelings of powerlessness when these changes were not well defined or explained. As his career has evolved, the researcher has worked to define and explain any changes he has initiated and is a proponent of process maps for defining organizational processes.

Bracketing and journaling were practiced to mitigate potential bias from the researcher. Before each interview the researcher prepared by listing any preconceived ideas, feelings, or thoughts that were central in their mind. Following the interview a similar debriefing bracketing process was undertaken. This free form open-ended bracketing helped to capture key thoughts and feelings that were then expended upon in deeper journaling sessions. As part of the journaling process the researcher noted any feelings that connected to their past experiences working in higher education, the researcher considered how those feelings could potentially impact the data collection and analysis process. The researcher also worked to consider all sides of the various decisions and issues that arose in this study, noting thoughts and feelings emerged from any decisions that drew the attention of the researcher. These journaling sessions allowed the researcher to understand potential biases that were arising and address them. By
addressing these potential issues, the researcher could approach the subsequent rounds of data collection and coding from a more neutral place.

**Trustworthiness**

Peer debriefing, transcription verification, and triangulation were used to assure that this study was credible. The researcher asked two impartial peers to examine the methodology and data analysis of this study and provide feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These peers were also asked to review the themes and codes that emerged. The feedback these peers provide will highlight errors, points that were under or overemphasized, and areas of potential bias for the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To further build on this study's credibility, the accuracy of the transcription was verified by watching the video recording of each interview. Finally, this study collected data from multiple sources using multiple methods (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). This action created the potential for finding triangulation from the data. This convergence of data allowed the researcher to find facts that were key to the findings of this study (Yin, 2009).

This study built its dependability through the creation of an audit trail and clearly defining the methodological steps and decisions made in the study (Yin, 2009). The researcher built a detailed audit trail that explained the decisions made throughout the study, and detailed the methodological and analytical processes that took place throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rice & Ezzy, 1999). This audit allows other researchers to follow the decision trail to fully understand the conclusions that were reached and the actions that were taken during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Thick description in the final report and the use of purposive sampling for interview participants allows for the potential transferability of this study. Providing thick descriptions also allows for the reconstruction of the participant's lived experience and their biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This thick description allows readers and outside researchers to judge and understand the conclusions reached in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Purposive sampling was utilized as it allowed the researcher to select
participants based on certain key characteristics that would lead to the best data to answer the research question (Merriam, 1988).

To build on the confirmability of this study, data from multiple sources was triangulated, and the researcher focused on reflexivity throughout the study. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the research instrument and is key to the data analysis process (Gearing, 2004). Therefore the researcher must recognize and mitigate their biases (Gearing, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Both bracketing and journaling were practiced as part of this study, allowing the researcher to recognize their feelings and opinions on the research topic (Tufford & Newman, 2012). During these reflexivity practices, the researcher considered: the reason the researcher decided to conduct the research, how the researcher fit into the power structure and hierarchy at play in the research, potential conflicts that existed based on the researcher's role, feelings of disengagement, considerations as to how the final analysis should be written (Hanson, 1994; Paterson & Groening, 1996; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

**Ethical Implications**

The institution participating in the study was provided a pseudonym to mitigate any potentially negative consequences that could result from participation in the study. Providing the institution with a pseudonym also aided in securing administrator buy-in for the study. Any data from the document analysis that contained the name of the institution was masked and all identifiers such as the titles of participants, titles of documents, and the names of departments connected to a participant were removed from the final analysis and report. Study participants were provided pseudonyms, and non-participating staff and managers were not provided with any data from interviews. Participants were also able to withdraw from the study at any point. All study-related data, including demographic questionnaire responses, interview recordings, documents, and transcripts, were stored in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer.
Chapter Four

Findings

The qualitative interviews for this study were conducted using Zoom, a video conferencing platform, due to COVID-19 protocols. The interviews were conducted during the Fall 2020 semester during the month of November. Gulf Coast University was selected as the site for this study because it was located in an area that was hard-hit by COVID-19 and had faced crisis events in the past. In total, a single, one-on-one interview was conducted with each of the 14 participants in this study. The participants included the university’s upper-level and mid-level administrators, faculty, and staff members. Some of the administrators interviewed were members of the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19. All interviews were recorded using Zoom’s recording feature and were then transcribed by the researcher using Otter.ai, a web-based transcription software. The interview data was then analyzed using open coding to identify individual codes; individual codes were then organized based on broader themes identified during the analysis of data.

Fourteen participants were selected using purposive sampling. Administrators, faculty members, and staff people were all included as participants in this study; in total six administrators, four faculty members and four staff people were included. A total of five participants were members of the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 and several of the faculty participants were members of the faculty’s governing body. The length of time the participants had been a part of Gulf Coast University varied, with some participants being fairly new to the university while others had been there more than 20+ years.
### Table 1. Participant categories and provided pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Brian Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Daniel Ramirez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Deborah Barnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Douglas Adams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Lisa Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Roger Mitchell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Aaron Roberts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Christina Perez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Jack Torres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Joan Patterson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Julia Williams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Nancy McMichael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Ruth Hughes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Sharon Anderson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four major themes were identified during data analysis, with several codes falling under each major theme. Table 2 provides an overview of both the major themes and their corresponding codes. The four major themes that will be discussed in this chapter are: (a) False sense of preparedness, (b) Rigid organizational communication structures, (c) Communication disconnections with colleagues, (d) a Saga of distrust. Three of the four themes were a direct result of the organization’s structure and its preparedness to deal with a crisis event (a), (b), and (d). These three themes would likely be seen in an investigation of any crisis Gulf Coast University faced. However, theme (c) was a direct result of the
COVID-19 related closures and remote work. Colleagues could no longer see each other in passing, chat before or a meeting, or stop by a peer’s office to talk. Many participants talked fondly of the collegiality they remembered before the COVID-19 crisis and looked forward to seeing colleagues again in person.

Table 2. Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. False Sense of Preparedness</td>
<td>1a. Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1b. COVID vs. Other Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1c. Preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1d. Start of the Pandemic/Campus Lockdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rigid Organizational Communication Structure</td>
<td>2a. Information Flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2b. General Communication Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2c. Return to Campus Guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2d. Opportunities to Dialogue with the Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Communication Disconnection with Colleagues</td>
<td>3a. Informal Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3b. Disconnection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Saga of Distrust</td>
<td>4a. Social Exchange Relationships Among Faculty and Staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

False Sense of Preparedness

Modern organizations are subject to a growing number of crisis events and universities are no exception (Acosta & Chandra, 2013). Gulf Coast University regularly plans for weather related crisis events and frequently issues crisis alerts to the campus community. Despite this, the United States had not seen a large-scale pandemic similar to COVID-19 since the 1918 Flu pandemic. While Gulf Coast
University had a plan in place for responding to communicable diseases, it had been drafted at least a decade prior to COVID-19 and had not been updated to reflect changes in technology and modes of communication. Some participants were aware that the university had the communicable disease crisis plan in place, while others were unaware of its existence. Those who were aware of the plan were either upper-level administrators or interacted with international students regularly. They noted that the plan was outdated and referenced reviewing the plan during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic and 2014 Ebola epidemic.

During data collection, almost every participant referenced hurricanes when discussing crisis preparedness at the university. Many recalled points in the university’s history when the campus was evacuated, and everyone worked remotely for an extended period of time. However, like the communicable disease crisis plan, the university had not been forced to issue a major evacuation order involving working remotely in over ten years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many university administrators banked on the fact that past evacuations and remote work had prepared the campus for future events. Professor Aaron Roberts taught at the university during one of the major storms that forced the university online for months, he recalled “At that time we didn't have the same tools, I guess. So, I used PowerPoint and narration, which looking back now that is very, like primitive compared to what you can do with Zoom and other software.” Aaron’s comment succinctly explains the technological evolution that took place in the 10-year period between the university’s previous evacuation and the COVID-19 pandemic. Many faculty members at Gulf Coast University had not taught courses online since the last evacuation and were unfamiliar with the updated technological offerings for online learning. An email from the President two days before the drill was the first mention of software training for online learning since the start of the pandemic. This gave faculty members little time to educate themselves and create their plan.
Technology

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic was unpredictable and fast moving, with federal, state, and local advisories being issued almost daily. The university’s administration decided to hold a COVID-19 preparedness drill to assess the campuses’ ability to offer its services remotely, where major deficiencies could be corrected before moving fully online. “How ready are we because we always say we're ready,” remarked the university president when asked about the need for the drill. He went on to add, “we have not in the last five years had to go online because of a hurricane, we have not evacuated.” The campus community was given 48 hours to prepare for the drill. However, by the day before the drill, scheduled for Thursday, March 12, 2020, the COVID-19 situation had progressed to the point the administration decided the campus would transition to operating fully remote on Monday, March 16, 2020. The president encouraged everyone to use the drill to prepare for operating remotely. While the drill offered some insights for administrators, a lack of faculty participation and time to prepare following the drill caused it to lack on its overall effectiveness. One result of the drill was a feeling of uncertainty in how the university could continue to offer services remotely. Regarding the drill, administrator Daniel Ramirez noted, “we hardly had time to even think I mean the drill is like couple of days and then we're in a real situation.” This sentiment was shared by multiple participants and highlights the fluidity of the crisis situation and the stress they generate. The drill was originally promoted as a preparation exercise where the university could judge its readiness, however the situation changed quickly and the administration had to act. Daniel and other members of the campus community may have experienced lower levels of stress if the administration had more fully explained the triggers that initiated the decision to move to offering all services remotely the day before the drill.

Every participant in this study referenced technology challenges, from minor annoyances to major failures that impacted the university’s ability to deliver services. Communication within the university was not impacted by all of the technological challenges that participants recalled. However,
communication was impacted by a lack of connectivity, lack of necessary hardware, and issues with certain software. Of all the codes and themes found in this study, the issues surrounding technology caused the greatest negative impacts to communication and the ability to participate as a member of the campus community.

A lack of internet or the lack of high-speed internet at home and a lack of portable hardware, laptops and cameras caused the largest initial issues. Administrator Deborah Barnes summarized the problem, “The problem was the connectivity.” Another administrator, Lisa Thompson, reflected on what she had heard from students: “either I don't have access to the internet at home, or my Wi-Fi is too slow.” It was not just students who lacked sufficient home internet for online learning, as many faculty and staff also lacked internet completely or had plans with slow speeds. The university’s library had a small number of mobile hot spots that could be checked out, but they were quickly reserved when the decision was made to move online. While the library worked to purchase additional hot spots, the university worked with local internet providers to have internet installed in the homes of faculty and staff who lacked it. Administrator Daniel Ramirez, discussed how the university leveraged its existing IT support hotline to field technology requests from the campus community, including calls from those needing reliable internet. If the IT department were unable to work with the library to acquire a hot spot for the caller, they would look at other means, like home installation of internet. He reflected on the lack of internet connectivity following the move online stating, “So it is such a situation is almost like power, almost like electricity, you don't notice it. If it's working, right, if it's working, you won't notice it. You know, it's like, your lungs, your heart.” During normal university operations the internet plays a key role in everyday life, however when a campus is forced to offer all services online the internet becomes a vital lifeline. Daniels compares the internet to electricity to highlight its importance during the pandemic, while many participants discussed connectivity challenges Daniel’s comment captures the situation well. During the summer of 2020, the library and IT were able to secure a significant grant to
improve the signal strength of the library’s Wi-Fi. This upgrade allowed students to access the university’s Wi-Fi from the parking lot outside of the library even when the library was closed.

A lack of portable hardware, mainly laptops, was another early issue that immediately followed the move to online service delivery. Some faculty and staff only had desktops in their offices that were not easy to relocate. While the library had a small number of laptops for checkout, like the hot spots, these laptops were also quickly checked out. Some of the faculty and staff who could not immediately obtain laptops moved their desktops home, while others opted to use personal laptops. Both IT and the purchasing department worked to find laptops, but COVID-19 created a large demand for the limited available supply. While the university was eventually able to get laptops to everyone who needed them, participants recalled stories of faculty sneaking into their offices during the lockdown and getting caught by campus police. Julia Williams, a staff person at the university, struggled to maintain her job duties due to problems with her personal computer. “I have my computer at home, it died, I couldn't get a replacement. I had to work from my phone for two weeks, I was finally able to borrow one because we don't have a laptop in our office.” The lack of forethought from the administration regarding technological preparedness for working remotely shows through in this comment. When this comment is considered with other participant comments and stories about technological struggles, the lack of preparedness becomes clear. In addition to a lack of planning, loose coupling between individual offices, the IT department, and the purchasing department is a likely cause of these issues.

As the IT department was working to restore connectivity and provide laptops, another problem arose, software. In the time that had elapsed since the universities last hurricane evacuation, video conferencing and online learning technology changed drastically. Some professors who taught online before the pandemic had already begun using Zoom, while others used a variety of different platforms with little guidance from university administrators. Administrator Daniel Ramirez reflected on the technology discussion surrounding the online drill, “the campus does not even have a Zoom license.”
the administration worked to obtain the major software licenses needed to maintain teaching, they also had to begin educating faculty and staff on the software and resources available. The university offered resources through the teaching center and some departments opted for a peer-to-peer approach. The more technologically advanced faculty helped to train those with lower proficiency. “We also got information from a couple of colleagues in the college that just shared some written instructions on certain things,” recalled faculty member Christina Perez. The fluid nature of the early phase of the pandemic and the immediate need for faculty training is captured in this comment. It also speaks to the collegial environment within Gulf Coast University, when the teaching center did not meet the training needs of faculty they collaborated for a solution.

Additional software issues arose as the pandemic progressed, and the university worked to triage the issues, as they were made aware of them. Faculty and administrators noted issues the online test proctoring software that both students and faculty struggled with. Additionally, the faculty in some colleges noted challenges related to their labs. The necessary software for their labs was expensive and the licenses had already been purchased for computer labs on campus before COVID-19. IT and the administration were able to purchase remote desktop software, allowing students in online lab sections to access the physical computer lab machines and their software remotely. While the upper-level administration, IT, library, and purchasing worked to solve the major technology issues the campus was experiencing, some one-off issues still caused headaches. For example, staff person Julia Williams experienced a technology related issue due to a clerical error between departments. She recalled, “we were able to finally get an Adobe license, but it took about two months to do it. You know, it's just stuff like that, that makes it a lot more difficult.” Comments like this underscore the importance of software and software licensing for university employees. The clerical errors that lead to Julia’s software issue were a series of miscommunications between IT and the purchasing department. Like many employees,
Julia expressed feelings of frustration toward the bureaucratic process she was forced to navigate while trying to complete her work from home, lacking the tools she needed.

**COVID vs. Other Crisis**

As participants reflected on the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, comparisons were made between COVID-19 and other crisis events the campus had experienced, mainly hurricanes. The geographic location of Gulf Coast University makes it very susceptible to hurricanes and the campus community receives emergency alerts regarding multiple times a year. Members of the campus community with longer tenures still remember evacuating for a major hurricane fifteen years ago that devastated the area and forced the university to operate remotely for months. When planning the move to the online delivery of services, some members of the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19, felt that the campus’s experience going remote for hurricanes would prepare everyone for making the transition again. The president expressed the feeling of confidence he had at the start of the pandemic based on the campus’s previous experience with hurricanes saying, “we're ready to move everything online, and work remotely, given the experience that this campus has had with [the large hurricane].” Many participants from the administration recalled having feelings of confidence similar to those expressed in the president’s comment. It is notable that these feelings seemed to permeate the administration and likely attributed to missteps in the initial response to the pandemic.

The administration’s confidence before the pandemic was shared by Deborah Barnes, but after reflecting on the realities of technological change she realized the campus community could have been more prepared. She noted, “the issue that we had was from [the large hurricane] to now, technology has changed, how we do digital instruction has changed. And not all our faculty were prepared for, you know, that change.” The communication director also recognized the level of effort and resources that went into preparing for hurricanes, noting the communication planning his office had undertaken. However, he noted that little communication planning had been done to prepare for a pandemic, “in
terms of whether we had a specific pandemic related communications plan prior to this, the answer is no.” While there was a pandemic response plan in place before the COVID-19 pandemic began, it included very little focus on communication planning for a pandemic. Additionally, the technology mentioned in the pandemic plan had become outmoded since the creation of the plan, rendering it not actionable.

A slightly different attitude was expressed by the faculty and staff, as they recognized that COVID-19 was a large-scale crisis that greatly affected the campus, but they were more reluctant to feel that experience with hurricanes translated to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty member Nancy McMichael said:

With [the large hurricane] because communication systems were so much different 15 years ago, there just wasn't as I mean, there was not zoom. There was not as much internet, online teaching, for example. So, the semester of [the large hurricane], I didn't well, that's not I was gonna say, I didn't teach. I didn't teach my regular semester.

This comment illustrates the challenges faced by faculty members who felt unprepared to teach courses fully online. Video conferencing technology had evolved significantly in the ten years since the campuses previous evacuation, but the faculty had received little continuing education to familiarize them with teaching synchronously over Zoom. Other faculty participants also discussed teaching asynchronously using recorded audio over PowerPoint during the previous evacuation and struggling to adapt to synchronous courses taught over Zoom during COVID-19.

When comparing hurricane preparedness to COVID-19, staff person Ruth Hughes felt “there was not a standard operating process for a pandemic, even though we had a lovely pandemic plan, it had not had to be an action.” Like many other participants, Ruth highlighted the unknown and variable nature of the pandemic. While the campus had a pandemic plan in place, as Ruth mentioned the plan had never actually been tested in a real-world scenario. In contrast, the hurricane plan in place on campus has been
tested and revised multiple times, leading to a plan that people can trust because they have seen it preform during activation.

In hindsight, there was considerable agreement that experience with hurricanes alone did not prepare the campus for the challenges and interruptions that COVID-19 would bring. Even with the technology issues and occasional missteps by the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19, many participants expressed positive sentiments toward how communication was handled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Professor Aaron Roberts said, “So the communication now was definitely much better. But I don't know if it's a fair comparison [comparing hurricanes with COVID-19].” Like Ruth, Aaron recognized that both COVID-19 and hurricanes can present challenges in trying to plan. Aaron also expressed a similar feeling that comparing hurricane planning and response with pandemic planning and response was not a worthwhile comparison. This feeling stemmed from hurricane evacuations causing everyone to leave home, ending up across the country in unfamiliar places. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to remain at home and presented a different set of challenges. While many participants felt it was difficult to compare the response to hurricanes with the response to COVID-19, they spoke positively about the communication and response in the current pandemic. Staff person Joan Patterson echoed that feeling stating, “they've done a good job communicating things with COVID.” The fact that many participants praised the communication in response to COVID-19, while there was no pandemic communication plan in place at the start of the pandemic, illustrates the communication skills possessed by the communication director and the university president.

The area where Gulf Coast University is located is also home to several other universities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, none of them coordinated or shared information on their crisis preparations and closure plans. Early in the pandemic, before the lockdown and closures, the university president contacted each university president in the city where Gulf Coast University is located and created a
network for information sharing before any university enacts closures or other major crisis related decisions. In the past, each university would make decisions about weather related closures and they would alert the media. One university might close three days before a storm, while another might announce they are moving online the following day. This lack of coordination caused some of the universities that were slower to announce their plans to receive pressure or criticism. While it could be argued that having this network in place before COVID-19 could have accelerated planning for the crisis, the president’s decision to bring everyone together positively impacted communication.

Announcements of COVID-19 related decisions did not take any of the university presidents by surprise because they knew what their peers were going to announce and when they were going to announce it. He recalled “we [the group of universities] talk about communication because one of the issues we have as a city is if I communicate details to my faculty, it will be picked up on newspaper and the next thing you know [the other universities in the area] are being backed in a corner to do the same thing.” The creation of this team approach among local universities speaks to the foresight and coalition building skills of Gulf Coast University’s president. He recognized that a more coordinated communication strategy was needed among local universities and worked to solve the problem. Without this group of local university leaders working closely in the early phase of the pandemic, it is likely that the response to COVID-19 would have been further complicated based on actual issues during previous crisis events.

**Preparation**

While COVID-19 was the first large-scale pandemic that Gulf Coast University had faced, some international students had been affected by the 2009 H1N1 pandemic and 2014 Ebola epidemic. The campus had a communicable disease crisis plan in place at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, however the plan was somewhat outdated technologically. The plan outlined the use of the campus switchboard, email, local TV and radio, the university website, text messages, and posting printed statements around the campus. However, the plan did not include utilizing social media, emergency
notifications to cell phones, or the use of any other technology or software. The plan also viewed communicable diseases in a linear manor, consisting of six stages. These stages include “Stage 1: Annual Preparation, Stage 2: Threat Assessment, Stage 3: Class Cancellation, Stage 4: University Closing, Stage 5: Continuity of Operations During Emergency Closure, and Stage 6: Aftermath--assessment, recovery, reopening, and return to classes” (Gulf Coast University, 2020). While the document’s Influenza Epidemic Overview recognized that a severe influenza pandemic could have multiple waves, the steps contained in the plan did not include extra considerations for a difficult pandemic, like COVID-19, with multiple waves where returning to campus all at once would be more difficult. The plan also did not account for a situation with impacts spanning multiple semesters, as this had not occurred previously.

The plan advocated for a decentralized approach where individual department plans would go into effect during an emergency closure. The individual department plans were intended to maintain the operations of the department and the university as a whole. The plan offers options to departments that could be included in their plans like online learning, working remotely, and alternating schedules in a hybrid-working model. However, the campus’s communicable disease crisis plan did not offer any additional information focused on maintaining service delivery. One aspect of the plan that showed the forethought that went into the overall document was the section that outlined the team members charged with managing the disease outbreak and their duties. Reflecting on the plan, administrator Lisa Thompson said, “I know who to go to when I have questions about the communications plan. I know what office is responsible for that.” While the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 that was formed did not exactly match the planned response team listed in the communicable disease crisis plan, many of those offices and positions listed were involved with the planning and management of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Based on the data collected, administrators and some staff were aware of the original communicable disease crisis plan, mentioning it during interviews. However, there was seemingly less awareness of the plan among faculty. When reflecting on the plan and how it had held up in hindsight, the president said, “we had a communicable disease plan. But frankly, … up until the pandemic, we really have not thought about it a lot.” While administrator Lisa Thompson praised parts of the plan, she did agree with the President stating, “even though the plan existed it wasn’t very good.” Interestingly, staff person Ruth Hughes remembered when the original communicable disease crisis plan was created several administrations ago. She noted that the original plan was created to cope with small-scale outbreaks like H1N1 and Ebola. “I can remember having conversations as a university staff member about it [the plan] and making sure that we had a plan, but we were not impacted, definitely nowhere close to what we've been impacted with COVID-19.” Ruth was one of a small number of university employees that were aware of the communicable disease crisis plan before COVID-19 because of the international students she works with. Even though the plan was posted to the university website, few faculty or staff members had taken the time to review the plan because the threat of a pandemic was not a major concern for most people prior to COVID-19.

Very early on in the COVID-19 pandemic the communicable disease crisis plan was partially updated to include two pages of reference information about COVID-19. However, the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 opted not to continually update the communicable disease plan as the pandemic worsened, instead creating a guide on how to return to campus when the campus had moved fully to online service delivery in Spring 2020. The communicable disease crisis plan and the return to campus guide differed in that the communicable disease plan focused on the public health considerations of a pandemic while the return to campus guide focused only on how the campus would transition from operating remotely to being back on campus. It could be argued that much of the information needed to update the communicable disease plan was sent via email or was public health
information distributed from third parties. The new return to campus guide was continually updated and provided the answers to many of the operational questions employees had. While both guides served a purpose, it is important not to minimize the fact that the original version of the communicable disease crisis plan was lacking and had not been updated to reflect operational and technological changes that had taken place since the guide’s creation. Many administrators likely felt that having a plan in place meant the campus was prepared, failing to consider the content of the plan and how it would be enacted.

The Start of the Pandemic & Campus Lockdown

March of 2020 was a difficult time for Gulf Coast University, as COVID-19 was on the rise across the globe and the city where the university is located experienced an early surge that forced the administration to make difficult decisions before many other institutions across the country. The president recalled a meeting of the university system at the state capital only days before the forthcoming drill and lockdown on campus. At this time the severity of COVID-19 was not equally distributed across the state. Urban areas were beginning to feel the major impacts of the virus, while rural areas were not yet feeling the severity and impacts. This meeting was the turning point for the president, following the meeting he called a meeting of the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 and they began planning scenarios for moving service delivery online. Shortly after the meeting at the state capital the COVID-19 team announced the online education drill, giving the campus 48 hours to prepare and go fully online for one full day. This drill was intended to highlight deficiencies in offering all the university’s services online. However, the day before the drill the COVID-19 team announced that the campus would be moving fully online the Monday following the Thursday drill. There was no time to reflect on lessons learned or to gather data on the level of success of the drill. Due to the short span of time between the drill and moving online, administrators were also unable to assess the level of faculty participation in the drill. Administrator Daniel Ramirez recalled, “We hardly had time to even think. I mean drill is like couple of days and then we're in a real situation,” The
communicable disease crisis plan did not include any considerations or details for a drill and provided vague information on how and when the campus would transition to be fully online. If the drill had been conducted earlier with time to reflect and make necessary preparations it would have been an integral part of the campus’s crisis response. However, the lack of preparedness and the oversights in the communicable disease crisis plan caused the preventable stress that employees like Daniel experienced.

The announcement of the drill and the lockdown that followed was a traumatic and tumultuous time. Faculty members were asked to move all their course delivery online with varied technological proficiencies. While the campus has teaching center that is tasked with assisting faculty in such matters, the fast-moving nature of this crisis stifled their efforts. “If it is a drill, basically, why didn't have any training?” expressed faculty member Aaron Roberts. Professor Christina Perez recalled the situation slightly differently “we were going to do a practice going online day. And the day before, they had some workshops about how to do things online. And I thought, okay, you know, this is coming, but I was, like, shocked at how fast it came.” Professor Jack Torres recalled emailing the staff person who led the teaching center to inquire about training. He recalled the email chain “oh, we're having a training session on that, like tomorrow? And like, really? How would I have known that… nobody had ever sent out an email about it or anything.” While many participants felt that Gulf Coast University did a good job communicating during the COVID-19 pandemic, one complaint shared by several faculty centered around the availability of and communication about resources and training for online education. Looking back, faculty members wished more training had been available before and immediately following the drill. Faculty members did not feel fully prepared even though many had courses with online components in the past. A preparation and training section in the communicable disease crisis plan, where teaching center could be engaged, for training and the university president could spearhead a communication campaign to engage faculty, building trust in both the plan and the administration.
Once the lockdown was underway, training for the faculty on best practices for online education and how to use the various software and platforms was moved online. Professor Aaron Roberts felt that the drill should have been held sooner to offer more time to train faculty members who were struggling or were resistant to teaching online: “maybe a week of maybe some face-to-face trainings. Because again, if you have like a Zoom training with someone who doesn't know how to use Zoom that…defeats the purpose.” Faculty member Jack Torres also struggled with some aspects of moving fully online, even though he had been teaching an online course for several years. He recalled reaching out to the teaching center for help once the lockdown was underway “when they don't do training sessions, they provide instructional videos. I hate instructional videos.” He went on to elaborate “I want a little document that gives me five easy steps to this, this, this and this, I don't want to have to watch a 10-minute video.” Professor Christina Perez echoed this sentiment recalling how her colleagues created and shared information “we also got information from a couple of colleagues in the college that just shared some written instructions on certain things, which was super helpful.” She also expressed empathy for the staff of the teaching center during this difficult time, recognizing the challenges they faced: “I'm not trying to bash the folks that [center], I just think they didn't have weren't staffed up enough and didn't have enough of these videos.” Two important points are contained in this comment, first is the feelings of empathy toward fellow employees during this unprecedented crisis, which was expressed by numerous participants. The second important point focuses on the lack of preparedness in the form of resources allocated to the teaching center. Christina notes the center did not have enough staff to create materials and train the faculty fast enough to meet the demands created by COVID-19. Relying on previous hurricane responses and an outdated communicable disease crisis plan, without considerations for a online drill, illustrate that administrators did not realize how far reaching the impacts of a pandemic could be. Properly educating faculty on new software tools and adapting their pedagogy for synchronous online course cannot happen overnight. Poor communication among administrators due to loose
coupling and siloing likely contributed to the lack of resources and preparedness that plagued the initial COVID-19 response.

While the impacts of the lockdown were felt throughout the campus community, staff at the university dealt with their own set of issues surrounding the lockdown and move to online service delivery. Several staff people expressed gratitude for the university’s handling of the lockdown and the precautions that were put in place to keep the community safe.

However, some staff people did find it difficult to complete portions of their workloads from home. Staff person Sharon Anderson expressed the difficulty she experienced this way, “not being able to work from the office was basically impossible, partly because the records were there.” As Sharon indicated, the more challenging remote tasks involved accessing secure records without university laptops or the university network, keeping hard copy files organized, and submitting documents to the government for international students. One participant recalled an office on campus that only accepted vaccination records via fax machine and during the pandemic they continued to instruct students to fax documents even though the office had been closed for weeks. A secure technological solution was eventually implemented, but staff in the office had a very challenging time.

Staff person Julia Williams expressed her feeling during the lockdown, “I thought my head was gonna fly off… We were just constantly busy.” Ruth Hughes expressed one of the clearest articulations of the remote work challenges faced by staff and the inequalities that existed depending on normal job duties. “I think your feelings are going to vary depending on what your role is, and how much you've been able to continue your normal work from home. We've done a lot of things virtually, but we can't do everything from home.” Many participants expressed stress and uncertainty regarding the university’s transition to offer all services remotely. While it was necessary for the university to take this action to keep the campus community safe, the lack of preparation caused additional stress and confusion that could have been prevented. If the administration had relied less on the campus’s previous experience
with hurricanes and focused more on preparing for an number of potential crisis events that could have forced the university online, resources and staffing would have been allocated differently. Loose coupling and siloing between departments are likely partially responsible for the administration’s overestimation of preparedness for COVID-19. It is clear that the lack of preparation caused stress and confusion among employees, beyond the stress generated by COVID-19. While some may argue that the pandemic was a once in a generation event that could not have been foreseen, the campus did have a communicable disease plan that provided a window into the university’s crisis planning process.

**Rigid Organizational Communication Structure**

COVID-19 upended the routines, workloads, modes of communication, and approaches to completing tasks. However, remnants of the campus’s organizational structure remained intact even during the lockdown and digital delivery of services. The main place this organizational structure expressed itself was in how communication flowed down from the administration to the faculty and staff. While the president and his communication director worked to ensure the emergency messaging and COVID-19 related changes were directly communicated with all members of the campus community, many other important messages still cascaded down the organizational hierarchy. This cascade of information within institutions of higher education is well documented during times of normal operation, though it is less documented during times of crisis (Kezar, 2011, 2013). Information cascade occurs when the leader of an organization sends messages down through the various levels of management following the organizational hierarchy, allowing the message to filter through potential gatekeepers who could alter or delay the massage before it finally arriving at the front-line employees (Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). In contrast, direct communication occurs when a leader sends a message to all employees at the same time, preventing misinformation or delay (Berger, 2008; Munter, 2009).
Information Flow

During normal operations in a large bureaucratic organization, most communication flows down from the upper-level leadership down through middle management before finally arriving to the frontline employees who need the information (Gayeski, 2011; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Institutions of higher education are no exception, with information flowing down from the president to the vice presidents, flowing next to the deans and senior administrators, then to the department heads and directors, before finally reaching the faculty and staff. This flow of communication is essential for most universities, but the information cascade it not without its flaws (Gayeski, 2011; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). The main issue with allowing messages to flow downward from the top, filter through each layer of the organization, is that messages can be changed, interrupted, or all together stopped (Berger, 2008; Mast & Huck, 2008; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). The communication director noted, “hopefully it [communication] will cascade down to individual faculty members… there's no way for us to discern whether it truly cascades whether there's bottlenecks to that point.” Crisis and emergency communication on the other hand is often sent directly to every individual member of the campus community simultaneously, removing any opportunity for the message to be altered. Given the extended nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication did not flow as directly as seen in other crisis events. Instead, many of the key emergency messages were sent directly, while many operational messages still filtered through the organization.

At different points in his interview, the president discussed the usefulness of direct communication and the organization’s affinity for cascading communication. When reflecting on different communication channels used to communicate information about COVID-19 the president said “Email was for the campus community, probably was the most helpful and informative.” He also recognized that information in an email can become de facto policy or can be leaked to the media. “When there are sensitive issues, things that we really don't want to create a policy around, we just want
to encourage certain behavior… we really, really communicated through meetings. You know, I often do this with the deans.” The president illustrates the fine line the administration had to walk while planning for and communicating about the COVID-19 pandemic. The administration had to balance their desire to share information with the fact that the information would likely be on the evening news or in the newspaper. Therefore, the president and the individual charged with communication had to be calculated in what they shared and when they shared it. This paradox likely led to the frustration expressed by several participants who felt the administration was not sharing enough information in a timely manner.

The fear of having information leaked prematurely extended beyond just the senior administration. Administrator Roger Mitchell stated, “everything we sort of send out to campus also gets outside. So that had to be done very carefully.” The fear, that something written in an email or memo could be leaked to the media or published on social media drove administrators to rely more heavily on the information cascade and communicating through meetings. Administrator Lisa Thompson said “I try to make it a practice that if it's something I don't want to be made public, or that might cause problems if it becomes public, that's a phone call, or a face to face meeting.” In this quote Lisa demonstrates why the information cascade remains the preferred avenue for communication at Gulf Coast University, as no administrator wants to be called into question for inadvertently providing information for someone to leak. Deborah Barnes provided additional insights regarding the university’s website and who the information was intended for: “One has to be very careful what is placed on a website. And because that's, although it may be meant for internal consumption, but it's also available for external.” For mid-level administrators, the fear of being the person that caused an information leak pushes them to rely more heavily on the information cascade. These administrators prefer to communicate though meetings or over the phone, as those non-written methods of communication are more difficult to leak. During
COVID-19, WhatsApp and Zoom aided in the cascade of information, when face-to-face meetings could not be held.

Frustration with the information cascade was expressed more by faculty members and staff who felt they did not receive crucial information because the message was altered or not pass along somewhere in the flow of information. Professor Aaron Roberts captured the issue from the faculty’s perspective when he said, “a person may have some information… from a dean from another college, maybe this information never reached me.” Administrators on the other hand, seemed to have a reverence for the information cascade, recognizing their role in the process, and striving to pass along messages through meetings without leaking that information. Administrator Roger Mitchell said, “I'm a fan of decentralized model. It just that the more we sort of distribute this, the better it is, because people need to hear it more than once.” The decentralized model Roger is referring to is the information cascade. While it is important that employees have multiple sources of and opportunities to receive information, relying solely on the decentralized information cascade allows gatekeepers to exert influence over messages (Gayeski, 2011; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Additionally, the loose coupling and siloing within Gulf Coast University creates additional opportunities for messages to be significantly changed or delayed because of the difficulty in monitoring the flow of information through a complex organizational structure. Understanding how information flows through the organizational structure of Gulf Coast University provides context on how the organization functions and the value placed on communication. By relying heavily on the information cascade to transmit important messages about how the organization will adapt to the crisis, the rigidity of the organizational structure becomes clearer. While the organization did send a significant number of direct messages about the direct response to the crisis, many messages with substantive information that altered the organizational lives of employees were discussed and communicated over the information cascade, following the hierarchy and structure of the organization. As scholars have noted, this reliance on the information
cascade could lead to distrust among front-line employees if information is altered or withheld (Frahm, 2011; Qian & Daniels, 2008).

**General Communication Strategy**

Given that COVID-19 is a crisis, communication during the event may behave differently than in periods of normally for the organization (Coombs, 2007; Hong & Kim, 2019). While every member of the organization has a role in communicating, at Gulf Coast University the president and the director of communication set the expectations and tone toward how communication should be handled across campus. The president understood the important role that communication plays in an organization; “I'm really involved in all the communications.” The president then went on to discuss the advisory role the director of communication plays in his administration. Unlike some organizational leaders, the president of Gulf Coast University understands the important advisory role that an expert in communication plays. The president values the advice of the director of communication, and he made sure that they had a seat at the table. The director of communication described their relationship with the president stating, “I think that because of my proximity to him in my position in my role as advisor to the president, it's a very efficient way of approaching this, which is that it's basically a one-to-one relationship between me and him.” This comment illustrates that the communication director also felt the university president treated him as an advisor and an important part of the cabinet. It becomes clear that the current administration values communication and the role of the communication director when both comments are considered together.

After establishing that the president and his director of communication have a good working relationship, it is important to look at their approach to communication. The communication director employs a multifaceted approach to communication, using all necessary channels at his disposal to match a message with its intended audience, while also maximizing the number of potential touch points across channels to increase the message’s potential reach. Both the president and the director of
communication also spoke to the fact that they value feedback and try and create opportunities to evaluate their communication strategy. The director of communication highlighted this when he spoke about an audit that included insights on communication: “Probably three years ago, we went through a significant auditing process, and it was clear that our employees and our students were receiving way too many emails.” Before the referenced audit, it was very easy to obtain sending permissions on a large number of campus listservs, creating a situation where anyone could email hundreds of campus community members with little to no oversight. The deluge of messages sent caused many in the campus community to disengage due to the volume of information, much of which lacked forethought and a full understanding of decisions being made by the administration. By lowering the volume of messages received by community members, the director elevated the importance of messages directly from the administration, reframing the norms of communication within the organization.

Insights into the success of the post-audit changes can be found in comments made by faculty members, staff, and mid-level administrators reflecting on the state of communication before the pandemic impacted the campus. Professor Jack Torres expressed that “our two top leaders [the president & provost] have been much better than pretty much any other administration, we've had it, you know, in terms of communications, they're more organized, they're more aware of the impact of what they're saying.” Most community members likely do not remember the audit that the director of communication and their team undertook, and they likely could not point to many specific examples of how the overall communication strategy on campus had improved. However, many participants expressed their gut feeling that communication on campus directly before the pandemic was better than most any point in recent memory. Staff member Nancy McMichael put it simply “on the whole, I don't have a problem with how things have been communicated.” The comments of Nancy, Jack, and multiple other participants regarding the university’s communication strategy speak to the effort the administration is
putting forth and the importance the administration is placing on improving how the university communicates with its stakeholders.

While the overarching communication strategy was well received, there are still areas that some community member’s feel could be improved. Many of the more critical comments stemmed from the administration’s reliance on the information cascade to deliver messages. “Then they [the administration] will get mad at us for not doing something that they wanted us to do and we will say, well, we never heard about that” said Jack Torres. Jack went on, “sometimes that system breaks and things don't get circulated all the way down, because somewhere, somebody along the line just doesn't bother to read the email or forward it.” Staff person Julia Williams reflected on the information cascade saying, “certain specific people getting more information and then you have to hear it from your supervisor or whoever.” While the information cascade exists within every institution, it is important to understand how heavily the administration relies on it as a channel for transmitting information and how well employees with little organizational power view how well the cascade functions. Those with the least organizational power are at the terminus of the cascade’s flow, thus they feel the effects of altered and withheld information. While the administration can shed light on the overall communication strategy, these employees can provide significant and meaningful insights into how well the communication strategy has been implemented. Based on the comments of various participants, it is clear that Gulf Coast University relies heavily on the information cascade, partly to its detriment.

**Return to Campus Guide**

Prior to the Gulf Coast University community returning to campus, the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 drafted a guide on how to return to campus. The goal of this document was to provide the campus community with all of the information they might need about how the campus was re-opening, what resources were available during the re-opening, and the tiered benchmarks leading to the campus being fully reopened at 100% capacity. The communication director
explained, “we thought it was important that our employees be armed with information about what our plan is.” Beyond the content and information in the guide, decisions had to be made on how the guide would be distributed. Due to the fast-paced changes related to the current spread of COVID-19 and the policy changes that were being made to keep the campus community safe, the guide needed to be easily updated. The COVID-19 team knew that the guide might need multiple updates per week, but they wanted to prevent outdated information being shared. The COVID-19 team also wanted the information in the guide to be widely available by the campus community and free from any influences in the information cascade. The team decided to upload the file to a secure Microsoft server accessible through the universities online Microsoft email portal. To prevent old versions of the document from being circulated they disabled the ability to save or print the document. Users also had to login using their university email credentials. The president explained:

   And it's sort of a double-edged sword, one of the things we wanted to do was put that on the web, in a transparent and wide an effort to communicate widely. At the same time, what we did not want is and people wanted it, people ask for, can I print this, I need to put this static document on my bulletin board or on my desk.

The president reflected on this approach, discussing how another university opted to print their reopening guide, noting that the books were already outdated before they were received from the printer.

   As the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 weighted the pros and cons of uploading the guide for returning to campus, disabling the ability of users to save or print the document, they had concerns on how this decision would be received by the campus community. Staff member Julia Williams recalled “it's difficult when you're reviewing a document that says you don't have permission to share or print it.” Beyond the expected issues with their approach, IT also had to troubleshoot an issue where third-party contractors, who worked everyday on campus but did not have university email credentials, could not access the guide. Administrator Lisa Thompson recalled
forwarding a link to the guide for the campus health clinic staff. She frequently forwards emails to the clinic staff because they work for a third-party healthcare provider and do not receive any of the emails about what’s happening around campus. The clinic staff replied to her email, telling her they were unable to see the guide because they lacked login credentials. Lisa went to the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 and got permission to share the guide, but since she could not send them a copy, she also had to coordinate with IT to get the clinic staff credentials specifically for accessing the guide.

While the selected delivery method had tradeoffs, the content of the guide was thorough and in-depth, providing the community with all of the information they needed. Ruth Hughes, a staff person that managed several other staff in her office, recalled sharing the guide at a staff meeting. She anticipated that her staff would have questions about the guide’s content. However, after they reviewed the guide, “I think maybe I got one question back about how to define particular phases, but for the most part, they haven't had many questions.” While some logistical improvements were needed with the guide, Ruth’s comment highlights that the content of the guide was clearly presented and easily understood. The rigid communication structure within the university is partly responsible for the logistical issues with the return to campus guide. The administration wanted to maintain control of access to the return to campus guide and make sure the information employees were accessing was current, opting for a password protected system that did not allow printing. In turn, third party contractors who had previously not been provided email credentials for the university system could not access the guide. It should be noted that these issues are not necessarily negative, but they are indicative of the rigid structure of the organization and provide context that can be used to understand the organization more broadly.
Opportunities to Dialogue with the Administration

Feedback is an important part of the communication process, though not all organizations and their leaders see the value (Frahm, 2011). Providing opportunities for faculty and staff to offer feedback on decisions made by the administration helps them feel that their voices are being heard (Ellsworth, 2000; Rogers, 2003). However, while scholars have established the importance of feedback during normal times in an organization, less is known about how feedback works during times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Gulf Coast University took a more reactive posture at the start of the crisis issuing direct emails to the community informing them of the decisions being made and how it affected them. As the crisis progressed into the summer of 2020 the administration began taking proactive steps toward reopening and began building more feedback loops into their communication.

The president prides himself in having an open-door policy where anyone in the campus community can email, call, or schedule a meeting with him to discuss issues. During COVID-19 he continued this policy, “whether it's a virtual door or real door, open door policy. And I've always said people have that ability to just communicate directly.” The communication director, backed up the president’s statement “we always get responses from internal stakeholders” referencing the responses they receive after sending campus wide emails from the president's email address.

Almost all of the faculty and staff that participated in this study felt that they had been given the opportunity to provide feedback during the COVID-19 crisis. Most also recognized that sometimes crisis situations are fast moving and threaten the health and safety of the community, limiting the opportunities for feedback. Faculty member Nancy McMichael stated:

I'm just going to call somebody and say, give me more information [if she felt she did not receive the information she needed]. But I don't know that I've really felt obligated to do that [during COVID-19]. I think the messaging has been good and measured.
Professor Aaron Roberts echoed this, “I believe that we had the opportunity to at least express opinions.” While many participants felt that their voices had been heard, staff member Julia Williams did not agree. Julia stated, “You’re always told. You’re told how it will be. You’re not asked.” Given the nature of the pandemic, feelings of being told to follow a new protocol or decision is expected. Unlike a more routine organizational change that normally involves collegial input and takes place over a period of time, the pandemic involved many unknowns, and the safety of the campus community was at stake.

Several decisions made during the response to COVID-19 show university employees were able to provide feedback beyond just emailing the president. Several offices created surveys towards the end of the Spring semester of 2020 aimed at better understanding the needs of faculty and students. A hotline was also established in the spring to both provide information and gather feedback. Administrator Daniel Ramirez was part of the team that created the hotline and he reflected on its creation: “we also created a hotline… people, including students, were just sending their questions.” Direct action was generated from the feedback received. Several different offices worked together to find the additional funds needed to hire a third-party consulting company who offered training to 40 faculty members who had expressed challenges adapting to teaching online. Additionally, it was brought to the administration’s attention that they were doing a poor job communicating with the parents of younger students. A signup page was created and those parents that wanted information on the university’s handling of COVID-19 could sign up to be added to the newly created parent’s listservs.

During the initial response to COVID-19 the administration of Gulf Coast University worked to respond to the crisis and keep the campus community safe. The communication within an organization responding to a crisis normally shifts to be more authoritative generated from the top of the organization with the goal of keeping the employees of the organization protected from harm. Creating opportunities for dialogue (feedback) are often minimized. However, most participants felt they had the opportunity to
provide feedback and dialogue with the administration. The administration did not openly solicit feedback during their response to the crisis, so the feeling of satisfaction in being able to provide feedback lies within the established norms of communication within the structure of the organization. This rigid structure dictates that those with less organizational power proactively contact those with more power to discuss their opinions and thoughts. While it could be argued that Gulf Coast University could have solicited additional feedback, the nature of the life threatening nature of this crisis minimizes this argument. This sub-theme was included with the main theme to illustrate the rigid organizational communication structure’s impact on how feedback functioned during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Communication Disconnection with Colleagues**

The nature of how COVID-19 spreads from human to human caused many people to pause their relationships with those outside of their immediate family. There was also a fear of the unknown, such as who might have the virus and be spreading it without knowing. When the campus locked down in March 2020 the campus community lost their physical connections to each other. The collegiality that many community members loved was interrupted. Everyone transitioned to connecting through technology, where a screen and camera were the only window into life on campus. Informal communication suffered greatly due to the disconnection of the community from the physical spaces on campus. The move to offer all campus services online in the Spring of 2020 interrupted organizational norms around communication and fundamentally changed how social exchanges took place between community members. Workplace Social Exchange Network (WSEN) theory was conceived to aid in holistically understanding workplace relationships from the employees perspective (Cole et al., 2002). Scholars have noted that it can be difficult to consider both faculty and staff as a homogenous group of university employees because each group has different motivations and loyalties (Blank, 1993; Hoyt, 2012; Siddique, Aslam, Khan, & Fatima, 2011). Faculty members often have more loyalty to their
academic discipline than they do to the organization (Hoyt, 2012; O’Briant, 1991; Schroder, 2008), while university staff are often more loyal to their departments and the organization (Blank, 1993; Schroder, 2008; Siddique et al., 2011). This subtle difference between faculty and staff creates an opportunity to apply WSEN separately to both groups to gain a richer understanding of social exchanges within Gulf Coast University.

**Informal Communication**

Some scholars, leaders, and communicators overlook the importance of informal communication in an organization (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Mills, 2010), often viewing this communication as detracting from the formal messages. Informal communication is also a more trusted source of communications for employees, when compared with formal communication (Kezar, 2011, 2013). Proximity between members of an organization is one important factor that drives informal communication, a walk to the water cooler where you chat with three colleagues who each might share something. However, the COVID-19 related lockdown stripped the campus community of this proximity, making it unclear what impacts informal communication would sustain.

As expected, the lack of proximity with colleagues greatly decreased the informal communication taking place. Senior administrator Roger Mitchell explained “that just 90% of it is no longer happening.” Administrator Deborah Barnes said “you really can't you know, you walk down the hall and see somebody to stand and talk for five minutes.” The small portion of informal communication that remained seemed to be driven by the quality of relationship that existed between individuals before COVID-19. Deborah elaborated, “it's very difficult to have any kind of authentic conversations except for people you really, really trust.” Several scholars investigating online education before COVID-19 also found elements of the difficulty connecting over technology. Dolan (2011) and Terosky and Heasley (2015) noted the lack of collegiality and connection that often accompanies online education. Both scholars also note the significant amount of training and planning required from administrators to
make online programs a success. While these scholars do utilize the WSEN framework to examine these issues, both discuss the social exchange relationships that underpin WSEN, and both investigate opportunities to strengthen these relationships.

Members of the campus community also expressed that they need to trust the communication channel in addition to the person with whom they are communicating. Members did not want to use any channel that could be distributed later or recorded. Phone calls, texting, and where possible, socially distanced informal meals were preferred to channels like email, Zoom, or social media. Employees did not want to use a platform that lacked safeguards to prevent messages from being leaked. Many community members felt that the lack of informal communication affect their ability to cope with the situation and operate effectively within the organization. Their tone of voice while talking about informal communication was often nostalgic for the times before COVID-19 when the organization was operating normally. Professor Jack Torres became nostalgic when he thought of his department stating, “during pre-COVID times, you might walk out the door and into the hallway, and you could, you know, speak to any, any faculty or staff or students as you walk down the hall going anywhere.” The nostalgia for the time before the COVID-19 pandemic is underscored when Jack contrasts it with how the department functioned during the pandemic when he said, “We haven't had a single sort of formal faculty meeting in months.” While faculty meetings provide formal communication, when a department’s faculty gather for a faculty meeting a significant amount of informal communication is often a result of such events (Bordia et al., 2006). Eliminating these opportunities for informal communication during the crisis added to the stress associated with the physical separation, taking place during the initial response to COVID-19. Scholars have estimated that 65% to 70% of organizational communication is informal (De Mare, 1989; Dunbar, 2004). While it is impossible to discern what portion of this informal communication was eliminated due to being physically separated, the elimination of events, that could have taken place over Zoom, where informal communication normally
happens further eroded what little informal communication could have taken place. Seemingly, the only informal communication that took place during this period was between individuals who possessed strong relationships with one another before the pandemic started. These individuals tried to maintain their relationships despite the added effort required. However, for the vast majority of employees informal communication completely disappeared during the pandemic, creating a void in the collegial environment they were accustomed to.

**Disconnection**

The lack of in-person interaction and informal communication caused many participants to express feelings of disconnection. The communication director discussed this lack of connection saying “And people felt increasingly disconnected. During this event, whether it was students or employees, they weren't seeing people they see on a regular basis.” Community members from all levels of the organization expressed these feeling: “Very difficult,” “widespread feeling among faculty, that they feel lonely, isolated,” “I kind of feel zoomed out,” “it was more depressing than ever,” “lack of three-dimensional interaction,” and “we just felt really disconnected.” S. Morgan and Symon (2002), Dolan (2011), and Kotera and Correa Vione (2020) highlighted the potential negative physiological outcomes associated with working remotely. Each author offered potential tactics that could lessen the psychological impacts but also noted that research aimed at improving the remote working experience is lacking. Based on the comments of participants from Gulf Coast University, negative psychological impacts were felt during the pandemic. Relationships that thrived in the collegial in-person environment struggled to exist during the pandemic. One major reason professional relationships struggle when working remotely is that mutual trust is difficult to build and maintain at a distance (Dolan, 2011; S. Morgan & Symon, 2002).

By the end of the Spring 2020 semester, the administration realized the level of disconnection that was being felt by the community and they did what they could to try and bring back that sense of
collegiality that existed before COVID-19. Various coffee chats and informal monthly lunches with administrators that had been suspended due to COVID-19 were restarted in the summer of 2020 using Zoom. Even though the platform lacked the full richness of meeting in person, reinstating these more informal opportunities to connect showed the administration cared about community members. This reinstatement also illustrates the evolution in the administration’s approach to the pandemic and communication.

The administration had a strong formal communication strategy, using direct communication for crisis response but still relying on the information cascade to communicate many messages on the functional operation of campus. The administration allowed feedback, though they did not expressly solicit it, using their organizational norm of directly emailing the president. However, the disconnection felt by most participants happened in spite of the administrations formal communication strategy because informal communication disappeared and all communication had to take place using some medium of technology. The human connection was temporarily lost during the involuntary shift to working remotely and feelings of disconnection soon followed.

**Saga of Distrust**

One of the first scholars to discuss the concept of organizational saga in higher education was Clark (1972). In this seminal article, Clark outlined the elements on which an organizational saga is built – a shared set of beliefs held by a formal group within an organization that are rooted in history. While Clark inferred that an organizational saga generally emerged from an accomplishment that those within the organization are unified by, later scholars have emphasized that, over time, a series of negative experiences can also unify to create an organizational saga (Kamens, 1977; Mahadevan, 2009; McCollom, 1992). Clark (1972) also identified trust as an element of an organizational saga, with positive organizational sagas building trust and loyalty among members. In this study, the saga of distrust was identified through the use of the social exchange theory of WSEN.
WSEN is a theoretical construct that seeks to understand how relationships in the workplace affect an employee’s attitudes and behavior by assessing the level of trust the employee feels in their various social exchange relationships (Cole et al., 2002; Liden et al., 1997). Generally, the faculty and staff at Gulf Coast University trust their colleagues and their supervisors. A comment from staff person Sharon Roberts provides a window into the trust between coworkers, “I do really trust the people that I work with. And I think we have a solid team.” While some participants singled out specific coworkers they had issues with, generally participants expressed feelings of trust among their coworkers. This general feeling of trust was also expressed toward supervisors. Faculty member Christina Perez expressed her trust in her schools dean saying, “So I had a very strong relationship with him [a college dean] before he became dean. So I have a lot of trust in him.” However, when asked about their level of trust in the organization and if it made them feel valued, many members of the campus community expressed negative sentiments. While there was a potential for the move to remote services delivery to negatively impact trust, all of the participant references about organizational trust happened before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants recalled stories from past administrations where communication was not valued, and information often did not get fully distributed to those who needed it. While many of the participants ascribed positive traits and attributes to how the president and the current administration handled COVID-19 related communication, the long organizational saga of distrust and secrecy still jaded many community members. Faculty member Nancy McMichael captured the saga of distrust saying, “it [the organization] will chew you up and spit you out and not look back.” Like other participants, Nancy spoke highly of the current university president and his communication team. This highlights the paradox of having an administration that is viewed positively in an organization that is perceived negatively due to the actions of multiple past administrations. It is important to recognize that the saga of distrust found at Gulf Coast University exceeds a few pockets of distrust within individual
departments or offices. Instead, the distrust found “links across internal divisions and organizational boundaries” and was “created over a number of years” (Clark, 1972).

WSEN can be used to understand the trust within relationships across an organization. While faculty and staff are both considered employees of a university, the two groups preform different tasks, have different motivations, and view aspects of the organization differently (Dolan, 2011; Kotera & Correa Vione, 2020; S. Morgan & Symon, 2002). By taking a more granular approach, examining each group separately with the WSEN framework a more full and rich understanding of trust within Gulf Coast University can be gained.

**Perceived Organizational Support Among Faculty and Staff**

Social exchange relationships are at the heart of WSEN and the level trust present in these relationships is an indicator of both the level of commitment employees have to the organization and the quality of the internal communication in the organization (Blau, 1964; Cole et al., 2002; Dansereau et al., 1975; Liden et al., 1997; J. Mishra & Morrissey, 1990; Nyhan, 2000; Piercy et al., 2006). Participants generally expressed high levels of trust in relationships governed by LMX and TMX. However, the participant’s relationship with the organization, under POS, was not as positive. While many participants praised the current administration, POS identified a lack of trust with the greater organization. Scholars have found that low levels of POS cause employees to view their role within the organization as an economic exchange where striving to exhibit positive citizenship behaviors is not necessary (Shore & Wayne, 1993). Additionally, POS has been found to influence absenteeism, turnover intention, organizational commitment, and effort toward job responsibilities (Cole et al., 2002; Eisenberger et al., 1997; Palmer et al., 2017; Settoon et al., 1996; Shore & Tetrick, 1991). When faculty and staff participants were asked about their level of trust in the organization a concerning trend emerged, overall they did not trust the organization and they did not feel the organization valued them.
Faculty members did not feel valued by the organization even though many expressed positive feelings toward the president and the current administration. Jack Torres explained that he felt the university valued his work, but he alluded to the fact that he did not believe that they valued him as a person. “Everybody can be replaced” is the reminder that Aaron Roberts offers to his peers. Christina Perez reflected on the past administrations she could remember, but many of her stories used events in the organization’s history rather than naming specific administrations. When she thought back over multiple administrations she said, “I think the leadership at the time was just, it was not honest with faculty.” She contrasted this with her feelings on the current administrations “they're much more transparent than past administrations, and I appreciate that.” Transparency is a key element of quality internal communication, which has been found to improve trust and the level of perceived organizational support (Vieira-Dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018; Zhou et al., 2009; Zou & Cavusgil, 2002). Comments from several participants, including Christina, praised the current administration while condemning the leadership of past administrations, indicating a potential shift in POS among employees driven in part by the current administrations communication strategy.

Like the faculty, the staff expressed positive sentiments toward the level of trust they had in the coworkers. Many also expressed feelings of trust in their supervisors. Despite this, the staff also felt that the organization did not value them. Julia Williams expressed her feelings saying, “I don't think that what we do in this office, in the community that we serve, is valued as high as other areas.” Another staff member, Sharon Anderson, expressed that she did not trust any large institutions, Gulf Coast University included: “I trust them as much as I trust any other institution that operationalize capitalism, white supremacy.” Interestingly, unlike the faculty, some of the staff associated their value to the organization with the revenue their office brought to the university. Julia Williams expressed a similar sentiment that linked value felt from the organization with revenue. However, she felt undervalued despite working hard every day. Some of these feeling of being undervalued stemmed from her office’s
lack of financial resources. While previous administrations were occasionally mentioned, the staff focused much less on who was in control and more on how their individual offices were able to bring value to the organization.
Chapter Five
Discussion and Implications

It has been over 100 years since the world has faced a pandemic on the scale of COVID-19. Therefore, most of the available crisis communication literature focusing on higher education addresses more commonly faced crisis events such as physical threats, severe weather, food contamination, administrative scandals, racial discrimination, hazing, or lawsuits (Coombs, 2007; Hong & Kim, 2019; June, 2007; Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003; Sturges, 1994). From the findings it is clear that the pandemic impacted both formal and informal communication, causing informal communication to be almost non-existent during the closure of campus. Additionally, the administration of Gulf Coast University highlighted the difficulty in clearly delineating between internal and external communication in a public university where organization members share internal messages with those outside the university. Both the president and the communication director recalled instances, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, where information shared only internally with employees was leaked to the press and included in media coverage. The administration felt that the campus’s experience working remotely during a hurricane over ten years ago would translate to an agile response to COVID-19; it did not go as smoothly as some had hoped. The theoretical framework for this study revealed an organization with a long memory and negative saga filled with organizational distrust. Finally, feelings of disconnection and loneliness were expressed by participants in association with the available technology for remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The findings of this study lend some insights to crisis communication during a major pandemic, but additional research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon. Four main themes were identified in this study: (a) false sense of preparedness, (b) rigid organizational communication structure, (c) communication disconnection with colleagues, and (d) saga of distrust. Several key points of
discussion emerged from the findings. When reviewed together, these four themes create important points of discussion that provide a basis for future scholarship and offer insights for practitioners.

**Overestimation of Flexibility in Online Transition**

The location of Gulf Coast University is prone to severe weather events that have previously forced the university to operate remotely. However, it had been over ten years since the university had been forced to do this. In those ten years, the university and the available technology became more complex. While most of the participants in this study felt that the university’s collective experience with previously operating remotely would translate to operating remotely during the pandemic, the transition did not go as smoothly as many envisioned. Clearly the pandemic and the subsequent response were unprecedented and affected universities around the globe. Gulf Coast University’s administration functioned well in their response to the pandemic; however, their over confidence based on their successful response to previous crisis events translating to the pandemic response became somewhat of an Achilles heel. The overestimation by the university’s administration can be attributed to two main issues, the reliance on information cascade within an institution with a higher degree of loose coupling and the increasing complexity of technology.

Crisis communication often differs from routine organizational communication, being more formal, generated at the top of the organization, and not soliciting feedback (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007; J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010). While this is true for many of the messages sent by Gulf Coast University, the administration also relied heavily on less direct communication sent via the information cascade. Administrators feared that widely distributed written formal internal messages could become defacto policy and they feared that information could be leaked to the public. This fear stemmed from several leaks to the media that occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the administration’s fear of a leak was rooted in experiences from the past, the fear of a leak also seemed to function as a shared boogieman. Like many institutions of higher education, loose coupling and siloing between departments
existed at Gulf Coast University (Orton & Weick, 1990; Rubin, 1979; Weick, 1976). One clear example of this siloing occurred when international athletes were told to go home by one office who had not checked with the office that handled student visas; no one had verified that these international students could maintain their immigration status if out of the country. When the administration relied on the information cascade, different siloed departments each overestimated their ability to transition online. When the COVID-19 team made plans, partly based on information gathered from the broader administration, this created a general sense of preparedness based on the successful response to previous weather events. However, key weaknesses were overlooked. While the university had historically offered fully online and hybrid courses, overall training and technological proficiency were the downfall of many of the faculty and staff. As an example, many of the offices on campus that serve current and prospective students were also not prepared to offer their services remotely, asking students to fax items to campus offices where everyone was working remotely. The administration tried to identify and prevent these issues with the drill they held, however the fast moving nature of the pandemic caused the drill to be the unofficial move to offering services remotely. The president and his communication team worked to be as transparent as possible given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, the second tenet of quality internal communication according to Grunig (2001). Still some participants faulted the administration’s communication around the drill and the training for faculty that followed, however most participants understood that these communication shortcomings were due to all of the unknowns at the beginning of the pandemic.

In addition to causing issues with communication, loose coupling and siloing between departments caused issues with the technological preparedness of the campus. At first glance this lack of technological preparedness may not seem directly related to communication, however it actually prevented access to platforms where communication was taking place and work was being done. The lack of technological access in software, hardware, and Wi-Fi caused a significant amount of stress for
members of the institution and presented a major problem for the administration. Without a platform for messages to be sent, communication cannot flow through models such as the Shannon-Weaver model and the SMCR Model of Communication (Berlo, 1960; Munter, 2009; Shannon, 1948). The impact of loose coupling can be seen by comparing different departments, with some departments mostly operating using laptops while others mostly utilized desktops. Additionally, many faculty participants were unaware of the training offered by the teaching center following the drill, although many administrators were aware of the training. Some departments banded together, and more proficient faculty trained less technologically advanced faculty members, while others left their faculty to figure out the platforms on their own. As feedback traveled back up the information cascade following the drill, the administration and COVID-19 team realized they faced some major technological challenges. To their credit, the administration worked as expeditiously as possible to address these issues, purchasing additional hardware, obtaining software licenses, and applying for grants to address the more costly challenges. However, some of these challenges could have potentially been foreseen and implementing regular move to remote drills would have helped identify issues as technology evolved between times of crisis.

**Organizational Memory**

It is difficult to obtain a full understanding of an organization’s internal communication by looking only at one moment in time. Large complex organizations like those found in higher education change slowly and memories from past events often influence the feelings of members of the organization (Clark, 1983; Hesburgh, 1971; Steiner, Sundström, & Sammalisto, 2013). When a university undergoes a change in leadership, members of the organization are often skeptical until the new leader has proven themselves (M. C. Brown, 1982; Röbken, 2007). However, if the institution has a history of multiple administrations providing poor leadership and making poor decisions, members will be extremely slow to begin trusting the organization and the new administration (Steiner et al., 2013;
Yukl, 2006). Gulf Coast University had a series of presidents that participants felt performed very poorly. Many participants felt they did not communicate well and offered the campus very few solutions to the problems faced by its members. In contrast, many participants felt that the current president was a trustworthy leader who understands communication and wants to better the working lives of organization members. Interestingly, participants seemed to parse their admiration and trust in the new president with their disdain and distrust for the university as a whole. Many participants framed their distrust in the organization overall by referring to decisions made by past administrations and reflected on how those decisions hurt them or the departments where they work.

When asked about their level of trust in the organization, members referred to larger decisions made by past administrations that negatively impacted their trust in the organization. However, it can be argued that the overall disdain for previous leaders is in part tied to their communication, as Mast and Huck (2008), Winston and Patterson (2006), and Yukl (2006) highlight communication is a key element of leadership. Additionally, while is in not always expressly mentioned by scholars that focus on change in organizations, most change models include the dissemination or knowledge sharing, a.k.a. communication, as a key element of the change process (Ellsworth, 2000; Kezar, 2013; Rogers, 2003). The paradox of having a newer leader that participants trust while sharing an organizational saga of distrust based on a history of poor leadership and poor decision-making highlights the importance of the collective memory of an organization. It is extremely difficult, in a short period of time, for an administration to turn around an organization comprised of members who share a negative organizational saga. The overall impact of Gulf Coast University’s current president will not be measured solely on his response to the COVID-19 pandemic, rather the entirety of the decisions made during his tenure and his overall communication strategy will be the main contributing factors by which he is measured.

It is clear that most participants in this study had a positive perception of the president and his
team’s communication strategy. In his interview, the president discussed the on-going struggle between his desire to be as transparent as possible while not setting defacto policy through unintended consequences related to his transparency. The president offered a specific example, involving proctoring software, where transparently communicating directly with all of the campus’s employees could have set defacto policy. In the example, many faculty members had been using a specific proctoring software to administer exams remotely during the initial response to COVID-19. The software charged students a fee before each exam and many had functional issues with the software once they were taking the exam. The president did not want to create defacto policy that violated academic freedom by directly emailing faculty members telling them to stop using the software. Instead he used the information cascade, through meetings, to explain the issues students were having and encourage the use of other options. The president did not set a policy that the software could not be used, but he made it clear that the software was negatively impacting students and provided better options.

Both his forethought and reflection provide a window into his leadership. In their integrated definition of leadership, Winston and Patterson (2006) discuss the leader’s ability to convey their vision for the future that resonates with followers - clearly the president has accomplished this. Scholars on the topics of organizational sagas and the succession of leadership highlight the complex nature involved with a single administration making a meaningful impact on the negative organizational views held by member (Kamens, 1977; Mahadevan, 2009; McCollom, 1992). However, it can be argued that policy and staffing decisions made during the president’s term could potentially plant seeds that will mature longitudinally to impact the organization. One specific area that could be impacted is the thoughtfulness applied to the response to crisis events such as COVID-19. The president and his communication team discussed the need to evaluate their communicable disease plan and other crisis response plans to incorporate lessons learned from the recent response to COVID-19. While these plans should be continually evaluate and updated, if the core of the plan is updated by the current administration, will
likely persist beyond the current administration becoming a potential seed of change that could positively impact the negative saga around Gulf Coast University’s communication.

**Mental Health Impacts**

All crisis events involve some level of stress for members of an organization; however, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant amount of stress and negative mental health impacts such as loneliness and feeling disconnected. Most participants referenced feeling disconnected and they missed the collegiality they were forced to leave behind when the campus closed. The administration should not be faulted for failing to foresee this outcome, as no large-scale studies focused on the mental health impacts of a crisis forcing an entire organization to work remotely existed. The fact that this move to remote work was not voluntary should be underscored; as studies have shown voluntary remote work can be successful with planning and appropriate considerations (Beauregard, Basile, & Canonico, 2019; Flores, 2019; Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008). However, this move to offering remote services was abrupt, mandatory, and affected all members of the organization. The mental health impacts associated with COVID-19 are still being studied by experts in the field of mental health, but this study offers two insights that can inform this emerging body of knowledge focused on the impacts of COVID-19. The first insight is that technology is mostly an impersonal medium for communication that does not offer the same depth of richness, compared to other channels of communication. Secondly, the pandemic forced a complete upending of the traditional operations of Gulf Coast University where administrators canceled many of the standing opportunities for informal communication and connection.

Prior to COVID-19 scholars who study the topic of online learning provided the first window into the impersonal nature of delivering services remotely in higher education. Dolan (2011) and Terosky and Heasley (2015) investigated the level of support that existed for faculty teaching online courses, the effect on collegiality, and discussed potential options for supporting these faculty. Both noted the high level of planning and support needed for faculty to successfully teach online. Also noting
the difficulty in creating meaningful engagement and collegiality in the impersonal spaces that are provided through software and technology. Faculty participants in this study were unified in their feelings of disconnection. Faculty members missed peers and students stopping by their offices to discuss ideas. They missed strolling across campus and interacting with acquaintances. Staring into a camera and computer screen did not offer them the same level of engagement and constrained their ability to communicate informally. Several participants discussed how these feelings of disconnection increased as the length of the campus closure extended. Throughout this study, the experiences of faculty, staff, and administrators were reflected upon both as the collective whole of the organization and as separate elements reflecting the shared experiences of each group individually.

While little research exists on the topic of university staff working remotely, the phenomenon of working remotely in the private sector has been researched in-depth. Isolation, disconnection, and difficulty providing adequate managerial support for staff have all been identified as negative outcomes of remote work for employees in the private sector (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997; Beauregard et al., 2019; Golden et al., 2008). These authors point to the lack of interaction between co-workers and the lack of informal communication mainly due to technology. Staff participants in this study echoed these sentiments. The stress and isolation leading to disengagement is an important phenomenon that warrants additional investigation as previous studies have shown that disengagement could lead to increased processing times, increased tuition, and poor customer service outcomes for students (Attridge, 2009; Rath & Conchie, 2008).

Administrators at Gulf Coast University provided additional context that helped to understand some of the elements contributing to this disconnection. During normal operations the administration offers coffee chats and brown bag lunch dialogue sessions, in addition to the faculty and staff meetings that occur in various departments across campus. When normal operations were suspended, the administration focused on delivering courses and services for students. The administration suspended
many of the standing meetings where faculty and staff members could interact with them informally. Additionally, many departments did not hold virtual faculty meetings and staff supervisors in many offices met with their staff individually over the phone instead of conducting staff meetings over Zoom. The elimination of these events further decreased the opportunity for informal connection with other members of the university. Many of these events reemerged during the summer semester of 2020 and participants felt they were a much-needed chance to connect. The decision to suspend these events and meetings is understandable given the tremendous stress and fear at the beginning of the pandemic. Making appropriate considerations and plans to hold meetings and informal events should be made in future iterations of the pandemic and crisis plans, as these opportunities are an important point of connection.

**Addressing the Research Questions**

This study sought to address three research questions focused on Gulf Coast University’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) How did internal communication, both formal and informal, shape the feelings toward the university’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic?; (b) What role did both administrators with organizational power as well as members of both the professional and administrative bureaucracies play in the communication process during the change event?; and (c) Was the formal communication symmetrical or asymmetrical, and how did this affect informal communication?.

The first question sought to understand how each type of internal communication shaped the participant’s views during the pandemic response. When the university was forced to suspend on campus operations, informal communication became virtually non-existent. Individuals with very strong relationships called colleagues and might have met outdoors in a socially distanced setting, however most relationships between employees did not contain strong enough connections for these interactions. The president and his communication team relied heavily on formal communication, which is understandable given the nature of the crisis event. The president sought to be as transparent as the
situation allowed and tried where possible to include empathy in his messages. Overall the administration’s communication strategy during COVID-19 was successful with many participants discussed the messaging and the president in a positive light.

Addressing the second question is slightly more challenging than the first. The administration relied heavily on the information cascade to carry messages from the president and the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 down the institutional hierarchy. While the administration continually communicated via formal messages over email, much of the discussion about decisions and guidance not formally created as policy was communicated through trusted communication chains where leaked information could be prevented. Administrators at all levels discussed their fear of being the person responsible for sharing information before the president was ready to make the information public. The president and the members of the administrative team tasked with responding to COVID-19 were the key players with organizational power that shaped the communication and response to COVID-19. Not surprisingly, slight differences between the responses of those in the professional bureaucracy versus the administrative bureaucracy were detected. Several faculty members discussed calling colleagues during the lockdown to communicate informally and then meeting for socially distanced meals outside as the pandemic progressed as was more understood about COVID-19. While much of the informal communication ceased, these faculty members illustrate the strong bonds shared between peers in the professional bureaucracy. In contrast, none of the staff participants discussed seeking opportunities for informal communication outside of communication specifically for work purposes. Most of the key COVID-19 messages came through formal channels from the president, but both parallel bureaucracies were able to transmit messages via information cascade. Given the existing research on the potential pitfalls of the information cascade, it was surprising that no participants discussed information being withheld or delayed in either type of bureaucracy (Gayeski, 2011; Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). However, this may have been due to the fact that COVID-19 was a life threatening
illness that threatened the university at its core.

The final question focuses on formal communication and investigating if the communication was symmetrical or asymmetrical. Many crisis events are fast moving and threaten the health and safety of the community and COVID-19 was no exception. It is understandable then that almost all of the initial COVID-19 pandemic communication in the spring 2020 semester was asymmetrical. The president and his team were receiving information from a number of outside sources and making decisions on how to best lead the campus during this event. There were many unknowns and it was clear that the lives of members of the campus community could be put at risk if incorrect decisions were made. Therefore, asymmetrical communication made the most sense, as there was not time to debate issues with the normal collegial spirit of the institution. Under normal circumstances, decisions made in an institution of higher education are discussed and debated through shared governance (Eckel, 2000; Hursch & Weber, 2001). Unlike the private sector, employees are afforded a voice in this collegial environment (Kok & McDonald, 2017). A university’s president is more than a figure head, setting the direction for the institution informed by the feedback received from those with less organizational power through the exercise of shared governance (Blaschke et al., 2014; Eckel, 2000). As the pandemic progressed and the immediate threat to the campus community lessened, more feedback was solicited as the administration shifted from responding to the pandemic to managing the associated realities for the campus community.

As noted previously, most informal communication ceased during the lockdown, but this was not the administration’s fault. The pandemic forced everyone to separate and interrupted all of the campus’s normal operations. The administration’s use of formal asymmetric communication did not drive additional informal communication because the campus community was physically separated and norms and channels for informal communication were mostly eliminated.
Connection to the Theoretical Framework

Workplace Social Exchange Network (WSEN) was derived from Social Exchange Theory and was concepted as a holistic approach to understanding the relationships an employee experiences in their professional lives (Cole et al., 2002; Dansereau et al., 1975; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Seers, 1989). WSEN is a newer overarching theory comprised of three sub-theories that have each been validated individually, Leader Member Exchange (LMX), Team Member Exchange (TMX), and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) (Cole et al., 2002). WSEN examines the employee’s trust, gratitude, feelings of personal obligation, and attitudes toward their co-workers, supervisor, and the organization as a whole (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961; Neff, 2008). The theory was selected for this study because scholars have successfully applied WSEN to examine informal networks within an organization and connections have been found between social exchange relationships and communication outcomes (Kahn, 1992; Mehta, 2016; Portoghese et al., 2012; Shih & Wijaya, 2017; Vieira-Dos Santos & Gonçalves, 2018; Wayne et al., 1997).

Connections have been made between quality relationships identified through WSEN and the readiness for change among the members of an organization (Burnett et al., 2015; Kahn, 1992; Portoghese et al., 2012; Van Dam et al., 2008; Wittig, 2012). While the changes associated with COVID-19 were not voluntary and the face paced nature afforded little time for dissension, WSEN and its sub theories provide a foundation to understand how these changes may have been received based on existing social exchange relationships (Bordia et al., 2006; Choi, 2011; Hargie et al., 2002; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Welch, 2012). Most participants understood and were able to easily answer the questions about the level of trust they have with their coworkers (TMS) and their supervisor (LMX). Overall participants described positive relationships with high levels of trust with their coworkers (TMS). This is important as it indicates increased levels of engagement are potentially present among the grassroots of the institution (Kahn, 1990). This finding speaks to the level of collegiality normally present in Gulf
Coast University, with peers and coworkers trusting each other in all facets of their relationships. When participants were asked about their relationships with their supervisors, most spoke positively and ascribed high levels of trust in their immediate supervisors (LMX). This finding indicates that the middle management of the organization has qualities that those with lower levels of organizational power find beneficial. This finding also indicates the likelihood of symmetrical communication that has strengthened the dyads described by participants (Dansereau et al., 1975; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

In contrast to the positive findings related to TMS and LMX, when asked about their level of trust in the organization some participants needed additional context to answer the question. It seemed that these participants had not considered if they could trust the collective organization (POS). However, once they considered the organization as a whole, most participants spoke negatively about their trust in the organization. Several participants used this question about their trust in the organization to discuss their trust in the administration or in the president. While this question may have been difficult for participants, it yielded insightful data that contextualized themes found in the data. Most participants expressed a distrust of the organization as a whole based on a saga of what they viewed as negative interactions over several administrations. This finding was concerning as the perception of poor organizational support (POS) has been linked to negative workplace behaviors such as increased absenteeism, turnover, and lowered commitment to the organization (Cole et al., 2002; Eisenberger et al., 1997; Palmer et al., 2017; Settoon et al., 1996; Shore & Tetrick, 1991).

The interview protocol created for this study included three questions directly related to this theoretical framework. Each of the sub theories, LMX, TMX, and POS, were the focus of one question. While these questions provided insightful data, fully understanding the participant’s lived experience using WSEN as a lens to understand where they place trust in their professional relationships could have been the focus of an entire interview with each participant. Trust is a feeling that is tied to emotions and actions, many of the participants in this study may have provided richer data related to WSEN with
additional time and rapport building with the researcher. While WSEN is not a communication theory; it is ultimately rooted in trust and grounded in communication at the core of the relationships it examines. The application of WSEN worked well in this study; its application provided insights on phenomena that otherwise would not have been fully understood.

As a wider body of literature develops on the application of WSEN in higher education and communication, creating meaningful opportunities to utilize this theory, incorporating this theory into research methods become less challenging. The application of WSEN in this study yielded insights about the organization, its leadership, the strength of relationships within departments, and it allowed participants to reflect on trust in their professional relationships. In many of the participant interviews the discussion of trust segued into the participants reflecting on the broader relationships in question. When considering these relationships, many participants voluntarily began discussing communication, indicating that they instinctually associated quality communication with higher trust.

**Implications for Practice**

Crisis events are becoming more common and are occurring more frequently (Acosta & Chandra, 2013). University leaders should begin reviewing and updating all of their crisis plans to reflect the lessons learned from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders should ask their campus communities to provide feedback on the response to pandemic, creating meaningful moments to collect feedback beyond emailing a blanket survey. Leaders should solicit feedback through email, face-to-face meetings, town halls, and from faculty, staff, and student governments (Berger, 2014; Men, 2014b, 2014c; White et al., 2010). Through the dialogue generated during these symmetrical conversations, it is likely that new ideas and considerations will emerge that may not have been previously considered (Grunig, 1992; Men, 2014c). Administrators should seek feedback on their crisis response as an important phase of the crisis management process. Leaders should not conflate feedback with criticism or personal attacks on their job performance. Rather they should see the feedback process
after a crisis as an important step in creating organizational knowledge that is key in responding to future crisis events (Anttila, 2014). It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to solicit feedback during the response to a crisis because leaders are trying to keep the campus safe (King III, 2007). However, giving members of the campus community a voice in the evaluation phase of the process will strengthen the plan and build trust not only in the crisis response process but also in the administration (Anttila, 2014).

These plans should include considerations beyond just crisis communication and the general response procedures. If a crisis event could shut down a university’s physical spaces then leaders must develop detailed plans on how they will offer services remotely (McCullar, 2011; Rayburn, Anderson, & Sierra, 2021). While many university leaders may feel their campuses are well-versed in offering services remotely following COVID-19, it is important that readiness and the capacity to go online is maintained (Rayburn et al., 2021). Gulf Coast University leaders felt they were prepared based on experience from previous crisis events, however technology had changed significantly and no new planning considerations had been made. Leaders should plan remote service drills where the campus tests their ability to transfer to being fully remote for a short period of time (Coombs, 2021). While these drills may seem like a disruption, they will be imperative to maintain readiness (Coombs, 2021; McCullar, 2011). Administrators should plan to use the drills to test and then refine their crisis plans and communication strategy (Zdziarski, Dunkel, & Rollo, 2020). In addition to drills, crisis plans that include moving to be fully remote should include actionable considerations for providing internet access, hardware (laptops and cell phones), software, and mental health services. Engaging in this level of planning would have prevented issues such as faculty sneaking into their offices during the campus closure because they did not have a laptop or home internet. Additionally, this planning would have prevented the need for students who had no home internet from relying on the campus library as their sole source of internet during the closure. Many of the software licensing and training issues could have
been identified during a drill and the administration would have been afforded time to solve these issues without the threat of an immediate crisis.

Updated plans should also include regular media training for upper level administrators as a key step in crisis preparation (Wilson & Kunk-Czaplicki, 2020). Most of the administrators in this study felt they were not communicators and left that job to the president and the campus’s director of communication. While the president and their communication team should set the policies and procedures around communication, preparing upper-level administrators before a crisis with media training will benefit the university (Wilson & Kunk-Czaplicki, 2020). Even if these administrators never need to formally use their media training in an interview, they will approach communication differently. Adding these communication tools to their toolbox could also have a positive effect on the organizational saga, making the administration’s communication more concise and of higher quality.

One of the more difficult areas for future crisis planning should center on maintaining opportunities for informal communication during campus closures and when offering services remotely. Faculty and staff need to feel engaged in a collegial environment similar to what they experience on campus. Providing these opportunities will require forethought and planning by administrators. The importance of informal communication cannot be understated and will help members of the campus community feel engaged even when physically separated. Maintaining virtual events that mirror those offered in-person during normal operations such as coffee chats, brown bag lunches, and town halls are important. Selecting the correct software platform for these events is also important. Video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Skype, or Google Hangouts currently offer the most immersive experiences for connecting online. However, these platforms have significant drawbacks for informal communication. Additionally, the number of available platforms can create issues if preferred platforms are not selected by the administration. Selecting a preferred platform and offering training could prevent a host of issues and make the continuity of services easier to achieve (Rayburn et al., 2021). Administrators need to
continually evaluate new platforms that offer opportunities for informal communication in virtual spaces. If the current trends toward the greater adoption of remote and hybrid working models continue, it is likely that software companies will develop platforms that fill this current gap, like creating immersive virtual work and meeting spaces that users access with virtual reality headsets.

Organizational sagas are often overlooked and the length of an organization’s memory is frequently underestimated (Clark, 1972; Kamens, 1977; Mahadevan, 2009; McCollom, 1992). University leaders and communication professionals must take an active role in understanding their organization’s saga. Leaders need to tap into campus thought leaders and the informal networks of communication to understand the positive and negative elements of the saga (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Mills, 2010). Once the saga is understood, tactics can be developed with the strategic goal of reinforcing certain elements while improving and enhancing others. Recognizing the longitudinal nature of altering an organization’s saga. The key to positively altering an organization’s saga starts with building trust (Clark, 1972).

Administrators and communication professionals in higher education must focus on building trust among members of their institutions. Building trust can be a challenging process and normally is a byproduct of quality leadership. However, it can be argued that utilizing WSEN as a lens to understand how employees perceive their professional relationships can yield opportunities to improve the work lives of faculty and staff, thus building trust in the administration. Communication teams should also build general communication plans that contain strategies and tactics that seek to foster transparency and provide omnichannel symmetrical communication. Communication plans should seek to reach campus community members on the platforms they prefer and should provide them with the information they are seeking. Administrators should use the information cascade sparingly as it creates opportunities for bad actors to withhold and omit information from those with the least organizational power (Proctor & Doukakis, 2003). Transparency and open communication should become the overarching goal of
communication during normal operations and crisis events. Future research focused on building trust through communication in higher education and the use of WSEN to better understand the employees in higher education should be undertaken. Specifically, WSEN could be used as a lens to better understand subtle differences between faculty and staff. Potential outcomes of this research would include providing a better understanding of how each group views themselves within the organization, where they feel their value in the organization is derived from, and how greater trust can be built using communication.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The results of this qualitative case study are not generalizable but could be transferable (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). The study results only reflect the specific timeframe and bounded system studied. This study is also localized to Gulf Coast University and the initial response to COVID-19 during the spring and summer of 2020. The results do not reflect how other campuses in the same university system or in the same region would behave during a similar crisis event. Additionally, in this study, the researcher served as the research instrument, collecting and interpreting the data. While subjectivity can be minimized, it cannot be eliminated. The results of this case study could potentially be transferable if the given size and structure of the institution and details of the situation closely match those of this case (Stake, 1995). The results of this study only represent the experiences of the 14 participants during the term of the research and would not reflect how another campus would react based on their response to COVID-19.

It is important to note that this study is being conducted at a four-year institution that has both commuter and residential student populations. The research site’s organizational structure differs from other four-year colleges whose students are mainly residential, and it differs from two-year community colleges. While this is a limitation, it also creates an opportunity for future research that could investigate what role institution type and composition of the student body play in internal communication in response to a crisis.
Crisis events are threats to the organization, its reputation, and its members (Barton, 2001; Coombs, 2007). These events are stressful and interrupt all aspects of organizational life (Coombs, 2007; Hong & Kim, 2019). The COVID-19 crisis greatly impacted both the personal and professional lives of many members of the Gulf Coast University community. The response to COVID-19 came directly from the leaders at the top of the university. These top-down decisions were made with the intention of keep the university community safe. Given both the stress of the pandemic and the top-down nature of the response, some potential participants may have been hesitant to participate in this study. A potential exists that those who participated may have been individuals with a higher propensity to speak up without fearing potential negative impacts. Additionally, this study was conducted while COVID-19 was still very much of concern. Some offices on campus were still under pressure due to an increased demand for their services. This also likely impacted the willingness of some potential participants.

**Future Research**

A wide body of research exists on the topics of crisis communication, change, internal communication, and organizational theory. However, a more limited body of literature on these topics specific to higher education exists. Arguably, pandemics at the level of COVID-19 are a rare occurrence, but crisis events are increasing in frequency (J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Existing research on crisis planning in higher education shows plans are largely untested and only focus on common events (June, 2007; Mitroff & Alpaslan, 2003). Future research should examine university crisis plans to better understand their content and the planning process. Crisis plans are normally closely guarded and often are not available to the public, causing a lack of understanding as to the contents of these plans. An opportunity for an impactful future study would be the collection and analysis of crisis plans from a number of universities using document analysis, highlighting common sections and actions. Plans
including specific provisions for communication could also be compared to better understand the level of planning for communication during a crisis that exists.

Internal communication in higher education is another area that warrants additional research. Only one major study exists on internal communication in an institution of higher education and was self-published by the institution who conducted an internal audit (Minia et al., 2015). It is clear that internal communication, both formal and informal, takes place non-stop in institutions of higher education, but less is known about the planning behind it. Universities have unique organizational structures with parallel bureaucracies that often do not function like organizations in the private sector. Therefore, additional research could help scholars better understand the similarity and differences in how internal communication happens and behaves within higher education. Further study of internal communication would allow practitioners and administrators an array of tools to build trust and increase morale.

A final area for future research could include an investigation into organizational sagas in higher education and the role communication plays in affecting the saga. A study of this nature would likely be longitudinal, monitoring for changes in the saga and investigating what precipitated those changes. Understanding the role trust plays in organizational sagas would also be insightful, as this is currently not fully understood. Further investigation on organizational sagas would allow communication practitioners and administrators to identify the sagas at play in their institution and could provide actionable insights for maintaining or altering these sagas.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of communication during a crisis event at an institution of higher education. Specifically, this study focused on internal communication, both formal and informal. While communication during a crisis event differs from normal organizational communication, this study offers important insights into both formal and informal communication.
during a crisis event. Some leaders may question the importance of communication, but the negative outcomes associated with poor communication are clear. Scholars have found that poor communication leads to cynicism, disengagement, employee turnover, poor customer service outcomes, and distrust (Choi, 2011; Frahm, 2011; Karanges et al., 2015; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Men, 2012; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Welch, 2011). In contrast, quality communication, that is transparent as well as symmetrical, leads to trust, higher morale, and greater readiness for change (Bommer et al., 2005; Qian & Daniels, 2008; Wanous et al., 2000; Wu et al., 2007).

Crisis communication in higher education has been studied previously, though more scholarship is needed on this topic. Few crisis events rise to the level of disruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This provided a unique opportunity to investigate the role internal communication plays in influencing the attitudes of members of an institution of higher education during a crisis event. Workplace Social Exchange Network served as the guiding theory of this study. This theory served as a lens through which trust and the subtle differences between faculty and staff could be better understood.

The findings of this study reveal the far-reaching effects of crisis planning and communication. Interestingly, technology in the form of internet connectivity, hardware, and software were major challenges that impacted the response to COVID-19. As the data was analyzed throughout the study, themes and subthemes emerged. These themes included the false sense of preparedness held by administrators, the ridged structure that organizational communication flowed through, the disconnection between colleagues during this crisis, and the saga of distrust that was built over multiple administrations. It is important to also underscore that the participants in this study felt that the administration handled the crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic well. There were no major mistakes noted, the administration should be commended for their hard work and resourcefulness.

The findings are further summarized and discussed as three categories for readers to consider. The first category of discussion centered on the administration’s overestimation of their flexibility to
transition to the full delivery of campus services remotely. Many administrators felt that the university’s prior experience transitioning online for hurricanes for make them more agile and able to transition successfully in a short period of time. However, technology had greatly evolved and became the campus’s Achilles heel. Secondly, the long memory of the institution and the organizational saga around communication was discussed. Through the use of WSEN, a negative saga surrounding communication was identified. Participants held negative views of the organization as a whole but felt the current administration was trustworthy and working to better the institution. Finally, the mental health toll on participants who were forced to work remotely using impersonal software was discussed. Collegiality and informal communication were greatly impacted during the period where the campus was closed and services were offered remotely.

The researcher hopes that this study will add to the academic literature focused on communication and crisis planning. Additionally, the usefulness of WSEN when applied to organizational issues in higher education and communication cannot be understated. The researcher hopes that future scholars build the body of knowledge surrounding WSEN and its application to higher education. Finally, it is imperative that upper level administrators and communication practitioners work to understand the importance of internal communication. Everyone is a communicator and should understand the tenets of quality communication.
References


Lewin, K. (1951). Field theory in social science: selected theoretical papers (edited by dorwin cartwright.).


135


Appendices

Appendix A. Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
   a. 20 – 29
   b. 30 – 39
   c. 40 – 49
   d. 50 – 59
   e. 60 – 69
   f. 70+

2. I identify my gender as:
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Transgender Male
   d. Transgender Female
   e. Gender Non-Conforming
   f. Not Listed
   g. Prefer not to Answer

3. I identify my ethnicity as:
   a. Hispanic or Latino
   b. American Indian or Alaskan Native
   c. Asian
   d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   e. Black or African American
   f. White
g. Two or More Races

4. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
   a. Some college, no degree
   b. Associate degree
   c. Bachelor's degree
   d. Master's degree
   e. Doctoral level degree

5. What is your primary role within the university?
   a. Faculty
   b. Staff
   c. Administrator

6. How many years have you been employed by the university?
   a. Less than 1
   b. 1 – 4
   c. 5 – 9
   d. 10 – 14
   e. 15 – 19
   f. 20 – 24
   g. 25 – 29
   h. 30 +

7. How many positions have you held within the university?
   a. 1
   b. 2
   c. 3
d. 4

e. 5 +
Appendix B. Interview Protocol for Administrators

1. Tell me about the crisis communication plan you had in place before the COVID-19 outbreak. What types of crisis scenarios did it plan for?

2. Tell me about the timeline of this crisis, when did the administration first become aware of COVID-19, when did leaders begin planning their response, when was the initial communication drafted, etc.? 

3. As the response to COVID-19 was being formulated, what planning for the communication roll-out to the campus community took place?

4. What channels did you send messages over?

5. Which channels were the most successful for communicating about the crisis? Why were they successful?

6. Which channels were the least successful? Why were they the least successful?

7. Tell me about the considerations made about communicating directly with individual members of the campus community vs. communication with those in upper administrative roles and allowing them to share the messaging with their stakeholders.

8. What technology were you able to utilize that you feel aided your communication strategy?

9. As you were planning your crisis communication, what thought was given to providing opportunities for the campus community to provide feedback?

10. How did the administration work with individual colleges and offices to ensure clear communication during the crisis?

11. Considering the performance of your crisis communication strategy, what do you feel went well? What could have gone better?

12. What role do you feel informal communication played in the campus community learning about and adapting to this crisis?
13. What are the top lessons learned from the crisis regarding internal communication during a crisis?

14. Which decision made by the team responding to the crisis caused the most concern, debate, and/or hesitation about communicating?
Appendix C. Interview Protocol for Faculty

1. How do you normally find information about the university (website, from your department chair/dean, from your co-workers, social media, email, the campus newspaper, etc.)?

2. Do you normally share information with people you know on campus? How do you normally communicate with them?

3. Describe your relationship with your fellow faculty in your department or school. If you could grade your level of trust in your team, what would that grade be?

4. Explain your relationship with the dean of your college. Rate your level of trust in your school’s dean.

5. Do you feel that the university values you? Rate your level of trust in the university.

6. When did you first learn of the COVID-19 outbreak?

7. What is the first piece of communication from the university that you remember seeing about COVID-19?

8. What are your feelings on the changes the university made as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak?

9. How were the COVID-19 related changes that took place communicated with you and your school?

10. Do you, your college's dean, and your fellow faculty within your school have shared feelings about the changes?

11. If you were the person-in-charge of communicating the proposed change, how would you have done it?

12. What impacts have the COVID-19 related changes had on your department, college, and the greater campus community?
13. Since you heard about the proposed change, did anyone from the administration ask your opinion about the change? How does this change compare to past initiatives?

14. As the details of the changes were being communicated by the administration, did you seek additional information from anyone? Did you provide additional information to anyone?

15. How has the communication for the COVID-19 crisis compared to other crises that have impacted the campus community?

16. Do you feel that you had the opportunity to give feedback on the COVID-19 related changes that were taking place?

17. What was your best source of information about the COVID-19 related changes occurring on campus?
Appendix D. Interview Protocol for Staff

1. How do you normally find information about the university (website, from your supervisor, from your co-workers, social media, email, the campus newspaper, etc.)?
2. Do you normally share information with people you know on campus? How do you normally communicate with them?
3. Describe your relationship with the team in your office. Grade your level of trust in your team.
4. Explain your relationship with your supervisor. Rate your level of trust in your supervisor.
5. Do you feel that your organization values you? Rate your level of trust in the organization.
6. When did you first learn of the COVID-19 outbreak?
7. What is the first piece of communication from the university that you remember seeing about COVID-19?
8. What are your feelings on the changes the university made as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak?
9. How were the COVID-19 related changes that took place communicated with you and your office/workgroup?
10. Do you, your supervisor, and your office/workgroup have shared feelings about the changes?
11. If you were the person-in-charge of communicating the proposed change, how would you have done it?
12. What impacts have the COVID-19 related changes had on your office? How do those impacts compare with those felt by the greater campus community?
13. Since you heard about the proposed change, did anyone from the administration ask your opinion about the change? How does this change compare to past initiatives?
14. As the details of the changes were being communicated by the administration, did you seek additional information from anyone? Did you provide additional information to anyone?
15. How has the communication for the COVID-19 crisis compared to other crises that have impacted the campus community?

16. Do you feel that you had the opportunity to give feedback on the COVID-19 related changes that were taking place?
The author, Jonathan “Boone” Clemmons was born in Kansas City, Missouri, later moving to and graduating high school in Sand Springs, Oklahoma. He obtained an Associate in Science degree from Northern Oklahoma A&M College in 2006. He then obtained a Bachelor of Science degree from Oklahoma State University in 2008. He then continued at Oklahoma State University earning a Master of Agriculture in 2010. After gaining professional experience, he discovered his passion for the fields of marketing and public relations. As he transitioned from student to practitioner, he also discovered his passion for contributing through mentorship and education. He joined the University of New Orleans in 2016 to pursue a Ph.D. in Educational Administration. His research interests include university marketing, branding, public relations, crisis communication, crisis management, and change management. He currently works at Southwestern Oklahoma State University as the Assistant Vice President of Public Relations and Marketing.