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Nicole Gahagan

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**Managing Change from the Middle:**

**An Exploration of How Midlevel Managers**

**Make Sense of Their Roles in the Context of Organizational Change**

by

Nicole H. Gahagan

Doctoral Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of

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## Abstract

During institutional change processes, unstructured sensemaking could result in inconsistent outputs across the organization, causing organizations the inability to achieve their intended outcomes. Because of their hierarchical and relational positions within colleges and universities, midlevel managers could be instrumental in stabilizing and aligning the sensemaking of others, which is a prerequisite for transformational change. Historically, midlevel managers have been considered change resistors or change saboteurs. However, what could be perceived as obstructionist behaviors might actually be the result of role ambiguity.

The purpose of my research was to illuminate how midlevel managers made sense of and subsequently enacted their roles within the context of organizational change. Using sensemaking as my theoretical framework, I conducted a single case study to explore how midlevel managers at a two-year postsecondary institution identified cues about their roles, assigned meaning to them, and acted upon them in the context of institutional change. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with midlevel managers, document review, and direct observation, I uncovered information critical to understanding how midlevel managers understand what is expected of them from various stakeholder groups and how they reconcile these messages to inform action throughout the lifecycle of organizational changes.

The results of this study help college and university executives better position their midlevel managers to serve as effective change agents by designing an environment and providing the resources that support their role sensemaking needs. Promising practices that structure and support midlevel managers' role sensemaking and enactment and, thus, enhance the outcomes of institutional change are offered.

*Keywords*: Midlevel Managers, Sensemaking, Organizational Change, Transformational Change, Higher Education, Institutional Executives

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Postsecondary education changed the trajectory of my life. It transformed me. I feel incredibly fortunate to work in higher education and help other students unlock their potential every day. To now hold the highest degree in this field is surreal, and I am eager to begin the next leg of my journey when I get to make an even bigger impact on colleges and universities across the country.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Institutions of higher education regularly attempt transformational change but fail to achieve their intended outcomes at high rates (Kezar, 2018). Caught in the crosshairs of poorly handled institutional change are managers who facilitate change from the middle, often negotiating a role that requires them to perform both leader and follower functions (Huy, 2002). Midlevel managers have a distinct perspective sandwiched between executive leaders and frontline employees (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). This intermediary role places midlevel managers in a unique and complex situation. Especially during institutional change, midlevel managers experience role ambiguity because of unclear or conflicting expectations from multiple stakeholder groups (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Buick et al., 2017; Huy, 2002). Without intentional role structure and support, directors, associate deans, and others with similar titles are left to navigate the murky middle throughout the lifecycle of institutional change efforts with little guidance.

Midlevel managers are hierarchically and relationally positioned within colleges and universities to be critical influencers of change (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011; Huy, 2002). They are situated to be instrumental in stabilizing and aligning how employees make sense of change (Balogun, 2003; Currie & Proctor, 2005), which is a prerequisite for transformational change to occur in postsecondary settings (Kezar, 2012). Over the last two decades, scholars from disciplines such as business management have recognized midlevel managers' capacity to serve as change agents and positively effectuate change initiatives. They argue that executives who structure and support role definition for midlevel managers as change agents are more likely to attain the strategic outcomes they strive to achieve (Buick et al., 2017).

Despite burgeoning research in other disciplines, higher education scholars have yet to adequately capture midlevel managers' roles in accomplishing large-scale institutional goals (Amey & Eddy, 2018). Furthermore, little is known about how midlevel managers understand their professional role in unstable times (Wilson et al., 2016), such as during institutional transformation. This study underscored the critical space between executive leaders and frontline employees in higher education settings by exploring midlevel managers' experiences during institutional change processes. Specifically, the purpose of my research was to illuminate how midlevel managers make sense of and subsequently enact their roles within the context of organizational change. The results of this study lend insight into how colleges and universities can better position their midlevel managers to positively affect the change process by intentionally attending to their role sensemaking needs.

## Statement of Problem

Higher education is no stranger to calls for change (Kezar, 2018). Kezar (2018) mentioned forces like the Yale Report of 1828, the Morrill Act of 1862, World War II, and the introduction of federal financial aid as historical drivers of transformation in the higher education sector. More recently, calls for a "new education" that is ethical, democratic, pragmatic, and uses technology wisely and creatively have gained traction (Davidson, 2022). Similarly, amplified attention to the nation's stagnated educational attainment rates elicited demands that institutions more effectively address issues around teaching, learning, and graduation (Merisotis, 2023). Add in institutions' lack of preparedness for demographic shifts, heightened affordability pressures, an endless chase to keep pace with educational technologies, and the reverberating effects of COVID-19 and racially charged tragedies of the early 2020s, and one can quickly surmise that

higher education is facing changes that will undoubtedly shape the future character and mission of the enterprise (Grabill et al., 2022; Ruben, 2022).

Pundits often call for higher education reform. Some observers insist that traditional colleges and universities must completely transform themselves (Grabill et al., 2022; Ruben, 2022). That is, institutions must become more efficient, affordable, and responsive to students or risk becoming obsolete and overpowered by competitors who can deliver such an education (Garcia-Morales et al., 2021; Parker, 2020). While many executives declare the need for transformation and assert an idealized future state, very few successfully maneuver their initiatives well enough for their wishes to be embraced and embodied by the campus community (Kezar, 2018).

Encountering forces of change is an unavoidable part of organizational life, and there is no question that postsecondary institutions in the United States are presently confronted with significant, acute motivators for change. While college and university executives are often attuned to what needs to change in the abstract, their visions of transformation often fail to cascade throughout the organization into concrete operationalized changes at lower levels (Kezar, 2018; Ruben, 2022). The enthusiasm and optimism of those initiating a new direction or strategy are not matched by those being asked to adopt the change. Skepticism about the need for change, doubt about the availability of resources, and misgivings about the motivations of executives proposing specific initiatives are just some of the reasons even the best ideas get stalled or stopped (Ruben, 2022). To flip the narrative and breathe life into a change initiative, broader human capital should be assembled and activated via shared leadership practices (Grabill et al., 2022; Kezar, 2018).

Shared leadership is defined by the coming together of top-down leadership and bottom-up leadership and creates the conditions necessary for sustainable, institutionalized change on campuses (Grabill et al., 2022; Kezar, 2018). The nexus between the senior and frontline levels of the organization exists within the middle management ranks. As noted above, scholars from other disciplines have studied midlevel managers' positive impacts on organizational transformation. If colleges and universities intend to thrive amongst the forces of change engulfing them today and into the foreseeable future, leveraging midlevel managers' positions within the college or university is a critical course of action. Understanding how midlevel managers make sense of and enact their role within the context of institutional change is a necessary starting point for deliberately engaging them in change agency.

## Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of my research was to illuminate how midlevel managers make sense of and subsequently enact their roles within the context of organizational change. The results of this study help college and university executives better position their midlevel managers to serve as effective change agents by providing resources that support their role sensemaking needs. By doing so, many potential pitfalls of transformational change in higher education settings can be avoided.

Using sensemaking as my theoretical framework, I explored how midlevel managers at a two-year postsecondary institution identified cues about their roles, assigned meaning to them, and acted upon them while facilitating institutional change initiatives. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with midlevel managers, document review, and direct observation, I uncovered information critical to understanding how midlevel managers understand what is expected of them from various stakeholder groups and how they reconcile these messages to

inform action during organizational change. Specifically, I sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do midlevel managers make sense of their role within the context of institutional change?
- How do midlevel managers' sensemaking processes inform their actions related to the change initiative?

## Significance of Study

Forces of change are a mainstay of the higher education enterprise (Grabill et al., 2022; Kezar, 2018). Recently, threats to public health and amplified calls for racial equity, social justice, and educational and economic opportunity have exacerbated the pressure for colleges and universities to transform efficiently and effectively (Ruben, 2022). In postsecondary institutions, where power is distributed and the status quo is perpetuated by the very individuals who created it, however, change is best led in a shared manner responsive to an open-system environment where initiatives are perceived through a wide array of lenses (Buller, 2014). Midlevel managers, because of where they exist in the organizational structure and their multifaceted relationships, are vital conduits for translating change strategy into new sets of adopted operational practices across and throughout the organization.

Unfortunately, planned change in higher education typically leads to missed opportunities and wasted resources (Buller, 2014; Rosenberg, 2023). When midlevel managers are not involved in strategic planning and decision-making about organizational change efforts, they are left feeling unsure about their role in the change process and report higher levels of role conflict as a result (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Buick et al., 2017). This ambivalence is problematic for higher education executives motivated to transform their organizations. Absent clear expectations,

midlevel managers may pave their own unsanctioned change implementation path, put self-imposed limitations on their change agency, or avoid taking on any role in the change at all (Olsen & Stensaker, 2014). The implications of role ambiguity for midlevel managers can have deleterious trickle-down effects. Frontline employees are less likely to traverse transitions smoothly when their midlevel leader cannot adequately manage uncertainty (Herzing & Jimmieson, 2006). As a result, strategic initiatives fail to take hold and postsecondary institutions fail to transform purposefully and fully.

The power of role identity is particularly strong for midlevel managers and can have significant effects on an organization's ability to achieve its strategic objectives (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Caldwell, 2005; Parris et al., 2008). Transformational change necessitates that organizational sensemaking occurs to develop shared understanding and motivate collective action aligned to the objectives of the strategic initiative (Kezar, 2018). This requires a widespread, interactive process of sorting out and uniting multiple individuals' varied thoughts and behaviors related to the initiative. Organizational sensemaking is difficult to achieve in postsecondary settings because of institutions' decentralized character, distributed labor, and multiple authority structures (Shugart, 2013). Because of their network centrality, however, midlevel managers can leverage their hierarchical positions and multifaceted relationships to be especially helpful in achieving organizational sensemaking, inspiring employees' engagement, and cultivating attitudinal and behavioral alignment with the change effort so institutional initiatives are carried out at scale (Huy, 2002; Kezar, 2018). Examining how midlevel managers make sense of their role within the ambiguous and equivocal conditions created by top-down organizational change is pivotal to understanding how institutional executives can help structure and support midlevel managers' role sensemaking and effectuate change as intended.

## Description and Scope of Research

In this study, I explored the experience of midlevel managers during planned institutional change to illuminate how they made sense of and subsequently enacted their roles. For the purposes of this research, planned change is defined as those transformations that are deliberate acts where a particular executive leader initiates a new direction to bring about a positive outcome for the overall organization (Kezar, 2018). Whether planned change initiatives are necessitated by external influences demanding institutional adaptation or come about via an internal desire for innovation or reform, it is incumbent upon cabinet members to consider how to reduce the tax such changes have on the organization and its human and other resources (Kezar, 2018). As described in detail in the next chapter, activating the change agency of midlevel managers can more seamlessly connect strategy to operations and mitigate many of the mistakes postsecondary institutions make when attempting to implement change. Before this can happen, however, midlevel managers need to understand their role within the context of this change.

Historically, most references to midlevel managers in change-related literature have been negative, portraying midlevel managers as either change resisters or change saboteurs (Huy, 2002). What might appear to be obstructionist behavior, however, could actually be the observable effects of role ambiguity. When institutional leaders initiate change, midlevel managers are charged with accomplishing four tasks: 1) processing the change for themselves, 2) helping others process the change, 3) implementing concrete changes in their departments, and 4) maintaining daily operations (Balogun, 2003). How well midlevel managers accomplish the first task influences how well they perform the others, which has a ripple effect across the organization (Balogun, 2003). Organizational change requires all institutional actors to undergo a

meaning construction process and to rethink their existing understandings (Eckel & Kezar, 2002). Midlevel managers are at the center of this process because of how they receive and subsequently interpret and disseminate change-related information that others use to create their own understandings of the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Fully appreciating midlevel managers' experience of change and how their organizational positions can be better structured, supported, and leveraged for change agency requires an exploration of their sensemaking.

## Theoretical Framework

Deliberate and aligned sensemaking may be the key to effectively leveraging midlevel managers in transformational change efforts (Kezar 2018). In his seminal work, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick (1995) describes the significance of sensemaking. He defines sensemaking as the reciprocal process by which people receive information, assign meaning to it, and act (Weick, 1995). Since this publication, many other scholars have researched sensemaking in organizations and added nuances to the study of this phenomenon. As a result, there is no single agreed-upon definition of sensemaking. However, there is a consensus that sensemaking generally refers to those processes by which people seek plausibility amongst concepts or circumstances to understand ambiguous, equivocal, or confusing issues or events (Brown & Harris, 2014). Because organizational change often causes ambiguity, equivocation, and confusion (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), and because midlevel managers regularly navigate complex and perplexing conditions in their work environment even in the absence of significant change (Baber, 2020; Pepper and Giles, 2014), sensemaking serves as an appropriate theoretical framework through which to examine midlevel managers' experience of institutional change initiatives.

Sensemaking is a critical step in attaining institutional change. Organization around a strategic initiative is achieved to the extent that sensemaking is accomplished (Sandbert &Tsoukas, 2014). For example, how effectively midlevel managers undergo sensemaking to identify, frame, and enact new information pertinent to planned change initiatives impacts how effectively they facilitate change within their spheres of control and influence (Balogun, 2003). Exploring how midlevel managers make sense of their roles in facilitating change within the organization offers insight into how college and university leaders could structure midlevel managers' sensemaking processes and influence their behavioral responses as a critical lever to achieving the intended outcomes of an initiative. In turn, I used Weick's (1995) seven principles of sensemaking as a framework to examine 1) the stimuli midlevel managers receive about their role inside a change initiative, 2) how midlevel managers interpret and create meaning from various forms of stimuli, and 3) the ways these mental frames inform midlevel managers' change agency and actions.

**Methodology**

To understand how midlevel managers make sense of their roles, I used an exploratory case study methodology that focused on a unique, information-rich situation and selected a bounded system as a case (Bhattacharya, 2017). The bounded system in this instance was a group of midlevel managers working at a public two-year institution in the Midwest whose professional roles were impacted by transformational change efforts aimed at improving the student experience, namely the transition to a new ERP system and a set of projects associated with the Aspen Institute's Unlocking Opportunity initiative. The benefits of a case study approach aligned with the objectives of this research, including the opportunity to conduct an in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Yin, 2018) and to

capture data about the multifaceted nature of interpretations, perceptions, and actions involved in the human experience of a change process (Merriam, 2009).

## Key Terms

*Midlevel managers*: Individuals who occupy a position in institutional hierarchies between the frontline of operations and executive leadership, are responsible for a particular department or a set of departments at the intermediary level of the college or university structure, and supervise other employees (Amy & Eddy, 2018; Harding et al., 2014; Rosser, 2000). Positions often found in the midlevel ranks include associate deans, deans, department chairs, directors, and managers (Johnson Bowles, 2022b).

*Institutional executives/executive leaders/cabinet members* (used interchangeably): Individuals who occupy a position at the highest ranks of the institutional hierarchy and are vested with authority to determine and articulate the vision and direction of the organization, set priorities, and develop strategy that shapes decision-making and policymaking for the institution (Kezar et al., 2020. Positions often found in the senior ranks include institution-specific presidents or chancellors, executive vice presidents or vice presidents, and chief officers (Johnson Bowles, 2022b).

*Planned/institutional/organizational change* (used interchangeably): Changes that are deliberate acts where a particular institutional executive initiates a new direction to bring about a positive outcome for the overall organization with the intention to transform college culture or practices (Kezar, 2018).

*Transformational change*: Change that (1) alters the culture of the institution by changing underlying assumptions and overt institutional behaviors, processes, and structures; (2) is deep

and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; (3) is intentional; and (4) occurs over time (Eckel et al., 2001).

*Sensemaking*: The human process of structuring the unknown by placing selected stimuli into a framework that enables individuals to comprehend, appropriate, explain, and predict the ongoing complexity of the surrounding environment to inform behavior (Weick et al., 2005).

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the criticality of midlevel managers' change-related behaviors during planned organizational transformation efforts. I also noted midlevel managers' complex positionality within higher education institutions and the role uncertainty that results - work conditions that are exasperated by change. My research agenda focused on understanding how midlevel managers make sense of and consequently enact their role in the context of institutional change. With this understanding, college and university leadership can strategically structure and support midlevel managers' role sensemaking processes and engage them more effectively as change agents, ultimately increasing the likelihood of success for college-wide change initiatives.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Given adequate role structure and support, midlevel managers have a distinct opportunity to help postsecondary organizations achieve desired transformations. In this section, I review existing literature about institutional change in higher education settings. Then, I discuss research about midlevel managers' positions within organizations, their experiences with large-scale change, and how organizational change exacerbates midlevel managers' role ambiguity. Throughout the literature review, I explore the sensemaking processes midlevel managers navigate as a critical factor in their effectiveness as change agents. Chapter two begins with a review of sensemaking as a grounding concept for my dissertation.

### Sensemaking as a Theoretical Framework

Midlevel managers have a complex and demanding set of four major tasks during institutional change – processing the change for themselves, helping others process the change, implementing concrete changes in their departments, and maintaining daily operations (Balogun, 2003). Balogun (2003) argued that the first task is the most critical because of its domino effect on the others. In this study, I examined the first task. Using sensemaking as a theoretical backdrop to explore how midlevel managers seek information about their role in the context of institutional change, assign meaning to it, and act upon it reveals information critical to fully appreciating midlevel managers' experience and understanding how midlevel managers' organizational positions can be better structured, supported, and leveraged as change agents.

Sensemaking is the process of creating an understanding of a concept or circumstances, often to inform action (Zhang & Soergel, 2014). In other words, sensemaking informs how individuals frame and enact new information (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Organizational change in higher education requires people to

undergo a meaning-construction process and rethink existing understandings (Eckel & Kezar, 2002). This notion aligns with Weick's (1995) seminal work about sensemaking, which examined how individuals conceive of, appropriate, and act upon their realities. Weick (1995) argued that organizations are social constructions; employees constantly create and recreate these social constructions as they make meaning of their work lives. Because individuals develop and live out their own realities, organizational change is difficult unless individuals collectively connect to the change and find it meaningful (Currie & Brown, 2003; Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) identified seven principles of sensemaking, which are summarized below:

1) Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction: Sensemaking starts with the sensemaker. Making sense of what is in the environment is closely related to a sensemaker's understanding of who they are. Because identity is the root of sensemaking, it influences other aspects of sensemaking. Identity is socially constructed; therefore, sensemaking is constantly in flux and continuously revised to incorporate individual experiences and experiences with others. How someone sees themselves in particular contexts shapes how they interpret and act in certain situations (Currie & Brown, 2003; Thurow & Helms Mills, 2009; Weick, 1995).

2) Sensemaking is retrospective: Sensemaking is about giving meaning to action, which can only be done after an action has occurred. Weick illustrated this principle of sensemaking in terms of a stream of experience. While individuals experience something, they are embedded in it as part of a flow or sequence of indistinguishable events. As individuals make sense of the experience, however, the experience is labeled and bracketed into distinct events. Labeling and bracketing are only possible retrospectively as one reflects upon an experience. The timing of retrospection affects what people

notice, and the ability to focus on reflecting is key to the sensemaking process (Currie & Brown, 2003; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Weick, 1995).

3) Sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments: The word ‘enact’ signifies that people produce part of the environment they encounter. As sensemakers react to an environmental cue, they contribute to the environment to which they respond. The environment presents individuals with stimuli out of their control; however, individuals have agency to react to cues. Sensemakers can respond to cues in ways that reinforce or resist their environment and, in turn, contribute to the environment (Currie & Brown, 2003; Weick, 1995).

4) Sensemaking is social: Sensemaking processes are influenced by others, whether the influence of others is present or imagined. As individuals interpret the world around them, they consider what others have told them and what they believe others think or expect of them. Through interactions with others, sensemakers build narratives that help them understand situations and organize their experiences (Currie & Brown, 2003; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995)

5) Sensemaking is ongoing: Sensemaking never stops. People are constantly immersed in a flow of activity, shaping and reacting to the environment and making sense of themselves and the situations they encounter. Throughout this flow of activities, people isolate moments or cues that are part of the continual feedback loop to inform sensemaking efforts and gain a sense of coherence about who they are and their environment. (Maitlis, 2005; Thurow & Helms Mills, 2009; Weick, 1995).

6) Sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues: Extracted cues are snippets of information or experience individuals use as a starting point to make sense of the whole

picture by connecting these points of reference to a more extensive network of ideas and meaning. Weick (1995, p. 50) referred to them as "simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring." Weick uses the seed metaphor to capture sensemaking's otherwise indefinite and open-ended nature. The extracted cues can be interpreted in multiple ways, and how they are interpreted depends on the context of the cue and who the sensemaker is (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

7) Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy: Sensemaking is not about accuracy but plausibility. The outcome of sensemaking is a coherent and reasonable sense that serves as a springboard for action. In this process, we may distort or eliminate information to achieve a sense of plausible coherence. The focus on plausibility rather than accuracy explains why people's understanding of the same situation varies and leads to different actions.

Since Weick's pioneering work, most scholars interested in sensemaking agree that sensemaking generally refers to those processes by which people seek plausibility amongst concepts or circumstances to understand ambiguous, equivocal, or confusing issues or events (Brown & Harris, 2014). Weick (1995) took time to split hairs between the terms ambiguous and equivocal in his scholarship about sensemaking, which is beyond the scope of this research. However, the important nuance that surfaces from Weick's lengthy debate is that both discovery and invention are critical and intertwined aspects of sensemaking. Individuals extract and interpret environmental cues and use them to make sense of and act upon what is happening around them. Sensemaking is a continual loop whereby people construct realities and then make sense of them retrospectively. Sensemaking is a "continuing dialogue of discovery and invention

in which identities and social worlds are concomitantly referenced and fabricated" (Brown & Harris, 2014, para. 6). That is, sensemaking involves not merely interpreting something waiting to be discovered, it also involves the active authoring of situations in which humans as social beings are embedded and attempting to comprehend (Brown & Harris, 2014). In Weick's words, "People generate what they discover" (Weick, 1995, p. 13).

Morgan et al. (1983) defined sensemaking as individuals "reading into a situation patterns of significant meaning" (p. 24). Given the fragmented nature of higher education organizations (Kezar, 2018; Shugart, 2013), intentional efforts to make shared meaning are essential during times of institutional change (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). Leaving the "reading into situations" up to each individual could result in as many interpretations of the change as there are employees in the organization. Intentionally attending to people's sensemaking can mitigate some commonly cited barriers to successful change efforts, such as ineffective communication, lack of buy-in and adoption, and a change-resistant culture (Prosci, 2020).

Sensemaking affects how employees rationalize their participation in organizational change initiatives (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) and is paramount to transformational change, a situation that demands coherent shared understandings among stakeholders before collective action can take place (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking involves cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and organizational dynamics (Zhang & Soergel, 2014). Outputs of the sensemaking process include the selection of behavioral responses and updated impressions of the environment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Given midlevel managers' work connecting strategy to day-to-day operations (Balogun, 2003), their sensemaking and the ripple effect of their sensemaking on their constituents' sensemaking could be a critical lever for achieving organizational change.

Sensemaking is essential to role identity construction (Weick, 1995). While this is not unique to midlevel managers, role identity emerges as an essential aspect of midlevel managers' sensemaking in a nuanced manner. Due to their network centrality, midlevel managers receive a barrage of implicit and explicit messages from others that trigger role sensemaking, often in conflicting ways (Amey & Eddy, 2018). For example, an associate dean of nursing might receive pressure to be innovative from the vice president at the same time state licensing and accrediting agencies are demanding compliance with stringent and standardized regulations. Full-time faculty members might implore the same associate dean to reduce their teaching and advising courseloads while the associate dean is also fielding students' feedback that they want to be taught and advised by the department's full-time instructors. Transformational change aside, the paradoxes midlevel managers straddle regarding what they do, who they serve, and the contradictory demands on how to perform their jobs makes role identity construction a continual and complicated process for midlevel managers (Rouleau, 2005).

The way in which individuals identify as midlevel managers and what that means to them impacts their internalization of role obligations (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick et al., 2005). Enter significant disruptions, such as those created by transformational change, and midlevel managers' role navigation becomes even more complex. Transformational change presents uncertainty amid already fluid circumstances. When midlevel managers encounter novel or perplexing situations, they often need to reassess and adjust their role identity and reconstitute what it means to be a midlevel manager in this new context (Hogg, 2000; Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

Higher education scholars highlight sensemaking as a crucial component of transformational change (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Kezar, 2012). While research about

transformational change in higher education settings tends to focus on the actions of cabinet members (Klempin & Karp, 2018; Kezar, 2018), burgeoning literature from business management studies suggests midlevel managers might hold the key to effective transformational change in postsecondary environments (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Huy, 2002; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau, 2005). Midlevel managers are positioned to achieve the three key elements of organizational sensemaking at colleges and universities: depth of the change process, breadth of engagement campus-wide, and connection to strategies and barriers (Kezar, 2012). Higher education literature falls short of examining how midlevel managers make sense of institutional change and their role in it (Klempin & Karp, 2018) – the crucial first domino in midlevel managers' influence on the sensemaking processes and subsequent work behaviors of others (Balogun, 2003). I aimed to fill this gap by exploring midlevel managers' experiences of institutional change. Research about how midlevel managers made sense of their role within the context of college or university reforms provided vital insights into how institutional executives can strategically leverage and support midlevel managers to increase transformational change success rates at their organizations.

## Transformational Change in Higher Education

In recent history, higher education has received criticism for declining student learning, bloated costs, and its inability to meet societal needs (Manciagli, 2020; Mintz, 2021; Sasse, 2022). Calls to reexamine the purpose of postsecondary education and how colleges operate to achieve those aspirations in light of a new economy, globalization, and technological advances have been plentiful (Chamorro-Premuzic & Frankiewicz, 2019; Grabill et al., 2022; Ruben, 2022; Vlachopoulos, 2021). After decades of maintaining a status quo that was designed around White middle-class norms, strong state funding, a nationalist mindset, and an industrial

economy, institutions of higher education are being called upon to undergo significant reform in order to respond to the 21st-century realities of diverse student bodies, tightening budgets, rapid technological innovations, and heightened societal expectations and scrutiny (Grabill et al., 2022; Rosenberg, 2023; Ruben, 2022; Vlachopoulos, 2021).

**Complexity of Change in Higher Education Environments**

Researchers and seasoned practitioners suggest significant transformational change is necessary for higher education to remain relevant and competitive in today's global context (Grabill et al., 2022; Rosenberg, 2023; Ruben, 2022). However, institutions' decentralized character, distributed labor, and multiple authority structures have historically slowed progress toward comprehensive institutional reform and made transformation a challenging goal to achieve (Kezar, 2018). Furthermore, the deeply valued systems, traditions, and practices also pose barriers to change (Johnson Bowles, 2022a; Rosenberg, 2023). Tenure, for example, creates a barrier to change because of whose biases it upholds. Significant disparity of tenure exists amongst White men, White women, and People of Color (Silbert et al., 2022; Gasman et al., 2015), creating a vacuum of ideas and perspectives. The homogeneity of tenure prevents diverse points of view from entering conversations related to the future of higher education (Brayboy, 2003; Gasman et al., 2015; Rosenberg, 2023).

Similarly, shared governance, a pillar of higher education, also makes change challenging (Rosenberg, 2023). The widely held understanding that decision-making responsibilities are bifurcated between faculty and administration creates tension when attempting a campus-wide transformation. When the faculty favors autonomy and effectiveness while administrators push for standardization and efficiency, reaching a consensus on the content and process of change becomes difficult (Kezar, 2018).

The introduction of neoliberalism to higher education has further complicated change processes within higher education settings. Individuals working in an industry once built around values of shared governance are witnessing reduced opportunities to participate in deliberations and planning about their institutions' futures (Kaufman-Osborn, 2017; Rosowski, 2020). Although shared governance has often been cited as a hindrance to transformational change, its devolution is also problematic. Diminished time and energy spent on attending to the human side of change misses the critical process of faculty and staff making meaningful joint connections to an initiative, which is essential to achieving change at scale (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Prosci, 2020).

Kezar (2018) reported that colleges and universities fail to achieve transformational change at high rates. Many researchers put the failure rate of top-down change efforts as great as 70 percent (Burnes, 2011). In large part, this is a result of cabinet members disregarding institutional context and neglecting to genuinely involve lower-level employees while developing and deploying their strategy (Kezar, 2018). Despite sound rationale for any given reform, many large-scale change efforts are unsuccessful because individuals across the organization engage with the change process unevenly (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Oreg et al., 2011). Uneven engagement with change causes heterogeneous, often divergent, responses toward an initiative and generally leads to failure (Rafferty et al., 2013). Mohrman et al. (2003, as cited in Kezar, 2014) emphasized the critical role of human interaction before, during, and after a change initiative:

> Lasting change does not result from plans, blueprints, and events. Rather the changes must be appropriated by the participants and incorporated into their patterns of interaction. It is through the interaction of the participants that the social system is able to arrive at a new network of relations and new way of operating. (p. 91).

An executive leader simply delivering a change edict is not enough to effectuate change. Instead, transformational change is more likely to be achieved when coherent, college-wide understanding exists to enable the enactment of cohesive actions that are collectively aligned with the objectives of the strategic initiative (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Kezar, 2012; Weick, 1995).

**Successful Change in Higher Education Environments**

Eckel et al. (2001) defined transformational change as that which 1) shifts the culture, changes underlying assumptions, and alters institutional behaviors, processes, and structures; 2) affects the entire institution at all levels; 3) is intentional; and 4) occurs over time. Beyond mere technical results of change, the socio-cultural effects of transformational change are systemic and show up in the human engagements that take place throughout an organization (Eckel et al., 2001; Kezar, 2018). Transformational change alters how groups or individuals interact with one another. The language used across campus and the types of conversations that occur shift, outdated arguments are abandoned, new relationships among stakeholders emerge, and new processes for decision-making are established (Kezar, 2018). Eckel et al. (2001) suggested that transformational change requires a level of depth and pervasiveness that alters the inner workings of an institution and redefines institutional norms – all of which are created and perpetuated by the people functioning within the institutional setting.

Eckel and Kezar (2002) found five core strategies for achieving transformational change. The first strategy highlighted the importance of executive support as demonstrated by positional leaders reinforcement of change initiatives through vocalizing value statements, allocating resources, or greenlighting new administrative structures. Developing a robust human-centered change management design to achieve the ultimate outcome also surfaced as a key strategy. While executive leaders casting a clear and understandable vision for the ideal future state is

valuable to transformational change, openness to the process and pathway to get there was critical. Next, an atmosphere of collaborative, shared leadership proved essential to sustainable reform. Securing the involvement of both hierarchical leaders and non-positional leaders from conception to implementation of an initiative expedited progress along the change continuum. Fourth, making high-level strategy concrete by taking noticeable action and celebrating small wins helps campus communities see that the change is still important and encourages continued momentum. Finally, providing staff and faculty development opportunities allowed individuals to access new knowledge and skills related to aspects of the change effort.

While the identification of five core strategies is helpful, perhaps the most thought-provoking finding is what these strategies have in common. What made these five strategies so powerful was their influence on individuals' conceptualizations of new identities, positive feelings about their investment in the effort, and willingness to be brought along with the institutional agenda – which Eckel and Kezar (2002) recognized as sensemaking. Across all cases in their study, sensemaking emerged as a superordinate theme underwriting success. The most effective organizational change activities provided vehicles for members of campus to alter their mental models, which changed how they perceived their roles, skills, and philosophies related to their work and subsequently aligned their change-related behaviors with the new institutional direction (Eckel & Kezar, 2002).

The impact of transformational change described by Eckel et al. (2001) and Kezar (2018) aligns with change management literature. Change management emphasizes the importance of attending to the human side of change to ensure the scale of implementation and level of adoption required to generate the outputs critical to the change initiative at all levels of the organization (Brown & Harris, 2014; Dasborough et al., 2015; Singh, 2020). Especially in

organizations where people are the greatest resource, such as in higher education institutions, attending to the needs of individuals impacted by change is crucial to realizing the intended outcomes of the transformational effort (Creasey, n.d.; Kezar, 2018).

**Attending to Sensemaking to Achieve Transformation**

Even as the pressure to reform postsecondary education continues to mount, institutions remain notoriously slow to change (Johnson Bowles, 2022a; Kezar, 2018). Rarely are major changes a welcomed event on college campuses; instead, they often result in protracted transitions, emotional upheaval, deadened morale, and a costly waste of resources (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). Large-scale change in any type of organization is complicated and typically generates confusion for those most impacted by the initiative – i.e., lower-level employees who are expected to live out the change by altering how they think about and perform their work (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Significant shifts in personnel, policy, procedure, and work responsibilities can feel threatening and trigger intense fear and anxiety (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Kieran et al., 2020). Human responses to change are an important factor in the likelihood of success for any given change initiative. That is, employees' sensemaking, including how they think and feel about a proposed change, impacts their change-related work behaviors (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Kezar, 2018).

Poorly managed change can have dehumanizing consequences. Especially since colleges and universities began to shift away from a shared governance model to a more bureaucratic form of administration, human-centered customs have been replaced with managerial norms (Giroux, 2002; Kaufman-Osborn, 2017; Olsen & Peters, 2007; Rosowski, 2020). Applying a neoliberal mentality to ensuring institutional effectiveness and sustainability in today's competitive postsecondary market has led to the adoption of traditionally corporate methods of

change reminiscent of a bureaucracy (e.g., top-down directives, power and control, siphoned information-sharing, and siloed decision-making) (Manning, 2018). The uniquely human behaviors of open expression of ideas and civil discourse that once informed the meaning and purpose of higher education have given way to a corporatization of postsecondary education (Giroux, 2002; Olsen & Peters, 2007). Higher education leaders who are attempting to usher in a new way of doing business have the difficult job of reconciling the mistrust and disenfranchisement the current performance and productivity-based mentality of higher education has generated amongst those who work in postsecondary settings (Shugart, 2013).

Theorists have long emphasized the unique human ability and predisposition to create (Gonzales et al., 2018; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998). When the ability to participate in creation is taken away from people through the mismanagement of change, employees' human agency is disregarded, resulting in people feeling alienated and demonstrating resistant behaviors (Gonzales et al., 2018; Kezar, 2018; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998). Institutional leaders can avoid estranging faculty and staff by intentionally offering employees opportunities to engage in organizational sensemaking activities (Kezar, 2012; Eckel & Kezar, 2002). In a study of six institutions over four years, Eckel & Kezar (2002) found that structured sensemaking activities provided a forum for meaning reconstruction. Sensemaking empowered employees to envision a new way forward, feel their change-making efforts are worthwhile, and engage in the institutional agenda, which ultimately made comprehensive change possible (Kezar, 2012; Eckel & Kezar, 2002).

Whether institutions sufficiently anticipate and attend to the vast array of employees' sensemaking needs could make or break change initiatives (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Kezar, 2018). For example, Dasborough et al. (2015) found that how employees made sense of a change (i.e.,

departmental merger) influenced their cognitive and affective responses to the change and impacted their subsequent work behaviors related to the change. Study participants who considered a departmental merger to be a positive opportunity demonstrated excitement and joy and were more likely to carry out the change in their daily work; those who considered the merger to be a threat demonstrated anger and anxiety and were more likely to engage in behaviors that sabotaged the intended outcomes of the merger (Dasborough et al., 2015). Employees' participation level throughout the change process emerged as the prominent differentiator between employees who supported and implemented change initiatives and those who did not (Dasborough et al., 2015). Similarly, Hatjidis and Parker (2017) found that employees' involvement with a change initiative influenced their perceptions of organizational change. Providing employees opportunities to engage in change-related activities gave them the time and space necessary to make sense of the change and associate constructive intellectual and emotional responses to the initiative (Hatjidis & Parker, 2017). As other scholars have noted, genuinely engaging employees engenders a sentiment of justice and transparency in the change process and leads to successful transitions (Dasborough et al., 2015; Endrejat et al., 2020; Helpap, 2016; Rafferty et al., 2013).

Change management researchers have demonstrated that employees prefer to make sense of how a change will impact them and their work responsibilities with their "people managers," who are most often midlevel managers (Prosci, 2020, p. E28). Midlevel managers have a unique capacity to help employees traverse change because of their perspectives of the institutional structure. The following section will illustrate the ways midlevel managers are the nexus of the organizational network, giving them opportunities to interact with institutional actors in multiple directions and in multifaceted ways.

## Midlevel Managers in the Context of Institutional Transformation

In higher education settings, midlevel managers occupy central positions between executive cabinet members and non-managing employees (Harding et al., 2014). Midlevel college and university administrators are typically experienced professionals, usually possess graduate degrees, and are often committed to their disciplines (Rosser, 2000). They have titles such as associate dean, dean, director, and manager (Johnson Bowles, 2022b). While college and university presidents and other executive cabinet members are employed to create and cast a strategic vision (Fugazzotto, 2009), midlevel managers are employed to support strategic decisions and ensure employees know about and conform with this direction (Davis et al., 2016; Marshall, 2012). As Amey and Eddy (2018) noted, administrators positioned in the middle of the personnel structure often provide day-to-day oversight of campus policies and procedures and ensure staff members within their purview fulfill their scope of duties.

Midlevel managers have been referred to as the “unsung professionals of the academy” (Rosser, 2000, p. 5) and invisible leaders (Young, 2007). In their study about middle management in higher education, Pepper and Giles (2014) identified five common themes among participants’ perceptions of their role: 1) the overwhelming nature of the position, 2) a sense of immense responsibility with inadequate authority, 3) incessant demands requiring immediate reactions, 4) feelings of isolation, and 5) a desire to lead others. Despite their limited authority, midlevel managers are responsible for operationalizing strategic plans, effectively engaging with multiple constituent groups, and reporting institutional outcomes to various internal and external entities on behalf of the college or university (Baber, 2020). In short, the capacity and quality of institutional administration relies on midlevel managers who span organizational boundaries to provide both high-level institutional knowledge and subject matter

expertise (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Baber, 2020). Because midlevel managers receive, break down, and pass along change directives, they are often perceived as mere change recipients or change implementers during large-scale organizational transitions (Balogun, 2003). However, midlevel managers are hierarchically and relationally poised to be critical influencers of change results within higher education organizations. As the next section will demonstrate, the potential inherent in midlevel leaders' 'middleness' should not be overlooked (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020); by way of their position within an organization, midlevel managers can emerge as productive change agents.

**Midlevel Managers' Potential as Change Agents**

Transformational change produces a context ripe for uncertain or ambiguous situations with a high need for sensemaking (Weick, 1993). When managed poorly, even the most well-intentioned change initiative could fail (Kezar 2018). In the absence of well-defined intentions, objectives, and role expectations, a wildfire of speculation, fear, and distrust ignites (Jones et al., 2008). Employees feel that change is happening to them, not with them. Any perception of a compliance-driven approach to change rarely leads to new ways of thinking and doing throughout an organization and, thus, does not result in new outcomes. Instead, employees engage in performative behavior to demonstrate change on the surface or expend energy creating workarounds to circumvent the change altogether (Choi, 2011). When consensus-building, authentic engagement, and aligned actions are the goal, efforts to help employees make meaning of and connections to the change should be prioritized for transformational change to take effect (Balogun, 2003; Currie & Proctor, 2005; Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2012).

Transformational change demands coherent shared understandings across the organization to enable cohesive actions collectively aligned to the objectives of the strategic

initiative (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Weick, 1995). However, in settings as complex as higher education, garnering widespread sensemaking is best approached in a planned and intentional manner and iteratively carried out over time. Because of their network centrality, midlevel managers can leverage their positions and multi-dimensional relationships to be especially helpful in achieving organizational sensemaking and democratizing change (Floyd & Woodridge, 2000).

Kezar (2012) identified three critical elements of sensemaking at colleges and universities, including 1) the depth of change process, 2) breadth of engagement campus-wide, and 3) connection to strategies and barriers. Collectively, midlevel managers can ensure organizations move beyond superficial or pocketed results and reach the levels of depth, breadth, and connection necessary to fully achieve the intended outcomes of the change initiative by shaping the sensemaking of others.

***Depth of Change Process***

To have depth, institutions benefit from moving beyond persuasion tactics that only produce shallow engagement. Institutions should look for ways to embed new meanings deep into individuals' consciousness and do so more concretely as the change process progresses (Kezar, 2012). Midlevel managers, with their access to and closer relationships with frontline employees, can be instruments for conveying consistent, scaffolded messages about the change and helping employees figure out what the change means for their work (Huy, 2002). Midlevel managers are a crucial link between the executive leadership, where organizational strategy is developed, and the frontline, where change is carried out (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Bryant & Stensaker, 2011).

Executive directives must be interpreted and made sense of in the local context at lower organizational levels for change to be actualized, and midlevel managers are often left to guide these interpretations (Balogun, 2003). The interactions between midlevel managers and employees construct interpretations of the change initiative (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011; Mantere, 2005) and shape how meaning is made of it (Weick, 1995). What is ultimately achieved from the original change plan is the aggregation of multiple, granular outputs resulting from midlevel manager-to-employee interactions across the organization (Balogun, 2003).

The engagements between midlevel managers and their employees matter. Midlevel managers play a substantial role in how each frontline employee (e.g., faculty member, academic advisor) perceives the change initiative's intent, deems it relevant to their professional purpose, and adopts new practices (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002; Rouleau, 2005). While the charge for change might be top-down, the products of change are bottom-up. That is, the collection of individual interpretation, implementation, and subsequent day-to-day performance of the change initiative by frontline employees has greater significance on the ultimate outcome of the initiative than any change vision, rationale, or charge executive leaders could provide (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). Beyond mere conduits of executive directives, midlevel managers are at the helm of helping employees across the organization make meaningful connections to change (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

***Breadth of Campus Engagement***

Breadth refers to casting a large net of sensemaking across and throughout various levels of the institution so all individuals rethink their work (Kezar, 2012). Midlevel managers represent one of the largest areas of administrative personnel growth in higher education (Rosser, 2004). Given that there are more midlevel managers than cabinet members within institutions of

higher education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.), the volume of midlevel managers logistically allows them to spread meaning-making efforts across the institution more efficiently than a handful of executives (Kieran et al., 2020). Planned change prompts sensemaking throughout an organization. Individuals try to figure out the meaning of the proposed change effort, its effect on them, and their role in it; any lack of understanding stalls change progress (Prosci, 2020).

Midlevel managers possess greater awareness of department-level operations and subcultures within an institution, as well as more direct and stronger relationships with those expected to carry out the change in their daily work (Huy, 2002); this awareness makes them well-situated to anticipate how staff members will think about and react to proposed changes (Huy, 2001). Because of midlevel managers' proximity to frontline personnel, they have frequent opportunities to interact with lower-level employees (Huy, 2001). Coupled with their operational knowledge and ability to guide change from a technical standpoint, midlevel managers have access to and influence over employees' cognitive and affective responses to change (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002). Cumulatively, midlevel managers' efforts to help their employees connect abstract strategy to concrete daily operations have the potential to yield the breadth of campus-wide engagement in sensemaking activity necessary for transformation.

### *Connection to Strategies and Barriers*

Deliberately facilitating sensemaking activities connected to specific barriers is beneficial to overcoming potential obstacles to implementing change initiatives. (Kezar, 2012). Midlevel managers are more aware of immediate operational, cognitive, and emotional barriers to change within their departments and can leverage this knowledge to overcome them proactively. Midlevel managers do not just "implement deliberative strategy;" more accurately, midlevel

managers "build realized strategy" (Balogun, 2003, p. 81). Based on their ongoing interpretations of the inputs within their immediate environment, midlevel managers can influence their employees' mindsets and, thus, how employees value, commit to, and enact change (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Combined with midlevel managers' ability to impact the depth and breadth of organizational sensemaking, midlevel managers' practical and relational knowledge gives them the ability to anticipate and mitigate change challenges across the organization.

Organizational sensemaking efforts cultivate shared understanding over time, which is an essential ingredient of transformational change (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2018; Weick, 1995). The development of organizational sensemaking requires a collaborative process of creating communal comprehension out of multiple individuals' varied perspectives and interests. Organizational sensemaking is a difficult objective to achieve in postsecondary settings (Kezar, 2018). As evidenced by the literature, however, midlevel managers are structurally situated to approach sensemaking activities with their employees in a knowledgeable and genuine manner that inspires employees' engagement and cultivates attitudinal and behavioral alignment with the change effort (Huy, 2002; Maitlis, 2005).

Although midlevel managers have the capability to influence institutional change positively, the reality is that they are not leveraged to the greatest extent possible (Huy, 2002). Unfortunately, they are often bypassed in colleges and universities' change strategies because they are presumed to stall or stop the process (Huy, 2002; Wai-Kwong et al., 2001). Researchers suggest that seemingly sluggish change behaviors might be caused by the high level of uncertainty midlevel managers face during large-scale reform efforts (Herzig & Jimmiseson,

2006). The section below explores how role ambiguity is especially problematic for midlevel managers and, ultimately, the organization.

**Role Ambiguity as a Barrier to Midlevel Managers' Change Agency**

Despite midlevel managers' potential to positively impact change initiatives, the popular opinion about midlevel managers remains pessimistic (Prosci, 2020). Midlevel managers are often referred to as change resisters or change saboteurs (Huy, 2002; Wai-Kwong et al., 2001). However, these labels may be unfair. What appears to be obstructionist behavior might actually be the result of role ambiguity.

Midlevel managers often find themselves teetering on the edge of continuity and change, a constant tension present in all organizations (Huy, 2002). Because there are still students to serve and other functions to maintain, midlevel managers are expected to be responsive to both the immediate and future needs of the organization. Midlevel managers are relied upon to make decisions critical to the vitality of the college and the livelihood of faculty, staff, and students; this is true whether they are maintaining the status quo or leading innovation (Baber, 2020; Balogun, 2003). Especially during times of organizational change, executive leaders assume midlevel managers to be capable of not only enforcing the directives from the top but also ensuring the health of the organization (Huy, 2001) Yet, many midlevel leaders are not adequately prepared to take on such responsibilities (Boggs & McPhail, 2020). Without a clear understanding of their role within the context of change, midlevel managers lack clarity about what their priorities should be, whose interests to satisfy, and how to fulfill these obligations effectively, leading to behaviors that institutional executives might perceive as filibustering change (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

What makes middle management valuable to an organization can also be a point of frustration for some midlevel managers (Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006). Midlevel managers "function as mediators between the organization's strategy and day-to-day activities" (Wooldridge et al., 2008, p. 1192) and report feeling pulled between the strategic and operational layers of postsecondary institutions, a battlefield of conflicting pressures and demands (Boggs & McPhail, 2020; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). In addition to mediating upward and downward, midlevel managers also mediate laterally amongst departments and engage with stakeholders such as students and local business leaders (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Conway & Monks, 2011; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Because of their accessibility to various stakeholders, midlevel managers are inundated with competing interests (Boggs & McPhail, 2020). Juggling divergent ideals at the nexus of interdependent but siloed constituents creates complex conditions for midlevel managers. Midlevel managers are left to negotiate conflicting demands, answer to multiple stakeholder groups, and navigate the nuanced rules of engagement for each setting (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006).

Cabinet members often make decisions regarding institutional strategies that require transformational change (Boggs & McPhail, 2020). Subsequently, midlevel managers are charged with ensuring these orders are carried out, often without clear expectations about how to proceed. When this happens, midlevel managers experience what McKinley and Scherer (2000) referred to as cognitive disorder resulting from feeling uncertain about their role and the best course of action forward. While some may perceive role ambiguity as an opportunity for self-authorship, such autonomy is not desired by midlevel managers during times of organizational change and rarely happens (Antoniono, 1996; Currie & Proctor, 2005; Harding et al., 2014). Planned organizational changes are especially stressful and anxiety-provoking for midlevel

managers (Peltonen, 2007), resulting in decreased organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and personal wellbeing (Grunberg et al., 2008).

Midlevel managers are often “at-will” employees with limited protections via organized unions or tenured status on college campuses (Amey & Eddy, 2018). Consequently, leading change can be a high-risk, low-reward position to be put in without adequate role structure and support (Baber, 2020). Uncertainty about how to occupy space as a midlevel manager throughout the lifecycle of a transformational change process is especially salient for individuals with minoritized identities related to race, gender, and the intersection of race and gender (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Eddy & Ward, 2015; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2015). As Baber (2020) pointed out, White women and People of Color who lead confidently and assertively are often perceived as self-aggrandizing. At the same time, White women and People of Color who lead in a collaborative, democratic fashion are viewed as weak-willed. Both perspectives are rooted in long-standing oppression that wields real consequences for midlevel managers with minoritized identities (Baber, 2020). This seemingly no-win situation can paralyze midlevel managers and lead to stunted or numbed change agency, or worse, if they do not make accurate sense of their role in reform efforts (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Baber, 2020).

When midlevel managers are not involved in strategic planning and decision-making about organizational change efforts, they feel ambivalent about their role in the change process and report higher levels of role conflict as a result (Amey & Eddy, 2018). This ambivalence is problematic for higher education institutions motivated to retain employees. Wilson et al. (2016) found that midlevel managers who report a strong sense of professional identity have an easier time navigating tumultuous periods of their student affairs careers (i.e., during significant reform efforts) and a greater commitment to their employer. When the integrity of professional identity

is compromised by unclear role definition within the context of organizational change, institutions risk attrition at the midlevel leadership ranks (Hay et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2016).

When lacking clear expectations, midlevel managers either assume a self-determined role and pave their own unsanctioned change implementation path or avoid taking on any role at all because they do not know what to do or where to begin (Olsen & Stensaker, 2014). Failure to construct a solid sense of professional-self in the context of organizational change has limiting effects on employees' performance (Hay et al., 2021). These findings offer key insights: the power of role identity and one's perception of their role in the context of organizational change is particularly strong for midlevel managers and can have significant effects on the organizations in which they work, especially during times of change (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Caldwell, 2005; Grunberg et al., 2008; Parris et al., 2008).

Employees traverse change transitions more smoothly when their midlevel leader adequately manages uncertainty (Herzing & Jimmieson, 2006). In turn, understanding how midlevel managers make sense of an ambiguous role within the equivocal conditions created by top-down organizational change is essential. Significant changes require investing substantial personal energy in midlevel managers' role identity construction (Alvesson et al., 2008; Curry, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). The result of this process directly impacts whether a change initiative is successful (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Olsen & Stensaker, 2014).

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the phenomenon of sensemaking as my theoretical framework and established midlevel managers as critical to institutional transformation. I reviewed existing literature about institutional change in higher education settings. I discussed midlevel managers' unique positions within organizations, their experiences with large-scale

change, and how organizational change exacerbates midlevel managers' role ambiguity. Throughout the literature review, I explored the sensemaking processes midlevel managers navigate as a key factor in their effectiveness as change agents.

# Chapter Three: Research Design & Methods

In this qualitative research, I employed an exploratory case study approach to understand how midlevel managers make sense of their roles in the context of institutional change. This chapter describes the case selection, data collection, and analytical methods for this study. Additionally, I discuss the quality assurance and ethical elements embedded throughout the research process to address the study's trustworthiness.

## Research Design

I answered two questions through my research: 1) How do midlevel managers make sense of their roles within the context of institutional change? and 2) How do midlevel managers' sensemaking processes inform their actions related to the change initiative? To understand how midlevel managers conceptualize and act out their roles in the context of institutional change, I studied the process by which midlevel managers at a public two-year college in the Midwest scanned their environments, interpreted stimuli, ascribed meaning, and took action (Weick, 1995). Case studies allow researchers to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important, current-state contextual conditions pertinent to the study (Yin, 2018). Therefore, I selected a case study methodology because a "how" question is being asked about a contemporaneous set of behavioral events over which the researcher has no control, a situation where the case study research methodology has a distinct advantage (Yin, 2018).

There are many definitions of what a case study is (Bhattacharya, 2017), and there is freedom in what might be considered a case (Merriam, 1998). A case may involve studying a person, program, or other present phenomenon that is intrinsically bounded by the researcher's interest to inductively discover new understandings (Merriam, 1998). While some scholars have

incorporated the characteristic of "holistic" in their explanations of case studies and their purpose, I agree with Bhattacharya (2017) that capturing the whole should not be the intent of case studies. Rather, I intended to document what I could "understand, gather, interpret, [and] analyze in the moments of time [I] have shared with the participant[s]" and report on the results of my inquiry (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 109-110).

An exploratory case study such as mine focuses on a unique, information-rich situation and selects a bounded system as a case (Bhattacharya, 2017). "Bounded" means the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or another explicit boundary (Creswell, 2011; Yin, 2018). The bounded system in this instance was a group of midlevel managers working at the same two-year institution whose professional roles are impacted by institutional imperatives to increase student success, most notably a transition to a modernized ERP system and the implementation of strategies under the Aspen Institute's Unlocking Opportunity initiative. Midlevel managers are defined by their employee classification as determined by the institution, making them distinct from sole contributors and executive leaders. These midlevel managers work at a public two-year institution, a type of postsecondary organization with characteristics that differentiate it from other types of colleges and universities, such as missions that focus on providing career-oriented programs and preparing students for transfer to 4-year institutions, open admission policies, and higher rates of enrollment from historically marginalized students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Finally, these midlevel managers fit into the bounded system because their typical work routine was interrupted by change, which stimulates sensemaking (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Weick, 1995).

The benefits of a case study approach align with the objectives of this study. A case study enables researchers to conduct an in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018), such as role sensemaking amid campus-wide transformation, and captures data about the multifaceted interpretations, perceptions, and actions involved in the human experience of a change process (Merriam, 2009). Kezar (2018) reminded us that context is an essential consideration of organizational change processes. In that vein, conducting research about the intricacies of midlevel managers' role sensemaking during institutional transformations in the natural environment promotes an understanding of the contextual conditions pertinent to my case. A case study provides an empirical method to do so because phenomenon and context are not always keenly distinguishable in real-world situations (Yin, 2018).

**Research Site**

Woodland Technical College (WTC) is a small rural institution in the upper Midwest. WTC is part of a statewide technical college system comprised of 16 schools scattered throughout the state that are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. WTC was founded in 1967 to provide education and training within the district, beginning with agricultural programming. WTC continues to fulfill this purpose by offering over 80 associate degrees, technical diplomas, and certificate programs that qualify individuals for a variety of high-demand career fields that meet local workforce needs. WTC's mission is to "provide education and training opportunities responsive to students, employers, and communities." Their vision statement reads "[WTC] will be a preferred provider of education, source of talent, and place of employment in the region. We at the College change lives by providing opportunities for success." WTC's core values include inclusivity, learning, integrity, accountability, and continuous improvement.

WTC enrolled 2,520 students during the 2021-2022 academic year (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], n.d.). Eighty-nine percent of these students identified as White,

61% identified as female, and about 38% were Pell Grant recipients (NCES, n.d.). Twenty-seven percent of enrollees were 25 years old or older. Seventy-two percent of students attended on a part-time basis. Of the students who began their WTC journey in fall 2017, fifty-one percent graduated within "normal time" for the program (i.e., two years for an associate degree), 55% graduated within 150% of normal time, and 58% graduated within 200% of normal time (NCES, n.d.).

WTC is one of several colleges within the state making significant changes to the structures and systems that support academic, student service, and administrative operations. WTC went from receiving citations from their regional accreditor for not doing enough to improve teaching and learning in 2016 to receiving the Aspen Prize for Community College of Excellence in 2023. The Aspen Prize honors colleges with outstanding achievement in five critical areas: teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor's attainment, workforce success, and equity for Students of Color and students from low-income backgrounds. By focusing on student success and lifting up models that work, the Aspen Prize aims to celebrate excellence, advance a focus on equitable student success, and stimulate the replication of effective culture and practice (Aspen Institute, n.d.). WTC is nationally recognized for its remarkable graduation rates, which are 16 percentage points higher than the national average, the preparedness of its students entering the workforce, and its commendable efforts to continually improve instruction and programming to increase student success (Aspen, 2023). Exploring midlevel managers' experience of organizational practices at this institution seems ripe with the potential to learn how an exemplar institution structured and supported the roles of midlevel managers and enhanced the effectiveness of their change strategies.

## Case Selection

I recruited six participants from a group of approximately 20 midlevel managers who work at the College. I grouped these six participants as a case because they met three criteria important for addressing the research question: 1) the institution at which they were employed was undergoing significant change; 2) the participants were hierarchically positioned between cabinet members and frontline employees and were thus considered midlevel managers within their organization, and 3) the participants were expected to contribute to the facilitation of organizational changes as midlevel managers. I invited a spectrum of new and seasoned practitioners to capture a range of viewpoints about organizational change in higher education settings. I also included midlevel managers from academic affairs, student affairs, and administrative services to gather different professional perspectives about midlevel managers' change-related roles.

# Methods

In line with the motive for choosing to conduct a case study (i.e., to examine a phenomenon in-depth in its real-world context), I utilized three common methods of data collection to gain the best insight into how midlevel managers make sense of their role in the context of institutional change: interviews, documentation, and direct observation (Yin, 2018). The first principle of conducting case studies is to use and analyze multiple sources of evidence, which provides an opportunity for triangulation by creating converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2018). By engaging in data triangulation and supporting my findings through multiple sources of evidence, I strengthened the construct validity of my case study (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

**Data Collection**

I gathered my primary data by interviewing midlevel managers. To answer my research question in alignment with a case study approach, I applied a purposeful sampling method to select midlevel managers impacted by student success initiatives at their institution, namely the implementation of a new ERP system and the Aspen Institute's Unlocking Opportunity transformations. Purposeful sampling provided the best means to gather robust data about issues of central importance to my study because this method involved "selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated," (Patton, 2015, p. 264). An administrator at the college served as a gatekeeper and provided access to a list of midlevel managers from which to recruit participants via email. I emailed members of middle management twice to solicit participation. I worded the messages to introduce who I am, my email's objective, and my study's purpose. Upon receipt of interest from midlevel managers, I emailed additional correspondence, including the informed consent form, a demographic survey, and options for meeting dates and times. A sample recruitment email, the demographic survey, and the informed consent form are included in Appendices A, B, and C, respectively.

I conducted in-person one-on-one interviews with each participant designed to examine how midlevel managers made sense of their change-related roles in this particular context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Interviews were an ideal data collection method for my research due to their targeted nature and ability to garner explanations as well as personal views (Yin, 2018). Because this study was concerned with the human phenomenon of sensemaking, collecting first-hand accounts of individuals' perceptions, interpretations, meanings, attitudes, and actions related to their roles in the institutional change process provided rich data that

uncovered how this group of midlevel managers made sense of their roles (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interviews were semi-structured using open-ended questions that generally addressed the following broad categories according to the interview protocol: 1) the explicit and implicit messages about change-related roles perceived by midlevel managers, 2) how midlevel managers made meaning of these messages to inform their conceptualization of their change-related roles, and 3) how midlevel managers' interpretations of their roles translated into change-related action or inaction. I did not predetermine the order and exact wording of the questions to allow participants leeway in responding and to make interviews more conversational in tone (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009). As suggested by Yin (2018), I interviewed as though I was naïve about the topic and asked questions in an unbiased way to avoid leading the participant to an answer. This approach was important because the data should reflect the interviewees and not the interviewer. For example, I prompted interviewees to describe some midlevel manager behaviors they demonstrated during the transformational change process. The direction interviewees took their responses varied. Some discussed stakeholders, others explained decision-making processes, and others listed their actions. When interviewees wondered if they were providing me with the information I needed, I assured them there were no wrong responses; rather, it was essential that interviewees felt free to share information that was relevant to their unique experiences and seemed important to them. To encourage thoughtful and thorough responses, I allowed for adequate pauses while participants reflected and gathered their thoughts, and I asked for elaboration when necessary (Jones et al., 2014). An interview guide is included in Appendix D.

I scheduled one (1) hour-long, on-campus interview with each participant. I recorded all interviews via an electronic device with each participant's expressed permission in alignment with St. Cloud State University and the institution's IRB protocols. I used Otter AI to capture the audio and generate a transcript of the interview. Within Otter AI, I created a pseudonym for each participant to protect their anonymity. I provided transcripts of each interview to interviewees and allowed them to expand upon or clarify any of their responses. No participants elected to make changes.

Second, I sought opportunities to directly observe activities or artifacts related to student success initiatives, including the ERP and Unlocking Opportunity projects. Direct observations provided access to relevant social or environmental conditions (Yin, 2018). Collecting data through observation offered the benefits of mitigating the behavioral effects of being interviewed and triangulating interview data (Jones et al., 2014). I made observations in the spirit of answering the research questions and utilized Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework to identify applicable data (Glesne, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

My observations highlighted contextual characteristics of the case that are important to the study. I sought general permission to be on campus from senior administrators. I primarily conducted informal observations and took pictures of physical artifacts related to the change initiatives displayed on campus or noted how non-participants interacted with me. These observations aimed to differentiate the familiar from the special, expose intentional and unintentional rituals or routines, surface sensory perceptions, and note patterns (Glesne, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). To ensure I adhered to the purpose of observations, I continually asked myself "Am I making judgments rather than observations?" and "What am I seeing that I have never noticed before?" (Glesne, 2011, p. 91).

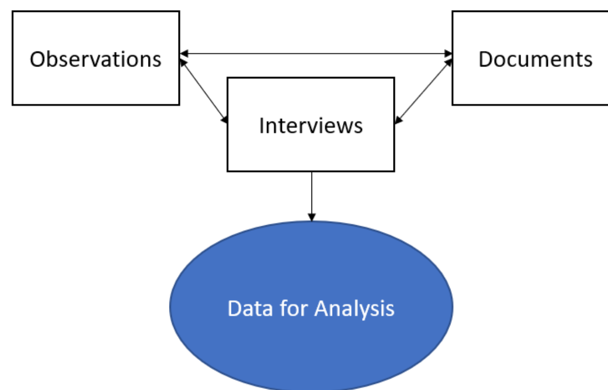
My third source of evidence was collected through documentation. Again, documentation was gathered in the spirit of answering the research questions and informed through Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework (Glesne, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I reviewed paper and electronic documentation for information about the initiative and midlevel managers' roles in carrying out the change. While documentation had limitations, it was a useful data collection method because of its stability and unobtrusiveness. That is, documentation spanning long periods of time and covering multiple events can be reviewed repeatedly to glean insights without causing an administrative burden to research participants (Glesne, 2011; Yin, 2018). Additionally, documentation can be helpful because of its specificity related to exact names, references, and details of an event (Yin, 2018). As Yin (2018) suggested, I did not use documentation as a primary data source due to the potential for inaccuracies and biases. Instead, I referred to documentation to corroborate or augment information from the interviews and direct observations. Documents confirmed other data or led to further inquiry by exposing other perspectives (Jones et al., 2014), helped tell the story about managing change from the middle (Glense, 2010), and uncovered the values and beliefs of the organization and its members (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Senior administrators provided me with official documentation about the institution and its change initiatives, such as strategic planning documents, KPI frameworks, snippets of job descriptions, and accreditation artifacts. Midlevel managers who mentioned specific change-related artifacts, such as promotional pieces about initiatives, provided such documentation. I also supplemented the documentation provided by members of the research site by conducting internet searches for publicly available information, including the WTC website, IPEDS data, and media coverage.

The documentation and the narrative surrounding the documentation (e.g., why the documents were made, how they were used, and what they were intended to convey) provided valuable information that helped me focus on patterns, discourse, and relationships (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Combined with interview and observation data, documentation enriched what I saw and heard by supporting, expanding, and challenging my perceptions (Glesne, 2011). I provided a figure depicting how my data sources interacted to inform my analysis below.

**Figure 1**

*Data Interaction*



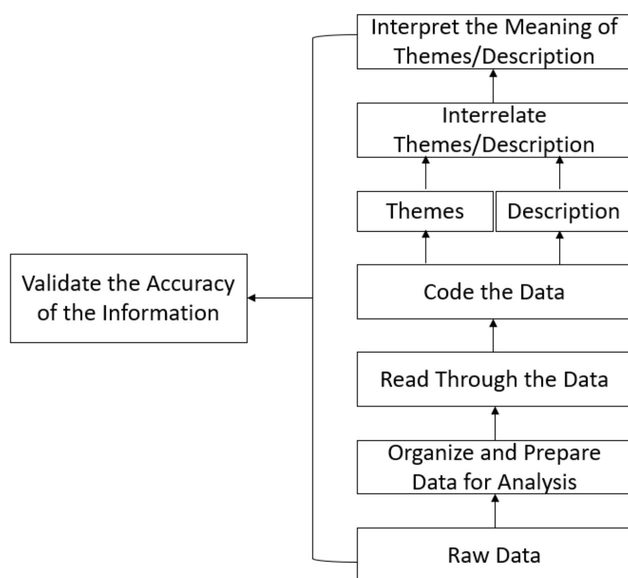

I compiled all data, regardless of the source, in an electronic qualitative research desktop application called NVivo that is maintained separately from my case study report, increasing the reliability of the entire case study (Yin, 2018). Preserving collected data in a retrievable form serves my potential need for future analysis activities. Field notes, pictures, documents, transcribed interviews, and narrative materials (e.g., memo writings) are examples of the type of data I gathered and stored.

**Data Analysis**

Like most other case studies, this case study was inductive in nature; I examined raw data sources, chunked information from those raw data sources, grouped information that was similar in meaning, and looked for commonalities across and within these groups to identify broad patterns or themes (Bhattacharya, 2017). To do so, I analyzed data from interviews, documents, and observations using data analysis procedures outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and represented in the figure below. This exploratory method is driven by the content, allowing codes to be derived from the data rather than a pre-existing set of codes (Guest et al., 2012).

**Figure 2**

*Data Analysis Process*




*Note*. Adapted from *Research design* (p. 194), by J.W. Creswell & J.D. Creswell, 2018, Sage.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with the data collection process. Qualitative research is emergent; analyzing data in the process of collecting data allows aspects of the study, such as who to interview, what questions to ask, and where to look next, to evolve in response to data that is revealed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Collecting and

analyzing data in tandem allows the data to be focused, dynamic, and manageable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

After transcribing interviews, reviewing documents, typing up field notes, and cataloging any visual materials that surfaced during interviews or observations, I sorted and arranged the data into types depending on the sources of information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data management is especially important to case study researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All information about the case was compiled to create a case study record, as Yin (2018) and Patton (2015) suggested. As noted above, NVivo was used to house the data.

Once I entered the data, I read or visually reviewed it to get a sense of the information and reflect on its general meaning and overall depth, credibility, and usefulness. Because transcribed interviews, documents, and observation notes produce dense data, all information cannot be used in a qualitative study. Instead, researchers winnow the data by focusing on some parts of the data and disregarding others (Guest et al., 2012). For this study, I used Weick's (1995) seven characteristics of the sensemaking process as a framework to determine which data to concentrate on and which to ignore. Throughout the continual and looped processes of data collection and analysis, I noted emerging codes in memos at this analysis stage. The codes derived during ongoing data collection were utilized to generate descriptions and construct themes.

My coding technique reflected the constant comparative analysis method. Coding involves organizing the data by bracketing segments of text or images, grouping those data of similar dimensions, and giving groups of data a name to categorize them (Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Stake (1995) referred to this part of the data analysis process as

categorical aggregation, or, as Jones et al. (2014) described it, "the collection of individual instances from the data until something can be said of the data as a group" (p. 98).

During the coding process, I generated detailed descriptions for analysis. Creating descriptions that include detailed renderings of people, places, or events in a specific setting is especially useful for case study research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because a case study is an intensive account and examination of a single bounded unit, conveying an understanding of the case is a key consideration in analyzing the data. Case study researchers are required to provide enough rich narrative depictions of case details to engage the reader in such a way that it paves the path for naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995).

Although constant comparative analysis is most often associated with grounded theory, there is strength in using this data analysis method outside of that methodology (Fram, 2013). Constant comparative analysis is a procedure for evaluating qualitative data in which information is coded and compared across categories, patterns are identified, and these patterns are refined as new data are obtained (American Psychological Association, n.d.). The first step is initial (i.e., open) coding. I closely reviewed the raw data and isolated individual snippets into specific chunks of data that seemed relevant to my research questions and named them (Jones et al., 2014). In this step, Weick's (1995) seven principles of sensemaking served as a cognitive frame of reference through which to make analytic sense of the data and judge the generation of codes (Dey, 2007). Next, I conducted focused (i.e., axial) coding. Focused coding is more "directed, selective, and conceptual" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). It involves comparing open codes to create integrative and theoretically rich categories that group seemingly related significant and frequent codes together (Jones et al., 2014). Finally, I engaged in theoretical (i.e., selective) coding to connect similar categories, identified possible relationships amongst them, and developed

themes. Although I used Weick's (1995) seven principles of sensemaking as a reference to aid in the theoretical coding process, I performed due diligence to ensure each theoretical code earned its way into my analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Constant comparative analysis is an iterative and evolving process. As my data analysis progressed, I refined initial connections identified in the data as new data were obtained and as I compared within and between data sources to identify contradictions of, expansions to, or support for the codes and categories already established (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009). In the end, themes captured recurring patterns that cut across all data and began to take on a life of their own (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited by Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The qualitative narrative further supports the descriptions and themes that surfaced throughout the data analysis process. Themes are representative of multiple perspectives of individuals and are endorsed by quotations and other evidence, such as corroborating documents or my observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## Positionality and Quality Assurance

The type of study, method of data collection, and my positionality influence findings that resulted from this study (Jones et al., 2014). However, I made a substantial effort to ensure this study's validity. My positionality and the procedures applied to address issues of credibility and accuracy are described below.

### Positionality

My positionality as a researcher is influenced by my personal and professional background. First, it is worth noting that being a first-generation college student from a limited-income household who is now a mid-career woman in higher education administration impacts my scholarship interests. Institutional change being conducted to achieve equitable student

success feels personal to me because of the barriers I had to overcome to succeed in a university system that was not created for me. My history and social identities have the potential to influence how I perceive interviewees' responses to student-centered changes, their employee experience, and the effectiveness of the College facilitating change.

I have worked in a higher education setting for 20 years, including 16 years as a leader facilitating programmatic, divisional, or organizational change. I have observed the high failure rate of transformational change efforts prevalent across the postsecondary sector. My interest in midlevel managers' roles during institutional change processes was triggered by my experiences as a higher education executive who has initiated and shepherded large-scale change. Through years of trials and triumphs, I realized how influential midlevel managers are to achieving the intended outcomes of a strategic initiative.

Most higher education institutions are too vast and complex for a limited number of executives to impact deep and pervasive change on their own. I believe, when leveraged appropriately, midlevel managers represent a network of influential institutional actors who can help facilitate the technical and human components of change to be implemented throughout the organization. However, in the absence of proactive and structured opportunities for sensemaking, midlevel managers are left to grapple with interpreting and navigating the complexities of their roles on their own. Role uncertainty can burden midlevel managers and lead to varied, fractured outcomes of the strategic initiative across the organization.

Indeed, my experiences as both an executive initiating change and a midlevel manager carrying out change impact my research agenda. Through careful research design and constant reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis processes, however, I have attempted to

minimize the adverse effects of my positionality. Efforts to curtail subjectivity in my findings are discussed below.

**Research Trustworthiness**

Rossman and Rallis (2010) reminded qualitative researchers that the quality of our research extends beyond technical procedures and must incorporate relational ethics grounded in principles of justice, beneficence, and respect for human beings. Inquiry and relational competence should be practiced throughout the research process to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Jones et al., 2014). In the following section, I summarized how I attend to both competencies in my data collection and analysis methods.

When a single case study is performed, findings are bound to this study's particular participants, time, and place. While single case studies can capture the nuances of complex phenomena, data are tied to the specific person, setting, or event (Travers, 2001). Kezar (2018) warns leaders to pay particular attention to institutional context when leading change, suggesting that every campus environment is different in terms of institutional readiness for change, the initiative's suitability at the institution, and which change approaches will be most effective. Thus, the role sensemaking of any midlevel manager can only be explored and understood within the context of that specific institution and that particular change event. As a result, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalizable to other midlevel managers' experiences of organizational change.

Interviews are a useful data collection method when the researcher cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret their environment in real-time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data collected is limited to personal reflections of past experiences that are filtered through the lens of interviewees and interpreted by the interviewer (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As a higher education administrator who has facilitated transformational change, I considered the ways in which my own biases entered the data collection and data analysis processes. The questions I asked and the verbal and non-verbal cues I picked up during interviews were influenced by my worldview. To minimize bias in my interview method before conducting this case study, I practiced with pilot interviews to test my questions for clarity and tone as part of a qualitative research course assignment in spring 2022 (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This step allowed me to practice reflexivity, adjust questions that were not clear or seemed to lead the respondents in a manner that aligned with my views, and ultimately achieve greater instrumentation rigor (Chenail, 2011). When conducting interviews, gathering documents, or making observations for this study, I engaged in data collection to the point of saturation as a strategy to ensure I got as close as possible to participants' lived experience of role sensemaking during a significant change event at their college (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Inevitably, my interpretation of the data was partly constructed through my positionality in the research. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I remained cognizant of how my identities and experiences influenced the procedures and conclusions of the study by applying strategies to avoid interjecting my biases. For example, I recorded and transcribed the interviews, which gave me the opportunity to listen to and read the interviews multiple times to increase my familiarity with the data and reduce the likelihood that I failed to notice or misconstrued data during my analysis. To further enhance validity, I employed member checks to avoid misrepresenting what participants said and their perspectives on their experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Member checks were used to determine the accuracy of my qualitative findings by taking specific portions of the narrative back to the participants to confirm

accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were asked to respond with any corrections to my analysis, and no one provided suggestions for changes.

Because I collected data from three sources, (i.e., interviews, documents, and observations), I triangulated the evidence to build coherent justification for the themes. Converging multiple data sources to establish themes added validity to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Construct validity was advanced by maintaining what Yin (2018) called a chain of evidence. The basis for the findings is traceable back to the research questions. One can see how findings were derived from tabular or text materials in the case study database, which was made up of raw data compiled from evidentiary sources as determined in the case protocol and informed by my research questions (Yin, 2018).

To make additional quality assurances, I followed Yin's (2018) framework for exemplary case studies. First, I attempted to produce a "complete" case study (Yin, 2018, p. 244) by exhaustively collecting all relevant data beyond interviews. I asked each participant and the senior administrator serving as my gatekeeper for ideas about additional data I could collect and analyze to answer my research questions to help ensure I did not overlook any relevant evidence (Yin, 2018).

Second, I purposefully sought out alternative explanations or ways of presenting the data that challenged my expectations. A lack of strong evidence contrary to the patterns I saw emerging in the data helped increase confidence in the themes generated in my analysis (Patton, 2015). According to Yin (2018), an investigator must examine the evidence from different perspectives to challenge the assumptions of a case study. I attempted to define and test what Yin referred to as "plausible rivals" (2018, p. 172). Collecting data to prove the potency of alternative explanations for my findings as vigorously as I collected other evidence added trustworthiness to

my study (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). For example, I note in chapters four and five that relationships served as the primary differentiator in my participants' sensemaking processes and outputs.

Finally, I provided sufficient evidence through rich, thick descriptions to convey my findings in the composition of my case study (Yin, 2018). Descriptions transport the reader to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experience, making the results more vivid (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I presented the evidence relevant to my case study, including how the data was collected, handled, and interpreted to enable the reader to reach an independent judgment about the merits of the study's findings (Bachor, 2002; Yin, 2018). The information contained in the case study composition demonstrates that I invested quality time onsite, made penetrating inquiries while there, and became steeped in the issues pertinent to the case; this gives the reader confidence that I "know [my] subject" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018, p. 247).

## Human Subjects

My study was submitted to both the St. Cloud State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the IRB-like committee of the institution where I conducted my research. As was detailed in the IRB applications, significant care was taken to protect the human subjects involved in my study. My research presented no or minimal harm to participants.

All participants were supplied with an informed consent form and could ask questions before signing the document. The individuals who supplied this content were adults who voluntarily participated in my study. I notified all participants of their right to stop an interview or withdraw from the study at any time. I maintained participants' anonymity throughout the data

collection, data analysis, and writing processes. For example, I used pseudonyms for the institution and all interviewees.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined my research design and methodology. I described how my exploratory case study approach to understanding how midlevel managers make sense of their role in the context of institutional change used data collection methods including one-on-one interviews, documentation, and observation. I summarized my data analysis method, which involved coding, categorizing, and theming processes typical of qualitative studies. Multiple measures were taken to strengthen the validity of my research. Throughout this chapter, I discussed my positionality in this research and the strategies I employed to minimize the influence of my background and experience. I concluded this chapter by overviewing the human subject approval process and other procedural plans that were necessary for my research.

## Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how midlevel managers made sense of and subsequently enacted their roles in the context of institutional change. My data comprised of six interviews with midlevel managers, institutionally provided and publicly available documentation about WTC, and observations made during a two-day onsite campus visit. These data were coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method to answer the two research questions that framed my study: 1) How do midlevel managers make sense of their roles within the context of institutional change? and 2) How do midlevel managers' sensemaking processes inform their actions related to the change initiative?

Interviews served as my primary source of data for this research. Interview questions centered on the cues midlevel managers recognize and discern to inform their role identity, their interpretation and meaning-making of these stimuli, and the sense-driven actions they took because of how they conceptualized their roles. My analysis of participant responses yielded three prominent themes: 1) the interplay of socialization and identity construction; 2) working with and through ambiguity; and 3) relationships as catalysts.

Because sensemaking and change-related actions are so closely intertwined and often occur simultaneously, the themes are not separated by research questions in the description of my findings below. Instead, I described the theme and combined discussions about how the theme surfaced in sensemaking processes and actions taken by the midlevel managers to demonstrate how the cognitive process of sensemaking and change-related action are not mutually exclusive events nor occur in a linear sequence.

The chapter begins with a description of the case study site, a summary of the suite of change initiatives impacting midlevel leaders at the College, and a review of basic information

about the interview participants. Then, I share descriptions and examples of the themes that resonated across interview responses. Participant quotes, document references, and on-site observations that support these themes are provided to reinforce my findings.

## Research Site & Participants

During my two-day visit at WTC, I did not pass by a single employee in the hallways without a greeting or a smile being offered in my direction. Although this was my first time on campus, I immediately felt welcomed. No one treated me like a stranger.

WTC is situated in a municipality similar to my hometown – a small rural, close-knit community where everyone knows everyone. Like the technical college where I grew up, WTC is a prominent feature of the area. In addition to being a major employer, most locals have ties to the institution because of the education they or their family and friends received at WTC. The surrounding business and industry depend on this institution for workforce development. In many ways, WTC is a beacon of hope and prosperity for the region. This notion is not something the College and its administration, faculty, and staff take lightly. In fact, it could explain the volume and pace of improvements the institution was undergoing when I arrived to conduct my research.

Two major changes are taking place at WTC, and the impact of these initiatives reverberates across the organization. The implementation of a new enterprise resource planning (ERP) system and projects stemming from the Aspen Institute's Unlocking Opportunity initiative had significant effects on the midlevel managers with whom I spoke during my two days on campus. Descriptions of these changes are below.

- ERP system: WTC was decommissioning its current, on-premises ERP system and transitioning to a cloud-based ERP. An ERP is a critical software that

organizations rely on to collect and organize institutional information, automate and coordinate core business processes, and provide analytics to enhance customer support and achieve optimal organizational performance (Swartz & Orgill, 2001). Because the ERP system contains data and technology the entire institution utilizes to conduct daily operations, such a change is substantial. “It’s like getting open-heart surgery and a brain transplant and a liver transplant, all at the same time. The scale is daunting, even in the best of times” (Smalley, 2022, para.5). Transitioning to a new ERP is not simply a matter of adopting new software; business processes must also be reimagined and reengineered to fit a modernized wireframe and interface (Swartz & Orgill, 2001). Ultimately, an ERP change project impacts every aspect of college operations and requires all employees to overhaul the way they do their jobs and all students to interact differently with the institution. It is important to note that WTC’s implementation effort took twice as long as originally planned, and the transition was not complete when I was on site.

- Aspen Institute Unlocking Opportunity: The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen) and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) have partnered to create a first-of-its-kind initiative focusing on excellence and equity in post-credential completion outcomes. Ten colleges, including WTC, were selected to network with Aspen, CCRC, professional coaches, and field experts to conduct comprehensive reforms over the course of three years and then spend the following three years evaluating the efficacy of these reforms. The overarching goal of the project is for “thousands more

> community college students, including Students of Color and those from lower-income backgrounds, [to enter and complete] programs that lead directly to jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage or to efficient and effective completion of a bachelor's degree," (Aspen Institute, n.d., para. 2). By participating in this initiative, each college commits to advancing reforms through five broad strategies: 1) set a family-sustaining wage standard and assess programs against it, 2) set goals for changing program-level enrollments and outcomes, 3) strengthen the program portfolio and partnerships to increase post-graduation success, 4) align advising to greater and more equitable completion of high-value programs, and 5) institutionalize reforms (Aspen Institute, n.d.). WTC's change efforts included redesigning its advising model and practices to more proactively support student success and innovating academic programs to increase students' future earning potential.

As many participants acknowledged, midlevel managers at small institutions 'wear many hats' and are responsible for a breadth of core functions at the College. As a result, each change initiative impacts the work of midlevel managers and their teams.

To answer my research questions, I interviewed six midlevel managers working at WTC whose work roles have been impacted by large-scale organizational change initiatives. Five of six interviewees identified as women; the other interviewee elected not to answer this demographic survey question. Four of the six interviewees identified as White; two interviewees elected not to answer this demographic survey question. Table 1 below provides additional information about my research participants.

**Table** 1

*Research Participants' Basic Information*

| Name (Pseudonym) | Division | Years working at WTC | Years working in higher education | Years in current position | Previous work experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jennifer | Student Services | 5 | 5 | 2.5 | K-12 special education |
| Kathleen | Student Services | 23 | 23 | 2 | Law enforcement |
| Katie | Student Services | 10 | 10 | 5 | Higher education |
| Sarah | Student Services | 17 | 17 | 7 | Accounting |
| William | Administrative Services | 10 | 10 | 2.5 | Technology industry |
| Laurie | Academic Affairs | 13 | 13 | 0.5 | Physical therapy |

## Themes

To make sense of their roles in the context of institutional change, midlevel managers benefit from multi-dimensional, deliberate engagement with information throughout the duration of the change, as well as purposeful opportunities to reflect and reconcile that information with their perceptions of themselves, their understandings of their positions and responsibilities within the organization, and the change initiative itself. Change within WTC is plentiful and continually activates the role sensemaking processes of the midlevel managers I interviewed. There was no clear beginning or end to role sensemaking processes. While the seemingly constant changes felt daunting at times, no interviewee expressed writ large resistance to change. Instead, a commitment to work together to operationalize institutional strategies was a sentiment they all shared.

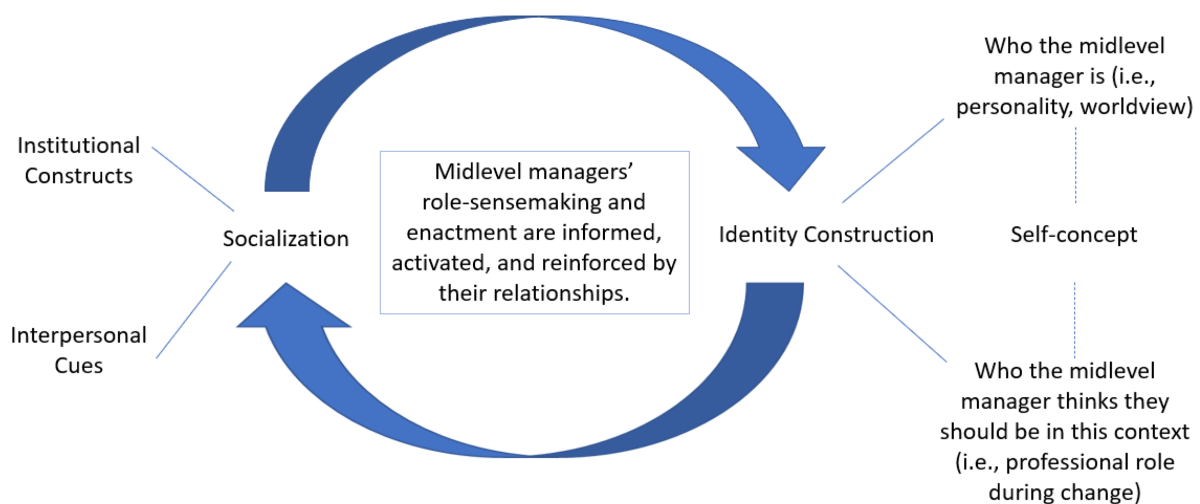
The product of sensemaking is the unique, individualized development of a cognitive structure, or a map, from which to base decisions and inform actions related to the change initiatives. Despite the distinctiveness of each midlevel managers' role identity and associated change-related behaviors, commonalities emerged regarding how they made sense of their role and formulated responses to changes in their environment. For the remainder of this chapter, I describe and provide examples of the themes and sub-themes that resonated across the data.

**Theme 1: Interplay of Socialization and Identity Construction**

Midlevel managers made sense of their roles through an interdependent cycle of socialization and identity construction that was perpetually reconciled by the midlevel manager and reinforced by the environment. The figure below demonstrates how the process of role sensemaking is emergent, ongoing, and takes place at the intersection of who the midlevel leader is and how the midlevel manager experiences and interprets their environment.

**Figure 3**

*Interplay of Socialization and Identity Construction*



The interplay of socialization and identity construction involved the interaction of three elements: self-concept, institutional constructs, and interpersonal cues. These elements were not mutually exclusive. Rather, significant overlap and interdependencies made the whole stronger than the sum of its parts. That is, each element informed and reinforced the others. Who a midlevel manager is and an institution's constructs were relatively stable factors of role sensemaking compared to interpersonal cues, which were more fluid in nature. The personality and worldview of an individual influenced where they choose to work, determined what they perceived in the environment, and framed how they interpreted the information. Institutional constructs, such as mission, vision, and values, seemed to attract a certain type of people as employees and guided the behavioral expectations of those who work at the College. Interpersonal cues shaped midlevel managers' experiences and informed how they made sense of their role in their present circumstances. In the following sections, I describe how self-concept, institutional constructs, and interpersonal cues appear in participants' role sensemaking processes.

***Self-concept***

Midlevel managers' perception of themselves and the value they bring to the organization through their individual strengths was a key factor in how midlevel managers made sense of their role in the context of change. Each midlevel manager had unique inclinations or natural tendencies to behave in a particular way. Amidst the chaotic atmosphere organizational change can create, midlevel managers often defaulted to what they know and do best. For example, when asked about why she continues to work in her current position at WTC despite the intensity of organizational change, Sarah said,

> Oh, higher ed loves change. I love problem-solving…I mean, ultimately, student satisfaction. However, [in] my current role, I have probably the least amount of student interaction that I've had in any of my roles. So, ultimately, the impact that it has on students. But what keeps me coming back every day is problem-solving.

Sarah explained that she does not always need to agree with a change to assume responsibility for contributing to the success of a change initiative. "When it's a done deal and [I have to] accept the change, I guess I look for 'How can I help facilitate that?' I might not be happy about it, but 'Where's the action item?" Sarah assumes a role that aligns with her propensity to problem-solve. Although Sarah has had student-facing positions at WTC, she prefers her current position because she'd "really rather be behind the process of navigating students through the enrollment funnel…I feel like that's where my skills are better utilized." Sarah's tendency to examine and raise issues about the systems and processes that a change might impact was propelled by her self-concept as an effective problem-solver.

Kathleen, a former police officer, discussed the strengths she developed through her previous employment. When asked how she determines how to handle a change, Kathleen described her inclination to look for nonverbal cues from her direct reports.

> I would say a lot of it...up until more recently because we haven't been together a long time...has been nonverbal. Like, if we're in a meeting or talking or doing something and I'll bring up, 'Okay, this is what we're going to do.' And you watch the nonverbals and you're like, 'Oh boy.' The law enforcement background has helped me with that because we have a lot of training in nonverbals.

Kathleen's affinity for the law enforcement vocation was evident throughout the interview, and it was clear that Kathleen identified closely with the training she received while in that line of

work. Although admittedly a very different type of work environment, Kathleen described resorting back to the knowledge and skills she gained during her career as a police officer when making sense of her current role amid organizational change in a higher education setting.

When asked what was particularly helpful to William when determining the actions he should take as a midlevel manager, he reverted to his technical skill set.

> I think those technical calls. Even though I'm kind of that middle manager role and very technical - and still, you know, if I had my druthers and it's probably 75% of what I do is not that; it's more than technical [tasks]. I think that's value and skill that I bring that really, really adds value, so trying to add value. So, it's those technical calls that we have now Monday and Wednesday with the vendor and with registrar and financial aid manager, where we are hashing through issues on a detailed level that lets me go back and make coding changes to the logic is the most helpful for me, I think.

William's self-concept as a technical expert was a common thread throughout his interview responses. Engaging his technical skills is how William believed he could contribute most to the ERP initiative, and this informed his conceptualization and enactment of his role in the context of this change.

Leaning on personal strengths, whether those strengths are natural abilities or skills built over time, was a common practice midlevel managers described. Without clear direction about their roles, participants defaulted to thoughts and behaviors that aligned with what they considered favorable features of their self-concept.

***Institutional Constructs***

To what degree midlevel managers identified with and adopted the institutional constructs, such as the mission, vision, values, and other cultural paradigms of the College,

influenced how midlevel managers made sense of their role in the context of institutional change and informed their actions related to the change initiative. For example, every participant pointed to student success as a primary reason for their buy-in and engagement with changes occurring at the institution. WTC's mission is to provide "education and training opportunities responsive to students, employers, and communities," and their vision is to "be a preferred provider of education, source of talent, and place of employment in the region" and to "change lives by providing opportunities for success." Learning is one of the College's values. The value statement reads:

> We work together to make high-quality, affordable education accessible to our diverse population. We help students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to an inclusive workforce and community success. Through partnerships, we seek opportunities to improve lives.

Student success is echoed throughout other artifacts that can be found at WTC. The strategic plan makes clear that students are their number one stakeholder. In the "What We Do" section of the document, three simple statements define the College's purpose: 1) "We provide affordable education," 2) "We help our students get good jobs," and 3) "We promote lifelong learning."

Participants shared similar purposes. William, whose position does not require regular engagement with students, still found significant meaning in knowing his work contributes to student success.

> I really love working in higher ed, because I've always felt like I need to be working somewhere there's more of a value add for me, not just making widgets, you know? In higher education…at the technical college system, I want to say that at least half of our students are economically disadvantaged in some way, shape, or form. And to be working

> in a place where they can receive an education to be able to have a great job, to be able to support their family, contribute to the community, it's just very fulfilling.

Laurie shared a similar sentiment. She stated,

> I really enjoy working here. I think I really like it here because our focus is our students. And we want to see them be successful. If it's in my program, and if it doesn't work, we're gonna find something else for the student to do. I always tell people that we have a resource for everything. You're not a number here, you are a name, and you are cared for, and I think that's really cool.

Laurie's statement resonated with how the College defined itself. Brief but poignant assertions are included on the strategic plan document and posted throughout the college on large posters, window wrappers, and electronic screens as reminders of what WTC stands for. Simple sentences like "This is where everyone belongs," "This is where you succeed," "This is where people care," and "This is where innovation is valued," are verbally and visually repeated to help build shared understanding and a common nomenclature about what WTC is as an institution and how they strive to operate. The image below exemplifies how these statements were represented on campus.

**Image 1**

*Example of Window Wrap at WTC*

When a change initiative fulfilled these institutional constructs, midlevel managers found it rewarding to play a role in and navigate the complexity of organizational change. The anticipation of contributing to the realization of a key college construct fueled the sensemaking process and shaped midlevel managers' responses to change. As Katie states,

> I mean, just being able to see like we did this thing, and this is what it meant for that student. Just seeing how this can have a positive impact on students. It's just so rewarding. And again, at the end of the day, that's why we're all here. Right? Everyone wants to see the students come in and do what they need to do, get the help that they need to be successful, graduate, and then get a job that's going to help them and their families.

Organizational development offerings, such as *The Speed of Trust*[1] and *Orange Frog - The Happiness Advantage*[2], served as key institutional constructs that participants lean on when considering their roles and behaviors in the context of change. All employees at WTC received training on the principles contained in these programs. Additionally, the philosophies are reinforced as standing agenda items at gatherings such as in-services and leadership meetings. Jennifer, one of the newer midlevel leaders at WTC, shared,

> Everyone on our campus is required to take *Speed of Trust* training. Everyone on our campus is required to take *Happiness* training, it's *Orange Frog* training. We all know you go to trainings, you learn these things, and then you forget about it. But they're constantly cycling it back in, like at our in-services and our professional development days. Even [at] our Student Services Leadership team meetings we'll do *Speed of Trust* exercises, we will do *Happiness* exercises. You know, so we are constantly bringing it back in. When issues might arise, you go back to that *Speed of Trust* training and you address it from that direction. I think that has been really helpful. Especially, the environment I came from was super toxic, and so, in my opinion, I don't know how other people feel about it, but I think that's been really helpful and transformative for decision-making about our college functions.

Katie, who has been at the College longer than Jennifer, provided a historical perspective and pointed out how specific organizational development projects evolved into cultural game-

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[1] The *Speed of Trust* (Covey, 2006) is a book and training that emphasizes the importance of trust and helps leaders and managers cultivate trust within their organizations to improve relationships and build high-performing teams.
[2] *Orange Frog* (Anchor, 2013) is a workplace engagement method that utilizes positive psychology to maximize employees' potential by tapping into their intrinsic motivations.

changers. When asked what it is about the culture at WTC that makes employees seem open to change, Katie replied,

> So, I think it's probably been a purposeful investment in things like *Speed of Trust*, *Orange Frog*. Like, as a college, the investment that they made in employees. And I think *Speed of Trust* was probably one of the first ones. Just really going through that coursework and reading the book and having that be part of our meetings, and just learning that it's okay to make mistakes. And if you make a mistake, how do you get someone else to trust you, or if someone breaks your trust, just those conversations. Nothing's earth-shattering. None of that was like brand new or earth-shattering information, but just having that reiterated and then everyone in the college moving in that direction. It kind of went from like this 'Gotcha' feeling to 'Okay, that's really a bummer that that happened. That shouldn't have happened. What can we do better?' And, of course, if the same mistake keeps getting made over and over again, it's a much different conversation. But yeah, I think just that that investment, that purposeful investment, and all employees to go through that just shifted our culture in that direction. I don't know that it would have moved that way on its own. And [the President] definitely got up at in-service and I mean, he doesn't say 'Make all the mistakes you can.' But, 'If you take a risk and it doesn't pan out, well, we'll look at it and we'll move forward.'

The institutional constructs participants referred to throughout their interviews served as prominent guideposts in their role sensemaking and action-taking processes. A critical component in how midlevel managers made sense of their role in the context of change was the intentionality with which WTC leaders featured and operationalized cultural paradigms. The

existence and reinforcement of constructs that define and strengthen the College's identity offered a steady reference point that midlevel managers could look to for direction.

### *Interpersonal Cues*

Middle managers learned about their roles through an ongoing series of processes that were often social in nature. In a dynamic and interconnected way, each process was also a product or a contribution to the sensemaking occurring in the environment. A cue, whether implicit or explicit, was put into the environment for others to make meaning of and connections to their role as midlevel managers. Interpersonal cues provided an important source of information for midlevel managers. Midlevel managers picked up on the cues others produced in their environment and reconciled them with their own self-concepts to make sense of their role. Middle managers' actions then reflected the integration of interpersonal cues with who the middle manager is or believed they should be in their role.

Various types of interpersonal cues helped shape midlevel managers' role sensemaking. Participants discussed adopting ideal leadership behaviors, meeting the expectations of others, and using behavioral clues to inform their thoughts and actions as midlevel managers managing change. Midlevel managers identified and interpreted interpersonal cues that were indirect and direct, distant and immediate.

Like other participants, William shared how he picked up on cues about change leadership from the President. When considering who the primary stakeholders of his management are, William noted,

> So, another stakeholder would be my reports. I see myself as trying to serve them and help them and remove roadblocks and check in, so they feel supported, so they can do their work. They can flourish. [Our President] is really good about servant leadership, so

it's really ingrained through our culture. So, I see them [as stakeholders] as well, because it's my job to help make them as successful as possible.

Observing the President assume a servant leader role inspired William to think and act in terms of servant leadership principles as he helped facilitate large-scale changes with his team and other stakeholders in the organization. William had not supervised anyone before coming to WTC, so having someone he considered a good leader to emulate helped to inform William's role sensemaking. His servant leadership mentality surfaced in what William finds most rewarding about leading change.

> From day one, when I am able to or the team is able to deliver a really good, solid innovative [technical] solution [and] whoever has come to us and says, 'You know, this is so frustrating. This would take me 10 hours to do.' And I could do it in one little SQL script in 30 seconds. I mean, stuff like that. Like, 'Thank you for asking me, because I want to be able to help. I don't want you doing that for 10 hours.' Or when we have people that are doing stuff manually and we can implement something that's much more efficient…so that [the Director of Financial Aid] and her staff are not doing this manual financial aid stuff, so they could be spending more time with students doing financial counseling to help students. That's the value add [I find] tremendously fulfilling.

Throughout the interview, William described how he looks for cues in the environment where he can capitalize on his technical expertise to serve others and meet institutional goals related to the ERP implementation. William's keen technical aptitude is a significant part of his self-concept. Executive leaders' recognition of William's technical skills opened the pathway to management opportunities for him at WTC. Providing technical solutions and innovating is where William felt most comfortable and found the most reward. William's story provided a

clear example of how self-concept and the expectations of others intersect to inform how midlevel managers made sense of and enacted their roles in the context of change.

Like William, Jennifer had not intentionally targeted management positions in her career trajectory. Instead, the encouragement and expectations of others prompted her pursuit of a midlevel manager role. Jennifer shared,

> When I took this job, I was going to ride out my disability services gig until retirement. Honestly, I taught special ed in K-12. This disability services job takes everything I loved about my K-12 special ed job and wrapped it in a really nice little package and got rid of everything I didn't like. And so, I'm just going to ride this job out. Like, this is incredible, this is awesome. But, then all of a sudden, one day, [the President and the Marketing head] came in and said, 'Hey, we want you to co-lead a recruitment initiative on campus.' And I was like, 'I don't know anything about recruitment. Why would I do a recruitment initiative?' And so, I got involved in that project and loved it. And then they kept bringing in all these other different projects. And I'm like, 'Oh, I kind of like leading these projects.' And then they're like, 'Well, what about putting some people on your team?' And then I was like, 'Oh, this is kind of fun, too. I like having people, like having this team that we work together and we help each other out and we support each other.' And so, they keep giving me these nice pushes. 'I think you can do this, and I think you can do that.' And now I'm doing things I would have never dreamed of doing. And so, that's been really nice. I always tell my supervisor, 'You're really good at giving gentle shoves.' So that's been great, having new challenges. And sometimes it can be stressful but most of the time it's been really good. And I really, really appreciated that. So, I've

> gone from just riding out to retirement to taking on new challenges and being excited about that.

As leaders at the institution introduced opportunities to take on more responsibilities, Jennifer's sense of herself as a midlevel manager evolved. The "gentle shoves," or social cues from others, she received contributed significantly to Jennifer's role sensemaking while leading change initiatives. Jennifer shifted her actions to meet the expectations of others.

Laurie was also new to management. When she encountered challenging leadership decisions, Laurie directly asked for cues from those around her and seemed to put the most value on cues from within her immediate social surroundings after regulatory cues.

> Well, my other instructor because we really work as a team, and my accrediting body. If it's a standard, gotta follow it. And then if I feel kind of wishy washy, or I'm not for sure or it could go either way, then I will talk to my supervisor who is the Chief Academic Officer. I'll talk to her about it. And I have in the past, I have gone to other Program Directors of the state just like 'Hey, how does this work with you guys?' So I try to get different perspectives. And sometimes outside perspectives are important, and then sometimes not as well. That's at [at a different institution in the system], right, what's going on here? So, I'm like, well, I always talk to my other instructor because we really make most of our decisions when it comes to program policies. You know, I want to make sure we're both on the same page.

Up until the last academic year, Laurie was an individual contributor. She recently transitioned from an instructor to an academic lead with supervisory responsibilities. When Laurie tried to make sense of her new role as a midlevel manager in the context of significant institutional change, she sought out others' expectations and used this information to piece together an

understanding of her new role. She also discussed level-setting the expectations of others and being open about her newness as a midlevel manager while testing out her role in action. For example, she shared the following about her experience delivering negative feedback from a student survey to another instructor for the first time.

> And, you know, I go, 'I am new at this so hang with me, but this is what I'm reading. This is what I'm thinking. Let's talk about it.' And I mean, it ended up being okay. I was a Nervous Nellie; it was my first confrontation. And it really wasn't a conflict, right? That's just not really - I've had conversations with students like my own students, but another faculty member - I am not saying I'm, you know, better than this person; it was just something I read. So yeah, it was a great learning experience.

Especially for participants who have been in management roles longer, subtle social differences in the environment provided clues that surfaced the needs and expectations of others. Midlevel leaders were often in tune with those they had the closest relationships with at the College. For example, when there seemed to be behavioral shifts amongst her direct reports, Katie considered how to address these.

> Our department has an open-door policy. So, I mean, I can hear what's going on. It's a gymnasium in here. Just like what's being said. And with most of my staff, with the exception of one - I've worked with him since 2020, and the other two at least seven or eight...almost the entire time that they've been here. I just have kind of learned to be like, 'Okay, [staff member], you're just being really quiet. Like is everything okay? Like do you need to have a conversation?' It's just kind of picking up on some of those verbal and nonverbal cues that they're giving off and just having those open conversations about that. We have weekly team meetings. So, I think also during that, 'Okay, what's going

well? What's not going well? What are some things that can help us? What are some things I can help get addressed?' I think it's just been really, really helpful…And sometimes it is more of those nonverbal, it's what's not being said or not getting done. That is a bigger cue than what is being said. Thankfully, I have a great team. I don't have to micromanage nor would I want to. They stay on top of things really well. But if something starts slipping, that's a really good cue. Okay, I know that this person never is late on this. And now they're two weeks late. Yeah, I need to reach out and have some conversations on what can we maybe shift, because I don't think they're not doing something intentionally. You know, they forgot, or they just got too much and we need to start moving some things or sitting down and making a list of what do you need to get done. 'How can I help you prioritize this?'

From Katie's perspective, part of her role as a midlevel manager is to ensure project or operational work is progressing as planned and to monitor the verbal and nonverbal cues of her direct reports. When either of these signaled that something might be wrong, Katie's actions were interpersonal in nature. She would openly communicate with her direct reports about what she saw and explored ways to support them through their present challenges.

Context is the operative word in my first research question. Midlevel managers were in a constant state of sensing their environment, which consisted of people, constructs, and interpersonal cues. As discussed in more depth later in this chapter, role sensemaking and enactment were catalyzed by relationships. Midlevel managers are at the center of the organizational hierarchy. The 360 degrees of relationships surrounding them provided endless information to midlevel managers about how they should think and act. Midlevel managers' experiences of and perceptions of the institution varied by who they had access to and how their

worldview filtered what they sensed and how they interpreted their environment. Which experiences middle managers have and how they interpreted them are also influenced by who they are. That is, midlevel managers' personalities and worldviews affected which cues they picked up on and sought out, the type and volume of information they consumed, and the sense they made of what they perceived in the environment.

## Theme 2: Working With and Through Ambiguity

In the context of organizational change, participants described how their role sensemaking was often uninformed, unintentional, and uncertain. With the volume and pace of change, midlevel managers rarely had the resources to adequately assess what the change initiative means for them or their teams and take a planful approach to facilitating change. Instead, midlevel managers typically perceived their immediate circumstances and reacted in real time, hoping that their actions positively contributed to the initiative and made things better for the students, their teams, and the institution. A shared sense of purpose and responsibility to serve the campus community and the surrounding region contributed to midlevel managers' perseverance amidst the ambiguity they experienced.

### *Working with Ambiguity*

Participants cited information and time as the key resources they lacked the most. Time to collect, process, and reflect on information would have created desirable circumstances for role sensemaking, but participants reported an absence of opportunities to fulfill these needs. While the desire to take a thoughtful approach to facilitating change was prevalent amongst participants, the conditions necessary to do so were not always available.

Especially when midlevel managers were not involved in strategic conversations about change initiatives, they did not have access to the information they need to be effective leaders in the context of change. Jennifer described her experience.

> Taking the Student Success plans [as an example], I'm not on that planning team that's working with Aspen. I know there's been a lot of conversation at the exec team about it as well. I'm not on the exec team, and so sometimes I feel like I don't have all the information. And so, when my team comes to me, or like I don't supervise everybody in this area, but because I'm the only supervisor in this area, I mean, you know how that works. Like people will come in to you. And so, I don't always have all the information.

Sarah also longed for readily available information and the opportunity to process the information through dialogue. She shared,

> I wish there was more time for conversation. More time to keep up on the communication and, you know, not just my time. I fully recognize that somebody is delayed at getting meeting minutes out that I could be reading but they're not there yet...That, in turn, I'm probably behind in getting that information to my team. So, time. Time for conversations, time to plan and reflect a little bit more. I know I need to make the time, but if you heard how many times in the last two years I've heard 'Well, it's important, you need to make the time.' There isn't enough time right now.

In addition to time to review and discuss information related to initiatives, participants identified a need to take time to reflect on the change, make sense of their role, and take purposeful actions related to change. However, participants experienced obstacles in meeting this need. While some midlevel managers attempted to manage their schedules to allow for dedicated time to think and strategize, these systems often broke down when more urgent, often

operational, needs arose. Jennifer described how balancing the dynamics of operational work and project work is both exciting and frustrating.

> It's so funny because if I looked at my schedule today, it's like I'm here and there and there and, you know, it's just, it's everywhere. Which is fun, you know, but sometimes it's hard because then you don't get things done…It's interesting because I was just thinking about this the other day that sometimes I get caught up so much in the day to day that it's really hard to do the big thing, you know? …And so for a long time, I was like, okay, four days of the day-to-day, and then one day I'm going to sit at home and this is all I'm focusing on and I'm going to shut off my email, and I'm going to turn off my phone and all of those things and really work on that. I've gotten away from that, and I need to get back to it. So, I would say right now I'm probably not doing a good job...Because we have time restraints, like, I need to have that welcome survey ready to go by July 18 and whatnot.

Prioritizing tasks was a complex challenge because of the diverse sets of stakeholders' interests that midlevel managers attempted to satisfy. For example, when asked how she makes decisions about allocating her time and effort, Katie shared the following,

> I don't know that I'm doing well, to be very transparent. Honestly, sometimes it's day-by-day. It's, 'I know that by the end of this week, I need to have these things done, or these processes won't continue, or that's going to impact these individuals.' So sometimes it is just a day-by-day, what can I get done today to make sure that what needs to happen at the College keeps going and what things need to happen so the project can keep moving forward. Some days it's, 'You know what, I spent the last three days packaging students, I'm going to just shut everything off in current world and just spend the next day doing all

ERP related things.' And then the next day might be, 'There's a bunch of new rules and regulations coming out, so I'm gonna focus my entire day today on that.' But again, as you know, working in higher ed, there's always things that come up, you can't just shut off current. The student walks up and has an emergency, you have to help that student. You can't say, 'Can you come back tomorrow?' I just try to be really, really aware of those deadlines. And that might mean putting a note on my calendar saying, you know, from three to four, I'm going to work on this or at the end of the day, I'll make myself a checklist and say, 'These are the three things that you need to make sure you get done tomorrow before you move on to the next thing.' And I don't feel like I'm doing any particular part of my job very well right now. There's just a lot of moving pieces. And at every institution, we always need one or two more people. I think I'm probably harder on myself than I need to be because everyone was very like, 'Hey, [Katie], did you know that you didn't get me this and I needed that.' 'You're right. I sure didn't. Let me drop [what I am doing], let me reprioritize and get you that.' People are really good about reaching out and saying, 'Hey, just a reminder, I need this,' or 'You said you were gonna do this, and you didn't,' which is good. Yeah, Department of Ed won't do that with our stuff, so I'm very cognizant of those dates and deadlines.

The doubt that is evident in Katie's response was common. All middle managers expressed some level of uncertainty regarding whether they were performing their roles sufficiently or effectively. Even though participants have experienced significant organizational change and expected change as part of their environment, they did not report professional growth regarding their change leadership knowledge and skills. Instead, they framed their behavior as reactionary in nature. As Sarah shared, "I wouldn't necessarily say that it has evolved. I would

say that the way that the expectation of me has changed on a regular basis. I'd like to say that I've evolved, but I think I'm adapting to the change." The volume and pace of changes on top of operational work left participants feeling ambivalent about their role and their performance as a facilitator of organizational change.

***Purpose Begets Perseverance***

Despite expressing a lack of resources and a desire to be more intentional in their role sensemaking and actions, participants did not express resistance to the change initiatives themselves. In fact, many reported being proponents of change, especially for initiatives that improved the student or employee experience. An overall sense of community and shared purpose seemed to compensate for the absence of information, time, and certainty in midlevel managers' experiences.

The sense of community was associated with colleagues who worked at WTC, as well as the surrounding region. As noted in more detail in the next section, relationships with others enabled sensemaking and change-related actions. The size of the College fostered a closeness among employees. Jennifer described how everyone works together.

> Our team functions as [if] we're one. We're one entity and if Student Life needs somebody to go serve dinner at one of their functions, we're going to show up and go serve dinner. Or, the mental health counselor is distributing things, we're going to help them. You know, like, we all work together as one team and really help each other out. And I think that's been really helpful to work together on these changes, and we've got each other's back. And we're going do it together, even though we're kind of a hodgepodge of different areas.

Participants' integration into the surrounding community created a heightened sense of responsibility to help students succeed. Laurie described what it is like to serve a rural district, where the majority of WTC graduates live and become employed.

> We live in a rural area. Everybody knows everybody. So I think that's also something in the back of my mind that, you know, others don't realize...that it's just like I know this person, I know this person through this. And, you know, if they don't pass like, oh my gosh, it's a conversation that I just don't want to have to have with somebody at Piggly Wiggly. So, and maybe that's just being too personal. I don't know. And it's funny because I've worked in three of the five counties that we serve, so like, I just know too many people and my husband is a police officer in [a neighboring] county. So, we know everybody.

Additionally, midlevel managers at WTC also engage regularly with students. Jennifer shared the following about her relationships with students.

> I get to go to graduation. And I know so much more than a lot of the people in this college know what it took for that student to walk across that stage. And to see them, like just knowing everything they've been through in the last two, three years, or whatever. And then walking across the stage, like, it's so cool. You know, and I think that is one of the benefits of middle level is that you still have that student connection, especially because of where my office is, too; students are out here studying all the time, and I can sit and talk to them and 'Hey, how's it going?' and still have that connection. We're a small enough campus.

The small, rural nature of the institution cultivated an atmosphere where 1) working together to contribute to a greater good was not only a necessity but also a cherished quality of

their workplace, and 2) midlevel managers witnessed the impacts of their efforts on students and fellow employees firsthand. Jennifer, one of the newest member of the Student Services Leadership Team, discussed how midlevel managers support each other through change.

> I'm probably the newest in management on that Student Services Leadership Team. And I always felt like, 'Oh, those other people,…' I always kind of looked up to them when I was just a disability service person. 'man, they really got it together. They're good at their jobs.' And so, it's awesome, because they come to me for advice. And I'm like, 'Why are you coming here?' You know? And so, that's been really cool for them to come and say, 'Hey, I think you're really good at handling situations like this. How do you do that?' And then, being able to go to them, and they know where my weaknesses are, where I'm like I'm not really comfortable with that. And then, being able to talk through those things with them as well has been super helpful and getting advice from them. And then once again, I feel like we're kind of all in this together. Very similar to my team, the Student Services Leadership Team is like, 'We're all in this together for student success.' And we're going to keep rowing in the same direction. So, yeah, I really appreciate our Student Services Leadership Team. They're really a great group of people, and we're all kind of that middle management. And you know, they all have much bigger teams than I do. But, you know, we all work very closely together and get advice from each other and support each other.

Although participants described struggling to meet the demands of organizational change, they also shared how a collective focus on student success helps them push through adversity. Student success fueled midlevel managers' energy to persevere through organizational change

obstacles. William, who was heavily involved in an ERP transition that has taken two times longer than originally planned, said,

> We are not having fun right now, but we are persevering…That's what it's all about. We're Project RISE. Raising and Innovating the Student Experience. That's what it's all about. So, it's good to frequently come back to that, remind ourselves why we're doing this in the midst of all the challenges or struggles.

Laurie’s student-focused mentality in approaching a new initiative reflected William’s sentiment. She mentioned,

> After being in the top 10 Aspen, like we're now making student plans of how they're going to get from A to Z. And we've not done that before. That's something that came out of this Aspen experience. And, you know, there's a lot of Negative Nellies out there who are like, ‘What? More change? More work?’ But I'm like, you know, I think it will motivate every department to see where they play a role in the student’s success. Like when we were thinking about reorganizing our team or our college, we were thinking of making it more student oriented.

Like other participants, Jennifer relayed how rewarding it is to hear student success stories. Jennifer witnessed how the combination of two large-scale initiatives she led changed a student’s life.

> I was in charge of the Ability to Benefit. I was in charge of getting that going on campus a couple years back. And then, Ability to Benefit combined with the Universal Design initiative. We had a student who just graduated last December, who was like, the poster child of why Ability to Benefit exists, like just a prime example. Had dropped out of school when he was in, I think, eighth grade…and was 35, came back here for Ability to

> Benefit to get his welding degree and was in math class. And math was really hard. Our math instructor had implemented cognitive wrappers[3] as a result of some of our Universal Design training…And so, this guy, thought he had failed the test, would have never looked back at that test had our instructor not implemented these cognitive wrappers and made them do it. He was going to quit math class, which was going to make him not graduate. And he, because of his cognitive wrapper, looked back and realized he really did pretty well on the math test. He just missed a couple, like, he should have went back and checked his work. But he was so frustrated with the math test he just wanted to throw everything away. And so, it ended up because of something silly like a cognitive wrapper, he got an A in this math class, was the leader of the welding group, like became the guy everybody went to. You know? So, it's success stories like that…Totally changed the trajectory of a student's life. So those little stories, I think are the best.

Experiencing camaraderie and witnessing student success smoothed the pathway to role sensemaking and actions for midlevel managers. While all participants expressed uncertainty about their roles, they effectively worked through the ambiguity and positively impacted their teams, students, and community. A general sense of community and shared purpose created an atmosphere that allowed midlevel managers to balance the tension of confusion about their role with the rewards of performing it anyway.

**Theme 3: Relationships as Catalysts**

Relationships emerged as a superordinate theme. Social interactions constantly influenced role sensemaking. Midlevel managers made sense of and performed their change-

[3] Cognitive wrappers are metacognitive strategies instructors use to help students think about and reflect upon assessments before and after they complete the exam to enhance learning and study habits.

related roles through their relationships with others. To whom midlevel managers had access and what conditions existed to enable social interactions mattered substantially in participants' role sensemaking and enactment.

Each interviewee discussed how their relationships with others on campus activated sensemaking. These relationships catalyzed middle managers' interpretation and meaning-making of various forms of stimuli. Because midlevel managers are situated between the C-suite and frontline employees, participants explained how relationships with executives, peers, and direct reports contributed to how they made sense of and lived out their roles.

Access to the President, the Chief Student Services Officer, or the Chief Academic Officer were a crucial factor in how middle managers made sense of their role. The behavior modeled by chief executive officers of the college set the tone for midlevel managers' sensemaking and subsequent actions. When asked what has contributed to WTC's recognition as a top ten finalist for the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, William stated the following:

> I would say primarily our president. This has brought a tremendous amount of energy and innovation and delegation. Like, really empowering other people to grow into leadership positions. Succession planning, all those kinds of things which you're not gonna see that at every institution. And just the level of transparency and what we're sharing and what we're talking about and, you know, the number of different organizations I've been in...and it's like…You think this happens in every college? No, this doesn't, so I think there's a unique culture here. But I think, again, I was here just a couple years before he came, so I haven't been at the College all that much longer than he has. But he's brought a

very, very positive, innovative approach, and he really believes it too. He's not just saying it, he really lives and believes it. So, I think it starts from the top.

Some participants in the study described a memorable interaction with one of the executive officers of WTC that shaped the way they think about their roles as midlevel managers in a dynamic, ever-evolving institution. Throughout the role sensemaking process, past experiences are projected onto possible futures. Oftentimes, the unscripted interactions with executive leadership broke the mental model of what it means to be a midlevel manager for participants. Sometimes these were breakthrough moments; other times they were moments that incrementally helped midlevel managers conceptualize their role in the context of institutional change.

Jennifer shared a breakthrough moment that involved the President. Jennifer is one of the least tenured midlevel managers I interviewed. She transitioned from the K-12 sector to the postsecondary sector about five years ago. The atmosphere at her former place of employment was less collegial and less open to bottom-up feedback. Initially, conceptualizing her midlevel manager role beyond taking and executing orders was a challenge.

> I will say my old job - it was kind of a keep your head down and keep your mouth shut to survive kind of thing. And so yeah, like, I remember when I first started here, I got called into an exec team meeting. And I find those very intimidating. I mean, our exec team people are all super nice. But I just find those meetings really intimidating. And I got called into one. And [the President] was dead wrong on something he was saying. And I've only been here a month and literally came from a job where you kept your head down and your mouth shut. And we're sitting at opposite ends of the boardroom table. And he goes, ‘Are you telling me I'm wrong?’ And I was like, ‘Can I?’ I don't even

> remember what I ended up saying. But I'm sure he saw my face was super red. Because I was like, 'I don't even know what to tell you right now, because you are wrong.' And he was completely wrong about what he said. And he came down to my office later that day, and he's like, '[Jennifer], you know, if I'm wrong, you tell me I'm wrong.' He's like, 'You know, that's just the way we work here. You tell me.' And I was like, 'You have to understand that that's not the way most cultures are. And I came from a culture that was very much not that way. So that's going to take me a while to figure out and to be comfortable with.' You know? I think that's part of what makes us work.

From this interaction, Jennifer learned the expectations of the President, was given permission to challenge institutional leadership, and learned a valuable lesson about the institution's culture – all of which shaped how she now understands and performs her role as a midlevel manager.

Kathleen described her interactions with the Chief Student Services Officer. The consistent opportunities to engage with her supervisor in ways that felt more like a partnership than the command and control she was accustomed to because of past experiences with supervisors led Kathleen to understand her role differently.

> [The Chief Student Services Officer] listens to me. I can't always say that that's been the case of supervisors that I've had at the campus. And so, if I come and I bring forward with anything, she genuinely listens to what needs to be done. And I usually consult with her and just say, 'This is what I want to do. Do you have a problem with it?' And she will tell me 'yes' or 'no, go forward.' It makes a world of difference. Having [the Chief Student Services Officer] as a supervisor in that position and having her that open-minded from what I've had in the past at the college, because I'm a little gun shy because of my previous role.

As these examples demonstrate, institutional executives set the tone for leadership across the organization. In both instances, institutional leaders who reinforce a culture of open dialogue, trust, and unity shaped how participants made sense of their roles. Interactions and relationships with the upper echelon impressed upon Jennifer and Kathleen what it means to be a midlevel manager at WTC. The results of their role sensemaking would have been different had these interactions never happened or had happened differently.

Higher education is a human enterprise, and change is therefore irreducibly social. The mechanisms put into place to encourage social interactions seemed to help midlevel managers manage and make sense of the large volume of changes. Traditions of shared governance make the social aspect of sensemaking particularly prevalent in higher education settings. College forums, advisory councils, executive team meetings, and other structured opportunities to collect information, provide input, and ask questions allowed midlevel managers in this study to gain clarity about change initiatives, consider their role in the context of the change, and perform their roles as midlevel leaders impacted by change. When Kathleen assumed her current position, she became a member of the Executive Team, which is a group of senior and select midlevel managers. She described the significant impact her participation on this team has had on her sensemaking.

> So, we have an executive team, which kind of does some of the higher-level thinking about the universe and how it works at [this institution]. And for the last year, since I've moved over here, I've been on that and it's a whole different world hearing the back story of how we're getting to where we're getting and why. I feel like if I wasn't on that group, that I would be a lost and confused soul right now. Because now I can see, okay, this is why they're doing that. Okay, got it. I understand. And for me, at least, it helps me to

understand the backstory and why we're doing this. And I can offer opinions and I can say things. Does it mean that's where it's gonna go? No. Is it considered? I think so. So, I do have a say in the matter, but the general gist is if a decision is made, and you've said your piece, then the decision is made. And we're going to move forward. It doesn't mean you can't ever speak up again. It just means now we need to all fall in the same direction. And I have to figure out how to deal with that so that when someone who works for me comes and says, 'What the heck are we doing that for?' I'm like, 'Because this is why. This is why it's gonna be better.' You know? And I've definitely run into that with like our advisors who've done their job a certain way for X number of years, and they're comfortable and they're happy. And so now it's like, 'Why are we doing that? What's this? What's the purpose? What's the rush?' And there's things that they're asking that yes, I've been kind of like, I don't want 100% buy in, but I at least understand it so then I can try and explain it to them better. So, I feel like I'm a middle manager with a little bit of extra knowledge, which is really super helpful. Because I would be probably not as effective without that knowledge and understanding myself.

Not every midlevel manager at WTC is included on the executive team. Knowing how helpful this has been to her, Kathleen empathized with midlevel managers who do not have the same access to the sensemaking factors she can leverage as a member of this select group.

It's very stressful to be caught in the middle. You're kind of trying to operationalize what you don't know. And like I said, the thing that's been most helpful for me and trying to define my role has been now that I've had the chance to glimpse into how the higher level is making the decisions. It's making a lot more sense, and so I feel fortunate to have been given that opportunity and I feel bad…Can you give all the middle managers that

> opportunity? To be able to get a glimpse into what really is behind the big decisions and the thought process or what's going on. I wish there was a way to do that, because I have peers who are middle managers who haven't been given that opportunity, and they're lost, and they're confused, and they're frustrated. And I'm like, I know how you feel because you got tasked with fixing this, but you don't understand how we got there. And it's hard. So, I don't know if there's a way to [give everyone this access] or not.

For participants who are not part of the executive team, opportunities to discuss institutional change with peers were another valuable outlet for midlevel managers making sense of their change-related roles and actions. When asked how she makes sense of change and determines which actions to take, Sarah shared the following:

> I ask a lot of questions. So, the Students Services Leadership Team is a good place to ask those questions, get clarification…and that's where we find out about a lot of change also. But those discussions are really helpful because I can put it into context, and I can say 'Alright, when I talk with Admissions about that, I anticipate here's some of the questions that will come back,' or 'These are some of the scenarios that we'll face in this. Do we have an answer for this, or do we need to think through that?' Sometimes it is simply asking, 'I'm missing something. Help me make sense of it.' That's a safe place [where] those questions can be asked. And I think it's understood that we're having those conversations so that we can interpret that and move forward.

Jennifer's comments reflect an appreciation for the Student Leadership Team as well. Being amongst her peers provided Jennifer with a sense of camaraderie and shaped the way she thinks about her role in the context of change, especially as it relates to championing the initiative with her direct reports.

> And so, the whole thought of every student having a Student Success plan is quite overwhelming for our staff right now. And, you know, there's a little bit of pushback with that, just because it's the unknown, and people aren't really sure what that's going to look like and what that means for them…I see my position getting us all kind of rowing in the same direction and kind of calming some of those fears. Like 'We're in this together, and we'll figure it out together.' And, yeah, just getting people rallied. I just feel like that's my position. I mean, as far as like…nobody's ever came and said, 'Hey, [Jennifer], this is what I want you to do.' But I think like, once again, I go back to our Student Services Leadership Team, like, I really appreciate that team. And, you know, we talk about, like, this is what we're going to do and just because of the way that team functions and how we exist, then you just kind of know that your job is to get your people going with anything that comes out of that Student Services Leadership Team. What we decide as a [Student Services Leadership] team, your job is to take it back to your team and get people on board and get going with it.

Finally, the relationships with direct reports were instrumental aspects of midlevel managers' sensemaking processes about their roles and actions related to the change. For example, William discussed how his direct reports are key stakeholders in his leadership and how he looked to them for signals about how he can serve them well as their manager.

> I see myself as trying to serve them and help them and remove roadblocks and check in so they feel supported, so they can do their work. They can flourish…it's my job to help make them as successful as possible…Are they happy? Are they thriving? Are they frustrated? Are they challenged? Are they growing? Are they learning new things?

Similarly, Katie shared how she understands her role as the middle person between strategy and operations, a communication conduit for her direct reports.

> When I think of my role, middle manager, it's like this middleman between my team and then the upper level is kind of what it feels like sometimes. Getting information [from my direct reports], communicating it up, getting information, communicating it down [to my direct reports]. And, again, we all have opportunities to be involved in that process, but I still kind of just feel like that's where I'm at in terms of change. To hear what my team is saying, I get to communicate, you know, the good things [and] the concerns up. I get to hear what the executive team is saying in terms of those things, communicate it down and kind of this, I don't want to say two-way communication, but I'm kind of the hub for that, for sure.

Relationships enable multi-directional communication and collective problem-solving. When these relationships are disrupted by turnover and reorganizations, the complexity of role sensemaking increases. As Sarah shared, “We have a reorg every year, and last year being the most significant. I'll be honest, it is confusing on where you're supposed to be.” Due to budget constraints, midlevel managers tend to receive additional duties when turnover occurs. Kathleen commented,

> There's a lot of redistributing of duties, because hiring is not an option, right? Okay. So, they may take a job and say, ‘Okay, now you're gonna get a piece, you're gonna get a piece, you're gonna get piece,’ but that person has already left so you don't really know what the role was. You kind of have an idea, but you're not really sure, and nobody else is really sure. So, there's not a lot of clear direction. It's kind of like, you got to figure it out…And it's very confusing, especially when the person is gone. And now I have no one

> to ask, right? I'm like, 'What am I supposed to do with this?'…There's just not a list of well, 'This is what you're supposed to do.' They really expect the leadership or the managers to figure out what makes students' lives better and just do it.

Furthermore, reorganization necessitates new relationship-building, which impacts participants' role sensemaking. When asked how reorganization impacts the effectiveness of change implementation, Sarah shared,

> It has a significant impact...I think that it's very difficult to implement a system that we're trying to set up a process within a system that already, at this point, we evaluated it over three years ago and decided this is what we want the process to be. You're in higher ed, you know that things have changed since then, so we need to adapt to that but then a new leader comes in and they want to do things differently. And that's great, I'm not opposed to change. In fact, I have a long list of things that I want to change, but we can't do it all right now. But I struggle with the timing of change. We need to keep that in mind. So, everybody on the project is shifting. For example, our Continuing Ed department is now moving into Records and Admissions. So, we've got that change happening and then our SA, our System Analyst, who resigned a few weeks ago, he used to report to IT. He's now reporting to me. Credit for Prior Learning, that's a direct report to me. That's now possibly changing to another person. That's a lot to pass off. That's a lot to take on. Directly supervising a new person or reporting to a new person, there's just things that it takes time to really get in the groove and figure out what works. What works best between the two of us? How do we work best together? How do we communicate best together?…All those things are unique to each team, each individual. I think it just takes time. I think it's really hard to build a new system and change the majority of what we're

doing at the same time…Now is the time to change if it makes sense, but then changing on top of that also is a challenge.

The consistency and maintenance of the relationships that exist within midlevel managers' social spheres contributed positively to participants' sensemaking. Even when institutional change initiatives disrupted the routines of midlevel managers, regular access to and engagement with others provided context and cues necessary for role sensemaking. In turn, reorganizations of personnel detracted from participants' ability to make sense of and enact their roles because the context from which to ground role sensemaking and the cues from which to refine behaviors that lead to effective change leadership shifted and needed to be relearned.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described how midlevel manager role sensemaking and enactment results from the interplay of socialization and identity construction. I noted how participants reconcile the constructs and cues that exist in the environment with who they are or think they should be in the context of change at WTC. Finally, I identified relationships as a superordinate theme. Relationships enabled multi-directional communication and collective problem-solving, which helped participants navigate the complexity of institutional initiatives despite the ambiguity change imposed on midlevel managers' understanding of their roles and the actions they should take. Relationships created access to information, provided implicit and explicit permission to behave in certain ways, and socialized the thoughts and actions of midlevel managers. When these relationships were disrupted by personnel reorganization or turnover, sensemaking became disordered and midlevel managers' effectiveness as change facilitators was hindered.

# Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to illuminate how midlevel managers make sense of and subsequently enact their roles within the context of organizational change. Using sensemaking as my theoretical framework, I explored how midlevel managers at a two-year postsecondary institution identified environmental cues about their roles, assigned meaning to them, and acted upon them during institutional transformation. The results of this study lend insight into how colleges and universities can better position their midlevel managers to positively affect the change process by intentionally attending to their role sensemaking needs.

In chapter one, I introduced the criticality of midlevel managers' change-related behaviors during planned organizational transformation efforts. I also noted midlevel managers' complex positionality within institutions of higher education and the resulting role uncertainty, conditions that are exacerbated by change. Unaddressed role ambiguity of midlevel managers can have deleterious domino effects on institutional initiatives. Yet, little is known about midlevel managers' sensemaking of top-down, planned change and how it impacts their conceptualizations of their professional roles.

In the second chapter, I introduced the phenomenon of sensemaking as my theoretical framework and established midlevel managers as critical institutional actors in institutional transformation. Researchers have suggested significant transformational change is necessary for higher education to remain relevant and competitive in today's global context (Grabill et al., 2022; Ruben, 2022). However, institutions' decentralized character, distributed labor, and multiple authority structures have historically slowed progress toward comprehensive institutional reform and made transformation a challenging goal to achieve (Kezar, 2018; Shugart, 2013). Higher education scholars highlight sensemaking as a crucial component of

successful transformational change (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kezar, 2012). Because of their unique positions within organizations, midlevel managers can leverage their hierarchical centrality and multi-dimensional relationships to be especially helpful in achieving organizational sensemaking (Floyd & Woodridge, 2000). For midlevel managers to be effective change agents, however, they need a clear understanding of what their roles are in the context of a given change.

When midlevel managers are not involved in strategic planning and decision-making about organizational change efforts, they feel ambivalent about their roles in the change process and report higher levels of role conflict as a result (Amey & Eddy, 2018). Midlevel managers' role ambiguity can be problematic to the success of a change initiative. Frontline employees struggle to adopt new practices when midlevel managers do not adequately overcome this uncertainty, and the institution fails to achieve transformational outcomes (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Herzing & Jimmieson, 2006). Understanding how midlevel managers make sense of an ambiguous role within the context of institutional change is essential to understanding how to support their change agency and increase the likelihood of success of institutional transformational change.

Chapter three detailed my research design and methodology. Using a case study approach to address my research questions allowed me to focus on a bounded system within a unique, information-rich situation (Bhattacharya, 2017): a group of midlevel managers working at a two-year institution whose professional roles are impacted by institutional directives to increase student success. To gain insight into how midlevel managers made sense of their role in the context of organizational change, I interviewed six midlevel managers during a two-day visit at WTC, a small, rural two-year institution in the upper Midwest that has significantly improved its

standing as a postsecondary organization over the last several years. Throughout my data collection, I gathered relevant documents and made direct observations to supplement the information gained through interviews. I applied the constant comparative method to analyze my data throughout the coding, categorizing, and theming processes typical of qualitative studies, which was a useful analysis method for understanding a phenomenon that was not previously studied in higher education settings.

In chapter four, I described how midlevel managers' role sensemaking and enactment result from the interplay of socialization and identity construction. Participants reconciled the constructs and interpersonal cues that exist in their work environments with who they are or think they should be in the context of change at WTC. Relationships emerged as a superordinate theme because they enabled multi-directional communication and collective problem-solving, which helped participants navigate the complexity of institutional initiatives despite the ambiguity change imposed on midlevel managers' understanding of their roles and the actions they should take.

In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss my findings in light of existing literature. I note implications for institutional practices critical to enhancing the outcomes of institutional change through addressing midlevel managers' role sensemaking needs. Finally, limitations to my present research are explored, and I make recommendations for future scholarship.

## Discussion

My data analysis yielded three prominent themes: 1) the interplay of socialization and identity construction, 2) working with and through ambiguity, and 3) relationships as catalysts. From the amalgamation of these themes, one overarching finding emerged: midlevel managers make sense of their roles through an interdependent cycle of socialization and identity

construction that is perpetually reconciled by the midlevel manager and reinforced by the environment. That is, the process of role sensemaking is iterative, ongoing, and takes place at the intersection of who the midlevel manager is and how the midlevel manager experiences and interprets their environment.

This key finding is commensurate with decades of literature about sensemaking. In his seminal work, Weick (1995, p. 4) defined sensemaking as "the making of sense," a process people undergo to understand the situations in which they find themselves. Sensemaking allows us to comprehend and articulate the unknown and involves a never-ending journey of apprehending and integrating novel information and ideas into something we already know, and then incorporating this new cognition into something we need to know (Coetzee & Wilkinson, 2020). In the case of this research, midlevel managers merged new information they discovered in their environment (i.e., institutional initiatives) with what they knew about themselves (i.e., self-concept) and their place of employment (i.e., institutional constructs and relationships with campus community members). Then, midlevel managers utilized this understanding to inform what they need to know (i.e., their roles and how to perform them).

As detailed in chapter two, Weick (1995) identified seven principles of sensemaking. He described sensemaking as 1) grounded in identity, 2) retrospective, 3) enactive of sensible environments, 4) social, 5) ongoing, 6) focused on and by extracted cues, and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Each of the seven principles surfaced throughout participants' narratives about their experiences of organizational change and were often difficult to distinguish because of how intertwined the principles become throughout sensemaking processes. However, principles one, three, four, six, and seven were conveyed most prominently by participants. The

following discussion of themes further illustrates how midlevel managers in this study made sense of their roles in the context of institutional change.

**Theme 1: Interplay of Socialization and Identity Construction**

Participants in this study described how socialization and identity construction occurred simultaneously and continuously to inform and reinforce their role sensemaking. The interplay of socialization and identity construction involved the interaction of three elements: self-concept, institutional constructs, and interpersonal cues. There was significant overlap and interdependencies amongst these elements. The idea that each element informed and reinforced the others is supported by previous research. First, Weick (1995) argued that organizations are social constructions. Like other employees, midlevel managers create and recreate social constructions as they make meaning of change and their role in it. Continuous intrapersonal and interpersonal cognitive processing either affirmed or altered participants' understandings of their roles. Personal reflections, cultural artifacts, and interactions with others all influenced how midlevel managers in this study conceptualized their role in facilitating change and how they enacted these roles.

Similarly, Wilson et al. (2016) noted that the development of professional identity involves the internalization of environmental norms and the individual's self-image, as well as the acquisition of specific competence in knowledge and skills. The midlevel managers in this study described how their perception of themselves and the value they bring to the organization by way of their individual strengths is a key factor in how they made sense of their role. Additionally, participants noted how institutional constructs served as normative guideposts for how they should think and behave in their role sensemaking and action-taking processes. Interactions with other college employees provided less concrete but equally vital socialization

cues relative to change initiatives and participants' roles in facilitating their implementation. While each midlevel manager in this study expressed their own unique inclinations or natural tendencies to behave in certain ways, participants described how interpersonal experiences shaped their role sensemaking. As Thomas-Gregory (2014) suggested, the way others interpret and react to a midlevel manager's way of being encourages the continuation of a manager's behavior or exerts pressure on that individual to adapt their behavior in conformity with established institutional norms, thus reflecting the reciprocal relationship between socialization and identity construction.

The midlevel managers in this study described being particularly prone to socialization and the impact socialization had on their role sensemaking. Whether discussing institutional mission, vision, values, and other cultural paradigms or replaying interactions with the stakeholders of their leadership, participants described being in a constant state of sensing their environment. Because they are in the middle of the organizational hierarchy, the paradoxes midlevel managers straddle regarding what they do, who they serve, and the demands on role performance make identity construction a recurrent and complicated process for midlevel managers (Branson et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2005). The 360 degrees of responsibilities and relationships that surrounded my research participants provided them with endless information that contributed to their conceptualizations of their roles in the context of organizational change. Midlevel managers in this study described how they reconciled the cues present in their environment with their own self-concepts to make sense of their role. Participants' actions then reflected the integration of cues with who the midlevel manager is or believed they should be in their role. Sensemaking is essential to role identity construction (Weick, 1995), and how

individuals identify as midlevel managers and what that means in the context of organizational change determine their internalization and performance of role obligations (Weick et al., 2005).

Throughout the analysis of data and the development of this theme, I observed Weick's (1995) first, third, and sixth principles at play. The first principle states that sensemaking is grounded in identity. Sensemaking starts with the sensemaker (i.e., the midlevel manager). Weick described how making sense of what is in the environment is closely related to the sensemaker's understanding of who they are. This concept can be seen in Sarah, Kathleen, and William's explanations of how identifying as a problem-solver, former law enforcement officer, and technology expert, respectively, influenced how they made sense of their role in the context of change.

Weick (1995) also noted that identity is constantly in flux and is continuously revised to incorporate individual experiences and experiences with others. How people see themselves in particular situations influences how they make sense of these situations. An interdependence between the individual and the environment in the sensemaking process was evident throughout participants' descriptions of their role sensemaking processes. Weick's (1995) third principle states that sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments, and the sixth principle states that sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues. That is, people produce part of the environment in which they engage. As a midlevel manager responds to an environmental cue related to the change, they contribute to the environment. Extracted cues are bits of information people use as a starting point to make sense of the whole. William and Laurie referred to cultural paradigms focused on student success and Jennifer and Katie referenced organizational development offerings as institutional constructs from which they extracted cues. William, Jennifer, Laurie, and Katie described extracting cues from interpersonal interactions. Whether

via institutional constructs or interpersonal interactions, midlevel managers are presented with stimuli they cannot control. However, they have agency to react to these cues in ways that reinforce or resist environmental pressures and, in turn, contribute to or produce the environment. Through their interviews, midlevel managers illustrated how they sought information, provided input, asked questions, and took action related to change initiatives – all of which became generative products of the institutional change tapestry.

**Theme 2: Working with and Through Ambiguity**

In the context of organizational change, participants described how their role sensemaking was often uninformed, unintentional, and uncertain. Bragg et al. (2018) indicated that community and technical colleges across the United States are struggling with the why, what, and how of their change reforms due to the sheer number of reform activities involved in institutional transformation. Not unlike other two-year institutions, WTC is also juggling multiple initiatives. Despite possessing a strong 'why', participants expressed challenges with the what and the how of WTC's desired changes.

Large-scale change in any type of organization is complicated. It typically generates confusion for those most impacted by the initiative, including midlevel managers who must operationalize the strategy and influence the way others think about and perform their work (Kieran et al., 2020; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). When midlevel managers encounter novel or perplexing situations, they must often reassess and adjust their role identity and reconstitute what it means to be a midlevel manager in this new context (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). With the volume and pace of change, midlevel managers in this study shared that they rarely have the resources (namely information and time) needed to envision the end product of an initiative adequately, assess what the change means for them or their teams, and take a planful approach to

facilitating change. Instead, participants described perceiving their immediate circumstances and reacting in real-time with the hope that their actions are positively contributing to the initiative and making the experience better for college stakeholders.

This behavior aligns with Weick's (1995) seventh principle: sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. That is, the outcome of sensemaking is a coherent and reasonable logic that serves as a springboard for action. As illustrated by Katie and Sarah's descriptions of how they feel they are merely adapting and reacting to their immediate environment rather than evolving into effective organizational change facilitators, midlevel managers in this study collected and considered whatever information they could to create plausible coherence of a change situation and take action.

Although participants identified the need to take time to reflect on and strategize about institutional changes and routinely attempted to manage their schedules to allow for contemplation, their time management systems regularly broke down when more urgent, often operational, needs arose. Much of the experience expressed by the midlevel managers in my study is reflected in research conducted by Pepper and Giles (2014), who found that midlevel managers perceived their roles as overwhelming in nature, experienced a sense of immense responsibility with inadequate authority, and struggled with incessant demands requiring immediate reactions.

Despite these negative aspects of the midlevel manager role, however, Pepper and Giles (2014) also found one positive theme that seemed to supersede the others: a desire to lead people in the collective contribution toward a greater good. This finding is commensurate with the intrinsic motivations participants in my study conveyed, including the community connections described by Jennifer and Laurie and the student success mentality described by William, Laurie,

and Jennifer. An overall sense of community and shared purpose seemed to compensate for the absence of information, time, and certainty in midlevel managers' change-related experiences.

The small, rural nature of the institution cultivated an atmosphere where working together to achieve a shared purpose was not only a necessity but also a cherished quality of their workplace and gave midlevel managers the opportunity to witness first-hand the impacts of their efforts on students. Wilson et al. (2016) found that a strong commitment to one's institution and geographic area were significant factors in the development of midlevel managers' professional identity and the motivation to perform their role despite their uncertainty. The size of WTC fosters a closeness among employees and offers proximity to students. Additionally, participants' integration and investment in the surrounding community created a heightened sense of responsibility to help students succeed.

Although participants described struggling to meet the demands of organizational change, they also shared how a collective focus on student success helped them push through. Student success fueled midlevel managers' energy to persevere through organizational change obstacles. Klempin and Karp (2018) found that transformative change requires a unified commitment to a shared vision for the reform and its goals. As described in my findings, WTC's midlevel managers perceived and reinforced a dedication to student success through their interpretations of institutional constructs and their relationships with other institutional actors. Experiencing camaraderie and witnessing student success smooths the pathway to role sensemaking and actions for midlevel managers. A general sense of community and shared purpose created an atmosphere that allowed midlevel managers to navigate the confusion and complexity of their role while enjoying the rewards of performing it despite these challenges.

**Theme 3: Relationships as Catalysts**

Sensemaking is inherently social in nature (Weick, 1995). It follows, then, that relationships emerged as a superordinate theme in my research. Social interactions constantly influenced role sensemaking. Relationships enabled multi-directional communication and collective problem-solving, which helped participants navigate the complexity of institutional initiatives despite the ambiguity change imposes on midlevel managers' understanding of their roles and the actions they should take. Relationships created access to information, provided implicit and explicit permission to behave in certain ways, and socialized the thoughts and actions of midlevel managers. The relationships that existed within midlevel managers' social spheres significantly impacted participants' sensemaking. Even when institutional change initiatives disrupted the routines of midlevel managers, regular access to and engagement with others at multiple levels of the organization provided the context and cues necessary for role sensemaking.

Midlevel managers who participated in this study made sense of and performed their change-related roles through their relationships with others. William and Jennifer described interactions with the President as influential to their role sensemaking. Kathleen's understanding of her role was developed and affirmed through her interactions with the Chief Student Services Officer. All participants expressed an appreciation for their peers' contributions to their sensemaking processes and noted how direct reports impacted their conceptualizations of their roles as well.

The mechanisms put into place to encourage social interactions seemed to help midlevel managers navigate and make sense of the large volume of changes. As institutional change researchers suggested (Eckel & Kezar, 2002), the most effective change-related activities

provided vehicles for participants to reconsider their existing mental models, redefine their roles, and align their change-related behaviors with new institutional directions. College forums, leadership meetings, and other structured opportunities to collect information, provide input, and ask questions equipped midlevel leaders in this study with clarity about change initiatives, an understanding of their roles in the context of these changes, and the capability to perform the role of change agent.

Branson et al. (2016) argued that midlevel management is best understood as a highly complex relationship endeavor characterized by the contextual negotiation of structure and power. This notion was evident in participants' descriptions of their sensemaking processes. To whom midlevel managers have access and what conditions exist to enable social interactions mattered substantially in participants' role sensemaking and enactment. Participants described the ways multi-directional relationships enabled communication and collective problem-solving. Kathleen's explanation about how her membership on the executive team was pivotal to her change leadership demonstrates the degree to which group membership matters. It became evident throughout the interviews that where there was variation in the opportunities for and quality of relationships, there was variation in sensemaking outcomes.

According to Branson et al. (2016), a relational analysis of midlevel management should acknowledge the individuality of the relationships that are central to midlevel managers' experiences. Individual midlevel managers are differently positioned amidst structural, power, and professional relations (Branson et al., 2016). Despite the relatively small size of WTC, multiple layers of leadership and governance exist, including division leadership teams, a supervisor group, shared governance councils, a cross-functional executive leadership team, and the President's cabinet. Participants in this study did not have equal membership in these groups,

which had implications on each midlevel manager's role sensemaking. As suggested by Kezar and Eckel (2002), uneven access to these group structures and the relationships they foster results in variations of midlevel managers' conceptualizations of new identities, feelings about their investment in the effort, and willingness to be brought along with the institutional agenda.

Organizational sensemaking, a necessary condition for transformational change, is a difficult objective to achieve in postsecondary settings (Kezar, 2018). Although challenging, facilitating sensemaking is a worthwhile endeavor. A measured approach to sensemaking results in adapted mindsets, and adapted mindsets enable individuals to align their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors related to initiatives accordingly and, thus, carry out the strategic initiative (Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2018; Maitlis, 2005). Transformational change is made possible when coherent shared understandings across the organization exist to enable cohesive actions collectively aligned to the objectives of the strategic initiative (Weick, 1995; Eckel & Kezar, 2002). Divergent sensemaking within institutions of higher education can be problematic for the execution of change directives (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar, 2012; Kezar, 2018). However, because of their network centrality, midlevel managers can leverage their positions and relationships to be especially helpful in achieving organizational sensemaking.

Like other scholars, Eckel & Kezar (2002) highlighted that sensemaking is vital to organizational change but failed to examine how midlevel managers can be influential in this process. Combined with midlevel managers' ability to impact the depth and breadth of organizational sensemaking, midlevel managers' practical and relational knowledge gives them the ability to anticipate and mitigate change challenges across the organization. However, midlevel managers must first be empowered to do so. Supporting midlevel managers'

sensemaking is a critical step to aligning change efforts toward targeted goals, and executive leaders should make this a strategic priority in the early stages of transformational reforms.

As demonstrated in my findings and supported by previous literature, midlevel managers' role sensemaking involves the interplay of socialization and identity construction (Coetzee & Wilkenson, 2020; Thomas-Gregory, 2014; Weick, 1995; Wilson et al., 2016). Furthermore, change-related sensemaking and enactment are informed by and activated through relationships midlevel managers access and leverage (Branson et al., 2016; Eckel & Kezar, 2002; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Weick, 1995). Midlevel managers in this study explained how they leaned into the explicit and implicit cues in their environment and their self-concepts to make sense of their roles in the context of organizational change. Their role sensemaking processes are then uniquely nuanced by their relationships with other campus community members.

## Implications

Below, I share implications for practice colleges or universities can consider when addressing midlevel managers' sensemaking needs and, ultimately, enhancing the institution's organizational change capacity. I have categorized the recommendations by the three realms in which midlevel managers' sensemaking processes take place: environment, individual, and relationships. The environment section addresses how institutional leadership can influence midlevel managers' role sensemaking by deliberately engaging socialization factors that exist in the environment. The individual section speaks to how institutional leadership can prepare and equip midlevel managers to construct a change agent identity. The relationship section discusses how institutions can create relationship-building structures that enable midlevel managers to make sense of and enact their change-related roles.

## Environment

Midlevel managers in this study described their environment as made up of institutional constructs, organizational structures, campus atmosphere, colleagues, college customs and norms, and the surrounding community. Institutional identity and context factors, such as those mentioned by my study participants, coalesce to create and perpetuate a campus culture that midlevel managers perceived, experienced, and were socialized by. Campus culture predisposes the underlying systems of meaning, assumptions, and values that shape institutional operations and prevent or facilitate change (Kezar, 2018). Aligning organizational change strategies with campus culture increases the likelihood of success for an initiative (Kezar & Eckel, 2002) Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for pulling environmental levers to foster change-readiness and inspire action that is collectively aligned to institutional goals are summarized below.

### *Create and Communicate a Compelling Vision of Change*

Because midlevel managers are not typically the institutional actors developing organizational strategy (Eckel & Kezar, 2002), it is imperative that the president and other cabinet members create and communicate a compelling vision for change containing cues that resonate with midlevel managers (Kotter, et al. 2021). Midlevel managers, as well as other faculty and staff, should be able to see themselves in an institutional change initiative. That is, they should be able to make meaning of the change in line with their own intrinsic motivations for working at the institution and make connections between the change's purpose and the work they perform (Kezar, 2012). The vision for any large-scale initiative should inspire a shared purpose amongst midlevel managers because it clearly reflects the institution's mission, vision, and values and directly serves key stakeholder groups midlevel managers care about. As my

findings suggest, when a change initiative fulfills institutional constructs, midlevel managers find reward in playing a role in it and are inspired to navigate the complexities of the organizational change.

### ***Align Organizational Development Efforts***

The delivery of a compelling vision for change is not enough to ensure midlevel managers and their constituents are prepared to receive and carry out the initiative. Cohesive organizational development efforts that build a strong cultural foundation for institutional change-readiness are needed. The consistency of cues contained in institutional systems, processes, and practices ensures all employees have a common understanding of institutional identity and modifies the campus climate to shape collective behaviors (Albert et al., 2000), which paves the way for midlevel managers to lead through change. Systematic organizational development comes in many forms, including visible representations and verbal reinforcements of institutional cultural paradigms, strategic planning and assessment activities, hiring and evaluation practices, and college-wide professional trainings – all of which should be aligned to enable transformation. For example, establishing and sustaining institutional customs and norms by delivering employee learning offerings, such as *Speed of Trust*, sets the tone and provides the tools for individuals to engage in and navigate the interpersonal challenges of organizational change. Another recommendation is to curate and regularly communicate student success stories related to past change initiatives so campus community members can hear about how their efforts produced outcomes that matter to and motivate them.

### ***Demonstrate Visible and Active Executive Sponsorship***

Visible and active executive sponsorship of a transformative initiative signals that the reform is a priority and legitimizes the efforts invested throughout the organization for the

change to be implemented at scale. Participants noted their observations of executive leaders 'walking the talk' as cues they internalized. Seeing and hearing executives express the sentiments and model the behaviors that lead to transformational outcomes is critical to the success of an initiative. Executive leaders who convey a consistent message and back up what they say with their actions inspire midlevel managers' change leadership and the followership of others across the college or university.

***Structure Opportunities for Engagement***

Institutional leaders should introduce midlevel managers to elements of the organizational environment they might not usually encounter to diversify, affirm, or adjust their perspectives by offering midlevel managers multiple opportunities to convene and engage with others throughout the course of a change event. The benefits of structuring these social arrangements include building a community of practice around a shared purpose, dedicating time to reflect on the change initiative, sharing ideas about operationalizing the strategy, and aligning efforts to achieve an initiative's intended outcomes – all of which participants expressed as important to their sensemaking. The rich, change-focused cues that surfaced during these gatherings, as well as the implicit permission to pause, consider their self-concepts, and share how their knowledge and skills fit into the change puzzle, lessened ambiguity for participants and made space to take a planful approach to their change agency. Critical characteristics of these convenings included access to executive leaders, cross-functional conversations, input-gathering and validation, and team-building activities. Participants discussed how structured opportunities to engage in dialogue at college forums and leadership meetings provided them exposure to diverse perspectives and allowed them to explore meaning-making and draw connections between the strategy and their work in community with others. These experiences

helped materialize their change-related role and gave midlevel managers the motivation to persevere toward a common goal.

## Individual

Although cabinet members' behaviors are important to initiating a campus-wide change, operationalizing the strategy happens at the midlevel ranks. Intentionally attending to midlevel managers' role sensemaking involves actively acknowledging the vital role they have in organizational change by documenting, engaging, resourcing, and rewarding their participation in it. Midlevel managers' capacity for and effectiveness at facilitating organizational change can be enhanced through professional development efforts focused specifically on the change-related sensemaking needs of midlevel managers. These gestures enhance midlevel managers' self-concept and minimize the ambiguity they feel.

### *Acknowledge Change as a Responsibility of Midlevel Managers*

Given the inevitability of change in higher education, it follows that midlevel managers will be impacted and expected to play a part in facilitating change. In turn, authenticating the role midlevel managers have in organizational change through documentation is a critical first step in helping midlevel managers make sense of these expectations. For example, including general responsibilities related to organizational change on job descriptions allows midlevel managers to anticipate participation in change initiatives and consider how change leadership matches their current self-concepts and understandings of their roles. More detailed change-related responsibilities specific to a given initiative can be further noted on action plans, project charters, or other initiative-related documentation. Regular check-ins via standing agenda items with supervisors, project managers, or other leaders can help to ensure midlevel managers understand and are prepared to fulfill their change-related roles.

***Leverage Midlevel Managers' Perspectives***

Executive leaders' role in mobilizing, aligning, and energizing people for action lies in their authority to remove obstacles and allocate resources appropriately (Kezar, 2018). Doing so requires executive leaders to invite and affirm feedback from midlevel managers who have a unique perspective of the institutional structures and operations and thus can collectively provide sound counsel about the initiative's pathway to success. Systematically including the viewpoints of midlevel managers through their participation on project teams or other feedback mechanisms moves institutions from hoping the simple tallying of individual contributions adds up to true transformation and toward a collective understanding and enactment of shared purpose and responsibility across and throughout the organization (Branson et al., 2016).

In addition to expanding the institutional change network by intentionally and inclusively involving midlevel managers, it signals to midlevel managers that they bring value to the change process. By inviting and validating midlevel managers' institutional knowledge and professional skillsets, executive leaders demonstrate that they value midlevel managers' voices. This practice bolsters midlevel managers' self-concept, which is an important element of role sensemaking that emerged in this study.

There is an added benefit in tapping into the technical expertise that midlevel managers possess. When intentionally leveraged, midlevel managers' understanding of and ability to perform core functions of the college, such as enrollment, advising, teaching, and technology services, is vital to paving an effective and efficient path forward. Because of their unique vantage points, which include a deep understanding of institutional operations and the people who carry out this work daily, midlevel managers can foreshadow for executive leaders the pitfalls of a change project and proactively mitigate issues before they arise (Balogun & Johnson,

2005; Bryant & Stensaker, 2011; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Throughout an initiative's lifecycle, institutional leaders could host regular listening sessions with the midlevel manager group to take the pulse of the campus community's experience of the change or integrate the check-in during already existing manager meetings.

***Equip Midlevel Managers with Resources***

College and university leaders can reduce midlevel managers' role ambiguity and evolve midlevel managers' self-concepts as change agents by providing adequate resources – most often in the form of information, time, and training (Kezar, 2018). Employees seek information about how a change is going to impact them from their direct supervisors, who are often midlevel managers (Prosci, 2020). It is imperative that midlevel managers are equipped with easily accessible and streamlined information about the change strategy and its operational implications so they can confidently answer their direct reports' questions.

It is important to note that providing static, one-way information is the minimum threshold for supporting midlevel managers' role sensemaking. Involving midlevel managers early and often in strategic conversations about change initiatives in systematic ways helps them make sense of the change, recognize what it means for them and their teams, and effectively enact their change-related roles to effectuate organizational transformation. Midlevel managers prefer dialogue that allows them to share their vantage points and expertise. Back-and-forth conversations between midlevel managers and their supervisors or executive leaders are critical to co-creating a shared understanding of the initiative and its intended outcomes. A given initiative's strategic plan should include collaborative sensemaking activities throughout the project's timeline.

One of the biggest challenges for midlevel managers is identifying and protecting the time they need to think and act strategically while trying to facilitate change. Executive leaders can rectify this often-cited barrier to change by incorporating midlevel managers' change-related roles into their calculated workload and eliminating or relocating some of their operational responsibilities. If this is impossible because of budget, personnel, or other constraints, executive leaders could carve out time in midlevel managers' schedules by calling meetings with agendas focused on reflection, sensemaking, planning, and problem-solving.

Finally, supervisors or other institutional leaders should assess for potential gaps in midlevel managers' competencies related to the initiative and change facilitation, then support the acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary to fulfill their change-related roles. Colleges and universities should provide baseline training that teaches midlevel managers about the fundamentals of change management, issues midlevel managers might encounter, and techniques for overcoming these challenges. These trainings can be delivered by hired consultants or by accessing faculty who are subject matter experts. Providing these training opportunities will enhance midlevel managers' self-concept as capable change agents and reduce their role ambiguity. Ongoing coaching by the midlevel manager's supervisor, a professional trainer, or another mentor should be made available to reflect upon, refine, and re-energize midlevel managers' role sensemaking throughout the lifecycle of the change event.

**Relationships**

Relationships are where the environment and the individual meet. It is at this intersection that divergence in my participants' sensemaking processes and products can be observed. Relationships are mechanisms that inform, activate, and reinforce midlevel managers' sensemaking in nuanced ways. Where there was variance in access to and quality of

relationships, there was variance in how participants made sense of their roles in the context of organizational change. To create the conditions necessary for organizational sensemaking, a necessary element of transformational change, institutional leaders should attend to the relationship-building of midlevel managers.

### ***Assume a Model of Collective Leadership***

Assuming a model of collective leadership is useful when implementing organizational change. Collective leadership flattens the hierarchy and creates a network of change agents who are invested in the success of the initiative (Kezar, 2018; Pearce & Conger, 2003). The relationships developed and strengthened by shared participation in a college-wide change are critical to minimizing the speed-to-learning, and learning minimizes the speed-to-action (Burke, 2011; Spillane, 2006). Especially for top-down change initiatives, creating opportunities to build relationships with executive leaders or their delegated change champions is critical to midlevel managers' role sensemaking and enactment. Democratizing change by inclusively engaging midlevel managers, who are structurally and relationally positioned to impact the change-related sensemaking and actions of others, in change leadership garners greater buy-in across the organization (Kezar, 2018; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Flattening the hierarchy brings midlevel managers closer to initiatives' sources of truth, guidance providers, and decision-makers. Mechanisms put into place to foster relationships, like communities of practice at the midlevel ranks, are vehicles for collective information-sharing, input gathering, and problem-solving (Kezar, 2018).

### ***Build Camaraderie among Midlevel Peers***

Participants in this study mentioned peer relationships as a substantially influential force in their role sensemaking processes. In turn, it is recommended that institutions create

opportunities for midlevel managers to gather and share their perceptions and experiences with one another. Based on this study's findings, peer groups offer an atmosphere of psychological safety where midlevel managers can be vulnerable, ask questions, seek advice, and test out ideas related to change initiatives. In addition to gathering and incorporating the sensemaking cues that surface during these conversations, midlevel managers develop common understandings and build a united front from which to execute the change initiative collectively.

### *Empower Partnerships with Direct Reports*

Midlevel managers oversee the work of others. When organizational change disrupts daily routines, midlevel managers are responsible for communicating and directing the new practices that those on the frontlines must adopt (Amey & Eddy, 2018). As noted in my findings, some midlevel managers do not feel well-equipped to facilitate change or approach the difficult conversations that often accompany change events. Institutions can hardwire constructs, such as the principles contained in *Speed of Trust* and *Orange Frog*, into the campus culture to sew trust and grace into the fabric of interactions between supervisors and direct reports. Other aforementioned environmental factors, such as visible and active executive sponsorship, also empower midlevel managers to practice change agency by legitimizing their efforts.

## Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Like all research studies, mine has limitations. I acknowledge that the findings from this study are not generalizable. Rather, my case study was designed to portray how midlevel managers at a single institution navigating organizational change made sense of and enacted their roles in that specific context. My goal was to provide thick descriptions of the participants' lived experiences in an effort to illuminate themes that will lend insights into midlevel managers'

sensemaking processes and allow the reader to ponder how these descriptions resonate with their own experiences or how recommendations for practice can be applied at their institutions.

Although a sample size of six participants is reasonable relative to the size of WTC's workforce, the demographic homogeneity, similarities in career trajectories, and ties to the community may minimize the differentiation amongst the participants' sensemaking experiences. For example, none of the participants originally had their sights set on a career in higher education. Across participants, there were instances of transitioning from careers in other industries, choosing to work at WTC because the College is a major employer in the area, and rising in the ranks from student employment. No participant had previous work experience at another institution of higher education. The commonalities among my participants could have limited the variety of perspectives, potentially hindering the exploration of diverse factors affecting sensemaking and the ability to make meaningful comparisons.

Finally, WTC is a small and rural institution. While I knew of these institutional characteristics, I did not anticipate the degree to which the size and type of the College would surface in the participants' responses. As a result, it is important to note that the findings of my study might not be representative of the broader population of midlevel managers.

To overcome these limitations, research on how midlevel managers make sense of and enact change should be conducted at institutions that vary in type and size to determine whether my findings resonate for midlevel leaders across higher education settings. In addition to differentiation amongst institutional characteristics, differentiation amongst participants is also key to overcoming the limitations of my study. Understanding the perspectives of individuals who represent diversity in terms of racial identity, gender identity, professional experiences, and geographic location is important to the purpose of this study.

Higher education literature falls short of examining how midlevel managers make sense of change and their role in it and, consequently, how they might be especially influential in the sensemaking processes and subsequent work behaviors of others. For postsecondary institutions to meet the demands for change at the pace they encounter them, understanding how midlevel managers make sense of and navigate the complexities of their role in facilitating institutional change could be key to more efficient and effective transformations. However, a larger, more diverse sample of midlevel managers representing variations of the higher education sectors and midlevel positions within the organization is needed before understanding can be achieved. Future research could examine which sensemaking strategies are most effective for midlevel managers. Equity concerns and power dynamics within these practices should also be addressed.

## Chapter Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed my findings in light of existing literature. I recommended promising institutional practices that could enhance the experience and outcomes of institutional change by addressing midlevel managers' role sensemaking needs. Finally, the limitations of my present research were explored, and I made recommendations for future scholarship.

Sensemaking, when left to individuals to figure out on their own, is varied and often haphazard. During institutional change processes, unstructured sensemaking could result in inconsistent outputs across the organization, causing organizations the inability to fulfill their change objectives at scale. Because of their hierarchical and relational positions within colleges and universities, midlevel managers could be instrumental in stabilizing and aligning the sensemaking of others, which is a prerequisite for transformational change. But first, midlevel managers' sensemaking needs must be addressed. Higher education executives making top-down

change directives can increase the likelihood that their desired outcomes will be achieved if they deliberately leverage their midlevel managers. Helping midlevel managers make sense of the change and their role in it, as well as providing resources to refine their sensemaking continually, will help to ensure midlevel managers are engaging in change leadership practices that achieve strategic objectives and garner the transformational outcomes intended by executive leaders.

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## Appendix A

## Sample Recruitment Email

Dear Woodland Technical College manager,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at St. Cloud State University. As part of my dissertation, I am interviewing mid-level managers at your institution. The purpose of my study is to illuminate how midlevel managers make sense of and navigate the complexities of their professional role in facilitating institutional change.

You are receiving this email because you have been identified by Woodland Technical College as a midlevel manager whose department has been impacted by recent or current institutional change initiatives. Your insights are valuable to understanding how two-year colleges can support midlevel managers' interpretation and enactment of their role in helping to facilitate changes within their organization.

Your participation in an in-person interview on your campus will take approximately 60 minutes and will be scheduled at a time convenient for you. Great care will be taken to protect your anonymity. The data you provide during your interview will be deidentified, and raw data will not be shared with college officials. Throughout the dissertation, I will use pseudonyms for interviewees and the institution. Please be assured this project has been approved by the St. Cloud State Institutional Review Board and a committee from Woodland Technical College.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email. A second correspondence with additional information, including a consent form, a brief demographic survey, and potential meeting dates and times will be promptly provided.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my dissertation advisor with questions about this research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Gahagan
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## Appendix B

## Demographic Survey

(Administered via SurveyMonkey)

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation research about how midlevel managers make sense of their role in the context of institutional change. To gather background information about you and to be sure you meet the criteria to be included in this study, please respond to the following prompts.

- What is your name?
- What is your email address?
- What is your gender identity?
- What is your racial/ethnic identity?
- How long have you worked in higher education?
- How long have you worked at this institution?
- What is your current title?
- How long have you had this position?
- Who (what roles) do you supervise and who (what role) supervises you?
- Have you held any other positions at this institution previous to your current position?
- Have you/has your department been impacted by the implementation of the ERP system or the Aspen Unlocking Opportunities initiative?

## Appendix C

## Informed Consent

### Managing Change from the Middle
### Informed Consent to Participate

I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program at St. Cloud State University. As part of my dissertation, I am interviewing midlevel managers in higher education institutions whose departments are impacted by significant change. The purpose of my study is to understand how midlevel managers make sense of their role within the context of institutional transformation.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in one (1) hour-long in-depth, semi-structured interview. You may also be asked to provide documentation reflecting your change facilitation efforts (e.g., presentations, meeting agendas).

Benefits of the research: This qualitative study aims to explore the experience of midlevel managers during institutional change processes. I also seek to illuminate how midlevel managers make sense of and navigate the complexities of their role in facilitating institutional change. While there are no significant benefits for participation in this study, some midlevel managers might find it useful to reflect on change practices to inform their approach to future change initiatives. Your insights are valuable to understanding how two-year colleges can support midlevel managers' interpretation and enactment of their role to help facilitate large-scale change within their organization.

Risks and discomforts: There are no significant risks to participating in this study. However, some midlevel managers might consider it uncomfortable to share their thoughts about how change is handled at their institution or to reveal how they feel about a particular change experience. Despite precautions taken to maintain anonymity, there is a chance someone will be able to identify you.

Great care will be taken to secure collected data and maintain the anonymity of the institution and individual participants. While this study will be published in part or whole, pseudonyms will replace your real name and the real name of your institution. During the interview you may refuse to answer any questions. After the completion of the interviews, you will receive a transcription of your interview. If you wish to expand, clarify, or remove responses contained in the transcription, you may do so.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, your institution, or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

If you have questions about this research, you may contact Nicole Gahagan (nicole.gahagan@go.stcloudstate.edu; 414-779-0729) or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Rachel

Friedensen (refriedensen@stcloudstate.edu; 320-308-3116). Results of the study can be requested from the researcher.

Your participation is much appreciated in pursuit of the goals for this study.

Sincerely,
Nicole H. Gahagan

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the information provided above, and you have consented to participate.

________________________________________ ____________________

Signature of Participant Date

# Appendix D

## Interview Guide

Project: Managing Change from the Middle | Interviewer: Nicole Gahagan

Interviewee: | Location:

Date: | Time:

**Introduction**

- Ask for permission to record the interview and begin recording.
- Welcome the participant.
- Introduce self.
- Review the purpose of the study. [Purpose: As part of a dissertation research study, I am interviewing midlevel managers whose departments are impacted by significant change that is part of a larger organizational strategy. The purpose of the study is to understand how midlevel managers make sense of their role within the context of institutional transformation.]
- Explain the data collection process. [Process: This interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I will ask several open-ended questions, giving you leeway to answer however you would like. Occasionally, I might ask for clarification or prompt you to elaborate further on certain aspects of your response. In addition to verbal information, I welcome you to share any documents or other materials that might help me understand how you made sense of your role during a time of change at your institution. I would also appreciate opportunities to observe presentations or other interactions between you and others related to the organizational change initiative.]
- Review informed consent form and request signature if the signature is not already present.
- Ask interviewee if there is a need for additional information or clarification before proceeding; answer questions accordingly.

**Interview**

Summarize and confirm what is already known about the interviewee using responses from the following questions on the demographic survey:

- How long have you worked in higher education?
- How long have you worked at this institution?
- What is your current title?
- How long have you had this position?
- Who (what roles) do you supervise and who (what role) supervises you?
- Have you held any other positions at this institution previous to your current position?

Ask the following questions, remaining flexible to the number of questions asked and the order in which questions are asked. Use probes, such as “Tell me more,” and “What does that mean?” to elicit additional information.

- Could you describe what your position generally entails? What are your day-to-day responsibilities?
- How does organizational change typically occur at this institution? Tell me about your experience as a midlevel manager while the institution undergoes planned changes. How is this similar to or different than what your role is typically like?
- Taking the ERP or Unlocking Opportunity projects as examples, what did you perceive your role to be throughout the lifecycle of that project?
  - How did you come to this understanding? What was most helpful to making sense of your role? What was lacking or caused confusion?
  - In what ways did your interpretation of your role evolve over time? What prompted any shifts in your understanding of your role?
  - Could you explain the thoughts that crossed your mind and/or emotions that surfaced as the change took place?
- Describe some of the midlevel manager behaviors you demonstrated during the transformational change process. Walk me through your decision-making process. What factors did you consider? What outcomes were you hoping to achieve?
- Using the ERP or Unlocking Opportunity projects as examples, walk me through some challenges you encountered in terms of your role. How did you overcome the challenges? What information or resources were available to you, and how did you use them? From where did you get cues about what you should do next?
- Using that same example, describe the most rewarding experiences of your role. When those experiences come to mind, what is it about each particular experience that made an impression on you?

**Conclusion**

- Ask: Is there anything I did not think to ask about that you think I should know?
- Ask: What questions for me do you have about the study?
- Remind the participant that interviews will be transcribed and a transcription will be provided to the participant for review. Expansion or clarification of any interview responses are welcomed upon the participant's receipt of the transcript.
- Verify the participant's contact information and ensure participant has interviewer's contact information and the supporting faculty advisor's contact information.
- Thank participant for their time and stop recording.

# Appendix E

## IRB Approval Letter

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

**720 4th Avenue South AS 101, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498**

Date: May 16, 2023

Name: Nicole Gahagan
Email: nicole.gahagan@go.stcloudstate.edu

Faculty Mentor/Advisor: Rachel Friedensen

**IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION:**

Expedited

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your continuing review for your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects.

PROJECT TITLE: **Managing Change from the Middle**

Your project has been: **Approved**

SCSU IRB#: **48604339**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1st Year Approval Date:** | **May 16, 2023** | **1st Year Expiration Date:** | **May 15, 2024** |
| **2nd Year Approval Date:** | | **2nd Year Expiration Date:** | |
| **3rd Year Approval Date:** | | **3rd Year Expiration Date:** | |

Please read through the following important information concerning IRB projects.

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc) by completing an IRB Modification/Revision Request Form.

- The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

- Expedited and full board review projects are up for annual renewal (1 year from your approval date, or on the expiration date listed on the approval stamp) and the principal investigator is *required* to report the status of the project *prior to the expiration date* by completing one of the following:
  - Continuing Review Form: Request to extend the project as either subject recruitment/enrollment continues or data collection continues and the project has not concluded.
  - Final Report Form: Indicate project completion as data collection is complete (data anaylsis may continue).
    - *You will receive an email reminder approximately one month in advance of the expiration date. NOTE: if a report form is not submitted timely, the protocol will be closed and a new submission will be required.*

- Approved consent form(s) and recruitment document(s) display the formal SCSU IRB stamp which is indication of official approval and lists expiration dates. These are the forms to be used during the project study. *If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.*

Feel free to contact the IRB for assistance at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding for expedited response. Additional information can also be found on the IRB website https://www.stcloudstate.edu/irb/protocol.aspx.

Sincerely,
**IRB Chair**:
Dr. Roxanne Wilson
Professor
Department of Nursing

Roxanne Wilson