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## A Multidimensional Leadership Model For Rural Community College Presidents

Michael John Raich

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A MULTIDIMENSIONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR RURAL  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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April  
2013

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This dissertation, submitted by Michael John Raich in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

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Title            A Multidimensional Leadership Model for Rural Community College Presidents

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Michael John Raich  
April 4, 2013

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To Carol, Allie, and Kendra

## ABSTRACT

A qualitative study involving six rural community college presidents was conducted with the intended purpose of understanding what dimensions of leadership emerge from rural community college presidents during times of sustained financial distress. Unexpectedly, the presidents pointed the study's discussions to insights much broader than the issue of leading institutions with decreased budgets and instead presented qualitative data that redirected the researcher to explore what dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the "new reality" of higher education. The new reality describes a higher education environment that—along with significantly decreased funding—includes rapidly changing technology, competition from for-profit institutions, the expanding reaches of e-education, and next-generation students who demand a flexible and sophisticated educational delivery. The researcher discovered five dimensions of leadership, which describe the presidential roles necessary for leading in the new reality of higher education: discerning speculators, impassioned advocates, hope-builders, decisive action-makers, and relationship-architects. A multidimensional leadership model was constructed to demonstrate how the concepts work synergistically.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A state-funded rural community college in Minnesota, Pine Mountain Community College (PMCC) serves approximately 1,200 students annually, and in 2007, PMCC experienced its third consecutive year of enrollment growth. Spirits were high as all of the bargaining units recently settled their contracts and employees enjoyed wage increases that outpaced the surrounding private sector. The economy was booming. Local industries relied on Pine Mountain to supply graduates and provide customized training to meet the demands of a growing workforce, and local legislators were pleased that PMCC responsively served its area constituents.

Dr. Bob Stance was passionate about his role as chief academic officer for PMCC where he constantly interacted with faculty and industry leaders. Building relationships and forming coalitions to make decisions were his strengths. Bob was surprised when PMCC president, Sheri Flynn, announced she would retire at the end of the academic year. A polished spokesperson and politically savvy, Sheri had received much credit for PMCC's strong standing in the region and its financial viability. Dr. Flynn did not spend much time on campus due to her constant presence at the system office and state capitol, which she felt was critical to keep PMCC on the map. Bob Stance seized the opportunity afforded to him through Sheri's retirement and was named the new president of Pine Mountain Community College effective August 1, 2008.

President Stance hit the ground running as he established regular meetings on campus called "Coffee with the President," invited staff and faculty to join the PMCC

strategic planning committee, and constantly stressed collaboration among departments. He symbolically attended as many events as possible to mingle with constituents. Dr. Stance also connected with shareholders external to campus. He met with CEOs of businesses in the region and discovered he did not need to seek out the local legislative delegation. Instead, they came to him, each of them espousing what was important to their legislative district.

Dr. Stance considered his first few months successful, but unfortunately, the November state budget forecast was in the hands of the system office, which projected a five billion dollar budget shortfall for the state. Not only would colleges face a substantial decrease in allocation for the next fiscal year, the legislature was taking back funds already committed to the state colleges and universities for the current academic year. As it turned out, this bad news was only the beginning of the financial crisis Dr. Stance would face during his early presidency. For the next three years, PMCC would experience a 35% decrease in state funding and a significant drop in customized training revenue.

Although enrollment growth intensified due to the high unemployment rate, the state legislators capped tuition increases, making it nearly impossible for colleges to make up for lost revenues. Hiring additional staff to handle the influx of new students was out of the question, and instead, workforce reductions were required to meet the new fiscal realities. The dismal financial condition of the institution did not translate to fewer expectations on Dr. Stance or PMCC. External constituents relied on Pine Mountain to continue the usual services during these difficult times, the faculty union demanded

administrative reductions in order to preserve faculty jobs, and PMCC students sent Dr. Stance a letter that requested no increase in tuition for the next year.

Exhausted, Bob sat at home and reflected on his leadership. In the past, his strength of consensus building served him well, but now he realized that the multiple expectations and current financial challenges of the rural presidency demanded a broader approach to leadership. He contemplated Sheri Flynn's leadership approach and deliberated whether her focus on internal structure and political relationships would be adequate during these times. Bob attempted to fall asleep that night and wished the financial crisis and the associated challenges were just a bad dream.

### **Statement of the Problem**

PMCC and the characters of Sherri Flynn and Bob Stance are fictitious, but the associated storyline is far from imaginary. The scenario describes the leadership realities that rural community college presidents face during times of sustained financial distress.

Minnesota colleges have struggled with unprecedented budget shortfalls due to the struggling state economy. According to Laura King, vice chancellor of finance for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) system, the MNSCU budget was projected to experience between a \$211.6 million to \$315.7 million reduction for the 2012 and 2013 fiscal years (January, 2010). King noted that in the last ten years, the state's appropriation per full-year equivalent (FYE) student decreased 16% and when adjusted for inflation, the decrease was 36.5% since 1995.

While operating within a significantly reduced budget, rural community college presidents must maintain core strategies, continue to assist business and industry, keep facilities and equipment current, and preserve a comprehensive menu of academic



offerings in order to serve students. To ensure compliance, MNSCU system officials hold community college presidents accountable for their institutional performance in areas such as access and opportunity, affordability, related employment of graduates, and financial sustainability using a publicly accessible accountability dashboard (“Accountability Dashboard,” 2011).

In addition to the expectations of the system office, Minnesota rural community colleges must fulfill the obligations of financial viability established by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Relative to financial health, the HLC measures a college’s fiscal strength using a tool called the Composite Financial Index (CFI), which takes into account several factors, including fund balance, expenditure-versus-revenue ratio, and asset depreciation (“Composite Financial Index,” 2011). Minnesota rural colleges do not fare well when measured by the CFI. Between fiscal years 2008 and 2010, 80% of Minnesota’s rural community colleges fell below a CFI measure of 3.0 in at least two of the three years while only 20% of the metro colleges shared the same distinction (“Composite Financial Index,” 2011). Rural community college presidents face extraordinary challenges of providing services to their region while facing disproportionate financial challenges.

Under normal circumstances, leadership in rural community colleges comes with a unique combination of challenges and expectations. Tackling these challenges and meeting the expectations when confronted with sustained financial distress makes rural community college leadership exceedingly complicated, which created an ideal environment for studying dimensions of leadership.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The original intended purpose of this research was to study what dimensions of leadership emerged from rural community college presidents during times of sustained financial distress. Instead, during the research process, the presidential subjects pointed the study's discussions to insights much broader than the issue of leading institutions with decreased budgets. The interviewees presented qualitative data that redirected me to explore what dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the "new reality" of higher education.

The presidents in this study described a common set of environmental conditions, which exist in the context of leadership at their rural community colleges. Defined as the "new reality" for the purposes of this paper, these conditions include significantly reduced state funding, the expanding reaches of e-education, rapidly changing technology, and next-generation students who demand a flexible and sophisticated educational delivery. All of the subjects expressed concerns about the abilities of their institutions to meet the demands of these conditions in order to remain relevant into the future. The presidents did not suggest the new reality represented a point-in-time environment that would change anytime soon. Instead, they believed this evolving context would affect the work of their institutions long into the future.

While other higher education leaders such as metropolitan presidents or presidents in other states might describe different environmental conditions as the reality of their leadership, it is important to note that the literature supports the new reality identified by the rural presidents in this study. Along with the dramatically reduced funding already supported in this paper, the current generation of students present uncertain challenges

for college leaders. McGlynn (2005) refers to people born in or after 1992 as “millennials” (p. 13). The group of millennial students, described as “Digital Natives,” (p. 5) has been immersed in technology their entire lives, which creates opportunities for colleges in the areas of e-marketing, social networking, expanded forms of instructional delivery, and an expanded market of potential students (Economist Intelligent Unit, 2008). Wilson (2008) states these students are racially and culturally more diverse and, consequently, more open-minded and tolerant of others. They are team-orientated people who grew up with technology and want to be entertained in the classroom. Wilson found that millennials are not interested in reading material that has already been presented in class or material that won’t be covered on a test. They are intolerant of boredom, and these students are more geared toward degree-attainment than simply gaining liberal knowledge. Staley and Trinkle (2011) point to a growing number of students who are older, are working full-time, and, consequently, require flexibility from their colleges to meet their needs. McGlynn (2005) says that non-traditional students are the new norm for colleges, and they need to understand that these students are often single parents, work full time, and will often need to attend school on a part-time basis.

Rapidly changing technology, the expanding reaches of e-education, and for-profits have also received attention throughout the literature. Davidson (2013) suggests that if faculty do not adapt their teaching methodologies, they might be replaced by computer screens. She uses examples of massive open online courses (MOOCs), the profitability of the for-profit sector, and the outmoded delivery method of many traditional instructors as supporting evidence for the need to change. Armstrong (2012) points to the recent successes of multiple providers of MOOCs and notes that one such

class offered by Stanford attracted 160,000 students. Armstrong (2010) also believes that much of the latest innovation in higher education has resulted from the efforts of the for-profit sector. He argues that these institutions have outpaced the public education sector in areas such as flexible scheduling, continuous delivery, individualized start and end dates, and an efficient, standardized curriculum.

Anderson, Boyles, and Raine (2012) found that 60% of respondents to a survey of digital experts and stakeholders within higher education believe that substantive change will occur in higher education by 2020. Suggested areas of differences include less people on campuses due to hybrid and online opportunities, individualized learning opportunities, and customized learning outcomes. The authors state that while colleges are attempting to be innovative and experiment with new educational approaches, uncertainty about the future has created frustration and concern about the appropriate path for change. These expressed concerns about the ambiguity of the future of higher education is shared by the six presidents interviewed in this study, and the new reality as described in this paper represents the context of this uncertainty.

The goal of this study was to find leadership dimensions that emerge during times of sustained financial distress, but it was discovered in the research process that the presidents did not discuss leadership in an isolated frame of leading in times of decreased financial support. Instead of differentiating financial burden as a singular component of leadership consciousness, the presidents focused on a broader set of conditions facing higher education leaders. This wider collection of conditions uncovered in the study is referred to as the “new reality” throughout the paper.

## **Research Questions**

The overarching questions that originally guided this research were centered on the leadership dimensions that presidents utilized to meet the expectations, navigate the challenges, and manage the relationships of institutions in sustained financial distress. In addition, I intended to determine what leadership dimensions presidents perceived as effective or ineffective and how these leadership dimensions affected presidents' priorities and actions. These questions provided context for me prior to the presidential interviews, and they guided the development of questions for the interviews.

As previously described, the presidents unexpectedly pointed the study's discussions to insights much broader than the issue of leading institutions with decreased budget, which led me to develop one new research question that then guided the study:

1. What dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality facing higher education?

## **Justification of the Study**

Organizational complexity and financial stress are not unique to Minnesota's rural community colleges nor are these complications disappearing anytime soon. Financial challenges exist across the country as states face embattled budgets that translate to fewer dollars for higher education. Minnesota's Office of Management and Budget projects a structural budget gap of nearly \$2.2 billion per year for the fiscal years 2014 and 2015 given revenue and expenditure trends ("Highlights," 2011). Projections indicate that in addition to Minnesota, 23 states will experience budget shortfalls during fiscal year 2013 totaling \$46 billion, which is in addition to the \$430 billion shortfall already experienced since fiscal year 2009 (McNichol, Oliff, & Johnson, 2011). Moody's Investors Service

changed its fundamental credit rating for the entire higher education sector from stable to negative for 2013, which has pressured higher education leaders to further reduce expenses and increase efficiencies (Bogaty, 2013).

College and university presidents accustomed to past funding levels must adjust to diminished financial resources and make leadership decisions that inevitably affect people and programming. Laura King, vice chancellor of finance for MNSCU, referred to the status of higher education as the “New Normal” and suggested college leaders must adapt to this new level of reduced funding (King, February, 2010). Remaining financially viable, while continuing to meet the expectations of internal and external constituents, requires skillful leadership. Both current and aspiring presidents need to understand that higher education budgets are unlikely to return to levels experienced in the past and, consequently, must be prepared to lead accordingly.

Along with significantly reduced funding, higher education leaders face a rapidly changing environment. Mark Erickson (2012), president of Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania, believes higher education is changing faster than ever before. He says technology change is accelerating exponentially, the focus on accountability is intensified, and cynicism about higher education is on the rise. Erickson adds disproportionately less funding for community colleges to the list of challenges facing leaders and refers to the environment as the “perfect storm” that he worries will negatively affect students (p. 4).

Allan Golston of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation spoke at a higher education conference and told attendees, “Welcome to the “new normal” for community colleges, and you’d better get used to it” (Bradley, 2011, p. 10). He was referring to

more accountability and less resources for community colleges. Steven Rosenstone (2012), MNSCU chancellor, formed three workgroups to address what he calls “...dramatic changes—in our students, in technology, in finances, and in the demands being placed on higher education...” (p. 1). The workgroups were tasked with helping create MNSCU’s long-term strategic direction and addressing what education of the future will look like, what the MNSCU system will look like, and how the workforce needs of the future will be met. The challenges and expectations associated with rural colleges coupled with the elements of the new reality of higher education justified this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Community colleges provide a wide range of opportunities for rural populations as they often serve as the educational, economic, and cultural leaders for rural regions (Eddy, 2010). When presidents attempt to fulfill these institutional expectations, they face challenges such as lack of proximity to the central office, a sparse student population, and difficulty attracting qualified employees because of the rural nature of their institutions. Leading an institution through these challenges is made exceedingly difficult when confronted with a financial crisis such as the one that exists in Minnesota along with the other elements of the new reality

Taking care of colleges’ external stakeholders becomes increasingly important during difficult economic times. Laid-off workers often take advantage of workforce-center funding to obtain additional skill sets at their local colleges, and businesses and industries use expertise at community colleges to seek outside funding sources and for training their workforce to become more efficient. In addition, community

services—such as recreational activities, cultural events, and community education offerings—are often reduced or eliminated due to less government aid. Again, citizens look to their community college for assistance, and college presidents are faced with significant leadership challenges.

The potential to explore leadership theory is exceedingly broad, and in order to study presidential leadership in rural community college settings, conceptually grounding the research within a framework is important. Smyth (2004) values a conceptual framework as a tool to make meaning of findings and as a starting point for reflection about the context of the research. The author suggests that a framework informs the design of the study, links the research to the literature, and helps keep the research on track. Krathwohl and Smith (2005) suggest a framework leads to a conceptual basis for a study and provides a theoretical, practical, or technical basis for the meaning behind the research. Due to the inductive nature of qualitative research, a conceptual framework does not drive the research but instead provides a perspective for data collection and eventually data analysis (Glesne, 2006).

My naturalistic research on rural leadership derived perspectives from the theory of multidimensional leadership. As illustrated in the story about Pine Mountain Community College, complex organizational contexts within the rural community college setting require varied leadership approaches, and consequently, it was appropriate to structure the study of community college presidential leadership in rural institutions using a multidimensional leadership framework. Existing research strongly supports multidimensional leadership as an effective approach to leading complex organizations, and I have included three noteworthy models to support my theoretical framework.



Bolman and Deal's four frames model describes organizational leadership using structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Given the complexity and dynamic nature of organizations, the authors believe that successful leaders understand which frame or frames to utilize in a given situation. They suggest multi-frame leaders are more successful than leaders who practice single frame leadership.

Eddy claims leaders must adopt broad perspectives for successfully leading change, and consequently, multiple leadership dimensions are necessary (Eddy, 2010). Eddy's model for community college leaders includes four broad elements, which are learning to lead, communicating and framing information, competencies, and gender. Eddy explains that the flexibility of her model allows leaders to pass through each leadership element at some point on the continuum based on a variety of situations and their experiences.

The American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) multidimensional leadership model focuses specifically on leadership competencies for community college leaders ("Part C – Competencies," 2011). The six AACC competencies deemed essential for community college leadership include organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, and professionalism. Again, successful leaders possess and utilize multiple competencies depending on the situation. These three models are thoroughly explained in chapter II along with an examination of other literature relevant to multidimensional leadership,

Dr. Sue Collins, president of a rural community college district in Northeastern Minnesota, says she utilizes multiple leadership approaches based on who she is working with and her desired outcomes of a given situation (S. Collins, personal communication,

October 12, 2011). President Collins also states that given the financial problems facing college presidents, there is absolutely no room for error, and “leadership moments” can make or break an institution. She notes that now more than ever, higher education is complex and requires a president’s leadership approach to be adaptable and multidimensional.

### **Researcher’s Perspective**

I have served in the educational field for a total of 23 years in a variety of roles. For the first 11 years, I taught high school mathematics. During this time, I earned a master’s of science degree in educational administration and a Minnesota sixth-year secondary school principal and superintendent licensure through St. Cloud University. In 2000, I was hired as an activities director at a large rural school district in Minnesota and four years later became the high school principal in the same district. In 2006, I accepted a dean’s position at a local community college and have served as the college’s chief academic and student affairs officer since that time.

The past 12 years of rural education leadership provided me with a thorough insight on the challenges and expectations of leading in a rural region and on the importance of relationship building in order to successfully accomplish goals. As chief academic and student affairs officer at a rural community college, I experienced two years of leading with adequate funding and five years of leading under a budget affected by a rapidly declining allocation, declining enrollment, and regulated tuition rates. I discovered that leading during times of financial crisis is more demanding and requires a range of leadership approaches in order to successfully meet expectations and navigate the challenges associated with education in rural settings.

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

The research was delimited to six rural community colleges within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) system, and the research did not formally include interviewing constituents of the presidential subjects. The narrow scope of the research subjects limited the breadth of the outcomes and diminished the ability to generalize the results. I brought certain biases to the research because of my employment as an administrator at a rural community college within the MNSCU system.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter I introduces the background of the study, presents the general problem, and provides the purpose for study. Delimitations and limitations of the study are given, the justification for the study is explained, and the conceptual framework is introduced. A definition of terms concludes the chapter.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature relevant to the challenges and expectations of rural institutions and their leaders. The chapter also includes an evaluation of the body of literature surrounding multidimensional leadership.

Chapter III presents the research methodology, data collection and analysis processes, and researcher bias. A pilot study, which led to this research project, is described.

Chapter IV presents the findings and assertions of the research centered on rural community college presidents leading in the new reality of higher education.

Chapter V provides concluding thoughts and implications for policy makers, college leaders, graduate programs, and future research.

## Definition of Terms

*Community College:* in Minnesota, a two-year state college is classified as community college, community and technical college, or technical college. In this study, a community college is either a two-year community college or a comprehensive community and technical college.

*Composite Financial Index (CFI):* a financial performance measure that considers an institution's primary reserve, return on net assets, and operating margin (King, 2010).

*Customized Training:* specialized workforce development or training provided by a college to specific business or industry partners.

*E-education:* online delivery of education to students who are off-campus.

*External Stakeholders:* community, industry, and business leaders external to the colleges who rely on or partner with the colleges.

*Internal Constituents:* people who work on the presidents' campuses.

*Rural Community College:* for this study, a rural community college is considered a community college located in a city with a population of less than 50,000.

*State Allocation:* state funding provided to state colleges and universities through legislative action and MNSCU Board of Trustees determination.

*Students:* for this study, people who are taking classes for college credit or people who are participating at the college in non-credit training.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The challenges and expectations unique to rural community colleges along with the conditions caused by the new reality of higher education provided an ideal setting to test leadership theory. This chapter first presents the challenges and expectations associated with the internal and external environments of rural community colleges. The study was conceptually framed using multidimensional leadership theory, since several studies show that effective leaders rely on multiple frames and perspectives to manage complex systems. The second part of this chapter highlights literature pointing to the importance of multiframe leadership, and then three specific multidimensional leadership models are presented in more detail. Literature relevant to the assertions discovered in this study is presented in Chapter IV.

#### **Challenges and Expectations**

In 1977, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) authored a publication in response to an increased interest in the unique characteristic associated with rural community and junior colleges (Vineyard, 1979). The report found that rural colleges faced a lack of cultural and social activities, lack of employment for both students and graduates, and limited enrollment, which affected the ability to provide a comprehensive program and service inventory. Rural colleges also faced difficulties attracting qualified faculty, procuring grants, and meeting regulatory requirements due to

limited staffing. It was noted that these institutions lacked the political and legislative influence enjoyed by their metro counterparts, and higher education funding formulas put small rural institutions at a disadvantage. Despite these challenges, the outcome of the report indicated that rural community colleges were expected to provide a broad range of opportunities to their citizens comparable to the services found in more populated areas.

More than three decades after the AACJC report was published, the challenges and expectations of the rural community college have not changed significantly. A study conducted of top administrators in ten Kansas rural community colleges found that a funding inequity exists between rural and non-rural colleges (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006). Interviewees indicated that by using a headcount funding method, smaller schools were disadvantaged and could not achieve equal footing with schools that enjoy large enrollments. Fluharty and Scaggs (2007) point out funding mechanisms that rely on credit hours do not consider the high per-student overhead costs associated with operating a low enrollment college. The authors also note credit-based funding does not take into account all of the other non-credit bearing activities that a rural institution is expected to provide including economic development, community service, and continuing education.

Mullin and Honeyman (2008) suggest that community colleges are disadvantaged because they lack their own identity related to funding and are caught in the middle between four-year university and public school finance. This lack of identity also includes grant-making for rural institutions. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy produced a report in 2004 that found that only 184 of 65,000 grant-making organizations made grants that were considered rural development grants

(Swierzewski, 2007). Small rural community colleges also often lack the resources to retain an institutional grant writer, which makes consistent grant-seeking difficult (Pennington et al., 2006).

In addition to funding concerns, rural community colleges face an array of other challenges. Rural community colleges attract a diverse and changing student population. Eddy (2010) notes that community college students tend to be low-income, often support families, and require remedial instruction to prepare them for college-level coursework. Cohen (2011) says successfully providing development education is difficult because “. . . most of the students who failed to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic when they were young have no less difficulty after they mature” (p. 100). Agriculture, mining, and tourism often represent the major employers in rural areas, which translate to a high population of first-generation students in rural community colleges (Leist, 2007). A study conducted by Murray (2005) discovered that rural community college faculty felt that students were often poorly prepared and lacked motivation in the classroom. By 2030, 70.3 million Americans will be at least 65 years old, and consequently, community colleges may need to prepare for an increasingly older student body (Garvey, 2007). This evolving aging population creates a new challenge in recruiting and retaining students that do not fit the traditional 18 to 22 year old student profile (Pennington et al., 2006).

While rural community colleges host a challenging mix of students, the institutions also struggle with attracting and maintaining qualified faculty and staff. A study of eight community colleges in North Carolina found the current economic crisis increased the use of part-time, unqualified instructors, especially in developmental education (Okpala, Hopson, & Okpala, 2011). The study concluded that despite an increase in enrollment

during the economic crisis, a corresponding decrease in the use of full-time faculty occurred. Small staff size and sparse population surrounding rural colleges create barriers to finding competent faculty. Murray (2005) found small rural colleges often have one instructor in some departments, and the sole responsibility of leading a department is too much pressure for some faculty. The need to reach out to students in distant rural locations also requires faculty to teach using multiple platforms such as interactive television, face-to-face instruction, and web-based delivery making it difficult to attract faculty willing to take on this responsibility (Pennington et al., 2006).

Providing adequate support and enrichment services for students represents a rural community college challenge. Hardy and Katsinas (2007) discovered rural colleges are less likely to offer childcare, employment services, accelerated programs, study abroad, or flexible class times than metro colleges. During financial distress, colleges in North Carolina reduced counseling and advising staff despite increases in enrollment (Okpala et al., 2011). These reductions not only disadvantage enrolled students but also add pressure to the workloads of the remaining faculty and staff. While online course options are important to reach out to people who cannot travel to campus, e-education challenges community colleges due to the cost of the technology and the staff required to support the faculty and online learners (Mitchell, 2011).

Cultural challenges exist due to the rural nature of these institutions. Leist found one president who stated, “Rurals are different” (2007, p. 36). He discovered that the cultural mindsets of rural residents are very traditional. Most diversity in rural regions is measured economically and socially, which challenges local colleges to educate a broad range of people with different beliefs about the value of higher education. For rural



presidents, a lack of anonymity exists, and peer networks tend to be small (Eddy, 2007). Residents expect a 24/7 mindset for their president (Leist, 2007).

Despite the challenges facing the rural community college, rural regions place numerous expectations on their local colleges that extend well beyond offering a traditional two-year credit-based education. Miller and Kissinger (2007) posit that rural colleges actually influence their community's identity by offering recreational, cultural, and economic development activities. The economic development activities include customized training, workforce development, and continuing education. Hardy and Katsinas (2007) found that large rural community colleges offer 20% more recreational and vocational programming than urban or suburban community colleges, underscoring the importance of the rural colleges' capacities to serve regional needs.

Eddy (2010) states community colleges are responsible for transfer and career education, remedial education, adult learning services, and customized training. The author also points out the unique partnership expectations placed on community colleges, since they are the bridge between high schools and four-year universities. Rural institutions are serving an older and more place-bound student population, and consequently, colleges are expected to offer upper division courses to supplement the two-year education traditionally offered by community colleges (Blanchard, Casados, & Sheski, 2009). This comprehensive arrangement allows students to complete a four-year degree without uprooting their families or leaving their jobs. Dassance (2011) points to a report on higher education that focused on improving completion rates by college students. The report included a framework, which suggests that some of the key factors

in educational attainment include preparation, college participation, and affordability, which largely fall on the backs of community colleges.

A study by Miller and Tuttle (2007) found that rural community colleges are expected to be the facilities and program leader for a community, and the colleges are a source of pride for communities as most residents somehow connected to the college in a way that improved their lives. Residents proudly noted that their community is a college town. The authors capture the expectations that residents place on rural community colleges:

They have a unique distinction, however, in terms of serving small towns in ways that 4-year colleges do not. They are socially enabling institutions that improve and help form the identity of rural America, both in terms of individual communities and in terms of individuals themselves. (p. 126)

### **Multidimensional Leadership**

Research has found that effective leaders rely on multiple frames and multiple perspectives when generating complete pictures of organizations. In order to understand how presidents lead within the complicated settings of rural community colleges, this research project was conceptualized using multidimensional leadership as a framework. For the purposes of this manuscript, samples of literature supporting multiframe leadership are presented. In addition, three examples of multidimensional leadership models are illustrated in more detail: Bolman and Deal's four lens framework of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2003), Pamela Eddy's multidimensional leadership model for leading change in community colleges (Eddy, 2010), and the American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) six item competency framework for community college

leaders (“Part C – Competencies,” 2011). These three models are widely accepted and provide a well-aligned framework for the study of rural community college presidential leadership.

A significant amount of research supports the concept that successful leaders possess multiple leadership abilities and employ these skills and traits appropriately depending on organizational context. Leithwood and Sun (2012) found that successful school leaders are capable of creating shared vision, developing their constituents, redesigning organization culture through collaboration, and providing instructional leadership. The authors compare presidents with these traits to that of a transformational leader. Schoemaker, Krupp and Howland (2013) found six skills were required for successful strategic leadership, and when practiced together, the ability to anticipate, challenge, interpret, decide, align, and learn allows leaders to “. . . think strategically and navigate the unknown effectively . . .” (p. 131).

Wallin (2010) describes four dimensions of leadership necessary to promote change. She states that community college leaders must have the ability to anticipate what is needed, analyze the environment, act with integrity, and affirm their decisions in order to transform an organization. Cloud (2010) proposes that in addition to these four dimensions, a transformational president must be able to listen effectively, collaborate, motivate and persuade others, and practice authenticity.

The literature provides examples of how to lead when faced with complex issues. Murray and Kishur (2008) discovered presidents who successfully manage campus crises possess the ability to predict the threat level, practice transparent communication of the facts, build a coalition of problem solvers, listen to suggestions, create a plan, and

confront the challenge. The authors found team-building was a critical leadership dimension for presidents facing crisis. Hines (2011) suggests leading a community college is a balancing act that requires multiple approaches to leadership. He provides a list of 22 concepts related to community college leadership and suggests, among other things, presidents must be good listeners, risk-takers, visionaries, influencers, and relationship-builders. According to Boggs (2011), a president must meet the challenges facing community colleges by advocating, acting entrepreneurial, providing mentorship for constituents, and developing productive relationships with people in power.

Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006) studied how community college administrators self-described their leadership. An abbreviated list of the most frequently provided leadership dimensions included decision maker, change agent, visionary, content-expert, mentor, and advocator. The researchers still found a reliance on bureaucratic leadership through a reporting hierarchy existed on campuses but suggested community college leadership is moving more toward team leadership. In contrast to Eddy and VanDerLinden's study on self-described leadership, Plinske and Packard (2010) researched trustees' perceptions of desirable qualities of community college presidents. Passion, character, ability to communicate and listen, team-builder, and visionary emerged as the top characteristics or competencies by the trustee participants.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011) believe that in addition to tactical knowledge, effective leaders must be skilled in making judgments based on values and morals. The authors found that wise leaders judge what is good in every situation, determine the meaning of the situation, and create opportunities to share the meaning. They then communicate situations in a way everyone can understand, bring people together to

create action, and build wisdom throughout the organization. The authors believe a complicated future will demand leaders to be philosophers who understand complexity, craftsmen who act on the moment, idealists who will do what is right, politicians who bring people to action, writers who can tell the story, and teachers who inspire others to learn.

One of the most recognized works for understanding organizations and multiframe leadership is Bolman and Deal's four frames model, which identifies the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames as categorical descriptions of organizational behavior (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The authors define a frame as "... a coherent set of ideas that enable you to see and understand more clearly what goes on day to day" (p. 41) and claim that leaders should incorporate the frames to help manage and lead within the complex and changing nature of organizations. At any point of time or in any given situation, utilizing one frame's perspective might be more effective for leading than working within the others lenses.

The structural frame has roots in the industrial age when clear objectives existed within an organization, and it was determined that a distinct division of labor, a hierarchical structure of power, and a well-defined set of work expectations led to maximum productivity (Bolman & Deal, 2003). While stable organizations tend to flourish in tightly structured environments, modern organizations are much more complex and require reconsideration of what the structural frame means for an institution. The authors note that globalization, rapid advances in technology, and complicated workplace dynamics means organizational leaders must consider a variety of approaches to accomplishing goals that extend beyond the vertical nature of control found in

traditional structures. Using committees, networks, and group initiatives brings lateral structure to an organization, which allows a leader to benefit from the collective intellect of groups.

In contrast to the structural frame where workers are placed in a hierarchy and given specific duties that are expected to advance the organization, Bolman and Deal's design of the human resource frame presumes that an organization's leaders can provide rewarding and energizing experiences for employees (2003). This frame is based on the premise that an organization benefits by serving its people with satisfying work, and as a result, the organizations will receive the talent needed to meet its goals. Without a good fit between the organization and its employees, the workplace will suffer. As organizations face increasing global competition and struggle to remain productive, the authors posit that leaders will need to decide, "Is it better to be lean and mean, or to invest in people?" (p. 132). The human resources frame suggests that when organizations and their leaders invest in people, a highly motivated workforce produces a competitive edge.

While the first two frames are relatively mainstream concepts, Bolman and Deal's political frame is sometimes misunderstood due to the negative connotation attached to the concept of politics, but this frame provides an important context for leaders to make decisions. The underlying basis for the political frame suggests that organizations are political venues that contain multiple and competing interests (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The coalitions of people within an organization bring competing values and interests to the workplace, yet these coalitions are dependent on each other. Stakeholders external to and co-dependent with an organization also bear conflicting principles and needs.

Internal and external groups compete for scarce resources, and conflict and power struggles result when leaders make decisions about allocating these resources. The authors suggest that decisions result from “. . . bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among competing stakeholders” (p. 187). The political frame contrasts the traditional view of persons of authority automatically holding power and instead suggests position leaders must compete for influence with several others in the organization. Bolman and Deal suggest efficient organizations depend on people in positions of power applying “constructive politics” (p. 201).

The symbolic frame represents Bolman and Deal’s final lens of organizational behavior for leaders to consider. People experience symbols that invoke powerful emotions in all aspects of their life, including the workplace. The symbolic frame attempts to make sense of how these symbols represent the culture of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Instead of emphasizing objective and rational behavior, the core principle of the symbolic frame centers on how people make meaning of their surroundings, and since people interpret events with different viewpoints, every situation has multiple meanings. As people experience uncertainty in an organization, they rely on symbols to resolve the ambiguity, and because of this symbolism, organizational culture forms. Symbolic events such as storytelling, rituals, and ceremonies all help to make meaning of an organization and its culture. Leaders who understand how to utilize symbolism are better equipped to influence their institution and help create a culture that aligns with the demands of the organizations stakeholders.

While leaders may operate effectively within any one of these frames in a narrowly focused condition, Bolman and Deal point to the importance of incorporating multiframe

perspectives for successfully leading complex organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2003). One example the authors present involves leading an organization that is experiencing conflict because of scarce resources. Using the political lens to leverage revenue streams represents one approach to tackle the resource deficit, but at the same time, bridging differences through shared symbolism would address the conflict. They assert that effective, comprehensive leadership requires combining multiple frames. Bensimon (1989) confirmed that experienced community college presidents were more likely to use multiple frames of leadership than new presidents were because older presidents possessed a more nuanced understanding of leadership complexities.

Eddy (2010), a renowned researcher in the area of community college leadership, developed a multidimensional model for community college leadership, which she states provides a guide for leading in community college settings. She believes that traditionally accepted two-dimensional leadership models such as Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership model do not address the complex application required for practice in community colleges (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997). Eddy points to Blake and Mouton's model of measuring leadership by comparing the concern for people to the concern for production and plotting the cross-section of the results on a set of two-dimensional axes to find where a leader fits. She says this type of model describes one way to lead, which is assumed to be better than all other ways.

Eddy notes these models do not take into account how a leader understands the surroundings or how a leader's own characteristics fit with how one is expected to lead. Eddy states, "Furthermore, we must rely on a more nuanced understanding of leadership in order to shift from a theoretical discussion of leadership to one of application and to



discuss how different leadership approaches affect practice in community colleges” (2010, p. 31).

Eddy goes on to claim that there is no universal model for leadership and leaders must adopt a broad perspective in order to find solutions, which means multiple leadership perspectives are necessary. Eddy says that multidimensional leadership provides flexibility and allows leaders to build off their own beliefs and perspectives. She notes this adaptable approach also permits leaders to change their leadership dimensions over time. According to Eddy, “. . . leadership is multidimensional, with the various dimensions existing on continua that reflect the evolution of a leader’s understanding of what it means to lead, as well as his or her ability to respond to leadership opportunities in new ways” (2010, p. 2).

Eddy’s leadership model is built on the premise that people change and grow their leadership as they learn along the way. Table 1 lists the elements of her multidimensional model.

Eddy explains that each element of the model exists as a continuum. Leaders pass through each element at some point on the continuum based on the situation and on their level of experiences. She states that there is no one correct path, and the flexibility of her model fits well with leading complex organizations.

A multidimensional leadership model specific to community college leaders was developed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), which focuses specifically on leadership competencies. In 2003, the AACC was awarded a grant by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to determine how to develop and sustain leaders in order to

Table 1. Pamela Eddy Multidimensional Leadership Model.

Elements of Model	Description of Elements
Learning to Lead	As leaders grow, the elements of their leadership model expand. Coursework, mentoring, and professional development all play a role in creating this broader set of skills.
Communicating and Framing Information	Campus members make meaning based on how and what presidents communicate. This provides leaders the opportunity to frame information accordingly.
Competencies	Leadership requires learned, skill-based and personality based competencies. Cultural competency is another facet of effective leadership. Competencies should not be thought of as singular traits but instead utilized in clusters.
Gender	Traditional viewpoints have been socially constructed over time to frame men and women in different leadership styles. In multidimensional leadership, men and women lead in an integrated style and are not bound by the roles suggested by traditional gender based leadership theory.

meet the need for community college administrators across the United States (“Part A – Development,” 2011). After conducting a series of leadership summits and follow-up surveys over the course of nearly two years, the AACC unanimously approved a competency framework titled “Competencies for Community College Leaders,” which

includes six competencies deemed essential for community college leadership. The competencies coupled with a brief description of related actions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders

Competency	Related Actions of Effective Leaders
Organizational Strategy	Improve the institution, sustain the mission, and promote student success by understanding the organization.
Resource Management	Utilize and protect resources to meet the institutional mission.
Communication	Listen, speak and write effectively and promote open communication among all involved parties.
Collaboration	Develop and maintain relationships that support the institutional mission.
Community College Advocacy	Advocate for the institutional mission.
Professionalism	Set high standards for self and others. Strive for institutional and self- improvement.

The AACC expounds on the competencies by stating leadership skills are enhanced through experiences and by aptitude, effective leadership involves vision coupled with effective management, and the use of different competencies by leaders will shift depending on the level at which they lead (“Part B – Thoughts,” 2011). McNair, Duree, and Ebbers (2011) found support for the AACC competencies in analyzing responses to a survey of community college presidents conducted in 2007. In an open-ended question on the survey, presidents were asked what they would have done differently to prepare for community college leadership knowing what they know now.

Out of the 371 comments, the authors tied 55% of the responses to one of the six AACC competencies, and all of the competencies were represented somewhere in the survey responses. Eddy includes the AACC competencies within her multidimensional leadership model and suggests community college administrators must cluster certain competencies together in order to effectively lead in complex environments (Eddy, 2010). For example, she says leaders must link the organizational strategy competency to the resource management competency in order to provide constituents with rational explanations for the financial decisions being made to balance budgets.

Exploring leadership theory is exceedingly broad, so providing boundaries for this study was appropriate and necessary. As discussed in this chapter, rural community college presidents face a number of challenges and expectations. This complicated organizational context requires a complex leadership approach, and consequently, it is appropriate to structure the study of rural community college presidential leadership using a multidimensional leadership framework.

**CHAPTER III**  
**METHODOLOGY**  
**Research Overview**

This chapter outlines the research methodology utilized to determine what dimensions of rural presidential leadership emerge during times of sustained financial distress. I chose qualitative research, which is appropriate given the complexities of leading a college with multiple challenges and expectations. The purpose of qualitative research is to give meaning to social interactions through understanding and interpretation (Lichman, 2010). This naturalistic approach helped me discover the intricate web of factors that a president must consider when leading an institution such as financial priorities, relationship-building with internal and external constituents, the historical context of the institution, and the political landscape of the region. Gergen (1985) terms qualitative research as social inquiry and describes the research process as providing explanation for the world in which people live.

According to Michell (2003), positivists argue that qualitative research lacks objectivity and logic. To provide a level of structure within my naturalistic research, I chose the grounded theory approach—introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967—because it allows for in-depth and meaningful discovery yet provides a logical and systematic approach to analyzing collected data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). In qualitative research, defined constructs are not typically stated prior to the study but instead are

discovered because of the inductive research process (DePoy & Gitlin, 2005). I framed my research with the concept of multidimensional leadership only to provide broad theoretical boundaries for my study.

Understanding the multifaceted responsibilities of a rural community college president requires more than a quantitative snapshot, especially when seeking an explanation of how she/he manipulates the environment to achieve necessary objectives especially during financial crisis. Meeting with each president face-to-face in their own environment helped me better understand the context of their work and added meaning to my research.

### **Site and Informant Selection**

Since my study included interviewing presidents from rural community colleges in Minnesota, I used the Carnegie classification to first identify Minnesota's rural community colleges by searching for public associate-degree granting, rural colleges ("Custom Listings," n.d.). This selection yielded 19 institutions. I then eliminated colleges that were co-located in cities with a major university or were located in cities with populations greater than 50,000. These site selection criteria were intended to leave rural institutions in the study that served areas lacking other significant support mechanisms for education and workforce development. I also eliminated any colleges classified as strictly technical colleges, since I wanted to research presidents who were responsible for comprehensive, two-year community and technical colleges. Finally, I eliminated the institution that I work at to avoid the complexity and bias that might occur by involving my own president in the research. These selection boundaries left eight institutions that fit my study's site criteria.

The selected campuses all belong to the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) system, which brings another element of research consistency. A governor-appointed board of trustees oversees the system along with the leadership of a chancellor who is located at a system office in the metropolitan area (“Board of Trustees,” 2013). Staff members from this office provide a variety of support services to state campuses, such as legal advice, instructional technology support, and academic program coordination. The MNSCU presidents meet regularly to discuss system business.

The selected campuses range in size from 1,387 full-year equivalent (FYE) students to 3,424 FYE students as of the end of the 2012 fiscal year (“Summary Reports,” 2012). All of the colleges have an open-admissions policy, so people who possess a general education development (GED) diploma or a high school diploma are eligible to apply for admission (“About the System,” 2012). State-wide collective bargaining agreements are present on every MNSCU campus, and depending on their assignment, college employees at the two-year campuses are represented by one of six different collective bargaining agreements (“Salary & Compensation,” 2012). MNSCU presidents are not actually individual college employees but instead are hired by the MNSCU Board of Trustees and are each assigned a campus (D. Knowlton, personal communication, January 31, 2013). According to the MNSCU Personnel Plan for Administrators, presidents’ initial contract appointments may not exceed periods of three years and subsequent contract appointments may not exceed five years (“Subd. 2 Vice Chancellors and Presidents”, 2009).

Once I determined which sites were eligible for my study, I focused on building my informant pool. The only selection criterion I established for the remaining research subjects was that the presidents served at least three years at their current colleges to ensure they led their campuses from the beginning of the 2008 financial downturn and to guarantee they had experienced presidential leadership through multiple academic year cycles. This three-year experience criterion eliminated one subject who was serving in a one-year interim presidential role. Of the remaining seven eligible subjects, one president did not respond to my requests for participation despite multiple attempts to connect with the president by telephone and email. This left me with six eligible presidents willing to participate in my study.

Five of the study's presidents possessed doctoral degrees and all subjects had previous collegiate administrative experience in rural settings. Both male and female presidents were part of the research process. The years of presidential experience at the campuses served during the time of the study ranged from four years to nine years with an average tenure of six years. Three of the subjects possessed previous leadership experiences outside of Minnesota while the other three held past administrative positions exclusively within Minnesota. Given the length of tenure for the included presidents at their current institutions, the extensive previous experiences of the presidents in higher education, and the overall stability of the institutions they led, I established these presidents as competent leaders. Consequently, I merited their perceptions about effective leadership for rural community college presidents as valuable insights for this study.



Lichtman (2010) notes that researchers must establish criteria for their interview subjects, and through this careful site and informant screening process, I was able to include six presidents in my study who all led rural, two-year comprehensive community colleges for a minimum of three years. This homogeneous subject pool reduced the outside variability that could have occurred if I included inexperienced presidents or presidents that led institutions with differing missions.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The narrow focus of my site and subject selection was purposeful. At first I considered a comparison of rural community college leaders from two states—one financially sound and one financially troubled—to evaluate how financial crisis affected leadership. I abandoned this idea because of too many other differing factors that made an “apples-to-apples” comparison impractical. I also contemplated a metropolitan and rural comparison, but my interest lay in the complexity of rural community college leadership.

The context of a rural community college coupled with the financial crisis that faced these college presidents lent itself well to a focused study on leadership. In the future, a parallel, comparative study on leadership in metro colleges or in other states is possible since I carefully documented my research process.

This narrow research lens created limitations to my study. First, the research was delimited to one state and one educational system, which made generalizing the results difficult. The challenges, expectations, and realities of leadership described by these six presidents do not necessarily align with the leadership context facing other leaders such as metro presidents or presidents from other states. Also, I did not interview the

presidents' constituents, restricting perspectives on presidential leadership to only that of the presidents. Finally, I work as an administrator within the same system as the presidents that I studied, which could present a perception of research bias.

### **Human Subjects**

I received permission to study human subjects through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Dakota. The IRB process ensured I identified any possible negative implications of my research or harm to my subjects ("Institutional Review Board," n.d.). Given the potential sensitive nature of the gathered data, ensuring confidentiality was an extremely important element of the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). An absolute guarantee of anonymity was not possible because of the narrow selection process of colleges for this study, which the presidents were made aware of through an informed consent document. This consent form, found in Appendix B, informed the subjects of my research intent and of their rights during the study. The form was approved by the IRB committee members and signed by each subject. The participating presidents received the consent form prior to the study. The subjects could refuse to answer any of the questions and were allowed to excuse themselves from the study at any time. All of the presidents stayed in the study through completion, and no one refused to answer any of the questions.

Although the study included male and female subjects, male pronouns were used throughout the manuscript to strengthen anonymity, and all subjects and their campuses were assigned fictitious names. These code names will be kept for future reference and are stored separately from the other data. Where necessary, potential identifiers were removed from the quotations and replaced with generic terms. All research results are

kept in a locked cabinet at my personal residence and will be destroyed after a minimum of three years from the completion of this research project.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for my study relied primarily on twelve formal interviews with my presidential subjects over a period of approximately six months. Seidman (2006) advocates for a three-interview sequence in order to establish the context of people's lives and surroundings, which helps give meaning to their behaviors and actions. He suggests using the first interview to learn about the subjects' pasts in the context of the study's topic.

Given the time constraints of my presidential subjects, I combined the elements of the first two interview rounds and accomplished many of Seidman's first-interview outcomes by collecting demographic information and curricula vitae from the presidents through electronic communication and from the MNSCU website prior to the structured interviews. In addition, I carried out a review of institutional documents, such as strategic plans and mission statements as well as MNSCU's accountability dashboard, which measures a college's effectiveness in several areas ("Accountability Dashboard," 2011). This review provided me with background information on the colleges, assisted me in formulating interview questions, and allowed me to cross-reference the results of my interviews, conversations, and observations with hard data and published statements disseminated by the college (Lichtman, 2010).

I proceeded with a series of two structured, one-hour long interviews with each of the presidents spanning a period of approximately six months. Questions for the first interview were prepared as a result of my background study on each subject and from my

review of relevant literature. The second set of interviews involved digging deeper into the responses of the first set of questions and were designed to get the presidents to give meaning to the previously shared experiences. According to Seidman (2006, p. 19), the last interview should “. . . make that meaning making the center of our attention.”

Appendix A contains a categorized list of prepared questions and follow-up questions that occurred within the interview setting for both rounds of interviewing.

Along with formal interviews, I made observations of staff interactions, campuses’ physical conditions, and the activities surrounding the presidents’ offices, and I took part in informal conversations while on each of the campuses. These observations and informal conversations provided me with a more complete picture by helping me understand the day-to-day behaviors and interactions of my subjects in their natural surroundings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Even though my research collection process was preplanned, qualitative research does not necessarily follow a prescribed set of procedures formed prior to research; instead, the work is inductive in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Maxwell (2005) agrees and notes that unlike quantitative research that is sequential, qualitative research contains components that are reflexive and adaptable throughout the process. An example of this flexibility occurred between interview rounds when one of my subjects left Minnesota for a presidential position in another state. Therefore, I conducted his second interview over the telephone, and due to scheduling conflicts, two other second-round interviews were also held over the phone. Interestingly, these phone interviews tended to yield longer, more thoughtful responses than the responses given by the same subjects in the first round face-to-face interviews. Another example of adaptability in

research occurred when the presidents pointed the study's discussions to insights much broader than the issue of leading institutions with decreased budgets and presented qualitative data that redirected me to explore what dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality of higher education.

This data gathering method fit well with a qualitative, humanistic research approach. When institutions navigate through uncertain times due to financial crisis, people are affected at all levels. Naturalistic research gives meaning to how leadership dimensions drive the priorities and actions of the presidents. Burman (1997) suggests qualitative research represents a humanitarian approach to research, since the process involves talking to people and not treating them as objects whose behaviors are measured. He asserts that qualitative research has "radical potential" (p. 797) as a research method. I believe that by engaging my subjects directly, my data gathering resulted in a meaningful and in-depth reflection of rural community college leadership.

### **Data Analysis**

The presidential interviews were recorded on a high-quality digital recorder with a second recorder present as a backup in case of technical difficulties. After each interview, the digital recording was transferred to a CD and given to a professional transcriptionist who converted the voice recording to typed text. All CDs and the transcriptionist's files were destroyed upon completion of the transcribing process. The original recordings and a hard copy of the transcribed interviews were placed in a lock file cabinet at my home where they will be kept for three years and then destroyed. To supplement the text of the transcribed interviews, I consolidated observation and field

experience notes in an electronic file. This compilation provided me with a comprehensive record of my research experiences.

To begin my data analysis, I manually coded the interviews line-by-line when I received each text copy of the transcribed interviews (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). This process, referred to as open-coding, led to identifying categories with similar content (Lichtman, 2010). After I completed coding the first round of six interviews, I transferred each individual code to a “sticky note,” which I placed in like categories on a large flat surface. I used different color sticky notes for each subject to allow me to analyze responses not only by category but also by subject. My next steps involved building an Excel spreadsheet with each column given a categorical title and transferring code words from the sticky notes to the appropriate categories in the spreadsheet. Again, code words from each interview were assigned different colors to allow for analyzing subject response. After a careful review of these categorical decisions, I created two iterations of the spreadsheet by rearranging code words and rethinking my categories. This resulted in a final document representing the first round of interviews with 532 codes and 8 categories.

I followed the same process for my second-round interviews. Again, I coded the interviews by hand as I received the text copy from the transcriptionist and converted the codes to designated color sticky notes. I placed the sticky notes in like categories on a large flat surface and then transferred the data to another Excel spreadsheet. After thorough analysis of the codes and categories, I developed two iterations of this document and ended up with 501 codes and 11 categories.

My next step in analysis was to combine the two coding documents into one master spreadsheet. I accomplished this by electronically moving like codes into the same columns and assigning a categorical name appropriate for each group of codes. Some category titles remained from one of the first two coding documents, and other code groupings produced new categories. After two more iterations of coding, categorizing, and eliminating duplicate codes, 724 codes and 15 categories remained.

I created a descriptive statement for each category of codes by analyzing the coded content within each respective column and by reflecting back on related statements made by the subjects. Using the color scheme to identify each president, I conducted a cross-categorical analysis of codes by president to establish a sense of each president's emergent themes compared to my open-coding categories and continued to analyze the construct of the categories to determine what thematic correlation existed between categories. The combination of these processes led to the formulation of four themes each containing a subset of the 15 categories and 724 corresponding codes. The themes resulting from this open-coding analysis were:

1. Outside influencers affect the decisions and strategies of a rural community college president.
2. Personal ethos impacts a rural community college president's leadership approach.
3. Interdependent relationships internal and external to the institution are critically important to a rural president's leadership.
4. Multiple strategies emerge as tools for the president to navigate the challenges and expectations associated with rural leadership.

A schematic of the complete diagram containing codes, categories, and themes can be found in appendices C through F. This data refinement process is consistent with what Lichtman refers to as “The Three Cs: Coding, Categorizing, and Identifying Concepts” (2010, p. 197).

Since open-coding compartmentalizes data into distinct categories, it is important to link the categories together for a more abstract analysis of the research (Birks & Mills, 2011). Throughout the analysis process, I consciously deliberated about recurring themes across the data set and about what central phenomenon was emerging from the data. Referred to as axial-coding, the cross-categorical analysis guided me in building a grounded theory model to represent my findings, which is illustrated in Figure 1 (Creswell, 2007). The model, also called a grounded theory map, consists of distinct sections that interrelate with one another to provide a template for developing theoretical assertions.

The focal point of the map is the central phenomenon, which is the underlying, recurrent theme discovered in the data analysis (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenon is influenced by a set of causal conditions, and because of the central phenomenon, action steps emerge called strategies. Two categories of mitigating conditions exist that inform and affect the developed strategies in either a positive or a negative manner. The first category, context, is considered as internal or narrow influencers. The second category is called intervening conditions, which provide a broad, overarching context of external factors that affect the strategies (Creswell, 2007). Finally, a consequences section describes the outcomes of the strategies put in place because of the central phenomenon.



The phenomenon grounding my research centers on the new reality facing higher education leadership, as the presidents in my study repeatedly mentioned the uncertainty and complexity of leadership in higher education's future. They pointed to the causal conditions of this new reality, which included increased competition from for-profit schools and the expanding reaches of e-education. In addition, the presidents mentioned an increasing tech-savvy and demanding student-body who expects institutions to keep up in a rapidly evolving technological world. Significantly reduced funding also concerned the presidents as they lead in the new reality. Strategies that emerged from the central phenomenon included environmental scanning to stay up-to-date on emerging trends, coalition building through transparency, adapting rapidly to change, focusing on the strengths of an institution, and making people aware of your mission and your challenges.

Both internal (narrow) and external (broad) conditions affected the strategic direction. Narrow influencers included campus mission, tradition and culture, staff burnout, collective bargaining, student success, and presidential beliefs and background. The broad intervening conditions consisted of increased accountability and expectations, economic challenges, conflict with system direction, and ruralness. Finally, the strategies led to the consequence of presidents positioning their colleges for a complex future. The content of the grounded theory map and the axial-coding findings are detailed in Chapter IV.

Through the creation of the grounded theory map illustrated in Figure 1, I was able to examine the data in an organized and comprehensive format, holistically analyze the research results, and ultimately develop theoretical assertions. For presidents to

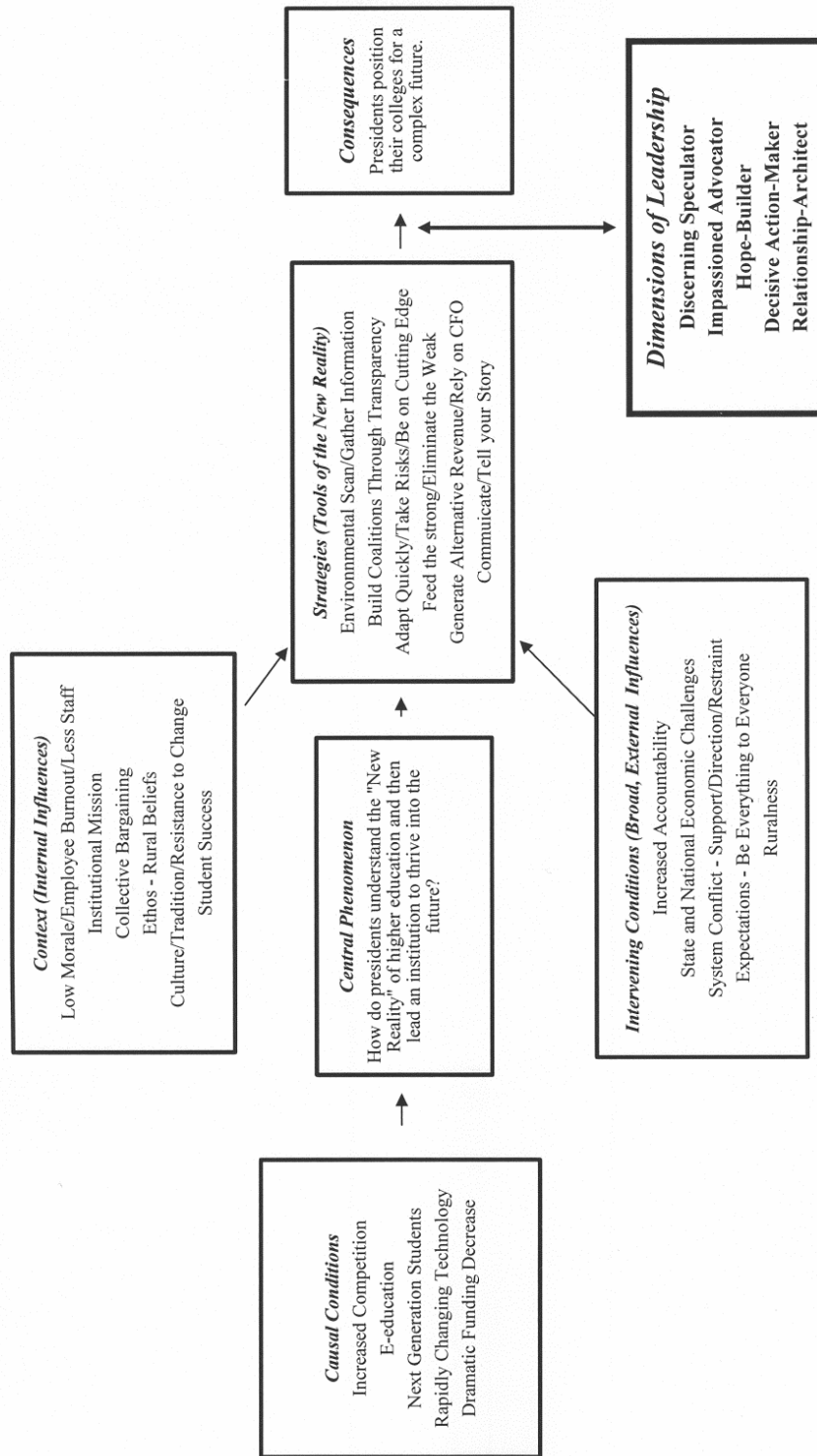


Figure 1. Grounded Theory Map.

understand the new reality of education that evolved because of the causal conditions and to enact strategies that will produce the intended consequences of positioning their colleges for the future are complicated tasks. To accomplish these tasks with both the internal influences of the institutions and external intervening conditions persuading the strategies, the need for a complex approach to leadership was evident. After careful analysis of the grounded theory model, five assertions emerged. Each assertion represented a leadership dimension, which answer the research question of this study. The overarching question that ultimately guided this research was, “What dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality facing higher education?” The five assertions that emerged were:

1. Rural community college presidents must be discerning speculators.
2. Rural community college presidents must be impassioned advocates.
3. Rural community college presidents must be hope-builders
4. Rural community college presidents must be decisive action-makers.
5. Rural community college presidents must be relationship-architects.

The five dimensions of leadership are purposefully placed on the grounded theory map between the strategies and the consequences. As previously described, the complicated context of leading in the new reality requires presidents to possess and utilize a complex array of leadership dimensions. As presidents adopt appropriate strategies to bring about intended consequences, they will need to rely on the asserted leadership dimensions. The two-directional arrow from the assertions box back to the intersection of strategies and consequences categories represents the cycling process successful presidents would utilize to enact appropriate leadership dimensions depending

on the context, intervening conditions, and chosen strategies. By adeptly practicing the context-appropriate leadership dimensions, the likelihood of achieving the intended consequences are significantly enhanced. It is important to note that these five assertions consist of leadership dimensions that, when practiced together, represent a multidimensional leadership model for navigating the new reality of higher education. This multidimensional leadership model is presented and discussed in detail toward the end of Chapter IV.

### **Validity and Reliability**

I addressed ethical considerations through the University of North Dakota's Institutional Research Board (IRB) and did not begin my work until I received all IRB approvals. With my subjects' consents, I used a high quality digital voice recorder during my interviews and hired a professional transcriptionist to convert the voice recordings to typed notes. I documented any field observations as soon as possible, so I did not lose meaning in the translation (Lichtman, 2010).

I followed prescribed research practices to ensure the validity and reliability of my research. I thoroughly documented all stages and methods of my study, which allows this research to be replicated. Using a multiple interview structure with six different college presidents from like-institutions provided confidence in valid results as well as brought a broad range of perspectives on leadership from people serving in similar roles (Seidman, 2006).

Carefully constructing interview questions that aligned with my objectives of the study kept my research on track. I started with a limited number of developed questions and allowed the dialogue of the subjects to generate subsequent questions, and the

questions I asked during the second interview were largely intended to probe deeper into the responses created in the first interview (Seidman, 2006). These strategies helped assure that the data collection represented the subjects' views and lessened the likelihood of me posing questions that lead the interviewees.

I utilized a chief academic officer from my sister institution as an outside debriefer to insure my interpretations of the transcribed interviews were reasonable (M. Healy, personal communication, January 4, 2012). Triangulating the data with informal observations, document reviews, and my own leadership experience helped validate the findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Cross-referencing my data collection with the body of related literature and spanning the research over several months reduced validity threats (Maxwell, 2005).

### **Researcher Bias**

As an administrator in the same system as my subjects, I was aware and acknowledged the possibility of researcher bias (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). While my leadership role uniquely positioned me to develop meaningful research questions and informed conclusions, I carefully avoided making assumptions or bringing in preconceived beliefs about rural leadership based on my experiences. I was aware that my practices as an academic officer were different from what a president experiences on a day-to-day basis, but I also took advantage of my years of experience and observations within MNSCU to confirm my findings. In addition, I was careful to balance my studied knowledge of the topic through my coursework at the University of North Dakota with the real life experiences of my subjects. I did not interview my own president, and I had

no personal relationships with any other presidents in the study. Finally, I conducted myself in a professional and respectful manner throughout the research.

### **Pilot Study**

Due to my interest in rural community colleges and knowing I was building up to a dissertation proposal, I often focused my class projects throughout my doctoral coursework on aspects related to rural institutions. I enrolled in an advanced qualitative research methods course in the spring of 2010 and, after consulting with the instructor, decided I had an opportunity to conduct research that could serve as a potential pilot study for a dissertation. I titled the qualitative study “A Day in the Life of a Rural Community College President.” Prior to conducting the research, I received IRB approval from the University of North Dakota’s institutional review board.

The pilot project paralleled my dissertation study but on a smaller scale. I conducted a series of structured interviews and both formal and informal observations with one rural community college president who began her tenure in 2008, the same year Minnesota’s economic difficulties began. My subject was two-years into her presidency at the time of my interview, so she provided me with meaningful data that helped me refine my dissertation work and formulate research questions for this study.

After completing the interviews and observations, I transcribed my interviews, compiled my observation notes, and coded the interviews and observation narratives. I assigned the codes to one of four categories and divided the categories into themes, which led to a final assertion. The pilot study not only validated the possibility and the potential for researching my topic on a larger scale, but it also provided me with invaluable experiences with qualitative research processes.

## **Conclusion**

I utilized qualitative research methodology to initially study the leadership dimensions of six Minnesota rural community college presidents facing sustained financial distress. The presidents unexpectedly pointed the study's discussions to insights much broader than the issue of leading institutions with decreased budgets. They presented qualitative data that redirected me to explore what dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge due to the new reality of higher education. My research was guided using multidimensional leadership theory contextualized in rural community college settings. The presidential subjects chosen for the study served a minimum of three years at rural comprehensive community colleges from Minnesota's MNSCU system. Limitations of the study existed because of the narrow scope of subject and site selection, but due to carefully documenting the process, a comparative study on leadership in metro colleges or in other states is possible.

Once I obtained institutional research board (IRB) approval from the University of North Dakota to study human subjects prior to the start of my research, I formally conducted twelve interviews in two distinct rounds of interviewing with my subjects, reviewed documents from their institutions, and observed them informally in their work environment. This data collection occurred over approximately a six-month period. I used a grounded theory approach, including both open-coding and axial-coding to organize and analyze my collected data. Codes, strategies, and themes were organized on an open-coding diagram, a grounded theory model was constructed during axial-coding, and theoretical assertions resulted from this comprehensive data analysis.

Triangulating the formal interview results with the institutional document reviews and the informal observations conducted on the presidents' campuses increased the research validity. My own work experiences, professional studies in higher education leadership, and pilot study involvement also helped me make sense of the data. I utilized ethical research principles, identified and acknowledged my own research bias, and followed IRB protocol to ensure research credibility.

Krathwohl and Smith metaphorically compare qualitative research to fishing or bargain hunting by claiming researchers never know what they will find at the end of a study. Consequently, they state, "Emergent dissertations have an exciting element of risk" (2007, p. 122). I took the risk of conducting this naturalistic research project because I was passionate about leadership, higher education, and life in rural America. Given the unique and challenging circumstances facing college presidents and based on the outcomes of my pilot study, I believed valuable data would be added to the body of existing literature surrounding rural community college presidential leadership, and I am excited about the findings that emerged from my research.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative research project set out to uncover the dimensions of rural community college presidential leadership that emerge during times of sustained financial distress. Unexpectedly, the presidents pointed the study's discussions to insights broader than leading with reduced budgets and redirected me to explore what dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality of higher education. The study was framed using multidimensional leadership theory because of the assumption that the complexity of leading rural institutions demands multiple approaches to leadership.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted with six rural community college presidents for a total of 12 formal interviews. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed first using open-coding, which resulted in 724 codes, 15 categories, and 4 themes. A subsequent analysis using axial-coding was conducted, resulting in a grounded theory model that identifies a central phenomenon, causal conditions, intervening conditions, and strategies, which all lead to a set of consequences. The combination of discoveries from both the open-coding and the grounded theory findings led to the development of five assertions. These assertions provide responses to

the study's research question, "What dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality facing higher education?"

This chapter first presents the themes and assertions that resulted from the research. Each theme generated from the open-coding is represented by relevant categories supported by direct quotations and statements taken from the interviews with the rural presidents. Axial-coding produced a grounded theory map, which will be presented in detail. The assertions are presented with support provided by pertinent quotations from the presidential interviews and with supplementary findings from a review of relevant literature. Data provided from all six presidential interviewees contributed equitably to the study's findings. Finally, a multidimensional leadership model built using the assertions discovered in the study will be described at the end of the chapter.

### **Open-coding Analysis**

As detailed in Chapter III, the open-coding process generated 15 categories within four themes that impact the dimensions of rural community college presidential leadership. The themes and related categories resulting from open-coding are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Open-coding Themes and Categories.

Themes	Categories
Outside influencers affect the decisions and strategies of a rural community college president.	Expectations Placed on the President Challenges Facing the President
Personal ethos impacts a rural community college president’s leadership approach.	Personal Background Personal Qualities Personal Feelings
Interdependent relationships internal and external to the institution are critically important to a rural president’s leadership.	The Customer - Students Chancellor and System Office Staff College Campus Team Members Partners and Stakeholders External to Higher Education Like Partners / Rural Alliance
Multiple strategies emerge as tools for the president to navigate the challenges and expectations associated with rural leadership.	Use Data and Mission as a Strategic Guide Practice Transparent Communication Feed the Strong and Eliminate the Weak Financial: Cut Costs and Generate Revenue Prepare for a Complex Future

***Theme 1: Outside Influencers Affect the Decisions and Strategies of a Rural Community College President***

As noted in the literature within Chapter II, rural presidents are charged with meeting multiple expectations while facing constant challenges. Examples of coded data from this research project that supported this theme include population drain, employee burnout, disinvestment, pressure to provide, and community board involvement. Interviewees shared several examples of how the expectations of the presidency influenced their leadership.

## *Expectations*

Presidents pointed to expectations derived from local partners external to higher education, the MNSCU system office, and accrediting bodies. In addition, interviewees noted they were expected to serve on boards, be community leaders, and create institutional capacity to provide regional services such as day care, housing, cultural activities, and building use. Several interviewees stated that business and industry leaders expected the presidents to provide skilled graduates and incumbent workforce training to maintain vibrant local economies. One president talked about the chancellor's visit to his college where a meeting was held with industries partners:

From that day on, he got it. He's a sharp guy. He heard 25 business people say, look, don't screw with these two-year colleges in rural Minnesota. This is what they do, and they went on to expand about the kinds of things we do like being involved in the community, community service, and all this stuff that was on the table.

The same president suggested his external partners should play a role in pressuring politicians if they expected to receive the workforce training to which they were accustomed:

I think we're going to get a lot of heat from the external partners who are kind of fed up with what's happening with legislative activity, and they're going to go right to the legislators and say, look, we need these trained students. We need good employees here. We want you to do this so we can continue to drive the economic vitality of this region.

President #6 alluded to the potential negative effects on local industries if the financial cuts to higher education continued:

...a trend that really concerns me and could be the biggest threat to rural community colleges because in tough times, and you're focused solely on the bottom line, on the budgetary financial fiscal elements, you lose sight of a less tangible characteristics or benefits that don't lend themselves to being tabulated and calculated. What it means to local communities, the workforce, and economic development; what it means for quality of life for the learners who become skilled workers and quality of life of the community that would benefit from those workers and their contributions, and the effects on having the skilled workforce that would be attractive in the business industry.

Another president discussed the criticism he received from the community when closing a program that, when measured by metrics, should have been closed:

All of that made perfect sense to me, and it was rubrics that you add the sums together and bam you've got the answer. Well, the emotional response was that cosmetology was always part of our college, and I've come to the college for thirty years to get my hair cut. Where am I going to go now because it was inexpensive? I had the salons' owners saying my business is, the success my business will get, will be new stylists out of your college, and without a steady supply of new stylists my business won't be worth as much when I want to sell it or retire. And even educated women in our community are saying now there's nothing at the college for women except nursing, and not all women want to study the science of nursing.

President #3 described what his local partners expected:

...you know those critical life skills, and every time I meet with Minnesota Power, Sappi, USG, they tell me they want people with not only the degrees, they want people with those skills, and it's very difficult for them to find.

In addition to supporting workforce development, presidents must meet the expectations of their system office and accrediting bodies. President #5 described such responsibilities:

I feel like I have an obligation to serve this community and this college, but I also believe I have an obligation to lend my knowledge and expertise toward creating this system of the future, and I think there's a huge opportunity right now with our new chancellor to look at things a little bit differently. You have to be aware of all of the areas where there are expectations, whether its accreditation, whether it's your system, whether it's your board, whether it's national statistics, if it was a local levy—you've got to find out those people who are funding you and believing you. What are their expectations?

President #2 talked about the new chancellor and said, "I think [Chancellor] Rosenstone has more of a system focus, and he's instructing us to be more collaborative." President #1 posited that the current MNSCU Board of Trustee and chancellor have set clear expectations:

I think the good thing is that we've got a board of trustees and a chancellor who have no expectation other than we will change the way we do our business. If you want to be part of the system, then you're going to have to lead it and you're

going to be part of it. And if you don't want to be, well, then you're not for this system. That's the message that we need to plug into leadership.

Presidents pointed to a variety of other expectations placed on them and their institutions. President #6 laughed as he gave an example of what it meant to lead in a rural area by pointing to a fundraising competition he was involved in with other college and community members:

I open it up [referring to a newspaper article], and I see this guy had done an article, and I'm sure it was based on his dissertation about rural community college presidents and how they are called upon to do things that you wouldn't expect ordinarily of college presidents. There it was, picture me kissing that cow [Laughter] in 2003.

President #2 talked about the challenge of affordably continuing to meet the community's expectations:

I guess I see that as one of our roles here in the community is not to only provide education and customize training but we also have the cultural dimensions. A lot of our theater productions are a mixture of community and students. We've got a community band, and they put a tour on a year ago in central Europe. Eighty-some people went; I would say sixty were from the community and twenty were students, so I think those are important to....Also, at some point we're going to be confronted here with are we just merchants for credits and education and we skip all this other stuff, or do we try to do it all, but then it's some cost to the institution. If nothing else, having the building open in the evenings and on Saturdays for some of these things, it adds a chunk of time to the budget so that's

overtime as you know and that type of thing so all the sudden you've got those expenses that are kind of indirect but they're still a part of the whole mix.... The unfortunate thing is five or six years ago after I got here we went out and said yeah come to the college, we want you to be on campus, and now we're going to say stay away, we can't afford to have you.

President #4 also talked about expectations extending beyond the mission of educating students:

My college, for instance, we're a training education institution, so if the town has a housing issue and they want us to build a dorm, I'm going to look at whether or not building a dorm is good for the college. And you get that kind of pressure all the time. The community has a parking problem, so you should build a parking lot; there are just a thousand examples like that that I should go through but if they don't serve your mission statement directly then you shouldn't do them. I wish we could still do that. I wish we were lucrative enough that we could just have psychotherapy services or have the day care I mentioned a while ago or have, if the town needs after school care, let's just hire somebody and let the school bus drop off their kids here; those are wonderful but no longer do we have the kind of definition it would allow us to be that wide spread. Our pockets just aren't that deep anymore.

President #5 expressed frustration because the funding formula doesn't take into account the multiple expectations facing rural presidents:

In fact, I'm just writing one [newsletter] now about how in the old days when we had local funding, it supported community activities. Well, now if you look at



our allocation money, there's nothing for community support or community enrichment; it's just academics. I know that there are people who will read that and they'll have their eyes open; there'll be other people who don't like it.

President #1 believes he is expected to connect his internal constituents to the external partners:

I think my job as a president is to make sure that the connections are there. I don't know that either one is more important than the other, but if we insist on and build a mechanism for making those connections or have an expectation that the connections must be there, that's the first step. I've got to be out in the community connecting with; I serve on the hospital board, so we get that place connected with all the major players in the healthcare side over here.

### ***Challenges***

The study also substantiated the challenges noted in the literature that face rural presidents and their institutions. Some of the challenges mentioned by the presidents in the interviews included declining enrollment due to a shrinking population, working within collective bargaining agreements, operating with fewer resources and staff, rightsizing the campus, and serving on multiple campus colleges. Connecting expectations to challenges, President #5 said:

A real challenge for leadership where we are is figuring out how to accommodate more demand with the same resources or less and the only tools you have are persuasion and appreciation and a willingness to sit down and reorganize.

The challenge of operating with less human and financial resources was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. President #2 lamented how he has less staff than his metro counterparts to carry out strategic planning:

I think most of our colleges are feeling the pinch to some degree, but those of us in the rural areas probably a lot more because we don't have the, like we were talking earlier with your administrator structure, we don't have the assistant associates. And all of that to say okay you're going to be in charge of this part of the operation or this part of the strategic plan. You've got to do three or four other things, and it's kind of this jockeying all the time. It's whatever fires during that day [laughter] is where you kind of put your time.

President #3 expressed the same challenge:

We have to be very careful about how we treat our faculty and our staff and what they do. I have one office, one person offices at this institution, and I go to some other institutions and there's six or seven, so what am I doing to that one person.

President #6 described the difficult task of trying to move the institution forward with fewer staff:

One of the toughest things during the budget crisis was trying to help people understand that we were all being asked to do two things at the same time, and they were somewhat conflicting, and one is you wanted to meet your short-term needs within the crisis. On the other hand, you also wanted to position your institution so that after the crisis, it would be in a position to continue moving forward and progressing. And so there was this thing you talked about, driving

one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake and to people in the internal community, particularly, I think staff doesn't make sense.

Limited financial resources means presidents must efficiently offer programming that doesn't conflict with other institutions. President #1 suggested this would be an ongoing challenge:

Do you need seven carpentry programs in Northwestern Minnesota that are all half full? Probably not. Where are the three that are going to survive or the four that are going to survive? Where are they going to be? Who's got the best one? I think that's going to be one of the challenges on the plate for rural Minnesota campuses the next three years. How do you right-size that institution with regard to the most important ABC programs?

President #2 noted how important tuition becomes due to a shrinking allocation and noted the challenge of building enrollment by saying, "Unless you're close to a population center, your population base is shrinking or aging, so you don't have as many opportunities to recruit folks."

While rural institutions have drastically reduced their staffing due to a significant loss of revenue, presidents commented on the challenge of explaining their plight to others as described by President #1:

At the same time, when you continue to run into people who are uninformed and choose to be uninformed, who become ignorant and then become belligerent, that in my mind is the biggest threat we've got to this system right now. The people who are uninformed, including voters, who've kind of tied their wagon to that far-

right group that says, I'm not going to ever pay another tax for anything in my life. The narrow mindedness of that group of people...

President #3 agreed with this assessment:

We're running on as tight of budget as we can, and we keep hearing, well you need to cut more and more. But at what point...they're slowing starving us to death when it comes to providing.

A common challenge for rural college presidents is leading multi-campus institutions, which are housed in multiple towns. Four of the six presidents in this study lead such institutions, and one president described the challenges associated with this role:

It's different. I've tried to talk with both of our chancellors about the challenges of multi-campus presidents, and before they start doing more mega-mergers, we really need to consider what the role of the president should be. You can't live in two communities. You can't equally represent two communities. You can't raise your children in two communities. And you can't attend all of the chamber and economic development things. I try to do as much of that as possible, but when times get tough and you have to look at enrollment, and you have to start squeezing down on one campus more than the other, what does that do to your relationship within that community?

President #6 recognized this same challenge and discussed how he copes with multiple communities:

When I came here I told them, "My vision is that [this college] is going to be a regional presence and we're going to promote the region; we're not going to favor

any one community over the other. We want you all to be successful. We know that if one is successful, the tide is going to lift all the boats at the same time.”

I’ve been very, I think, I’ve been very successful at earning their trust that I can be on one Chamber Board and then I can get on another Chamber Board, and they know I’m not going to talk to the others. I’m not going to share anything I shouldn’t. My predecessor, I’ve gotten word, he wasn’t good about that. He would go to one meeting and then go to another and then share. I certainly learned, don’t do that.

One president mentioned how collective bargaining created a challenge by hampering the efforts of moving the campus forward:

I think collective bargaining for compensation and terms of employment are important, and boy every time we get together, we add more rules and regulations and protections to the point where it’s really difficult to move on something. I don’t know if you’re going to quote me on that. It’s always dangerous.

Finally, president #1 summed up the challenges facing rural community college presidents by sharing a story:

I had an interesting review one time with the guy who hired me here, and I said, “You know what? I used to be pretty good at keeping all these balls in the air. I’m not sure I’m as good as keeping those balls in the air anymore.” I said, “I’m not sure what’s going on.” He had a perfect answer, he said, “The balls are bigger.” That was it—the balls I had in the air when I was teaching and coming p in the ranks were, for all intended purposes, were pretty small. Now you get to

the point where those balls are pretty big, and they're hard to handle and keep them all in the air at the same time. That was good advice.

Presidents understand the scope of outside influencers and how these expectations and challenges influence their presidency. These expectations placed on them come from multiple constituents and stakeholders, and while they desire to meet these expectations, the presidents face a litany of challenges that make fulfilling these expectations difficult. Most of the challenges are due to the rural nature of their campuses and are made worse by the complexities associated with the new reality of higher education.

***Theme 2: Personal Ethos Impacts a Rural Community  
College President's Leadership Approach.***

The presidential interviews revealed that presidents are informed in their work partly by their personal ethos. The presidents spoke about what shaped their beliefs as well as where they were and what they were doing prior to their current presidency. In addition, they alluded to how personal values affected their decisions and styles of leadership during their presidency. Examples of codes that support this theme include solid rural values, community pride, confidence, fear, toughest year, and conflict with mission. The codes were grouped into three categories related to personal ethos: personal background, personal qualities, and personal feelings.

***Personal Background***

As presidents described their backgrounds related to their current position, they focused mainly on the rural nature of their past experiences, their previous higher education administrative experience, and collegiate teaching experiences. All six interviewees had rural working or living experiences prior to their presidencies.

President #2 stated:

...I always wanted to do a presidency; I was interested in staying in a rural area versus the metropolitan. I thought that's where my strengths were. Well, basically, I grew up...on a farm...I understand the rural economy, the needs about the state of Minnesota.

President #4 also pointed to his rural background:

The thing that led me to this specific presidency, it's the only one I applied for, and it was just such a good fit between my personality and where the place is and the type of people who live here. I grew up...and the issues are identical, a lot about migration. The town I grew up in when I was living there, there were 30,000 people and probably ten years after I graduated it was down to 3,000 people.

When asked how previous experiences led to the current presidency, president #5 said, "I had worked at colleges that had two campuses...I was very familiar with rural community colleges."

This was the first presidential position for all six presidents interviewed, but all had previous higher education administrative experiences, which included leadership in student services, customized training, or academic programming.

President #5 described a vice presidential position he held as a challenge but also a learning experience:

I went back to... as the vice president of academic and student affairs, and from almost day one I had people suggesting to me that there was a lot of dysfunction between the president and the board and that soon something was going to happen, and I was really selected to be the next president. Well, you know how

politics can twist things, and in the course of ten years of...I worked for five different presidents. I say to people sometimes because I worked for a lot of presidents and like at the community college in...My observations have probably taught me more what not to do. I know that what I always appreciated most when I was in the subordinate position was if a president looked at me as being competent and being able to execute the duties of my position and then would let me go do it.

President #2 explained his progression to the presidency and also described the differences he found between being a vice president and a president:

Well, I guess my entire career has been within MNSCU with the exception of a couple of years at the front end down in...It's just been kind of progression— instructor, campus dean, vice president, and then...this opportunity came along. ...I was a vice president for 14 years, and I just kind of assumed I guess that I knew pretty much all there was to know about being a president, but when you sit in the chair, it's all of the sudden, you're it. I mean you've got the chancellor of course above you, and the board but basically you can't say well this is my opinion, but I think you need to talk to the president. Those kinds of questions and things are being referred to me.

The presidency wasn't necessarily planned for President #3. When asked what led him to the presidency, he noted:

It sure wasn't planned, I can tell you that. It started when I was at...and coming up here as dean of students. And over the years it gradually, things happened, and changes were made and opportunities were there, and I ended up being the



president. There was no plan; it just happened...I guess you can say it was in the Creator's hands.

Like President #2, this president also noted the difference between previous positions and the presidency:

There's a lot more responsibility, but it still boils down to you really help one person ahead of time and you have the situations where you're working one-on-one, but as the president, I can do policy things or make things happen, that I can make the judgment on. And hopefully, it's a good judgment, so I have a little more freedom to help people as being the president.

Three of the presidents discussed previous teaching experiences in higher education.

President #4 pointed out his time as a teacher in an urban area was different from what he experienced working in rural areas:

I have worked in urban areas where I was at a university in an urban area as a teacher, and even people who lived very close by had no idea and didn't really care that there was a university there. It's not the way it is here in the small town.

One of the presidents actually started teaching at his current institution, moved to another MNSCU college for an administrative job, and then returned to ultimately become president.

### ***Personal Qualities***

During the interviews, presidents described what they perceived as important qualities for a rural president to possess in the current higher education environment. I was able to identify three main themes related to qualities: trust, accountability, and risk-taking.

The presidents described the need to lead in such a way that constituents will trust you as president. They also described the need to trust others to do their jobs and add value to the institution, since the role of the presidency is too large to accomplish everything in isolation. President #1 described why he believed his relationship was strong with faculty union leadership on campus:

I think it's trust. I used to be the faculty president here...so I know what that job is all about. It was different then, though. I do think there's an element of trust going back to that transparency concept you talked about earlier. We're not perfect; we've got lots of things to work on. At least I think on that trust side I think most everybody understands we're all working for the same end.

The same president stated the importance of keeping lines of communication open to maintain a level of trust:

I think we've got a level of trust here because we don't play games. If I see something that's going wrong then I'm going to talk about it, and if they see something that's going wrong they're going to talk about it as well. So we've established that over the years.

President #6 talked about being able to survive the presidency by placing trust in others and spreading the ownership of the decisions and issues across the campus:

If you come into this role thinking that you're in charge and you've got to control everything, you'll be up at night. You can't. You've got to trust other people that they're as bright or brighter, and they all have the success of the organization as their primary interest. You just let them do what they were hired to do.

Being accountable for your actions as a president and holding others accountable for their work was a theme heard across the interviews. When asked if decisions are best made from the bottom up or the top down, President #2 noted it is important to have people engaged in the process, but “at some point it’s going to have to be, the buck stops here.” President #6 agreed with needing to take ultimate ownership even during participatory processes, as he pointed out:

Going through the budget reductions, I wanted ownership of whatever decisions we’d made because they were going to be very difficult decisions, and I wanted people to be as participative and involved in those decisions so that it was a matter of what we were doing rather than what the president was making us do.

President #2 laughed as he described how others hold the president accountable for their actions:

People watch to get the cues from you, and so you have to be aware of that. I guess I was aware of that to a point, but like being the academic V.P., you kind of are somewhat in that role, but the president really sets the tone. You can’t, if you want a friendly campus, you have to be a friendly. If you want people to watch their budgets, you’ve got to watch your budget.

President #1 pointed to setting clear expectations and then holding internal constituents accountable for their actions as a leadership strategy during difficult financial times when he said, “Part of communication is just being open in terms of expectation and making sure that people are being held accountable and that type of thing, and I’ve got some work do to in that area too.”

The personal quality alluded to most often by interviewees centered on a broad concept that, although I am referring to it as “risk-taking,” was described by the presidents in many different forms. Presidents talked frequently about taking risks, being aggressive and innovative, being a daydreamer, thinking out-of-the-box, and being frontier-like in order to navigate the new reality of higher education. President #1 described how his role includes making sure his internal constituents understand the current external environment and that they are actively staying on the cutting edge:

We need to get them in here to see what the hell is going on around here so that gives our internal people an understanding that, you know, what we’re not going to be shy about what we do, and we’re also not going to be shy about where it is we need to go because we need to step it up....My job as a leader, I think, is to make sure those bridges are there, and if the bridges aren’t there, then I’ve got to get involved through academic affairs programs that just aren’t very good at this. Do you know where you might be headed if we don’t do this a little more aggressively, a little more focused on where you need to be pragmatically? Then we move ahead...I think that you’ve really got to be a frontier-like person to go out and really jump into this stuff and understand at a higher level than ever before because it’s going to make such an impact on how you teach and how you learn.

When asked to describe an innovative rural community college president, President #3 responded:

Probably the president has to be a person that can take chances, but they at least find a way to be back up if it fails. It’s difficult to go out there and put all your

eggs in one basket and put your money into a huge project and if it doesn't work. But sometimes you've got to be all in, too. You've just got to know when the correct time to do that is.

President #4 provided this response when asked the same question about describing an innovative president:

A daydreamer with a budget, it would be something like that. If I looked at a president, and several examples are jumping to my mind right now, but I see them as daydreamers with practical skill and with realistic expectations and the courage to stand in front of a bunch of people and say here's what I think. That would be what I would say: a daydreamer with practical skills.

President #1 summarized the importance of this presidential quality by saying:

You need to be curious, you need to be innovative, you need to get out of the box, you need to do things that other people aren't doing that are focused on what those learners need and what those industries need from those employees they're going to hire....You've got to be confident, you've got to be somewhat of a risk-taker, you've got to have a balance of recognizing and appreciating the old, well understanding that you move in new directions. And if you can put that all together, you're going to probably have an opportunity for you.

### ***Personal Feelings***

Throughout the interviews the presidents expressed how they felt about their presidency. I was able to align their expressed feelings into three broad groups: pride, enjoyment, and worry. Pride and enjoyment were feelings on one end of the spectrum used to describe how they felt in general about the presidency and the work they

accomplished. On the opposite end of the spectrum, worry was a feeling they all experienced due to the current financial crisis, the uncertain future of higher education, and the difficult decisions they were forced to make during these challenging times.

A feeling of pride expressed by the presidents resulted from several different recurring themes. President #1 commented about his institution's high performance statistics:

We've done a good job in terms of all the performance indicators, and our graduation and placement retention stats are very high. We're proud of that, and it didn't just happen, so that kind of attracted me to kind of stick around and see if we could make it better. We haven't made it any worse, and I think in a few years we've made it a little bit better.

When asked what made him most proud about his rural presidency, President #4 said, "The degree to which we're part of the community." President #1 agreed with this assessment, responding, "The thing that I'm most proud of is that we have continued that legacy of connection to community and it's more than just a phrase, it really defines how this place is worked." Presidents also take pride in what they provide to their customers. President #3 said, "I think our students' success," when asked what make him proud.

President #6 also took pride in serving students:

I think the thing that I'm most proud of is that we are so important to those we serve. If it weren't for our college here, those students might not be able to relocate, give up jobs, families, whatever to go someplace else and get an education.

President #5 suggested he was most proud about the opportunities his college offered to people and stated, “That we are really providing phenomenal opportunities, not just average opportunities, but phenomenal opportunities for our local people as well as people coming from the outside to get the training they need to have very self-sufficient lives.”

In addition to taking pride in their work and what their institutions accomplish, presidents described feeling enjoyment in their jobs. President #2 simply said, “I’m excited about coming to work every day.” President #3 expounded on this feeling:

I enjoy what I do. I don’t consider this a job, this is just, I get to get up and go, how you want to say to work every morning, but I get to come here and try to help people, and there isn’t anything better than that.

When asked to give any parting thoughts about rural community college presidential leadership, President #4 described his enjoyment of the job:

It’s got to be the greatest reward. This is the best job I could ever imagine having. This is the sweetest existence; I don’t know what your spirituality is but mine is tremendous. I didn’t get his job because of myself. If I had been led by my own decisions, Lord knows where I’d be right now. To me, I would just really encourage you to get into it. Being a president of a rural college is just the way to make the town survive in a way that I don’t think I could do in any other capacity. I very much encourage you to get into it.

As mentioned, along with expressing pride and excitement about their work, all of the presidents also talked about being concerned and worried about many aspects of their

work environment. Anxiety centered on issues such as declining enrollment, a lack of resources, the relevancy of their missions, and the effects of their decisions on people.

President #3 pointed out some of his concerns:

Well, it always is, what have I missed? What could we be doing better? And what, how do we continue to help students succeed?...The other things I worry about are dorms, and you know it isn't a question of what's going to happen, it's when it's going to happen, and how bad is it going to be. I worry about our enrollment every year—that we maintain our enrollment and worry about keeping quality people here.

When asked what kept him up at night, President #4 pointed to two issues:

Right now, it's enrollment. Our enrollment is dropping; we knew it was coming, but it doesn't mean it's easy. Relevancy, I worry about. We have to be sure that people are getting training they need right now. We can't follow traditional models of higher education. We might be serving our constituents, and we won't last. Those two things are probably one and two on my list of things to worry about.

When talking about constraints and lack of resources, President #6 said he worried about the effects of constraints and lack of resources:

Then you worry that am I burning out people. Are we putting too much on so that they can't do anything really well? What is the error rate going to be because they're overwhelmed and trying to keep up with it? The lack of resources would be the major piece that I worry about.

President #1 described his concern about laying off people:



Last year was the toughest time because we didn't have much fun here last year. We typically have quite a bit of fun, but I think we eliminated nine or eleven positions, and just making those cuts was the toughest time I've had. This is my 36<sup>th</sup> year in education; toughest year, longest year, most sleepless years in terms of going home and saying, "What the hell—isn't there a better way to do this?"

Asked how he stays in good health, President #3 offered insight to how he coped with worry:

I don't. [Laughter] No, I'm just kidding. I do a lot of, get a lot of working out. You know I do a lot of physical activity. Probably the most important thing I don't consider this stuff stress. It's part of the job, and I don't get crazy about it. I get concerned. You know tomorrow the sun is going to come out and you know...our first president, every year he would say don't worry, come August 29<sup>th</sup> or September 1<sup>st</sup> the school will open up and we're all going to do our jobs and we're going to get through another year, and he's absolutely right. It's a matter of keeping things in perspective, and everything can't be a big issue.

The interviews revealed that the backgrounds of the presidents, the personal qualities they possess, and how they feel about their jobs and their decisions are all important factors to consider when studying how rural community college presidents lead their institutions. Whether it is a rural background that helps inform their relationship building, a frontier-like quality that moves along institutional strategic planning, or a feeling of concern that makes a president think twice about laying off an employee, personal ethos appears to either consciously or subconsciously affect presidential leadership styles and decision-making processes.

***Theme 3: Interdependent Relationships Internal and External to the Institution are Critically Important to a Rural President's Leadership.***

After analyzing the 12 presidential interviews, it became clear that building and maintaining quality relationships with people was a top priority for presidents, since presidents cannot manage the complexities of leading institutions of higher education alone. Codes that supported this theme included student success, system expectations, shared governance, town hall meetings, and rural collective support. From the codes, I was able to distinguish five unique groups of people with whom presidents held relationships, either directly or indirectly. These interdependent relationships were categorized as the customer (students), the chancellor and system office staff, college campus team members, partners and stakeholders external to higher education, and like partners (rural alliances).

***The Customer – Students***

The interviews revealed that presidents believed students were core to the college's function, and decisions were made with students in mind. They took pride in their college's service to students. President #2 stated:

...I like the atmosphere here, but there's something special. It has to do with the students that attend this institution. It's a commonality, and it has to do with we say we're a union of cultures...we're not here to make people, change people—we're here to help people do what they can...

President #4 noted that strategic decisions were made with students in mind and said, "We laid off people who statistically were not benefiting to students. Anybody who was

not in direct student contact and the further we got away from direct student contact the closer to the layoff list we got.”

The same president expressed concern about the future of higher education if the focus does not remain on students:

As an industry, the automotive industry and America just got so arrogant that it was no longer taking care of people, and I worry that that happened in higher education as well. If we don't concentrate on who we're here to take care of and make those people feel like they're taken care of we will go out of business. We just will.

When asked what made him the most proud about being a rural leader, President #5 said, “That we are really providing phenomenal opportunities, not just average opportunities, but phenomenal opportunities for our local people as well as people coming from the outside to get the training they need to have very self-sufficient lives.” President #6 also expressed pride in their service to students by saying, “I think the thing that I'm most proud of is that we are so important to those we serve.” He went on to state, “As a president, I'm proud of the fact that I'm in a position to keep us focused on who we're serving—the student.”

While presidents take pride in the fact that students are core to their mission, they are also aware of the challenges facing today's students. Mental health issues, poorly prepared learners, students facing poverty and first generation students were frequently mentioned as barriers to students succeeding in school. When asked if he feels constrained by the system office, President #2 noted:

We've got a situation in both communities but maybe a little bit more in this one in terms of diversity and acceptance of the people with different backgrounds and that type of thing, and we're trying to do some things with that as well. It's kind of hard, and that doesn't seem to be as high on the priority list for the system, but it's something that for us we really need to do, bringing students in who've grown up in poverty.

The same president pointed out the emotional struggles facing students and the challenge this made for the college: "We figure about thirty to forty percent of our students have fairly severe, they have emotional needs....we don't have that kind of resource to get that kind of help."

President #3 spoke passionately about the challenges facing the population of students his college serves:

There's a group of students who come in who are not ready. I mean they tested where they have to take developmental courses, but they're not ready to take them yet, and so we put them in developmental courses and they fail. Well, that shouldn't be a shock to us after all these years.

His frustration with higher education's inability to better serve struggling students was evident:

We have to figure out different ways and again get out into the community to work with the groups that are lost there that have already dropped out of school who have graduated or don't have GEDs and figure a way that we make it non-threatening....They have a different world they live in, and they learn how to live poor, but yet they still have dreams...how can we help the students in life?

President #3 summarized the importance for rural colleges to serve students by saying:

Our colleges out here have the challenge of working with students that aren't the most ready but who this country desperately needs to become ready. If we want to have a society that has winners and losers and then all the problems that come with that, or do you want to have people that contribute? That's why I think a community college's role is to take students who are not quite there yet, and granted a lot of them are, but still to build those successes.

While the interviews revealed how important the colleges are to the rural student population, the interdependent nature of the students' relationships to the presidents and colleges was noted. The presidents articulated that students are essential to the sustainability of the colleges. President #5 stated:

Only about 70% of the kids graduate from high school, and then of those only 50% or 35% of the total go on to post-secondary ed. What are we doing to try to recapture that lost talent?

He went on to say, "I think obviously the biggest threat is being able to keep enough variety in what we offer that we can attract students." President #4 offered strategies to attract more students to his college because, like most rural areas, the regional population is declining:

Online enrollment is very high; mostly we remember who we're here to serve so mostly our students are from this geographic region. Pretty much all within this region, and we have quite a lot of from the metro area as well, I think only because they're such a large demographic to pick from. Mostly we're for athletes

as well. You know, we try to recruit from this area for athletes; we try to provide education that's relevant to this geography because that's why we're here.

Likewise, President #2 noted:

Our high school populations here are going to be depressed now for about 10 years... So what do we do? Try to work with the underemployed, and we can try to do more things online. We can try to build different partnerships and stuff. We're trying to do all those sorts of things.

### ***Chancellor & the System Office Staff***

The presidents are inextricably tied to the chancellor and the system office staff. They consider themselves as system employees assigned to campuses throughout Minnesota. President #4 noted, "You have an immediate job duty to support the system, and here in Minnesota, we're hired by the MNSCU systems office, and we're assigned to our colleges, but we're not college employees."

President #5 articulated how presidents are obligated to serve local and state interests:

I really consider myself an employee of MNSCU, and I feel like I have an obligation to serve this community and this college, but I also believe I have an obligation to lend my knowledge and expertise toward creating this system of the future. And I think there's a huge opportunity right now with our new chancellor to look at things a little bit differently.

While presidents are employees of the MNSCU system, they suggested a disconnect between the rural colleges and the system office and indicated how important it is for presidents to build closer relationships with their system office constituents.

President #1 said:

The concern here on the allocation side with rural schools is very real, and unless that Board of Trustees recognizes it, and I think Steve Rosenstone has because we've had some very candid conversations with him about that. The question really being do you want rural colleges in Minnesota or not?

One president pointed out the disadvantage rural colleges face due to geography:

I think the system office folks, within a twenty mile radius of St. Paul, they've got multiple colleges, multiple campuses; it's easy for a metro president to pop in to the chancellor's office or the system office or vice versa.

President #4 noted how he counters the perceived rural disconnect by strategically maintaining relationships with system office staff:

If I can just bump into one of the chancellors or associate chancellors or vice chancellors, if I can bump into them at lunch, we'll sit and sometimes we're talking about our families and sometimes we're talking about business and it just sinks in, it really does.

Lastly, one president, after a long pause, suggested a disconnect has also resulted from a leadership change with the chancellor because it has created some uncertainty how the MNSCU presidents fit into the system:

I think there are many of us who are feeling a little bit like we're not quite sure what the rules of the game are, not quite sure how to engage, not really sure how important our opinions are. That'll probably become clearer as time goes on. I think when you've got a system as big as ours, and you've got 31 presidents, if those presidents don't feel like authority has been clearly delegated to them and they're tentative, the system kind of falls apart a little bit. I know that that is one

of the things on our work plan this year, is to try to clarify what belongs to presidents at the local level and what belongs to the chancellor at the system office level, but we haven't really gotten that on our agenda yet, so we're a little bit unsure.

Despite the sense of disconnect between the rural presidents and the system office, presidents wholeheartedly expressed how the survival of rural colleges depends on the support and the direction the system office provides. While one president expressed concerns about the rural disconnect, he was also quick to point out the benefits of the relationship:

I have felt really supported by the system office. I feel our system can work phenomenally well because there are the resources there that small campuses, small colleges, cannot provide on their own...My overall feelings about our system and what our system can provide to colleges, it's about 80% positive.

When asked about strategies in dealing with the budget deficit, another president pointed out the assistance he received from the system office:

What we needed to do to get ourselves back out of deficit spending. The system office, the vice chancellors at the time, and the chancellor all were very helpful in providing training and opportunities and direction for us, and that was really an important thing on our campus at the time.

President #1 commented on how the system office provides direction for the colleges as a whole in order to move along a statewide agenda and position the colleges for a successful future:



I think that Steve Rosenstone knows very well that that's the biggest charge ahead of him—to make sure that we've got all of our institutions targeted to where we need to be and not where we've been. And he's working hard at that. I think there could be some significant changes in the next five years in terms of what does the leadership model, the leadership design look like for rural colleges.

President #2 concurs with the importance of working with the chancellor:

The framework is really focused on quality education, which we all agree with; very focused on work force development, which we agree with....The system is really supportive of innovation. I think Rosenstone has more of a system focus, and he's instructing us to be more collaborative.

### ***College Campus Team Members***

All six rural presidents made it clear that building strong relationships with people internal to the institutions was essential to successfully moving the institutions into the future. The presidents stated that innovative actions needed to come from teams of people and not just from the president. They also stated because of the complex and financially stressed environment, people would not last long if their work became stagnant. President #1 said, "Key faculty who understood the fact that we've got to be a little more entrepreneurial and innovative went out and found new partners and found new things to do." He went on to say:

We've got high expectations with people who come here. We've been unbelievably fortunate with a high area and really, really good faculty who understand this notion about if you're going to be a player in this marketplace of higher education...you better be damn good at what you do.

A change made by President #3 illustrated how he needed to put the right people in place to tackle the challenges facing the institution:

...we had to establish some things there; again, there was another change that had to be made in leadership, so during that first two years I ended up with a new CFO and a new academic vice president, which turned out to be absolutely a savior. I couldn't have done it; it was that I was able to put a team in place that could do it.

President #6 noted how he relies on his staff due to the sheer number of responsibilities he must manage himself:

These are very bright people, and I've got to trust that they can do it, and I don't have to do it all. I think if you talk to other people you'd find that would be what they would consider a strength, is that I hire good people and then I give them the freedom to do what they were hired to do, and I don't micromanage.

President #4 pointed to the value of including others in campus decisions:

You can't change it individually; you have to build teams and procedures. Teams of people you have faith in who are always paying attention and their hearts and minds are in the right place. I can't make any of those changes on my own for program delivery, but I can make changes about who's in charge of the program. Any president, I think, will tell you that you have to invest in people first. We can affect change here, especially being as dispersed as much as we are. I'm comfortable because I feel like I'm making good partnership decisions with my own employees, and they can affect the change; I can only affect the people. I think any president will tell you that you cannot do anything alone.

Ironically, despite the reliance on their internal constituents to carry forward the institutional agendas, the budget crisis faced by the colleges forced presidents to make numerous personnel cuts. The concerns unanimously expressed by the presidents were employee burnout and whether the required campus work would be completed. The presidents noted that the amount of work did not decrease when reductions were made, so existing campus employees were given more responsibility.

President #1 exclaimed:

We need business offices and registration offices and placement offices and admissions office—you can go down the line. And they have to be staffed five days a week. If we don't have that, then we don't have a college, and we're getting pretty close to some areas as to where those things are getting very, very difficult to keep staff on a regular basis because I'm not sure about how you guys are, 80% of our costs here are salary and wage related. 80%! What do you got? Pretty soon you've cut people, and that affects services. It's a huge issue. It's a huge issue.

When asked what one thing he would change about his presidency right now, president number #2 said, "It'd be nice to just have a full staff that you could really move some things forward. I guess if I had a wish that would be the wish." President #5 laughed when asked to provide parting thoughts on what his leadership meant in the last few years:

In rural colleges, and there's such a distinction right now in Minnesota between the rural colleges and the metro colleges, when there are new challenges that come up, our metro colleagues are saying, well, let a specialist deal with that

problem or that thing. And we had to say looking at the people we have here, who is the least overtaxed. You don't have anybody that's sitting around doing nothing, and we can't add new positions. A real challenge for leadership where we are is figuring out how to accommodate more demand with the same resources or less, and the only tools you have are persuasion and appreciation and a willingness to sit down and reorganize.

In order to counteract the burnout potential and keep people excited about innovative strategies and moving the college forward, presidents provided hope, support, and encouragement for their employees. President #6 talked about how he moved people to think about cutting-edge changes:

My success...I think was predicated primarily on my ability to plant seeds and nurture those relationships with key faculty people so that they eventually when innovation came around, it was their idea. They embraced it, and I could praise it and acknowledge it and credit them because after all it's not, I'm not seeking credit. It's not why I was hired.

President #1 related how he attempted to maintain morale and affected positive change while making personnel reductions:

I think, if somehow you can get people to believe and get on board that you can do it this way, you got a better chance. And you involve them at the front end, obviously, and you lead them through and some of them are going to balk and that's understandable, but you have to try it. You've got to try it... I often times say that the more you tell people how good they are and how successful they are,

sooner or later they start to believe it. We do that a lot around here, and it's easy to do because it's not artificial.

To avoid the fallout from having to make difficult decisions on campus, President #5 stated:

You can't start building good relationships after things start going bad. You really have to start from the beginning, being interested in the people in your college, and talking to people, and caring about their lives, and caring about what they do.

### ***Partners & Stakeholders External to Higher Education***

While presidents relied heavily on internal staff to carry forward the important work of the presidents' agendas, they relied equally on their external constituents to provide the necessary real-world knowledge and support. Presidents referred frequently to industry and business associates, local legislators, K-12 colleagues, and community officials as necessary partners to strengthen their institutional efforts.

When asked how his institution survived the fiscal downturn in 2008, President #1 said, "We went out and found new partners and new things to do." In describing how important his external relationships were to his institution, he stated, "I have to be at the table; this community, this region and this state needs to know we're players." President #2 also looked to local partners to help in difficult financial times:

We've banded together with the school district and the city, two cities.... We've been meeting on a monthly basis and talking and coming up with some ways we can share services and just some of those things. We've been able to...because of

our resource situation we get together with others and try to pool and do what we can.

President #5 talked about partnering with the local school district in order to encourage more students to consider post-secondary education:

We have with our ...high school consortium, we work really well together. Even when you get to high school, you feel like you have to go deeper, you have to go to into the middle school, you have to go into kindergarten or preschool or back to the family. With the resources, even doing a campaign to educate people and how they can come back to education, how they can get a GED, how they can come and get skills training. It's difficult to do, but it's a societal problem through and through.

The need to engage political partners came up frequently as a way to garner institutional support. President #3 realized he needed to further his efforts in this area:

I just marvel at...one day she's talking with the governor and then one day she's with [a U.S. Senator]. She's doing those things politically that needs to be done and that's an area that I have to step up, but I wanted to—that's part of my next phase to speak. I think it's very important because to be out there in that cutting edge and be able to bring money into your institution or develop programs. [U.S. Senators] and you need to be able to get out and talk to other people in the world.

All of that is very important. In this business, they need to know who you are.

President #1 provided an example of building political relationships and expressed how important he felt external relationships were to his institution:

I was out in my fish house with my brother [Laughter] on a lake up north here, and it was early January, and the phone rang, and it was [a U.S. Senator], and I said, “Oh Senator what are you doing?” We talked a little bit, and she said, “I want to see if you can come to the meeting next Tuesday.” I said, “Well I can probably check my calendar and see what’s going on.” Her phone was kind of blinking off and on you know so I said, “Which meeting are you talking about?” She said, “Well, the State of the Union Address.” I said, “Oh, oh that one! I think I can make that one.” It gives you one idea, I think, of the position that we’ve established particularly in manufacturing because she’s been here two or three times, [a U.S. senator] has been here a couple times; they know what we do...whether you call him or her a president or a provost, V.P., I don’t care what the hell you call them, they’ve got to be connected...

The interviews revealed that the associations with external stakeholders were interdependent relationships. The presidents expressed pride in how important the colleges’ efforts were in supporting the vitality of their regions. President #5 said:

We’d had the two chamber banquets in the last month...all of them talk about the wonderful partnerships they have with ...the college. We’re just the best secret. We’re a contributor to the community, to the economic development, and here’s the president of the university going on and on about me and this college and what a great partnership we have. We’ve got about 11 healthcare programs; we’ve got two major health systems here, and 90% of their staff, outside of physicians, comes through [this college]. That’s a huge contribution to the local area.

In support of local high school students, President #6 pointed to a program his college developed:

We started this “Be your Best” program which was serving traditionally represented students in high school trying to get them ready for college. Often times they were juniors, or they are juniors, and they come for summer work—math, English, reading—and then go back to finish their senior year.

The presidents also discussed strategies for building relationships with their external stakeholders. President #6 talked about getting campus people involved:

One thing we try to do is position people in communities into key areas so you get...on Human Rights Commission or on the Economic Development Authority or Chamber. I’ve got other people that are on clubs and things like that...I’ve actually served on the Chamber Board of Directors in...; I’m on the Chamber Board of Directors now in...; I’m on the Economic Development Authority here in...and that’s a real fine line to try to walk.

President #4 explained the difference between building relationships in rural areas compared to urban areas:

I didn’t feel any community attachment in an urban area and didn’t feel like people cared one way or another if the college was there then something else would have gone there. It’s exactly the opposite here, and I’m happy with that.

In a rural community, people trust faces they know. I think especially governance from afar, like for us it would be St. Paul and Washington D.C. and people here just are inherently suspicious of newcomers and governance from afar. Really the



effort that you take to build those grocery store relationships adds up because those are people who will really stand beside you and if you need something. President #5 gave this advice to aspiring rural community college presidents about tending to relationships:

I spend twice the time I intend to at the grocery store because I'm bumping into people, but it took a long, long time. What would my advice be to a new president that first year? I think, sometimes, if I think about going to another place, what would I do, and I definitely would get to know all of the elected officials, and not just know who they are, but go down and have a one-on-one conversation with them; I'm new in town, what do I need to know because politicians have run for office and they know what it's like to be liked and not liked. Who are the important people for me to get to know? Are there things about this community I need to know? The same thing I did internally, I would tell a new president to do externally. Don't just look at the list of who's on what boards and so forth, but really go out and spend the time with that one-on-one and try to connect at a different level.

### ***Like Partners/Rural Alliance***

All of the presidents spoke extensively about the unique challenges facing their colleges, such as a perceived funding disadvantage when compared to metro colleges and a declining population, which translates to enrollment concerns at rural colleges. The presidents expressed the importance of banding together as a group of rural advocates to bring attention to the challenges and needs of their institutions. President #6 described some of the difference between rural and metro colleges:

The rural presidents are faced with somewhat different challenge, and that is that you don't have the rapid growth, you don't have the crowds pounding on your doors to gain access, so the standard enrollment model, which favors the funding allocation model that favors enrollment, rewards enrollment—that works against the rural colleges. But they also recognize that, yeah, it's a smaller number of people, but in some respects they're even more important or certainly as important as the door pounding crowd in the metro area. You need resources, and even though you can't build a case based on volume and enrollment, you still need to help people understand, funders, understand that rural colleges are critically important to the local economy of the region it serves.

When asked how rural colleges can thrive, President #1 suggested that rural presidents need to advocate for their institutions with people that have the power to make a difference:

We're going through some conversations right now about the system with regard to a new finance model. At your college, our college, because they're heavy on the technical program side, we're having some struggles with the existing allocation model. We believe it's partially, and mainly, because of the fact that we have a high concentration of high cost programs. Let's make sure that we get on top of that and bring that to the attention of the state folks and make sure that they understand that in these tough times two-year colleges with high concentrations of high-cost programs are struggling more than a two-year college in the metro area that has basically transfer programs because they're much less expensive.

President #3 discussed the importance of working together to counter the threat of other higher education institutions taking market share:

The main thing is between the two colleges though is that they have to realized that we're going to have to find ways to cooperate, and we're going to have to realize that the enemy isn't among us and our own grouping. The enemy is the for-profit and the people that are putting on programs that are not solid...

The alliance of metro presidents was used as an example of effective lobbying for like causes by several of the rural presidents. President #4 made this point and used MNSCU's allocation formula as an example of the need for rural presidents to unite:

When the metro presidents formed an alliance, that gave them a voice that the rest of us in the outer upstate Minnesota had to match by forming our own alliances. So sure enough, now we have one in Southern Minnesota, and we have one for Northern Minnesota. I don't think we have to advocate amongst each other quite as much as we had to advocate with the systems office. I wouldn't say there's a lot of understanding in the systems office about what greater Minnesota needs. For instance, if we have our allocation models for funding are based on enrollment, which right at the top of your head seems like it makes perfect sense, but when you do that you're automatically going to favor an area that has a population density like the metro area or St. Cloud or even Rochester, maybe a little bit of Mankato, Bemidji.

When asked how rural presidents can do the best with the hand they are dealt, President #5 reinforced the point of advocating as a group of rural leaders and also suggested it was making a positive difference:

In Minnesota we rural presidents have been working very closely together to try to give a fact-based argument back to our system office about how the budget downturn has disproportionately affected the rural areas, and I think we're beginning to be heard and have an impact on future decision making.

In summary, rural presidents rely heavily on building and maintaining relationships with a wide range of people in order to manage the complexities of leading their colleges through challenging times. Together, these partners generated a holistic viewpoint of the environment for the presidents, which made them informed leaders and sensitive to a wide array of ideas and issues.

***Theme 4: Multiple Strategies Emerge as Tools for the President to Navigate the Challenges and Expectations Associated With Rural Leadership***

In order to face the challenges and meet the expectations placed on rural presidents coupled with the new reality of higher education, the interviewees described several leadership tactics, which they thought to be effective. This theme is supported by codes such as transparent leadership, data-driven decisions, repurpose space, re-conceptualize, and alternative funding sources. These codes are captured by five distinct strategies that emerged during the interviews, which are use data and mission as a strategic guide, practice transparent communication, feed the strong and eliminate the weak, cut costs and generate revenue, and prepare for a complex future.

***Use Data and Mission as a Strategic Guide***

The presidents recognized the power of sharing data to their advantage and used it to promote their colleges, communicate the need to make changes, and plan their strategies. President #1 spoke with pride about his institution's performance results:

Focusing on students and their success is becoming more and more important each and every day across this country, and performance measurement is here to stay.... We could look at our placement and retention and graduation statistics, and we can look at our Noel Levitz results and our assessment results and say hey that stuff is on the upper two to three percent of colleges in the country. That's damn good. We need to be proud of that, but we also need to understand that it didn't just happen.... This college has statistics in all performance categories that put us in the upper five percent of this country, what the hell is it that we need to do beyond that for you to sit up in a legislative session and say you know what... we're going to support re-investment in them because they drive 892 graduates every year with the placement percentage of 95 percent that puts these people into tax payer status.

President #3 noted how he promoted efficiency among his constituents using his institution's low CFI rating as a talking point:

I think our CFI was .03 and now we're almost up to 3, and so but again it was um, it really had a lot to do with making sure they were running efficient class sizes, that we weren't, that we were spending things through planning what we need them for instead of everybody just getting a budget then spending our, or spending over enough, but just to have a handle on where all the money was.

When asked what one thing he could change in his presidency, President #2 expressed a desire to have better research capabilities:

...it would be nice to have the positions that you need to really do the job. We don't have an institutional research position, we've got somebody in that capacity

that, but is more of a data person. It's not somebody that you say we're thinking about doing this and we need to have you do a study on this so...I mean she can pull the data if we need it. She's marvelous at doing that, but she's not a research person.

Several of the presidents expressed how important sticking to the institutional mission becomes in difficult financial times. President #6 shared why he adheres to his college's mission statement:

You don't know exactly what that future is going to be like, but you've got your mission, you've got your values, and you want those to feed into your practice, and you're planning strategically so that you can achieve and evolve in ways to continue to be faithful to one's values and mission.

President #4 was asked about the most important message he can convey during tough times, and he said:

Stick to your mission statement. We can't be all things to all people, and there's a lot of temptation to do that. Every group that needs something is going to come to the college and asking for the college to do it....Whenever I'm in front of a group and the sales pitch can be very persuasive because it is really is a legitimate humanitarian need, but I've got to say I agree with you that that needs to be done, but here's why we can do it because it is in our mission statement, or we cannot because it's not in our mission statement.

When asked about using his mission statement to guide his decisions, President #3 said:

Continuously. That's what we have to base...you can make or break your budget by closing a class and getting to the fill-up that makes huge savings. Then you

look at your mission. We may take a hit on that class, but it's part of that mission, and so it depends....Realizing the impact that what you offer and what you don't offer can make it very difficult.

### ***Practice Transparent Communication***

Presidents discussed the importance of transparent communication throughout the interviews and across all topics. Many of the presidents identified this skill as the most important strategy during difficult times of leadership. President #6 was asked what leadership strategy was important to take an institution through difficult financial times, and he said, "Well, communication is going to be huge up there. You've got to communicate the nature of the crisis, the challenges, what's expected of us, what's the desired outcome and then ask for everybody's help." President #2 responded to the question by saying, "I think transparency is right at the top." Asked the same question, President #3 stated, "Well, first of all I think transparency is so important with the budget. I mean, what do you have to hide in a community college budget, you know? There isn't anything that, if you're doing everything legally."

When asked to describe the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful president, President #1 said, "I think the ability of that successful president to make sure that she or he has been transparent, totally transparent with the kinds of things that are happening in and around both the college and the system."

President #3 would give this advice to an aspiring rural community college president:

I would say that you need to be a very good communicator with your people, your faculty and staff. You have to be transparent....I think the more information you

can give out to your people about what your situation is, what your plans are, and have them be a part of it, the better off.

The interviews also revealed how presidents view transparency different from communication. President #4 noted:

Transparency allows people to see what you're doing even when you're not deliberately communicating. Communication can be artificial; it can be a political campaign where you're delivering very polished and calculated results, but transparency just allows people to react to what you're doing a little bit at a time. It's harder than you think. I favor transparency, but it's harder than you think because when you get busy, you're just going to attend to what needs to be done, and the act of being transparent means you take an extra minute and send out an email to everybody with a question.

President #5 described his perception of the differences between communication and transparency by saying:

I think transparency is a willingness to have all of our decisions examined, to have all of the data available if somebody wants to dig into it...Communication, you're trying to tell a story, you're trying to give the quality of background for why you made certain decisions and why this data lead you in one direction or another. But then if anybody questions it and wants to put the effort to dig in, they know that anything they want to see is there and available. I just can't imagine trying to be secretive in our public sector work.... I think the communication allows me to give the narrative to that emotional side of things; the transparency is that more rational, logical, build an argument move forward,



but I think that's really the difference between the transparency and the communication.

***Feed the Strong/Eliminate the Weak***

Rapidly changing times, an uncertain future, and a significant decrease in funding has compelled presidents to make decisions and take action much quicker than in the past. Some of the interviewees lamented how their inaction in the past had created even harder times during the financial crisis. Presidents described how struggling academic programs and/or faculty that before would have been allowed to continue were now in danger of being cut. Instead of trying to spend money to improve the poorly performing entities, presidents talked about reallocating the money (saved through the reductions) to programs with strong potential and progressive faculty. President #2 pointed to past indecisions when he said:

I think, we'd have been better served if we would have made some of the major shifts that we're starting to make now, earlier. I think some of our sibling institutions did that are probably in a little better spot than we are. We're kind of getting there this year and to some degree last year. Not that we misspent money, but I think we weren't as vigilant in saying okay how can we change the processes. Now all the sudden our back is against the wall and we're having to do it. It would have been nice to kind of have been making more cuts than just reacting to the latest short fall or change funding from the legislature or whatever.

President #1 made a similar assessment of his past inaction related to the elimination of a service that really wasn't missed after the change:

That's my fault as a leader for not looking ahead far enough and saying maybe we should have done that three years ago. Maybe I should have been smart enough to say we don't need that ...let's see if we can do things differently. I wasn't smart enough to figure that out until we really got pinched. Part of our responsibility, I think, is to continue to think a little bit ahead of everybody else and try to figure out is there a way that we can do the same kinds of things but maybe do it differently.

Several of the presidents described their decisions to disinvest in weak programming.

President #4 spoke bluntly about his decision-making mindset:

I don't throw money at the weakest link. I throw money at the strongest performer, and that sounds, that makes me sound cold-hearted, but we're no longer in a service industry. Our education is a business more than it ever has been, and if you're going to survive and accomplish your mission statement, you better be competitive. For me to look at programs and go, we have 100,000 dollars in marketing and we're going to look at our lowest enrollment programs and throw money at those programs to try to beef them up; I'm not going to do that. I'm going to do just the opposite. I'm going to go why are you so struggling with enrollment? Has your life expectancy just passed? Do you we have to move you along or cancel you or...it's really easy especially in a difficult time to try to be heroic and throw your best resources at your worst and weakest performers. That sounds democratic and heroic, and everybody will love you for doing that, but your college is going to suffer.

President #5 spoke about the reality of his situation as a leader and the need to focus on the strong performers:

Crudely put, perhaps, but I don't have the energy to energize everybody, but I do have the energy to get excited when I see people trying to advance the college through their own vision, energy, knowledge, skills, ability....I think the process we've gone through over the last four or five years maybe has been good at identifying what is efficient, what is functional, what is its purpose.

In describing his program evaluation strategies during budget reductions, President #6 said:

What I did is I set some expectations for what we would do and I'd say, for example, we're not going to do across the board cuts, because while that seems fair that everybody share equally in the pain, what it does is it tends to erode your strong programs and artificially strengthen programs that probably need to go, or would go in the long run. We saw that happen with a couple of programs that we've actually had to close, and they had been artificially sustained, put on life support, and we could have used those resources, reallocated them to either new or helped our strong programs stay that way.

President #1 defended the concept of cutting weak programming by explaining how he thinks most internal constituents would agree on what should be eliminated at his college:

Now, the other side of that story though was that we were able to move out some of what I would call the non-performers. I mean if you would have asked for a list two years ago from the administration and from the rest of the college who are the bottom 10 nonperformers at this place? Our list would have been the same. I

believe and we were able to move some of those people out which was a good deal. That's the only way we probably could have done that, and now we're replacing them with people who are stronger, who have a better skill set, who kept that skill set up at a high level because they knew it was coming as opposed to just kind of sitting back and say, "I'm not going to go back to school. I'm not going to take this workshop. I'm just fine, and I'll be able to retire in seven years and things will be okay." You can't have that philosophy; it's not going to be okay.

***Financial: Cut Costs and Generate Revenue***

The presidents did not spend a significant amount of time talking about purely financial strategies during the interviews. It appeared this was largely due to them all relying on their chief financial officers (CFO) for financial leadership. They all spoke about the importance of a highly competent CFO, which was evidenced by two outcomes of the interviews. First, when asked (hypothetically) if they could only have one vice president at their college, four of the presidents said they would choose the CFO. One president said he could not function without an academic vice president or his CFO, and the other president chose the academic VP, but said that VP would need a financial skill set. Also, during their terms as presidents, four of the interviewees made a change in their institutions' CFO positions because of unsatisfactory performance. President #5 said:

I have made a couple of personnel changes, particularly in the finance area. We now have a chief financial officer who has background in both accounting and auditing and is a CPA, also taught at the college level. Her ability to explain why

we're doing things has gone a long way to foster people's adherence to policy and procedure.

When asked to describe a set of tools to navigate tough budget times, this same president said, "I think having a CFO that you really trust, who can give you accurate information about how money is being used throughout the college."

The financial themes that were discussed most by the presidents centered on reducing costs and raising revenue other than tuition and state allocation. President #5 made a point about the importance of raising revenue for a program due to be cut:

We brought it back under a director who I told, "Either you're going to make this take off again or your job is going to be to get rid of all the accumulated equipment and shut it down." Well [he] made it take off, and we've now got almost 10 million dollars in federal grants.

President #1 also explained how faculty are now required to consider raising revenue to support their programming:

If you just sit back and say well gee whiz, I haven't got any equipment money this year and my supply money has been reduced by 50%, woe is me. What am I going to do? That's one option, and we've had people who've done that, and they all sit in their office and fret about the fact that gosh, five years ago I had all kinds of money and today I don't. Woe is me. And then you've got the other side that says, okay I've got my industry partners built, I've got a couple of grant opportunities, I've got some people I know, I'm going to go after it because I know I have to have it.

In response to needing additional revenue to meet the expectations of his college, President #3 explained how he planned on creating a new position solely focused on raising money:

I want to create a temporary job as a developer, and this person is going to be hired...can this person come in and be creative enough to support the position to help us build for the future and we have an environmental institute and that's one area I want this person to work with. I want this person to do one thing with the foundation and that's the foundation board members, do one big campaign, and do nothing else.

In order to reduce costs and save money, the presidents described different approaches to preparing for the future. President #4 explained:

Community colleges like mine, whenever the economy worries people, they start taking classes at the colleges like mine. So we knew that that was going to be a benefit to us, but we also knew it wouldn't last. We pocketed the money. I shouldn't say it like that. We put the money in our reserves, and we had sense not to spend it or hire a bunch of new employees. We just knew that enrollment spike wouldn't last and sure enough it has not.....We prepared for it to come, and we saved the money that we earned when our enrollment spiked. Luckily I'm surrounded by good financial managers.

President #3 detailed his strategy for saving money:

You know where you can save the area, or save the most money is through efficiency in your class schedules. And so, our CFO, he developed a system where when we run our classes, we put a number in what we take in in revenue

and what our expenses are; it's all calculated for us, so we can make better decisions about which classes are going to run and which classes are not going to run.

Collaborating with other entities outside the college was described by President #2 as a means to reduce institutional costs:

We've been meeting on a monthly basis and talking and coming up with some ways we can share services and just some of those things. We've been able to...because of our resource situation we get together with others and try to pool and do what we can.

Finally, President #3 talked about how when he became president, he was tasked with fixing the budget. He noted that he used a team approach and tapped the knowledge of the system office to assist in the process:

Well, the first thing that we needed to do was get a handle on what we were spending, and we needed to make the budget process a transparent process for the whole community, so we started a budget group. We started a strategic plan, we, um, that budget committee or budget group, called the budget committee developed a number of ways for people to understand their budgets, how to plan for next year's budget. What we needed to do to get ourselves back out of deficit spending was the system office, the vice chancellors, and the chancellor all were very helpful in providing training and opportunities and direction for us, and that was really an important thing on our campus at the time.

### *Prepare for a Complex Future*

The most frequently discussed strategy for leading in the new reality of higher education was focused on the task of preparing for a complex future. Presidents described the need for them to personally understand the myriad possibilities for the future of higher education. They also talked about how critically important it was for them to lead their institutions in a manner that keeps the colleges relevant and competitive. Getting their internal constituents to understand when to maintain traditional values and when to seeking cutting-edge ideas emerged as a key component of this futuristic approach.

During his interviews, President #1 talked multiple times about leading in the future. He said:

If I were going to in the next 10 years, I would probably understand that maybe part of my effort needs to be looking at that next leadership design model and how that works is the fascinating part of what we're doing...The question you asked then is what does the leadership component of an organization need to do to get you to the next model that needs to be more efficient. It certainly needs to be focused on the future, the kinds of things that are driving education.

When asked about parting thoughts on leading into the future, he stated:

Like I said, it would be fun to be around for another 10 years just to kind of migrate through what's going to happen because you guys are going to have some interesting times ahead of you, but I think you have to approach it positively. I think you have to approach it saying, look it's not going to be the way it was so the first person to put their arms around the new design—the new model is going



to win... I just think that you need to have that ideology that says, let's look ahead. Let's consider some new models.

When asked to describe an innovative rural community college, President #2 said:

Someone who is looking for new opportunities. Someone that kind of pushed the limits—they think out of the box. I think one of our problems here is that we get a little bit too worried about it, and we just need to know this is what the policy is and this is what we need to do. A lot of times there's more wiggle room there than we're willing to take. I think someone that's innovative is someone who's looking for partnerships would be an example of putting aside some institutional barriers and say how can we move this forward.

One president described his view of a president leading a successful college into the future:

I think in the years leading up to that, the president of the successful institution has really created an environment that allows the college to look beyond what they have always done; you've got somebody who is scanning the environment and engaged in what's going on regionally....Then you show vibrancy, a willingness to change, a responsiveness for the community.

He also described what he felt were conflicting messages from the system office that created barriers to thinking out-of-the-box:

They get piece number one, because piece number one keeps us in the box of educating the people of Minnesota. Anything that's outside of the box, if there isn't specific permission, it's viewed as prohibition. Even though the Board of Trustees has in their strategic plan innovation, entrepreneurship, bringing in

extramural funding. The reality of negotiating the kinds of contracts necessary to do out-of-state or out-of-nation customized training to sign nondisclosure agreements with corporate partners—it has been an absolute nightmare.

President #3 expressed some trepidation about the concept of cutting-edge education, as he talked about a lack of financial support and about his population of at-risk students:

I think I gave you a graph last time of where that's going, and we manage to survive and do things, and I think those are good. But are we really being innovative and creative in terms of the cutting-edge? Especially with our state colleges, how do we provide the extraordinary education without the support to do it?...I'm at odds with the fact that if a student does not have a background with online education they're going to fail, and I know there's tons of statistics that back me up. We were just talking about, come on over we'll make you into this or that online, but where's the support, you know? There isn't support, and I know that everybody from the government to HLC, and they're looking at what's happening here, and it's almost like some of these colleges that are for-profit is almost like a scam.

Despite these reservations, President #3 recognized the need to support innovation:

...I've created an innovation fund for faculty and staff. Now we don't have to go out and get a grant every single time. We set aside 100,000 dollars to build that, that we can be innovative within our own way. There's money where faculty and staff can go do creative things.

President #4 talked about the need to recognize a changing student body and how he and his college must respond:

Generation X wants to know what they're getting for their time and money, and we better have an answer for that question. Times have changed in higher education; we are not assumed to be the most wonderful thing you can do anymore. Even if education in general is still assumed to be a valuable thing, there's just so many places to get it now. Some of them are geographic like my college is associated with a specific regional geography, but there are privates all over the place that have no territory at all, just the world is their territory. We have to keep that in mind because if we don't deliver what people want and need somebody else will.

When asked about what he worried most about, the same president pointed to a changing landscape:

Relevancy, in a changing world, not only technology but just the way we do business. We have to remain current in a way that people would feel like they're coming here to get training that's going to benefit them right now, not in general but right now and very specifically. That's always on my mind.

President #6 affirmed the need to be a futuristic risk-taker when asked to describe his perception of an innovative president:

Well the ones that come to mind are the ones who are risk-takers. They sometimes are rule-breakers, or they'll certainly bend the rules. They are very collaborative, entrepreneurial; they have a keen insight and understanding of opportunities for their organization.

President #1 affirmed this viewpoint by saying:

I think that you've really got to be a frontier-like person to go out and really jump into this stuff and understand at a higher level than ever before because it's going to make such an impact on how you teach and how you learn.

President #5 confirmed the importance of prospecting the future when he remembered a recent MNSCU Presidents' cabinet meeting where the discussion turned to preparing for a changing higher education environment.

When we met in our retreat in September we really worked together on, what are the biggest issues facing us as a system, and we kind of broke away from the typical things. We really were talking about the structure of the system and how higher education is changing and are we positioned to contribute to that change or to react appropriately to that change and that to me was very exciting, that we really talked about issues that are much bigger than locally running our institution.

Five distinct strategies emerged during the interviews as tools for the president to navigate the challenges and expectations associated with the new reality of rural leadership. The presidents noted that sharing data and adhering to their mission helped them promote their colleges, communicate the need to make changes, and plan their strategies. While using data to guide decisions was deemed an effective presidential strategy, many of the presidents declared transparent communication as the most important strategy during difficult times.

Interestingly, the presidents did not spend a significant amount of time discussing financial strategies during the interviews, likely because they relied on their CFOs for budget guidance, but they did focus on creating institutional efficiencies and generating

outside revenue. Presidents spoke about being compelled to take action much quicker than previously and eliminating nonproducing programs because of decreased funding and a rapidly changing future. Finally, the most often talked about strategy for leading in the new reality of higher education was preparing for a complex future, as presidents described the need to clearly understand the prospect of higher education in order for their institutions to compete.

### **Axial-coding Analysis**

As noted in chapter III, the open-coding process created distinct grouping of data, which were sorted into separate categories. This process limited the ability to cross-categorically analyze the data for a more abstract research examination (Birks & Mills, 2011). Therefore, throughout the analysis process, I consciously deliberated about recurring themes across the data set and considered what central phenomenon was emerging from the data. This process, called axial-coding, guided me in building a grounded theory map to characterize my findings (Creswell, 2007). The map, represented in Figure 2, consists of distinct, interrelated sections that provided me with a template for considering theoretical assertions. The following paragraphs define the purpose and explain the content of each map section.

### ***Central Phenomenon***

The central phenomenon, considered the core of a grounded theory map, contains the most frequently occurring, underlying theme discovered during research (Creswell, 2007). During my interviews, the rural community college presidents repeatedly discussed the need to understand and respond appropriately to the complex future of higher education. Therefore, the central phenomenon determined for my grounded

theory map was, “How do presidents understand the new reality of higher education and then lead an institution to thrive into the future?” Cross-categorical data analysis led to the discovery of this theme throughout the data set. President #1 provided one example of how rural leaders need to be thinking about the future:

I would say that you’d better understand technology. You better understand the next generation of teaching and learning as we start to redefine it. You look at, not sure if you’ve done much reading on the massive online open source coursework that’s out there, I think if there’s a game changer ahead of us that could be it. I don’t know how these 10,000 people that are enrolled in this psych class through Stanford are ever going to get college credit for it, but you know what? They’re going to figure it out. That’s three credits that are either going to transfer to your college or mine or some other one that they’re not going to take from us.

The presidents’ concerns about understanding the future more now than ever before are a result of rapidly changing conditions, which create an uncertain prospect for the presidents and the rural colleges they lead. These conditions represent the next element of my grounded theory map.

### ***Causal Conditions***

In grounded theory, causal conditions are considered to be factors that influence the existence of a central phenomenon. The rapidly changing factors alluded to in the previous paragraph are the causal conditions in my grounded theory map, and the presidential interviewees pointed to several that affected the central phenomenon. These included increased competition from for-profit schools, the expanding reaches of

e-education, an increasing tech-savvy and demanding study body, and severely reduced funding for higher education. These conditions are multifaceted and each contains complex undertones.

Presidents expressed worry about the flexibility of for-profits schools to enter a marketplace quickly and become instant competitors. President #3 described his displeasure of this concept:

There isn't support, and I know that everybody from the government to HLC and they're looking at what's happening here, and it's almost like some of these colleges that are for-profit is almost like a scam. It's here we'll make you all these promises you can do this, you can sit in your pajamas at home, but you really get an education that you need or you're being taught to get up in the morning or you're being taught to be respectful to people, you know those critical life skills...

While all of the presidents recognized the rapid emergence of e-education and their need to "get in the game," they were conflicted with their belief that much of the student population was not prepared to handle the challenges associated with online learning. Presidents talked about how a changing student population made many traditional campus practices outdated and discussed the challenge of moving their campus colleagues along to meet the needs of this new generation learner. President #4 said:

I don't know how your college experience was, but I remember my own. You'd sit down, and they'd say look to the person on your left, he won't be here and look to the person to your right and he won't be here after a year. Those sorts of moments just made us feel intimidated and fortunate to be in college, but the

Generation X is not feeling that way. Generation X wants to know what they're getting for their time and money, and we better have an answer for that question. Times have changed in higher education; we are not assumed to be the most wonderful thing you can do anymore. Even if education in general is still assumed to be a valuable thing there's just so many places to get it now. Some of them are geographic like my college is associated with a specific regional geography, but there are privates all over the place that have no territory at all, just the world is their territory. We have to keep that in mind because if we don't deliver what people want and need somebody else will.

The presidents noted the irony of needing to face these emerging conditions but doing it with significantly reduced budgets. President #1 described how the condition of decreased funding creates a challenge of coping with the other causal conditions:

A real challenge for leadership where we are is figuring out how to accommodate more demand with the same resources or less and the only tools you have are persuasion and appreciation and a willingness to sit down and reorganize.

### *Strategies*

The existence of central phenomenon demands a responding set of strategies. As a result of the need for presidents to understand the new reality of higher education and then lead accordingly, several strategies emerged from the interview analysis. These action steps included environmental scanning, coalition building through transparency, adapting rapidly to change, focusing on the strengths of an institution, generating revenue, relying on a skilled chief financial officer, and making people aware of your mission and your challenges.



Many of these strategies were discovered in some form during the open-coding process and served as category headings for the fourth theme, but the cross-categorical analysis added some depth to the strategies.

As presidents position their institutions for the future, they essentially need to pick paths that are appropriate for their colleges' missions and resources (both human and financial). The presidents discussed the need to scan the external environment and find a future that fits their capabilities. President #5 summarized how he thought a president must lead to create a successful future:

I think in the years leading up to [a successful future], the president of the successful institution has really created an environment that allows the college to look beyond what they have always done; you've got somebody who is scanning the environment and engaged in what's going on regionally. There always are some demographic and economic forces that a president isn't responsible for, but I think a president who is out in the communities engaging with business people and engaging with senior institutions and universities seeing what the points of connection are and then taking the resources within the college and reallocating, if you will, to those things that are success points and maybe defunding those that are not success points.

Presidents also noted that building relationships or coalitions was critical in order to produce results. They talked about building support by keeping the work and decisions of the president transparent to constituents and stakeholders. President #5 noted:

I think I've tried to do a lot of communication, and I know that everything we do here is public record and if anybody asked for it they could see the work that I do; so if I provide them with plenty of information... We try to do that with the budget... I think some of that helps with overall relationship building.

Explaining your mission and challenges to others was a strategy that might not show immediate or direct results but was still explained by the presidents as an important element of leadership. The presidents described their frustrations of cutting back drastically on human and capital resources and running extremely efficient campuses but still being told to do more with less. President #1 spoke passionately about his efforts to bring awareness to others about the effects reduced funding has on his college's ability to operate:

Yes, we are taking that message out; in fact, we're doing it much more aggressively now than we ever have before. In fact, we're almost getting to the point where we're really challenging some people to get beyond the rhetoric of political theater and start finding solutions. We're hosting two sessions: one for the house and one for the senate for all the candidates for office... we're saying look, this is about solutions; we want solutions from you people so don't come and give us the rhetoric of the party line, we're looking for solutions. It's going to get interesting because this is a republican town, and we're going to challenge some of the republican office holders here to say enough of this, let's look at what's coming next. Where are your priorities, and what does this college need to do to have you support us as one of the drivers of economic vitality and by the

way job creation, which you've talked about significantly, but they haven't done anything about it in the last four years.

Presidents noted that to generate more revenue for their institutions, it takes a combination of strategies, including building external relationships, aligning grant opportunities with the campus mission, and investing in people such as development officers to solicit external funding.

In grounded theory, the central phenomenon prompts the necessity for a set of strategies, but the strategies do not come to form and function on their own. Two sets of mitigating conditions exist that inform the creation of the strategies and how the strategies are ultimately carried out. Creswell (2007) defines the first category as context, which is considered to be internal or narrow influencers on the strategies. He refers to the second category as intervening conditions, which are broad, external factors that affect the strategies.

### *Context*

The internal influences identified in the axial-coding analysis include issues related to staff shortages, institutional missions, collective bargaining, traditional cultures, student success, and the personal ethos of the presidents. Presidents realize they need to meet the new reality of higher education by creating strategies that produce out-of-the-box and cutting-edge programming. The support of their internal constituents is critical to this process, but presidents report that reductions in human resources have left their campuses short-staffed with people that are burned out. President #6 described what worried him about moving his college forward:

I worry that we're not as effective. We're not making as much progress as we could if we had more staff, people in the right places. We cobble together somebody that's working in farm business management and is doing institutional research at the same time. You get these really odd patchwork quilts of talent to try to get the job done. Then you worry that am I burning out people, are we putting too much on so that they can't do anything really well, what is the error rate going to be because they're overwhelmed and trying to keep up with it?

Presidents also described how traditional campus values must be considered when trying to create change. Some of the presidents described a more balanced approach to moving the campus forward yet remaining sensitive to the campus culture, while other presidents talked about taking a more aggressive attitude toward creating change without as much regard to campus traditions. Whatever the approach, all presidents realized that the rapidly changing environment did not allow for tradition to stand in the way of progress.

Presidents put strategies in place to create new opportunities for their campuses, but a vast number of possibilities existed. Consequently, the presidents pointed to their mission statement as an influencer on their decisions. When asked how to navigate through tough budget times, President #4 simply stated, "Stick to your mission statement." Ultimately, the success of their customers, the students, helped shape their leadership in this environment. This also tied closely to their personal feelings of pride and their rural backgrounds. The presidents described how proud they were of their colleges' abilities to positively affect students' lives and, in turn, create productive

graduates to strengthen their rural communities. President #6 ended his interview by saying:

I always look at, okay if what they want to do, is that consistent with our mission? Is it consistent with the needs of the others and where we want to go to toward our preferred future? I'm pleased to be in a position to help make that happen. Helping other people be successful, I know how important post-secondary education is to the students we serve.

### *Intervening Conditions*

The broad intervening conditions discovered during axial-coding analysis consisted of increased accountability and expectations, external economic challenges, MNSCU system control, and the rural nature of their campuses. The funding challenges didn't deter the presidents from taking action toward creating new futures, but it was frequently mentioned as a complicating factor. The funding challenges were described as more severe because their campuses exist in rural areas. When asked about trying to meet the system office's direction of providing an extraordinary education to students, President #2 made a statement representative of themes repeatedly discussed by all of the presidents:

Yeah. I just heard our technology dean was talking about instructional technology at [a state university], and so now they're doing the upside-down lecture classes, and they've spent I don't know how much on four different classrooms to do all the technology stuff, like 90,000 a pop or something like that. There's no way in the world we could ever do one of those rooms, much less four. I know some of the metro schools, for example, something new comes along, and they can jump

right on it, and we're not going to do that. So students have said this to our leadership council meeting. It's a matter of system integrity as well. You're from [a rural campus], and you go there and you get this level of education, but if you're in the metro and you go to [a metro campus], you get this level of education because they've got the resource to have more support staff and more support services and more bells and whistles and classrooms, and you come here, and it's a lot those things are hit and miss.

Expectations and accountability come from several different sources and in different forms as described by the presidents in the interviews. The chancellor along with the MSNCU system office sets strategic directions for the presidents to follow and measures the campuses' progress on accountability dashboards ("Accountability Dashboard," 2011). The presidents also note they likely could not survive without the system's support due to their small sizes and limited resources. Accreditation standards are on the presidents' minds, including the need to maintain financial integrity as measured by the Composite Financial Index (CFI). Local advisory boards and employers demand trained workforces, and the communities expect the colleges to provide services such as cultural events, day care, and facilities. President #4 described this external influence placed on his campus: "We can't be all things to all people and there's a lot of temptation to do that. Every group that needs something is going to come to the college and ask for the college to do it."

### *Consequences*

Consequences that emerge from the strategies represent the final section on a grounded theory map (Creswell, 2007). In my model, strategies were implemented in

response to the central phenomenon of understanding the new reality of higher education. The ultimate consequence of these strategies is “Presidents position their colleges for a complex future.” It appears to be a simple statement, but as my grounded theory map illustrated, this consequence resulted from an intricate cause-and-effect relationship between three groupings of influencing conditions, a set of presidential strategies, and a central phenomenon, which fundamentally determines the presidents’ leadership environments.

President #1 embodied this consequence as he reflected on his pending retirement:

Like I said, it would be fun to be around for another 10 years just to kind of migrate through what’s going to happen because you guys are going to have some interesting times ahead of you, but I think you have to approach it positively. I think you have to approach it saying, look it’s not going to be the way it was so the first person to put their arms around the new design, the new model is going to win.

### **Assertions**

Through the creation of a grounded theory map, I was able to examine the data in a comprehensive format, analyze the research results, and develop theoretical assertions. For presidents to understand the new reality of education that evolved because of the causal conditions and to enact strategies that will produce the intended consequences of positioning their colleges for the future are complicated tasks. To accomplish these tasks with both the internal influences of the institutions and external intervening conditions persuading the strategies, the need for a complex approach to leadership was evident.

After careful analysis of the grounded theory model, five assertions were developed.

Each assertion represents a leadership dimension, which answer the research question of this study, which was, “What dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality facing higher education?” The five assertions that emerged were:

1. Rural community college presidents must be discerning speculators.
2. Rural community college presidents must be impassioned advocates.
3. Rural community college presidents must be hope-builders.
4. Rural community college presidents must be decisive action-makers.
5. Rural community college presidents must be relationship-architects.

The following paragraphs rationalize these assertions and confirm their validity as leadership dimensions through the inclusion of applicable quotations taken from the interviews and the addition of relevant supporting literature. At the end of this chapter, a model will be presented to describe how these five assertions, when grouped together, represent a multidimensional leadership model for rural community college presidents who are navigating the new reality of higher education.

***Assertion 1: Rural Community College Presidents  
Must be Discerning Speculators***

Rural community college presidents must consider the multitude of possibilities that lie ahead of them. Higher education’s future is complex, and leaders must embrace a future that advances their institutions parallel to the mandate of their students and other stakeholders while at the same time, aligning that future with their campus mission. President #1 spoke about trying to determine where to take his college in the future:



We try to share the stuff that we see that's coming. Critical area. Critical issue. How do you get that conscience of what's next embed it into how you do your business. When you come to work every day thinking, I'm going to do the same thing I did yesterday because 30 years later that doesn't work. Let's talk about where we think this place needs to be and how we can continue to have that essence of forward thinking. We talk about a culture of curiosity and innovation, those are two things that we like to talk about that drive us. You need to be curious, you need to be innovative, you need to get out of the box, you need to do things that other people aren't doing...

Interviewees frequently discussed how to balance new technologies with traditional practices and what niches would attract the new generation students. President #3 recognized the possibilities for distance education that existed but also talked about staying grounded to traditional models due to the reality of the population his institution serves:

I'm at odds with the fact that if a student does not have a background with online education, they're going to fail, and I know there's tons of statistics that back me up. We were just talking about, come on over we'll make you into this or that online but where's the support, you know?

The presidents talked about the need to always scan the environment, talk with others about the future, and watch the movements of competitors such as for-profit institutions. They expressed concern about making the right decisions about future investments, especially given the decline in financial support. President #3 pointed out the importance of taking risks into the future:

It's difficult to go out there and put all your eggs in one basket and put your money into a huge project and if it doesn't work, but sometimes you've got to be all in too. You've just got to know when the correct time to do that is.

In the financial or commercial-business environment, speculators make choices about future investments based on strategies, such as current data, trending information, and intuition. They are faced with unlimited choices, so they speculate about what possibilities are likely to produce results for their companies and make decisions accordingly. Given the complex future of higher education, the same type of visionary skills are required of rural community college presidents. My first assertion purposely uses the terms "discerning speculator" to describe the need for presidents to be constantly searching for and recognizing, among a nearly unlimited number of opportunities, what future is right for their institution.

Researchers and leadership clinicians support the concept of leaders as discerning speculators. Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006) found that more than any other administrator, college presidents and provosts believe they are responsible for creating a vision and shaping the future of their institutions. Other practitioners support generating ideas by utilizing the skills of many people throughout the organization. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) suggest leveraging the diversity of your constituents will generate new innovation. They note this approach requires leaders to relinquish some power and to prepare for a range of ideas. The researchers note that an individual leader does not have the ability to fully grasp the complex future and must distribute their responsibility to others. They pointed to the words of a retiring search firm CEO and described the importance for leaders to maintain certain traditional values as they search

for opportunities: “How we deal with change differentiates the top performers from the laggards.’ ...Again, most sustainable change is not about change at all but about discerning and conserving what is precious and essential” (p. 69).

Gavetti (2011) supports the concept of speculative leadership and suggests successful strategists must search for opportunities where others will not look. He says the essence of strategic leadership is to notice opportunities, which are invisible to the competition, and then earn the trust of your constituents to act on these “distance opportunities” (p. 125). In a study of 20,000 executives, researchers discovered skills that guide successful leaders in negotiating the unknown future (Schoemaker, Krupp, & Howland, 2013). The researchers note the six skills, which include the abilities to anticipate, challenge, interpret, decide, align, and learn must be used together in order to navigate the unknown environment. Anticipating includes talking with external constituents and environmental scanning while challenging requires leaders to examine the status quo. Interpreting requires leaders to synthesize the complex information, and deciding entails some risk-taking because decisions may need to be made without complete information. Aligning obliges leaders to earn buy-in from constituents, and learning means that leaders should accept mistakes as growth opportunities for them and their company. These skills taken together align well with the concept of rural community college presidents’ needing to be discerning speculators of a complex educational future.

Nonaka and Takeuchi believe intelligent leaders need to think beyond “...just explicit or tacit knowledge” (2011, p 61). The authors state that wise leadership goes beyond knowledge and instead must include the ability to “...project a vision of the future

or the consequences, and decide on an action needed to realize that vision” (p. 63). Eddy described the importance for presidents to realize how context and background affect leaders as they move forward in their careers: “...the roadmap in the presidency is not static, but rather dynamic and changing” (2005, p. 718). In a study of nine community college presidents, she found that presidents created a future based on their past experiences, personal ethos, and the context of their current workplace. She found presidents moved into the future while continually altering their concept of leadership. This, in turn, affects how they lead into the future. Finally, Kotter (2012) argues that vision is the foundation for a leader attempting to transform an institution. He says that vision leads to the alignment, inspiration, and action of people within an organization and that without vision, efforts of transformation can go nowhere.

***Assertion 2: Rural Community College Presidents  
Must be Impassioned Advocates***

Rural community colleges must meet wide-ranging expectations while faced with a multitude of challenges. Rural colleges are usually located far from a system office and are rarely in the spotlight. They tend to be politically disadvantaged due to sparse regional populations and financially disadvantaged because they serve less revenue-generating students and customers than metro schools. Often presidents serve multiple campuses in different towns, which creates communication gaps even with internal constituents. All of these reasons belie the importance for presidents to communicate the story of their institutional vision, challenges, and successes. Impassioned advocacy requires presidents to communicate their story with unfettered transparency.

Dr. Sue Collins, president of the Northeast Higher Education District of Northern Minnesota, said it is critical that presidents get the story of their institutions’ successes

and struggles out to the business leaders, politicians, and community leaders (S. Collins, personal communication, December 5, 2012). Specifically, she spoke passionately about making people aware of the negative effects of decreased state allocation to rural community colleges. Shortly after this conversation, she wrote an editorial to the local newspapers in her district that spoke about all of the accomplishments and challenges that have occurred on her campuses during these trying times.

The presidents in this study also spoke about the need for presidents to tell their story. They pointed out that advocacy needed to occur not only for their institutions but also for rural colleges and public education as a whole. President #1 talked about his efforts to create awareness about his institution:

Yes, we are taking that message out; in fact, we're doing it much more aggressively now than we ever have before. In fact, we're almost getting to the point where we're really challenging some people to get beyond the rhetoric of political theater and start finding solutions.

Likewise, President #5 attributed recent successes to making others aware of his institution:

We grew 4% this past year at a time when many of our colleges were dropping in enrollment and some of that may be the economics of the area or who knows, but we've been very contentious about trying to raise the profile of our institution.

President #4 spoke about the need to keep rural colleges collectively in the spotlight:

If you take a bigger piece of the pie for metro issues, you're going to have a smaller of the pie left for rural issues. I don't think, and I just want to keep adding, I don't think anybody in the metro, the state government or MNSCU, I

don't think anybody is doing that on purpose, but we do have to keep clanging the cymbal out here just to remind people that we're here, and I do feel that way... I think there's a number of us that are saying wait a minute think about the rural impact. We just had a retreat a week ago...that was one of the things that kind of identified as an elephant in the room, rural versus metro.

President #1 pointed out his role to advocate for his state's education system:

I need to represent the college and represent the community, represent the system. In national conversations I have been asked to represent the system, and I'll talk about the MNSCU system because I think we do a hell of a job with regard to the workforce challenge that are out there. With regard to success rates, because we look at them as a system, and they're pretty good compared to other systems across the country, so I can change hats pretty easily.

A review of the literature confirms the importance of this assertion. Duncan and Ball (2011) say that along with building a case for support of community colleges, advocacy entails communication and relationship building. The authors also note that advocacy requires passion and a belief in institutional goals for effectively describing the challenges of educating students. Duncan and Ball contend that students can be advocates for the college when they tell stories of their successes, and presidents need to remind legislators and business leaders that successful students fuel the success of the regional economy, especially in difficult times. The authors suggest presidents designate a person to track legislative activity to inform the president, and then presidents should make their case at local, state, and federal levels.

Leist (2007) found that rural culture plays a powerful role on how presidents must lead their institutions. He notes that presidents in rural areas are considered more than just a person at the top of an organizational chart, and they are expected to be highly visible in the community as well as readily accessible. He found one president who said, "...a rural community college leader must always be out working the crowds—because local constituents expect it" (p 315). Leist believes that telling the story of their colleges requires rural presidents to be much more than polished spokespersons. In addition to strong communication skills, he says presidents must become part of the local culture, listen carefully to the rural citizens, and deliver on agreements made with constituents. Leist states:

Telling the story provides rural community college presidents with the opportunity to showcase the many contributions and support that an institution can offer to external constituents. It demonstrates respect for, and the embracing of, the local culture. More importantly, it says that a president has assimilated into—and become a part of—the rural way of life. (p. 319)

According to Phelan (2005), presidents must engage and build consensus among external stakeholders about the direction and needs of their colleges. He says presidents must pay special attention to being the spokesperson for their colleges and "as such, must ensure the public is ever-aware of their existence, mission, outcomes, and benefit to the region" (p. 93). As it relates to advocacy, Fullan (2008) points to transparency as a critical method for gaining credibility and says the survival of an organization relies on public confidence. He says transparency improves an organization and shows

accountability, and he reminds leaders that transparency involves communicating to others about the leader's transformational efforts.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) lists community college advocacy as a competency for community college leaders but does not discuss advocating beyond the institution ("Part C- Competencies," 2011). The competency illustrates the importance for leaders to advocate their missions, visions, and goals for their institutions. Boggs (2011) believes policy makers need to be informed of the important roles played by community colleges but says one challenge facing community college advocates is a lack of agreed upon accountability measures, which makes it difficult for presidents to talk about the successes of their institutions. A study of community college trustees found that trustees believe community college presidents need to be passionate about their institutions and champion their causes (Plinske & Packard, 2010). In the study's interviews, one of the trustees said she felt a president needed to be both a cheerleader and a spokesperson for the college.

The unique nature of community colleges often means they face disproportionate budget cuts and greater expectations, which requires their leaders to advocate for their institutions (Eddy, 2010). Eddy believes leaders can be more successful in obtaining resources and support if they make a point of keeping their case in front of policy discussions. She says that an open-door mission and a focus on teaching and learning are central points for community college leaders to advocate for at community events and policy forums. Eddy also points out that advocacy is not an isolated skill but instead is tied to other competencies, such as communication and strategy. She says, "Clearly, all conversations a president has with internal or external constituents, even those that occur



in a grocery store or on the golf course, provide opportunities to advocate for the college and its mission” (p. 100).

Similar to Eddy, President #1 sums up the importance of impassioned advocacy:

I try to go out of my way sometimes whether it's in a grocery store or at a football game or a hockey game or any community event. I try to move around. My wife always gives me hell for not sitting down. I don't think that's my job to sit down. I like to see what's going on, and it's amazing the conversations you have about things that are maybe of little importance but also about things that are of great importance. I play golf. Some of my best golfing buddies are some major industries leaders in the community, and we've, the joke is always well, you've got to go play golf to have some conversations. You don't have to play golf, but I tell you what we've had some very interesting conversations, this whole new [building], much of that conversation in terms of how that needed to happen happened on the golf course. That whole connection point that I talked about with one of these points of the community side, a rural college president simply has to be out among them. You have to be out there.

***Assertion 3: Rural Community College Presidents  
Must be Hope-Builders***

My presidential interviews revealed that presidents did not want to dwell on the financial stress placed on their institutions, but they all talked about the effects of the tough times they were facing. Given the difficult financial conditions, people were on edge about their losing their jobs and burned out from taking on the extra work caused by employee reductions. Rising tuition and an uncertain employment outlook disenfranchised many students, and increased calls for transparent accountability from

state and federal agencies, accreditation organizations, and the system office made administrators and other college employees uneasy. In addition, external partners were uncertain about the rural college's ability to deliver quality graduates due to decreased support service, aging equipment, and fewer academic programs.

The new reality of higher education requires rural community college presidents to understand the importance of hope-building. Students, employees, and external stakeholders must be assured that their colleges' visions for the future are aligned with their missions and that the presidents are positioning their colleges to successfully fulfill all of the expectations despite the challenges. President #5 described his approach to deal with the campus mood:

One thing, I think, here is that we've gotten so exhausted looking at budget that we've kind of forgotten to really celebrate what our faculty are doing....I probably tend to reward behavior more, and I can't do it with money, but I can certainly do it with praise and consideration when people are selfless working together trying to work out problems and improve the institution....You can never completely alleviate the security needs of the individuals, and that's what hurts you most when you are cutting. You will cut them, you'll cut their position, and that's where a lot of fear comes out. I can't alleviate it all, but we're going to be rational about how we make decisions and we're going to try to be humane to the greatest extent as possible.

President #4 also acknowledged the difficulty created by reduced budgets and described the need to stay focused on the path ahead:

It isn't so much the budget reduction itself; it's how you handle it and the information that surrounds it. It's being in a job like this when you have to lay so many people off or fire so many people, you build up enemies over time, not intentionally and some people understand and some people don't. But that's probably one of the most difficult pieces of being a leader of an institution. Sometimes you have to let good people go and other times you have to let people who are not good go, but still there's a cost to it. And whether it's physically or mentally...that kind of thing can build up on you, so you have to keep focusing on the path ahead versus the other decisions you have to make to get there.

President #2 described how his role as a president allowed him to help people:

There's a lot more responsibility, but it still boils down to you really help one person at a time, and you have the situations where you're working one-on-one, but as the president I can do policy things or make things happen, that I can make the judgment on and hopefully it's a good judgment, so I have a little more freedom to help people as being the president.

The literature supports the concept of leaders providing hope to constituents in order to accomplish the goals of an organization. Given less revenue, increased accountability, and a turnover in faculty, Eddy believes it is important for community college leaders to make sense of the environment themselves and then communicate a cohesive message to constituents (2010). Northouse (2007) points to ethical leadership as a means to provide hope for constituents. He states that ethical leaders confirm the beliefs and values of subordinates, listen to their ideas, and empathize with their needs. Consequently, employees will feel competent about their work.

Hines (2011) describes key roles for community college leaders and refers to the movie *Hoosiers* when he says leaders must help create hope by turning the underdogs on our campuses into heroes. He also says leaders influence employees and help them succeed by modeling effective behavior and providing suggestions about different alternatives for success.

Eddy (2010) suggests change and uncertainty on campuses requires leaders to first personally understand their contexts so that they can then help followers make sense of the situation and connect past experiences to new opportunities. Eddy points out that subordinates make sense of a situation through the vision and plans portrayed by their leader, and therefore, presidents must frame their messages thoughtfully. She reminds leaders to consider the culture of the campus and attitudes of constituents in order to most successfully frame information and produce results. Eddy says to keep a focus on immediate needs and celebrate short-term successes to keep people motivated in following the president's vision.

Phelan (2005) believes that most employees understand the complexity of higher education issues but want to be aware of changes occurring on the campus. He says it's the president's role to address changes in direction, staffing, and operations during the budget process to avoid low morale, stress, and frustration among employees. If employees are left in the dark, they lose hope, which may cause negative fallout.

Leithwood and Sun (2012) studied the impact of transformational school leadership (TSL) and found support for the claims that TSL positively affects teachers and, in turn, influences institutional conditions. They found TSL had the biggest impact on understanding direction, shared goals, and team cohesiveness. The leadership practices

in TSL relevant to hope-building included building consensus, providing individual support, and strengthening institutional culture.

Bolman and Deal's (2003) human resource frame ties closely with the concept of hope-building. The premise of this frame is organizations need the talents and passions of people in order to be successful. The authors suggest the needs of the employees and the needs of the organization often do not align very well. For example, with declining resources, companies disinvest in human resources, which results in a loss of talent and in employee loyalty. Through the human resources frame, Bolman and Deal suggest organizations should invest in people instead of downsizing the workforce to save money. They believe by providing a satisfying work environment, aligning the values of the organization with the needs of the people, and giving meaning to the efforts of employees, organizations will benefit from talented and energized followers.

***Assertion 4: Rural Community College Presidents  
Must be Decisive Action-Makers***

The rapidly changing higher education environment coupled with the significant funding decrease to rural colleges requires presidents to act decisively. Increased calls for accountability and strict programmatic and institutional accreditation standards force decisive action in order to align with these requirements. New generation students demand flexible academic programming that fits their needs and learning styles, and campuses must meet their demands or students will choose from a myriad of other educational options, such as for-profit providers. The presidents all talked about the rural disadvantage within the system, but the perceived disproportionate funding model is not likely to change without the rural presidents taking action. More than ever, rural community colleges must strive to be best in class, and the presidents must be willing to

take calculated risks and model action-making behavior for their constituents to ensure this goal is sustainable.

The presidents in this study gave numerous examples of action-making, and most were precipitated by the new reality of higher education facing these leaders. Several presidents talked about the need to eliminate weak programs and reinvest in programs with strong futures. President #6 talked about taking action because of funding challenges:

How do you take risks as a president when you don't have money? Risk-taking can take so many different forms you know that braking/accelerating analogy, maybe you close a program that not everybody thinks should be closed and then use some of the savings to meet your budgetary needs but also you strengthen a program that you know is going to be increasingly important to the community or the employers or the college. It's the ability to see the opportunity in the midst of all the lows and be able to shift resources, shift focus or people.

Rural colleges are often the focal point of the community and are relied on to provide a wide range of activities. Thin budget margins forced presidents to eliminate or not pursue non-mission related activities since the funding formula does not compensate colleges for these services. President #4 explained his decision to not act on certain community expectations:

We can't be all things to all people, and there's a lot of temptation to do that.

Every group that needs something is going to come to the college and ask for the college to do it; we get pressure to provide day care because the town needs day care. That would be wonderful, but unless it serves our students we can't do it.

The college is not here to solve the town's management problems, and in a tough budgetary time people will look at their needs are but you have to ask two questions, one is what needs to be done and two is, is it our business to do it? That mission statement is the thing you just have to stick right to.

President #5 eliminated some services despite their popularity:

Shortly after that I had a visit from folks from the system office telling me that our college had subsidized a private business, like a housing facility, privately owned but next to the campus. There was day care on our campus, and when I found out that the ramp was like a thousand dollars a year, there were some of those things where I got the clear message, you've got to back the college out of those and explain it to the community.

As the presidents looked back to times when their budgets were solid, they realized action should have been taken to better position their colleges for the possibility of reduced funding. These observations serve as a reminder that environmental scanning of opportunities should occur in good times as well as bad times. President #2 talked about regretting the lack of action:

I wish we would have been more careful with our spending...I think, we'd have been better served if we would have made some of the major shifts that we're starting to make now, earlier....If there are any regrets it's maybe not acting as quickly. I think compared to some other leaders, I'm probably not as quick to pull the trigger. I have this—I don't know if it's a flaw, but certainly a characteristic, or personality character—that I want to believe that I can work with people and help them improve and be effective and sometimes it just doesn't pan out.

Four of the six presidents acted to replace their chief financial officer (CFO) while serving their current institution. President #3 explained the importance of his decision despite how difficult it was due to his relationship with the CFO:

And so we had to establish some things there, again there was another change that had to be made in leadership, so during that first two years I ended up with a new CFO and a new academic vice president, which turned out to be absolutely a savior. I couldn't have done it; it was that I was able to put a team in place that could do it. It was very difficult because the CFO was a good friend of mine, and we had a direction going. I believe that he wasn't going in that direction and basically had to let him go.

President #4 talked about his desire to make broad changes in higher education that are needed to meet the reality of today's students:

I want to get away from the agricultural calendar as much as we can. It was a good idea when farm kids had to work on the farm in the summer, but now if people get laid off in February, the clock starts ticking on their unemployment benefit expiration so they can't work until September to get in school, and they need some training right now. They need to get on with it, and they don't want to go to class three hours a week; they want to go to class eight hours a day and wrap this up.

Speculating about the future, advocating for higher education, and then building hope all lead up to the point of successfully taking action. A review of the literature finds support for the concept of action-making.



Northouse (2007) says, “Leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). He says leadership includes setting goals and acting upon those goals along with your leading your constituents to do the same. Fullan (2008) contributes six concepts he believes are necessary to create system-wide reform in an organization. In describing leaders’ actions, Fullan states, “Probably the two greatest failures of leaders are indecisiveness in times of urgent need for action and dead certainty that they are right in times of complexity” (p. 6). Wallin (2010) says change-leadership is an important concept for community college leaders to embrace given the complexity of their institutions. She believes change-leadership involves anticipating the change, analyzing the environment, acting on the idea, and affirming the change. The assertion of action-making parallels Wallin’s third step of change-leadership. She says sound leadership means preparing and allowing constituents to take action based on their strengths. Wallin posits that in the past, organizations gave resources to existing programs in decline, but now a different approach is necessary. She says there is no guarantee colleges that did well in the past will perform in the future, and leaders must be willing to act on the necessary changes to strengthen their institutions.

Cloud (2010) compares change-leadership to transformational leadership but believes where transformational leaders create a motivated workforce, change leaders’ actions affect both individuals and the organization. He says, “Change leaders think and act outside the box...” (p. 74) and suggests they cannot be risk averse. Riggs (2009) states the importance for community college presidents to lead the change effort required in today’s higher education environment. He believes dramatic change is inevitable, and

outside forces will shape the future of community colleges if the institutions themselves don't take charge of setting their own direction. He says, "We cannot afford another decade of rhetoric and finger pointing when it comes to developing new dynamic leaders who will lead the transformation of our community colleges" (para. 22).

A complex environment requires leaders to act quickly and sometimes without all of the necessary information (Schoemaker, Krupp, & Howland, 2013). The authors suggest that when leaders act, they must consider many options and follow a disciplined process despite the need to act swiftly. In a study of community college presidents, Murray and Kishur (2008) researched best practices for presidential decision-making when faced with major challenges. The authors found that once the facts were gathered, the appropriate constituents were informed, and a plan was developed, the presidents needed to act on the plan. They found that unless a significant change in circumstances required a change in the agreed-upon plan, presidents were more successful to follow the plan as outlined. Plinske and Packard (2010) found that risk-taking and confronting challenges were two of the top 12 leadership skills that college trustees looked for in potential presidents.

Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006) studied data from a nation-wide survey of community college administrators to determine how administrators define their leadership. Two of the top findings included administrators describing themselves as the people responsible for decision-making and initiating change. Boggs (2011) believes community college leaders must react quicker than ever before to meet emerging regional and national requests. He says leaders must position their college to help with workforce

shortages, prepare students for a global environment, and keep up with technological advances all with less resources than in the past.

***Assertion 5: Rural Community College Presidents  
Must Be Relationship-Architects***

The complexity of the new reality of higher education requires presidents to construct extensive relationship networks. This relationship building goes well beyond the concept of presidents forming partnerships for their institutions. Instead, it requires presidents to empower those people internal to their organizations and ensure that the teams that are built function effectively. Presidents rely on their campus constituents to advocate and create action on behalf of the college, so these leaders must create and communicate shared visions for the institutions. President #3 explained how he spent the first part of his presidency focusing on internal bonds:

Internally, I've taken my relationships internally. As I told [the] chancellor..., I've kept my head low these last three years in developing our base and his response was by keeping it low you didn't get in chopped off and so, but now it's time to take those risks a little more, but I believe you have to have, you can't be out there telling people that you have a great institution if you don't have things in order. You have to tend to businesses first and then do the things. You can bring in programs and money and if your faculty and staff don't buy into it you might as well, it's not going to work. You have to work, I think, inside out.

President #4 explained how he built up trust to affect change on his campus:

You don't show up and ask for it, that's for sure. You have to have relationships of trust that let people let you approach them in the first place, and that takes a long time. Change is only fearful when it becomes haphazard, so change that is

purposeful and explainable and driven by the obvious truth that you've let people in on all along, that's much less fearful....You've got to be trust worthy, which means you're competent and honest and you have to be that way every day to establish a relationship where people drop their guards and at least give you the benefit of the doubt that even if they don't know what you're doing, they're still going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you're doing it for the good of the college overall.

Presidents must establish mutual trust and develop personal relationships with community leaders, business people, legislators, other presidents, the chancellor, and the board of trustees. They depend on these external partners for funding, expertise, political support, and advocacy. President #6 described how he focused on creating connections between the college and a large company's foundation:

[This] is pretty much a one-horse town in terms of [this company], and that's an interesting story about how I've built the relationship between the college and [the company] and their foundation....Over time there was cultivating that relationship and trying to show them how we can be a good resource to their workforce development needs. About three years ago I started to develop a relationship with... [the] chair of the foundation....Obviously we thought a relationship with them would be helpful because they are focused, their very narrow focus on the...area, so only this campus could benefit from them.

Presidents must also be adept at facilitating relationship building between other people. Solid intra-relationships are necessary for administrators to work effectively with faculty and faculty with their colleagues. The new reality requires a team approach to

moving an institution forward. In addition, presidents need to foster connections between external stakeholders and internal constituents. By serving on community boards and supporting local industries, presidents can convince business and community leaders to connect with faculty on advisory boards and assist with cutting-edge program development. Also, bridging the gap between the external and internal can mean customized training business for the college as industry leaders get to know and trust the training representatives and faculty. President #1 talked about his role in nurturing relationships:

I think my job as a president is to make sure that the connections are there. I don't know that either one is more important than the other, but if we insist on and build a mechanism for making those connections or have an expectation that the connections must be there, that's the first step...I think that ability to engage the external with the internal is going to be critical. I think the ability of that successful president to make sure that she or he has been transparent, totally transparent with the kinds of things that are happening in and around both the college and the system.

An extensive amount of research exists supporting the importance of relationship building for leaders. Northouse (2007) introduces a team-leadership model, saying that a leader is responsible for group accomplishments by monitoring the team and intervening to improve the group's effectiveness. Bolman and Deal's (2003) human resources frame and political frame both have roots in relationship building. According to the authors, the human resources frame centers on relationships between individuals and the organizations and among co-workers. Bolman and Deal believe successful leaders think

of their subordinates as partners and empower their employees. The authors point to human resource theorists who say effective leaders promote mutuality, participation, and empowerment. While human resource leaders are often considered kind and caring, political leaders are described as realistic and persuasive. Instead of empowering others, political leaders influence relationships through persuasion and negotiation. According to Bolman and Deal, political leaders recognize the value of building relationship networks to link stakeholders with their organization.

Given the pressure on higher education institutions to search for revenue, presidents are required to build relationships with external boards, which could ultimately lead to external support for their institutions (Weisbrod, Ballou, & Asch, 2008). Amey (2010) states achieving institutional goals are made easier when community college leaders form partnerships, consortia, and other networks. The author defines partnerships as loose structures often without written agreements, which allows for more flexibility in the arrangements. In a study of community college presidents' leadership approaches, all interviewees listed collaborative leadership as an approach they used to lead their colleges. Presidents described sharing vision, empowering others, and inclusivity as approaches they used in their leadership (Malm, 2008).

The presidents in my study all served in union environments, and several described the benefits and challenges associated with collective bargaining on campus. Garfield (2008) believes presidents must face the reality of unions. He says to build solid administrative-union relationships, presidents must move slowly with decisions, be familiar with contracts, not take issues personally, and remember it is not about winning or losing. Most importantly, Garfield states presidents should build a respectful working

relationship with the union leadership. A case study on a community college change initiative led Locke and Guglielmino (2006) to discover the institution is much bigger than the president, and in order to build a better college, the president needed to involve other internal constituents. They found that subculture groups existed on the campus, and presidents needed to recognize and involve the subcultures in the change process.

In a study of higher education doctoral students, interviewees identified relationships as a major theme of community college leadership (Taylor & Killacky, 2010). The participants believed that connecting with universities, K-12 partners, faculty, and students were all essential relationships. A collaborative partnership case study was conducted by Hoffman-Johnson (2007), and she found the success of the partnership included the interdependent and changing nature of the relationship. The researcher says leaders are facing long-lasting budget reductions and increased demands for accountability, which makes collaboration more important for leaders to consider.

Eddy (2007) studied how five rural community colleges attempted to form a statewide partnership due to change in state leadership coupled with declining enrollment across all five institutions. The partnership ultimately failed, and Eddy offers suggestions how others can successfully collaborate. She says someone needs to champion partnerships to help shape meaning for the long term. Presidents must think systemically about what would add to the long-term success of partnerships, form clear goals, and offer feedback on a continual basis. In another study of rural community college leaders, Eddy found that presidents began forming relationships during the interview process where they met business, community, and educational leaders. Overall, Eddy discovered rural presidents were more likely to rely on relationship building to achieve their mission.

Presidents at smaller community colleges were also found to form tight relationships “...with even the lowest person on the academic ladder” (Bashman & Mathur, 2010, p. 27). These authors also found that leaders must form adaptable teams to meet the changing demands of the higher education landscape.

Boggs (2011) concisely sums up the importance for community college leaders to form relationships internal and external to the college by saying, “In order to advance the mission of the college, it is essential to have the active support of all college constituencies. External relationships can give the college support in the form of resources, facilities, and goodwill” (p. 14). Finally, the AACC recognized the value of relationships when defining competencies for community college leaders (“Part C-Competencies,” 2011). Collaboration represents one of the competencies where an effective leader builds and sustains internal and external relationships to meet the college’s mission.

### **Multidimensional Leadership Model**

Eddy (2010) believes that complex organizations are most successfully led by leaders who use multiple dimensions of leadership, and Bolman and Deal (2003) state effective leaders incorporate multiple frames to develop “...a holistic picture of complex systems” (p. 319). The AACC’s development of six necessary competencies for community college leaders also explains that presidents need to lead through multiple frames. I conceptually framed this study using multidimensional leadership, and my findings confirmed the theoretical assumption that successful rural community college leaders must practice multidimensional leadership due to the complexity of their environment.



While each of my five assertions is a critical dimension of presidential leadership, both the literature and my research confirm that the assertions must be synergistic for presidents to successfully navigate the new reality of higher education. In other words, the five dimensions must be practiced together where one dimension leads to the inclusion of another dimension in a continuous cycle. Presidents must discerningly speculate a future for their colleges and must advocate their visions and then provide hope to motivate their constituents to take action. Throughout this leadership evolution, community college leaders must develop and maintain an intricate network of relationships because navigating the complex environment requires a broader approach than one person can provide. Consequently, my research findings and a review of relevant literature led me to a multidimensional leadership model, which includes the five assertions working in concert with one another.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the center of the model features the assertion of relationship-architect, since virtually every element of rural presidents' leadership is affected by connections with internal or external constituents. The circular depiction of the four other assertions represents how presidents cycle through the process of speculating organizational direction, advocating the chosen vision for the colleges, building hope to motivate constituents, and creating action together to move their institutions into the future. One dimension does not necessarily lead directly to another particular dimension; instead, the dimensions are practiced in order of necessity given the environmental context. Again, each leadership dimension integrates an element of relational commitment from the presidents' constituents and stakeholders.

The multidimensional leadership (MDL) model that I developed as a result of this study contributes to the body of literature surrounding the concept of multidimensional leadership. When compared to the three models presented in detail in Chapter II, my model

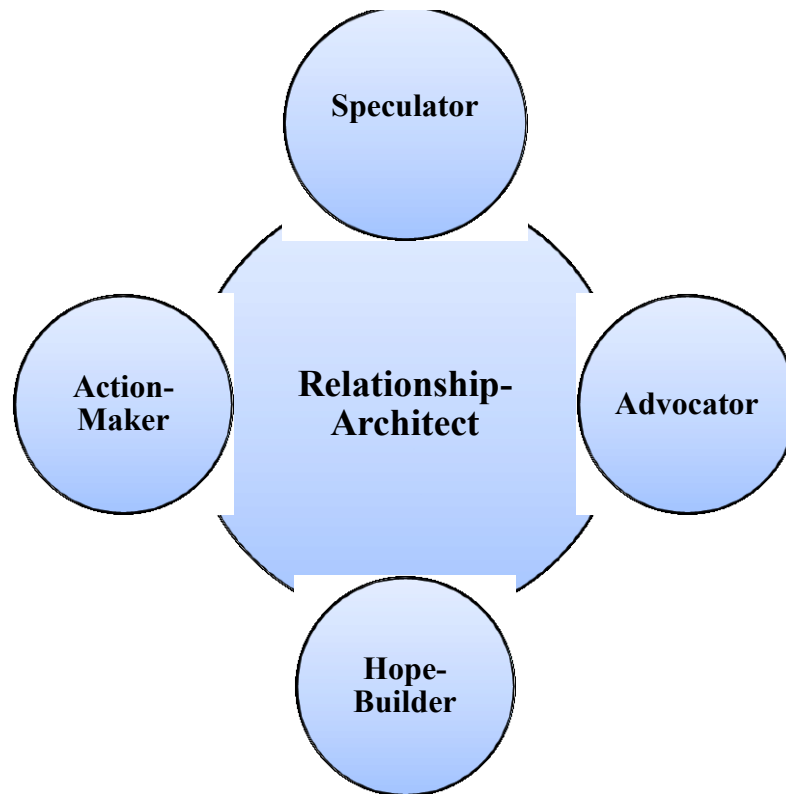


Figure 2: Multidimensional Leadership Model for Rural Community College Presidents. more distinctly defines dimensions of leadership necessary for successfully leading in the rapidly evolving higher education environment. Bolman and Deal’s four frames, Eddy’s model, and AACCC’s competencies do not clearly articulate the leadership dimension of speculating the future. My MDL model suggests presidents must be discerning speculators to accurately select a future for their institution that will meet the needs of increasing complex customers. The descriptor “discerning” is a purposeful word choice since presidents must wade through a myriad of rapidly changing information in the areas

of technology, funding, instruction methodology, and workforce demands.

Consequently, they must discern between the many choices to make decisions that align with their vision.

The AACC refers to advocacy as a necessary competency for community college leaders, and my model supports this assertion (“Part C – Competencies,” 2011). Both Eddy and the AACC suggest communication and transparency are important dimensions of leadership, which also support the concept of advocacy. While my model details that presidents need to advocate for their chosen futures, being impassioned advocates in my MDL model also suggests that rural community college leaders need to go beyond speaking only for their own institution and their own mission. Rural presidents must advocate on behalf of rural colleges in order to keep them in the minds of system office administrators, policy makers, and legislators. In addition, all presidents need to better inform an increasingly skeptical general population about the value of post-secondary education.

Multidimensional leadership models that include the element of hope-building are lacking in the literature. The challenge of working in the current and future rural higher education environment due to significantly decreased funding and uncertainty about the future requires leaders to build hope among their constituents. Advocating a clearly articulated vision through transparent communication helps build hope among the campus community, as constituents can imagine what the future holds for the institution and themselves. Presidents who lead by example and exude hopefulness can instill the same beliefs in others and, consequently, strategically position the college for the future with college-wide support.

A leader as decisive action-maker is not stated explicitly in the three other MDL models highlighted in this paper. Again, this leadership dimension ties closely to the new reality of a rapidly changing environment coupled with significantly reduced funding. Once presidents have advocated and built support for their vision to the campus communities, they must facilitate action-making in order to make progress in a timely and meaningful manner. The specific action-making that emerged frequently from the study's data centered on eliminating non-performing entities and investing in strong performers.

Finally, the relationship-architect element of my model aligns with the AACCC's collaboration competency and Bolman and Deal's human resources frame although neither of the two models places this element as the cornerstone of multidimensional leadership, as is the case in my MDL model. The four elements of my MDL model already described work in concert with the presidents building relationships between themselves and their constituents or fostering relationships among constituents. The rural presidency is too complex to navigate the environment alone. Presidents must trust others to inform them and rely on others to work together to ensure their colleges are competitive and relevant to the needs of the customers.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Conclusions**

The rural community college presidents in my study were charged with meeting a myriad of expectations while facing complex challenges. Expectations of the presidents and their institutions were derived from different sources. Locally, students expected quality and relevant for-credit programming, and industry leaders wanted highly skilled graduates and customized training for their incumbent workforce. Community leaders looked to the president to provide facilities for community use and cultural activities for the local population. Rural presidents were expected to be active leaders by serving on local boards and advocating on behalf of the community. At a state level and federal level, presidents were expected to lobby for rural colleges and advocate for higher education. They were expected to answer to accreditation standards and arbitrary accountability measures that were often ill-defined. External fundraising, such as obtaining grants and actively building foundation dollars, was a necessary component of their leadership.

These expectations were made more difficult to accomplish due to a set of challenges placed in front of the presidents. Due to sparse population, rural presidents needed to align with one another to achieve the political clout enjoyed by their metro counterparts within the state, and their distance from the system office sometimes left them less involved than their metro counterparts in state-level decision making.

Collective bargaining agreements and employees experiencing burnout due to staffing shortages made accomplishing strategic progress more difficult for these presidents. In many cases, rural population decline meant lower enrollment at the colleges, which generated fewer tuition dollars, and the colleges also tended to offer higher-cost technical programs positioned to meet local workforce needs. The funding for these programs were not differentiated from liberal arts funded programs, which added an additional budget burden on the colleges. These financial setbacks were exacerbated by a significant and multi-year decline in state allocation to the colleges.

The intended purpose of this research was to study what dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge during times of financial distress in the context of these rural college challenges and expectations. Instead, I discovered that presidents directed the discussions to presidential responsibilities much broader than leading rural colleges under sustained financial distress. The interviewees presented qualitative data that pointed to a revised research question, which was “What dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality facing higher education?” The concept of the new reality of higher education emerged from analysis of the data collected through my research, and the concept can best be described through a brief review of this research process.

Guided by a grounded theory approach, I used open-coding to establish hundreds of codes, which were separated into 15 categories. These categories were then grouped together into the following four themes:

1. Outside influencers affect the decisions and strategies of a rural community college president.

2. Personal ethos impacts a rural community college president's leadership approach.
3. Interdependent relationships internal and external to the institution are critically important to a rural president's leadership.
4. Multiple strategies emerge as tools for the president to navigate the challenges and expectations associated with rural leadership.

Next, I performed a cross-categorical analysis of the data, which led me to a grounded theory model. This model, presented in Figure 1, contains a central phenomenon, which is informed by a set of causal conditions. The central phenomenon discovered in my research was "How do presidents understand the new reality of higher education and then lead an institution to thrive into the future?" The causal conditions that led to this phenomenon represented what I referred to as the new reality of higher education and included increased competition from for-profit schools, the expanding reaches of e-education, an increasing tech-savvy and demanding study body, and severely reduced funding for higher education. The conditions were complex, and each contained multi-faceted nuances.

The grounded theory model also contained strategies used by the presidents that included environmental scanning, coalition building through transparency, adapting rapidly to change, focusing on the strengths of an institution, generating revenue, and making people aware of your mission and your challenges. These challenges were influenced by internal and external factors and, ultimately, the consequence of these strategies was that presidents position their colleges for a complex future.

The themes, categories, and codes discovered in the opening coding process along with the grounded theory content developed in the second phase of data analysis led me to five assertions that answer the research question presented in this study: “What dimensions of rural community college leadership emerge because of the new reality facing higher education?” The assertions, which were validated by a thorough review of relevant literature, were:

1. Rural community college presidents must be discerning speculators.
2. Rural community college presidents must be impassioned advocates.
3. Rural community college presidents must be hope-builders.
4. Rural community college presidents must be decisive action-makers.
5. Rural community college presidents must be relationship-architects.

The complicated context of leading in the new reality requires presidents to possess and utilize a complex array of leadership dimensions. As presidents adopt appropriate strategies to bring about intended consequences, they will need to rely on the asserted leadership dimensions. Successful presidents will cycle through the use of appropriate leadership dimensions depending on the context, intervening conditions, and chosen strategies in a given environment. By enacting suitable leadership dimensions, the likelihood of achieving the intended consequences significantly improves.

These assertions deserve an abbreviated summary. Rural presidents must wade through countless opportunities and discerningly speculate futures for their campuses that not only align with the institutional mission but also meet the demands of the students and external stakeholders. Since people external to higher educational institutions generally are not informed of their local campuses’ achievements nor are they aware of



the challenges and expectations facing rural colleges, presidents need to tell the stories of their colleges. This advocacy requires presidents to communicate their story with passion and transparency.

Students, campus employees, and external stakeholders are all affected by the new reality. Funding cuts have created extra work for remaining employees as well as fears about job security. The uncertain and complex environment leaves constituents with a feeling of uncertainty about the college's future. The new reality of higher education requires rural community college presidents to understand the importance of hope-building, and these leaders must assure everybody that they are positioning their colleges to thrive into the future.

The higher education environment rapidly changes and suffers from significantly reduced funding. In order to compete, rural presidents must be willing to take calculated risks and model action-making behavior to ensure the successes of their institutions. Finally, the presidents must construct extensive relationship networks since they rely on their external stakeholders and campus constituents to advocate and create action on behalf of the college.

Complex environments demand complex leadership, and I confirmed that rural community college presidents must practice multidimensional leadership to effectively navigate their environments. My research findings and a study of literature led me to develop a multidimensional leadership model, which includes the five dimensions of leadership working synergistically. This model, displayed in Figure 2, describes how presidents lead through the process of speculating appropriate directions for their campuses, advocating these chosen visions, and building hope to motivate constituents to

act on behalf of the presidents. The centerpiece of the model features the assertion of relationship-architect since rural presidents' leadership requires continuous connections with internal and external constituents.

## **Implications**

### ***Implications for Future Research***

A significant amount of research supports the importance of leaders possessing multiple leadership traits and skills to cope with challenges, but relatively few studies model how leadership dimensions meld together to successfully navigate these complex environments. Therefore, further research should be conducted on multidimensional leadership modeling similar to Bolman and Deal's concept of reframing leadership or Eddy's multi-perspective leadership model.

Interviewees talked about the importance of hiring high-performing CFOs to provide financial guidance in support of their presidency. They discussed the importance of grant writing and building curriculum relevant to the needs of the current marketplace. Since all leaders cannot possibly excel at all of the dimensions necessary to successfully lead complex organizations, additional research should be conducted on building leadership teams to accomplish a multiframe leadership approach. Challenging times caused by diminished resources and an uncertain future create anxiety, stress, and burnout among institutional employees and the presidents themselves. Further research should be conducted around the concept of hope-building as a leadership dimension.

Presidents talked extensively about the rural funding disadvantage, yet little empirical evidence seems to exist to support or refute this discussion of financial inequity. Research should be conducted to determine if a funding disparity exists for

rural campuses. Four of the six interviewees served colleges with multiple campuses in different communities, and they talked about the complications with this arrangement. Further cost-benefit analysis should be conducted to determine if the multi-campus concept provides worthwhile efficiencies to counter the complexities of presidents serving more than one campus and community.

### ***Implications for Policy Makers***

Rural communities expect their local colleges to serve multiple roles for their residents. These institutions serve as the cultural facilities, workforce development, and educational leaders in their regions. While the colleges are expected to fulfill these requests, they also face unique challenges when compared to their metro counterparts, such as smaller enrollments and proportionately more expensive programming to meet local workforce needs. Policy makers should be aware of the unique conditions facing rural presidents and their colleges.

Allocation formulas that favor high enrollment disciplines disadvantaged rural colleges. Providing the same amount of funding for a student sitting in an urban psychology class with 100 other students as a welding student working alongside nine other students in a small institution makes it difficult for rural colleges to afford quality programming that meets the workforce needs of their areas. Policy makers should also consider non-credit generating activities performed by rural colleges when deciding on how to fund colleges. Often times, rural communities rely on their colleges to provide many functions beyond for-credit instruction, but colleges are forced to say no to these requests because of a lack of corresponding financial support.

When developing policies that affect higher education, policy makers should involve rural leaders in the decision-making process to bring rural perspectives to the discussion. The new reality of education includes a future complicated to predict, and policy makers should consider supporting rural presidents as they take risks investing in future technologies. Finally, policy makers should realize how rural community colleges positively impact regional economies and, consequently, advocate on their behalf during policy sessions.

### ***Implications for Higher Education Graduate Programs***

Graduate universities preparing future leaders should bring the rural perspective into their curriculum. Unique challenges and expectations face rural leaders, and all higher education leadership students would benefit from conceptualizing this rural perspective. Community college leaders focus more on workforce readiness and customized training than their university counterparts do, and graduate programs should include these concepts in their academic programs. Every educational environment whether rural or urban, two-year or four-year, brings with it a unique context for leadership. Graduate school programs should ensure these differences are noted as they prepare future educational leaders.

The assertions discovered in study along with the multidimensional leadership model can adapt to most leadership settings. Presidents did not spend time talking about managerial tasks such as program review, legal considerations, or understanding financial modeling. Instead they talked about leadership qualities such as the intricacies of maintaining relationships, envisioning future possibilities for their colleges, practicing transparent coalition building to create a sense of hope among constituents, and acting

decisively to strengthen their institutions. Graduate programs should place significant focus on leadership dimensions such as the five assertions developed through this research.

Working in the higher education environment can be difficult for constituents at every level. Facing increased demands for accountability and transparency, operating with less human and capital resources, and facing an uncertain future creates stress for employees. Therefore, graduate programs should explore how to imbed “soft-skills” development into their leadership curriculum. Graduate faculty should challenge themselves to determine whether hope-building, developing relationships, and advocating are learned skills or inherent traits and how to best teach these leadership dimensions to prospective leaders.

The presidents spoke passionately about their colleges, their leadership approach, and about the challenges they face. Graduate faculty cannot possibly convey this leadership message with the same amount of clarity and pride. Graduate programs should consider a series of guest-lecture practitioners so that aspiring leaders receive a first-hand account of the realities of higher education leadership. Many graduate students have likely never experienced a rural community college, so graduate programs should require students to visit a variety of campuses, including rural institutions.

### ***Implications for Current and Aspiring Rural Community College Leaders***

The complexities of rural community colleges demand leaders who possess and utilize multiple dimensions of leadership. Single-frame leadership does not suffice in the current higher education environment. While leaders tend to excel in certain dimensions of leadership, they must pay attention to how differing situations require alternative

leadership lenses. The environment will continue to rapidly evolve, become increasingly complex, and face aggressive competition into the future. As discerning speculators, successful aspiring leaders will be prepared to choose the appropriate strategic positions for their institutions to remain relevant into the future.

Rural colleges face many challenges both internally and collectively as a group of colleges. It is important that future leaders advocate on behalf of not only their own goals and objectives, but also for the mission of rural colleges as a whole. Communities rely on many services provided by rural colleges, yet the recognition and subsequent funding needed to provide these services are often inadequate. These challenges along with other new realities facing rural institutions require aspiring presidents to understand the importance of hope-building among their constituency. College employees will need to be apprised of their president's vision and made to feel like they are a valued part of making that vision become a reality. Aspiring presidents must also be prepared to practice decisive action-making. The higher education environment is rapidly evolving, and institutions that are slow to react will flounder in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

The relationship-architect leadership dimension is the cornerstone of the multidimensional leadership model presented in this paper. Colleges are filled with highly intelligent and highly motivated individuals who, when called upon, add a broad perspective in speculating an institution's future. These same people become the leaders' greatest advocates when they feel empowered and share a common vision. Motivated individuals who are hopeful about the future are willing to act on behalf of their leaders

to strengthen the institution, and presidents should develop an environment of mutual trust to foster this team-oriented approach.

Presidents and aspiring presidents must be adept at multidimensional leadership and especially accomplished at building and maintaining relationships with multiple internal constituents and external stakeholders. Ongoing self-reflection, evaluating feedback from others, and building years of experience will all help presidents become more effective multidimensional leaders.

### **Final Thoughts**

MNSCU Chancellor Steven Rosenstone (2012) recognizes the perilous plight of the institutions he leads as an uncertain future brings into question the relevancy of how colleges and universities provide higher education to students today and into the future. He is concerned about the competition from for-profit schools, the expanding reaches of e-education, and the drastic reduction in state financial support for system institutions. The chancellor turned concern into action with two distinct approaches. First, he established system-wide work groups charged with answering three broad questions:

1. What will the education of the future look like?
2. What will the MNSCU system of the future look like?
3. How will the workforce needs of the future be met?

When the leader of a statewide, multi-campus college and university system expresses sincere concern and uncertainty about the future of higher education and his system, other educational leaders need to take notice and respond accordingly.

Second, he implemented a comprehensive set of strategic framework metrics to measure the performance effectiveness of the system's college and university presidents and the performance of their institutions. These 28 metrics are divided into four goals:

1. Provide Access to Extraordinary Education for All Minnesotans
2. Be the Partner of Choice to Meet Workforce and Community Needs
3. Provide Highest Value / Most Cost-Effective Higher Education Option
4. Collective Success of the MNSCU System in Serving the State and Regions

(T. Roy, personal communication, February 8, 2013).

Meeting these goal areas and their associated metrics represent incredible challenges for rural presidents and their institutions given the conditions of the new reality described in this paper. Providing extraordinary education, being the workforce partner of choice, and remaining affordable is difficult in healthy circumstances. Doing so under conditions of increased competition, rapidly changing technology, a demanding student body, and significantly less funding will require expert and complex leadership.

As illustrated in this research, rural presidents understand a call-to-action is required to meet an uncertain future, and this complicated educational environment requires a robust approach to leadership. Fortunately, the multidimensional leadership model presented in this study provides a comprehensive leadership tool for rural community college presidents to successfully navigate the new reality of higher education.



## APPENDICES

## **Appendix A Consent Form**

### INFORMED CONSENT

#### Leading Complex Organizations in Financially Distressed Times: A Day in the Lives of Rural Community College Presidents

Project Director: Michael Raich  
218-969-6002  
Higher Education Leadership – University of North Dakota

A person who participates in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

You are invited to participate in a study related to rural community college leadership in times of sustained financial distress. I am inviting you to participate in this study because of your vast experience in community college leadership.

The purpose of this research study is to discover:

1. What leadership styles do community college presidents utilize to meet expectations, navigate the challenges and manage relationships that correspond with rural institutions in financial crisis?
2. How do these leadership styles affect rural community college presidents' priorities and actions?
3. What leadership styles do rural community college presidents perceive to be effective? Ineffective?

Approximately six people will take part in this study within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. Your participation in the study will last approximately one year. Your obligation will be to participate in at least two audiotaped interviews, which will each last up to one hour at a place and time agreeable to you. Along with audiotaping, I may also take notes during these interviews. In addition to the face-to-face interviews, I will ask you to provide me with demographic information. You will be free to skip any of the questions that you prefer not to answer. There may be some risk from participating in this study. The interviewing will take time away from your normal work schedule and could cause extra strain or fatigue. Some of the questions may be uncomfortable for you to answer. You may experience frustration because of the potential sensitive nature of

the questions, but the risks are not viewed as being in excess of “minimal risk”. If, however, you become upset by questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question.

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, I hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study. The outcomes of the study are intended to provide rural community college leaders with an understanding of leadership appropriate for meeting expectations, navigating challenges and managing relationships that correspond with rural institutions in sustained financial crisis. There will not be any cost incurred by you for being in this research study nor will you be paid for being in this research study. The University of North Dakota and the researcher are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. I will be the only one with access to the digital records and their transcripts and I will keep them secured in a locked receptacle at my home for 3 years after I complete the study after which they will be destroyed. While I cannot guarantee anonymity due to the narrow selection criteria of research subjects, confidentiality will be maintained by means of assigning codes to all places and people.

You will have the right review and edit the audiotapes and any notes that are taken during the research. The results of the research will be used for my dissertation research project that is a required component of my graduate studies at the University of North Dakota.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota. You will be informed by the research investigator of this study of any significant new findings that develop during the study, which may influence your willingness to continue to participate in the study.

The researcher conducting this study is Michael Raich. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Michael Raich at 218-969-6002 at any day or time from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research or researcher, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

## **Appendix B** **Interview Questions**

### *Interview Protocol: Round 1*

1. What led you to this presidency?
2. Tell me about your first year as president. What surprised you?
3. Tell me what makes you most proud about being a rural community college president.
4. Tell me about the most difficult decision that you have faced as president at this college.
5. Describe the leadership strategies you consider to be most important to lead your college in difficult economic times.
6. What advice would you give a new rural community college president entering the profession now? How about 5 years ago?
7. What keeps you up at night/what do you fret about? Why?
8. Tell me what goes into your decisions and actions when making tough decisions because of your reduced budget. Lead me through a budget reduction decision.
9. Give me an example of a plan you've put in place or a decision you've made and implemented where it didn't go well. One that you'd like to 'do over' again.
10. What one thing would you change about your presidency if you could? Why?

### *Interview Protocol: Round 2*

1. In 2022, institution A is a thriving rural community college and institution B is struggling to survive. Describe the difference in leadership styles of president A versus president B in the 10 years leading up to this point in time.
2. How would you describe an innovative rural president?

3. A) How would you describe the informal culture of your college to a stranger, for example, modes of communication, norms of courtesy, informal traditions, how word gets around.

B) How could you tell if someone who works here did something one day “in violation” of the way things are done?

C) How do you align that informal culture of your college to the future external demands on your college?

D) Tell me about a time when faculty pushed back against a change.

4. Explain what is different about being transparent about your budget planning versus communicating with people about the budget.

5. What is more important: Communicating your financial situation with external partners or with people internal to the college. Why?

6. Is it typically more important for you to strengthen internal or external relationships as you consider budget constraints? Explain why.

7. What is the most important message you –as president- can convey to people during difficult budget times?

8. Are budget decisions during hard economic times best made from the top down or the bottom up? Why? Would this process be different if your college had a budget surplus?

9. What are a few of the scariest threats in the near future to the prosperity of rural community colleges, and as president what can you do about the threats?

10. Would you describe planning for the future as necessary to survive or a means to thrive? Why?

## *President Specific Follow-Up Questions*

### *Budget*

“We’re running on a tight of budget as we can, and we keep hearing well you need to cut more and more...they’re slowing starving us to death...they want us to have a great school or extraordinary education but we need to have the support to do that.”

How can you as a rural president ensure your college is doing the best they can with the hand that is dealt? How can you affect change within the state to help level the playing field?

### *Rural*

“I spend twice as much time I intended to at the grocery store because I’m bumping into people ...”

Does leading a college in a rural area change how you make decisions that affect people either internal or external to the college? If so, how? What do you get accomplished at the grocery store?

### *Communication/Transparency*

“One of the things we really did -I think right- was to say okay here is all the information, hear is the money that we’ve got coming in, here is all the budget information...and we talked about it openly...I think we gained a lot of trust and credibility despite the fact that we were making some major changes”

How do you leverage that trust and credibility as you lead your institution through future challenges and/or opportunities?

### *Strategy*

In our first conversation, you stated that: “We were having to do budget planning...it wasn’t flowing like it needed to, so I appointed [my vice president] as our Incident Commander and actually he used that incident command model that we use for crisis’...we really did have a crisis facing us”

How did you feel about having to assign an Incident Commander for a budgeting process? Describe how a crisis model helped drive decision-making through the budget process. Was it participatory or top down?

### *Relationships*

“...all the president know we’re MNSCU employees and we’re here to take care of the Greater Minnesota good because of that. Our specific assignments are relevant to our colleges, so we have important relationships within the college too...”

How do you feel about this leadership model within the system? Describe how you take care of colleges in Greater Minnesota beyond your own institution? How much do you concern yourself with metro colleges within the system?

### *Futuristic Thinking*

In our first conversation, you stated that

“I think you that you’ve really got to be a frontier-like person to go out and really jump into this stuff and understand at a higher level than ever before because it’s going to make such an impact on how you teach and how you learn.”

How do you get all of the other key players –like faculty- to get on board with you? How do you balance tradition with “cutting-edge” change?



**Appendix C**  
**Open-coding: Categories and Codes**

*Theme 1: Outside influencers affect the decisions and strategies of a rural community college president.*

<b>Challenges Facing the President</b>	
Bad Habits	Fighting to Survive
Stress from Change	Take a Beating
Shared Governance	Hard Feelings
Enrollment Decline	Under staffed
Over-worked Staff	Forced Choices
Breaking Point	Low Moral
Lack of Resources	Selfish Interests
Degrading Services	Conflicted Understanding
Decreased Industry Support	Past Traditions
lack of data	Dis-investment
depressed rural economy	Allocation Problem
population drain	Tuition Increase
ignored warning signs	Complacency
leadership stretched too thin	Funding Shortage
Budget Cuts	Concern about access
Technology Shortcomings	High cost programs
Faculty Contract	Financial conundrum
Limited Resources	Employee burnout
Labor Agreement	Reality
FA Regulations	Online competition
Resistance to Change	Lose services
Barriers to Change	Less time to react
Population Loss	For profit competition
Collective Bargaining	Increased competition
Accreditation	Patching/scrambling
Lack of Flexibility	Loss of Autonomy
More Demands	Burned Bridges
President Retirements	Lay-offs
Unexpected Reaction	Tough Decisions
Tuition Cap	Eroding Support

<b>Expectations Placed on the President</b>	
Cultural Provider	Nurture Relationships
Community Access	Do more with less
Providing culture vs. cost	Real World
Multiple roles	Be at the table
In the public eye	Workforce support
Pressure to Provide	Make Connections
Growing Student Expectations	Meet constituents needs
Accountability	Community Outreach
Community expectations	Assessment
Serve the State	Accreditation
Engage Businesses	Help people achieve goals
Community impact	Serve the area
Knowledge of community	CFI
Contribute to community	Racially Diverse Leadership
Solve community problems	Meet consumer demand
Helping others	Economic development role
Public Eye	Community board involvement
Procedural control	Serving business
Expect accountability	Access
Sustainable programs	Serving minorities
Public Benefit	

**Appendix D**  
**Open-coding: Categories and Codes**

*Theme 2 Personal ethos impacts a rural community college president's leadership approach.*

<b>Personal Qualities</b>	
Conservative	Confident
Survival	Pride
Better Times	Passion
Life-long Learner	Accountable
Lead by Example	Take Ownership
Enjoy the Job	Broad Responsibility
Ownership	Strong
Uneasiness	Curious
Uncertainty	Reflect the Culture
Engagement	Welcoming
Lead by example	Supportive
Final decision maker	No Hiding
President can affect change	Survival
Acknowledge	Personal Touch
Emotional vs. Rational	Give-and-Take
Focus	Coping
Tenure	Respect each other
Discouraged	Holistic
New Skills Set	Conservative
Fairness	Simple guy
Able-Servant	Mistrust
Praise	Resiliency
Responsibility	Inspiration
Trust	Rewarding
Honesty	Courage
Set the tone	Loyalty
Family	Anger
Reassure	Longevity
Autocratic	Personally connecting
Decisiveness	Keep perspective
Have Faith	Trait leadership
Risk Takers	Aligned values
Bend Rules	Tone

<b>Personal Qualities</b>	
Quality	Delegate
Fit	Learn from the negatives
True to Self	Build a reputation

<b>Personal Feelings</b>	
Tough decisions	Pride in student success
Drama	Conflict with mission
Emotional backlash	Enemies
Role identity conflict	Concerns
Culture clash	Enjoyment
Surprise	Conservative thinking
Misperception	Tough days
Respect and caring	Horrible experience
Controversy	Proud reputation
Survival	Keep it simple
Frustration	Fear of The For-Profits
Rational vs. emotional	Worry about relevancy of mission
Desire to expand	Have patience
Reputation	The human factor
Toughest year	Pride
Lost sleep	Worry about resources
Pride in results	

<b>Personal Background</b>	
Rural fit	Tied to culture
Rural background	Past administrative experience
Rural interest	Community college background
Family fit	Past academic management
Past admin experience	Fit with students
Community pride	Culture of population
Understands rural	Institutional fit
Rural family influence	Unplanned rise to president
Like professional background	Rural solid values
Integrating	Rural appreciation
Community acceptance	Personal connection
Sense of belonging	Rural likeness
Own identity	Learn by experience
Past mistrust	Legacy
Past frustration	Influence of past presidents

<b>Personal Background</b>	
Rural familiarity	Community fit
Natural fit	Institutional fit
Past administrator	

**Appendix E**  
**Open-coding: Categories and Codes**

*Theme 3: Interdependent relationships internal and external to the institution are critically important to a rural president's leadership.*

<b>The Customer - Students</b>	
Rurals are student focused	Supporting Students
Rural Student needs	Developmental Ed
Low-income/first gen	Student Retention
Poverty	College Success = access
Student Success	Student Completion
Personal Student Support	Poor Students
First Generation	Focus on Underserved
Student Success Data	At-risk students
First Generation	Under prepared students
Financial Hardship	Care for students

<b>Chancellor &amp; System Office Staff</b>	
Rural Disconnect	Restraint of system
System Approach	System Relationship
System distance	System Alignment
Lack of system connectivity	System Leadership
System direction conflict	System Direction
System Control	System Pride
New Chancellor	System Future
System Expectations	System Plan
System Push-back	System Governance
System reliance	Responsibility to System
System uncertainty	System Support
System restraint	System relationship
Reliance on system	Connection with chancellor
Role uncertainty within system	Board control

<b>College Campus Team Members</b>	
Campus Wide Process	Campus Agreement
Employee Responsibility	Culture of Success
Union Relations	Need more internal connection
Employee burnout	Faculty driven improvements
Team Budgeting	Engage staff
Shared Governance	Hire good people
Areas of Expertise	Position cuts
Trusting CFO	Need innovative faculty
Cross-training	Work Together
Internal Influence	Team Approach
Invest in people	Care for Staff
Friendly Campus	Progressive Faculty
Personnel reduction	Internal Affairs
On campus relationships	Internal Buy-in
Employee morale	Work Inside Out
Empower Others	Trusting Relationships
Internal Support	Talented Staff
Work Together	Collective Wisdom
Bottom Up	Closeness of faculty and students
Key Faculty	Friends
Intra Competition	Union of cultures
Org Culture	Admin team
Influence Faculty	Manage people not money
Campus Wide Goals	Invest in people
Campus Culture	Employee fit

<b>Partners &amp; Stakeholders External to Higher Education</b>	
Town Hall Meeting	Political relationships
Partnerships	Build relationships
High Schools	K-12 collaboration
External Support	Community partnerships
Political Relationships	Reliance on relationships
Lobbying	Community fit
Community Perception	Local Culture
Community teamwork	Collaboration
Legislative support	Community Connections
Small community connection	Business Sector
Local support	Influence Politicians

<b>Partners &amp; Stakeholders External to Higher Education</b>	
Advisory Boards	Industry Expectations
Engage External	Cultural partnerships
Industry Partners	Government
Influence Legislators	Facility sharing
Skilled Workforce	Alumni relationships
Align with External Partners	Earn community trust
Challenge Politics	Community melded with college
State and national partners	Community buy-in
International partners	High schools
Community importance	Chamber of commerce
Community Interests	Governor

<b>Like Partners / Rural Alliance</b>	
Rural Population Challenge	Rural informality
Rural Alliance Trust	Rural faculty relationship
Rural Disadvantage	Rural role
Metro Difference	Rural undertones
Rural isolation	Rural collective support
Rural fit for students	Rural Access
Scarcity	Share Ideas
Multi-campus challenge	Metro Growth
Small campus viability	Small Rural Mission
Distance from university	Rural Disinvestment
Rural job issues	Rural Survivability
Rural presidential visibility	Rural Challenges
Sparse rural industries	Regional planning
Recruiting challenges	Common Enemy
Socio-economic challenge	Rural Fit
Metro financial health	Rural Pride
Metro power advantage	Non-Compete Alliance
Duplication of efforts	Metro Alliance
Shared services	Rural Connectedness
Partnership	Belief in rural mission
Partnerships and alignment	Metro dislike
Rural Disconnect	Logistical difficulty
Niche Programs	Changing demographics
Rural Metro Distinction	Intertwined rural relationships
Rural Background	Out migration
Disproportionate Funding	Urban contrast



<b>Like Partners / Rural Alliance</b>	
Rural absence	Wide open spaces
Rural College Partnering	Unique rural roles
Rural Shared Resources	One horse town
Rural Allocation Disparity	Independent culture
Common Rural Message	Lack of visibility in state

**Appendix F**  
**Open-coding: Categories and Codes**

*Theme 4: Multiple strategies emerge as tools for the president to navigate the challenges and expectations associated with rural leadership.*

<b>Practice Transparent Communication</b>	
Engage	Information giving
Reach Out	Shared decision making
Transparence	Listening
Chain of Command	Participative
Miscommunicate	Team Decisions
Top Down 'communication	Collaborative Decisions
E-mail	Open-door Policy
Nothing Hidden	Written Communication
Transparency	Send a Message
Town forums	Uniformed/ignorant are enemies
Open information sharing	Transparent Leadership
Gain trust	Budget Transparency
Make finances a common problem	Transparent Planning
Shared governance	Promote the College
Communicate the problem	Fake Communication
Keep an open environment	Prefer Transparency
Sell ideas to staff	Budget committee
Use chain of command	Share information
Delegate authority	Rumors
Trust and delegate	Team building
Eliminate layers	Build public consensus
Communication	Speak Your Mind
Tell Your Story	Team approach
Be Available	Earning community trust
Internal Communication	Employees respond
Explain the Challenge	Buy-in to leadership
Examine Decisions	Cope by communicating
Rational Arguments	Communication
Differing perceptions about budget	Campus buy-in
Budget sharing	Shared responsibility
External awareness	Participatory budgeting
Campus silos	Satisfied employees

<b>Use Data and Mission as a Strategic Guide</b>	
Survey	Data Driven Decisions
Show Data	Prioritize Data
Bottom Up	Intuitive Decisions
Team Decisions	Focus on performance measures
Common goals	Results equal influence
Communicate with Data	Mission and Money
Anonymous Budget Survey	Sell Your Mission
Emotional Decisions	Rational Decisions
Budget Process	Focus on Academics
Lose focus on mission	Heroic Decision
Metric indicators	Find your niche
Mission change	Protect learning
Role identity	Focus on academics
Mission and Values	Structural Decision Making

<b>Feed the Strong and Eliminate the Weak</b>	
Realign	Best in Class
Priorities	Efficient Leadership
Reorganize	Set Direction
Active strategic plan	High Expectations
Preplanning	Adaptable are Strong
Program closures	Program Fit
Change the culture	Improve to Compete
Change vs. tradition	Invest in Strength
Changing campus culture	Thrive
Solid Foundation	Administrative changes
Sacred Cows	Choose lesser of evils
Defund Poor Performers	New programming
Reallocate	Keep historical perspective
Reward Performers	Make change slowly
Program Results	Student-centered strategy
Take advantage of situation	Methodical decision making
Lean Efficient Decisions	Breaking Tradition
Eliminate the Weak	Calculated Risk
Situational Priorities	Need to make changes
Focus on Strength	Consolidate
Short-term Survival	Repurpose space
Right sizing	Restructure your staff
Downsize	Assigned incident commander
Do things different	Act quickly

<b>Feed the Strong and Eliminate the Weak</b>	
Set Direction	Strive to Survive

<b>Prepare for a Complex Future</b>	
New Opportunities	Changing skill set
Out of the Box	Changing technology
Push Limits	Futures team
Creative	Changing marketplace
Be forward thinking	Move toward multi-campus
Systems thinking	Future complexity
New Generation	Next gen competition
Tradition VS New Generation	Changing times
Dealing with Change	Keep in front
Change Tradition	Forced to act different
Reconceptualize	Curiosity and innovation
Future Structures	New components of learning
New normal	Can't Wait
Economy drives changes	Progressive Thinking
Growth	Dream Big
Forward Thinking	Education is Business
Emerging Fields	Planned Change
Updated Brand	New Way of Doing Things
Scan Environment	Conflicted Future
Responsive	Invest in Innovation
New Industries	Foresight
Looking Beyond	E-Ed Challenge
Environmental Awareness	E-books
Make Changes	Different delivery methods
Long-term Positioning	On demand training
Innovations	Scan the environment
Nurturing Ideas	Changing world
See Opportunity	Remain current
Change	Changing delivery
Strategic Investment	Generational differences
Position for Future	Expand and grow
Update Values	Do profound work
Informed Risk Taking	Adapt
Benchmark Visits	Transformational education
Aggressive Improvements	New thinking
Budget-driven Change	Need to change
Leading Edge	Changing expectations
Embrace Reality	Think ahead

<b>Prepare for a Complex Future</b>	
New Leadership Design	Move ahead
New Model	Real World
Changing Campus	Reality

<b>Financial: Cut Costs and Generate New Revenue</b>	
Reduce programs	Cost of people
Plan for resource decline	Budget planning
Lay offs	Reserves
Goals vs. money restraint	Employee costs
Outside funding	Lay-offs and retirements
Reduced funding challenges	Harmful cuts
Higher tuition	Deficit
Financial vigilance	Find Money
Finance driven decisions	Development
Multiple role vs. for credit conflict	Foundations
CFO reliance	Fundraising
Perception of wasteful spending	Build Resources
Expectations of efficiencies	Money Driven Outcomes
faculty reductions	Cost Strategies
Foundation reliance	Student success equals money
Resource sharing	Spending
Manage resources	Enrollment
Allocation vs. tuition	First year budget crash
Grants	Invest and save
Alternative Funding	Innovation Fund
Build Reserves	Return on investment
Need for infusion of money	Appropriation loss
New Approach to Funding	External funding
Grant Writing	Alternative funding sources
Donations	Tuition cap
State disinvestment	Scholarship support

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