Looking Inward: Higher Education Public Relations and Internal Communication

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LOOKING INWARD: HIGHER EDUCATION PUBLIC RELATIONS
AND INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

by

Kelly A. Campbell

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Most of all, I want to thank Connor (old soul) who as a wise child ran determined interference with those who would dare try to enter the “Ph.D. Cave” when I was sequestered. As a wee lad Connor left me a note that [exactly] said “I love you get your phd done so I can have my mom back so we can go fishing on realy schie {shiny} ice on a river in 10 degree wheater love Connor”. So guess what kiddo, (who is now 20!) it is time to get out those poles and long underwear and let’s fish on ‘schie’ ice!

Kelly A. Campbell
There has been a decline in public good will toward institutions of higher education for nearly four decades. Resultantly, the public, media, and politicians call for greater transparency. It would be beneficial for institutions of higher education to utilize strategic means to communicate their stories, successes and brand directly to various publics. A critical, albeit often an overlooked public, are the employees of the university. They can serve as ambassadors for the university interacting with outside publics. In this capacity, not only do employees need to know information about their organization to function well at their positions, they also need to understand the strategic direction of the organization. Strategic communication of this nature can be accomplished with them via internal communication, and that falls under the domain of the public relations entity on campus.

This study seeks to examine how senior level public relations practitioners in higher education develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees. Understanding was sought regarding the practitioners’ beliefs and practices regarding: (a) public relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) whether symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment.
This study also looked at common and unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best practices, and whether they coordinate internal communication with other entities within their college or university and analyzes some demographic data regarding the career paths and education of the practitioners. It concludes that, while the participants in the study were operating with direct reporting to the president of their respective universities, and that all participants demonstrated working in a strategic capacity, none had documented communication processes with respect to internal audiences, and few had formal methods in place to evaluate the success of their efforts. In addition, none had well-formulated and strategic processes in place with respect to whether symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION
Why We Should Not Ignore the Increased Scrutiny of Higher Education

There is currently a decline in public goodwill toward universities and colleges. Various constituencies are increasingly directing criticism at these institutions. This decline in public trust and good feeling has occurred over approximately the past 30-plus years even as student enrollment had substantially increased (Bok, 1992; Callan, 2014; Callan & Immerwahr, 2008; Cook, 2012; Dennis & Lamay, 1993; Lederman, 2017; Lumina Foundation, 2013; Kelderman, 2010; Marcus, 2018; Phair, 1992; Public Agenda, 2016; Reynolds, 2013; Rouse, 2016; Selingo, 2017; Tompor, 2016). Polling has indicated that higher education is not perceived as meeting the needs of students (Gallup-Lumina Foundation, 2014). While paradoxically, the public increasingly believes in the importance of higher education, they also believe that the ability to obtain a degree is becoming increasingly difficult (Immerwahr, 2010; Johnson, Ott, & Rochkind, 2010).

This decline of good will has resulted in increased pressure exerted upon institutions of higher education by external forces. Resultantly the higher education environment has become one where various publics are demanding more public demonstrations of increased rigor, effectiveness and stewardship. Concurrently, budgets, federal and state funding, grants, and tenure-track hiring are decreasing and programs of study are being eliminated (Chin, 2010; Daughdrill, 1994; Ewell, 2014; Hamermesh, 2011; Mitchell, Leachman & Masterson, 2017). For the sixth consecutive semester student enrollments are also declining (National Student
Clearinghouse, 2018). During this same three-decade-plus period traditional colleges and universities have also faced increasing competition from for-profit educational institutions and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) (Anderson, 2012; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching [CFAT], 2011; Daughdrill, 1994; Dennis, 2012; Ewell, 2014; Hamermesh, 2011; Wilson, 2010).

As a result of this convergence of factors, there is an increasing level of public scrutiny directed toward institutions of higher education (Greer, 2013; Immerwahr, Johnson, Ott, & Rochkind, 2012). This pressure originates from a variety of publics, also known as stakeholders. Stakeholders are defined as “any individual or group who can affect, or is affected by, the actions, decisions, policies, practices, or goals of the organization” (Freeman, 1984, p. 25). Stakeholders in this document are used interchangeably with the word ‘publics.’

Higher education stakeholders include, but are not limited to, trustees, legislators and government entities, students (and potential students), parents of students, employees, the media, and the very communities in which colleges and universities are located. In addition, other stakeholders may be latent and arise during times of crisis. The common factor with all these public groups is their demand of increasing transparency and accountability from higher education (Allen & Bresciani, 2003; Alonso, 2010; Alutto, 2011; Dill & Soo, 2004; Hamermesh, 2011; Hebel, 2011; Lake, 2010; Phair, 1992; Trow, 1996).

Institutions of higher education face risk if they ignore these stakeholders. If colleges and universities do not communicate with their stakeholders, how will the college or university grasp the concerns, attitudes, beliefs and potential actions of the stakeholders? Ignoring stakeholders can result in stakeholders evolving into activist groups. Activist groups can limit the ability of the organization to function and achieve its goals via media attention, boycotts or strikes, or
other means of public ‘outrcy’. This can potentially result in government regulation or unionization, which limits the autonomy of a college or university (Grunig, 1993; McCowan, 2007; Washington Partners, 2015). According to Hon and Grunig (1999) “organizations that communicate effectively with publics develop better relationships because management and publics understand one another and because both are less likely to behave in ways that have negative consequences on the interests of the other” (p. 13).

The Value of Public Relations to Higher Education in This Environment

One of the means colleges and universities can use to demonstrate both transparency and accountability, as well as to exchange information and communicate with stakeholders, is via public relations. Public relations is defined as “a management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip & Center, 1999, p. 6). The Public Relations Society of America defines public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, 2012). Public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness by managing relationships with a variety of publics in the environments in which it operates (Grunig, 1992a).

Public relations has a boundary-spanning role in an organization (White & Dozer, 1992). Boundary spanning roles are a critical link between environmental characteristics and organizational structure (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). In the role of a boundary spanner, a public relations practitioner will interact within an organization and its publics and will research and relay information to the decision makers in the organization (White & Dozer, 1992). In this role public relations practitioners manage the organization’s response to changes in its environment (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982). This monitoring is called environmental scanning. It is a continual
reading, listening, researching and watching current affairs while being mindful of the organization’s interests and relationships (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012).

Due to its relative newness as a discipline, public relations does not have the depth of theory upon which to practice as do other social science-based disciplines, such as communications. Public relations research began in the 1950s as an offshoot of mass communication research (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006) and the first scholarly public relations journal did not publish until 1975. No additional journals followed until 14-years later in 1989 (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

The *Excellence Study* as the Dominant Paradigm in Public Relations

The *Excellence Study* was a 15-year longitudinal seminal research study that greatly impacted the practice of public relations and it is considered the dominant paradigm of the field (Grunig, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). In speaking of the value of the study and what it brought to the field Grunig said, “The *Excellence Study* provided solid theory and empirical evidence of how the function should be organized to maximize this” (2006, p. 159) i.e. to increase the value of the public relations function to the organization. The *Excellence Study* produced ‘benchmarking’ by identifying critical success factors across different types of organizations (Grunig & Grunig, 2002). The body of normative theory that emerged from this research became the foundation for public relations practice and is found prolifically in journals and public relations textbooks (Grunig, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1993; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Grunig; 2000; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Grunig & White, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Grunig, Dozier, & Grunig, 1994; Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; Grunig et al., 1991).
Three Key Practices from the Excellence Study

In addition to defining excellence, the Excellence Study provided the empirical underpinnings to the theory that public relations contributes value to organizations, publics, and society. This is achieved via: (a) the role of public relations as a strategic management function; (b) role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) how symmetrical communication is a best practice in public relations for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment (Grunig, 2006). Public relations adds value to an organization when it helps identify stakeholders and can add to that value when it uses symmetrical communication to develop and cultivate relationships with strategic publics (Grunig, 2006). Once public relations does this it can then, as a managerial function, work to develop goals and programs that are beneficial to both the organization and its publics. It is also more likely to achieve those goals due to the fact they are a result of sharing and collaboration with both the dominant coalition within the organization and with key publics.

It is these three key practices in public relations that contribute to excellence: (a) being a strategic management function; (b) cultivating relationship management; and (c) using symmetrical communication. Here are some considerations of public relations as a strategic management function.

Public relations as a management function. Public relations has a research tradition that conceptualizes itself as a holistic strategic management function rather than a transactional publicity and press-agentry function (Grunig, 2006). In its boundary spanning role public relations is empowered to function on an excellent level when it has access to, or is represented in, the dominant coalition. This positions public relations to have an effect on organizational
decisions and policies framed by the knowledge of the organization and the desires of its publics. The *Excellence Study* found when this kind of access does not occur, i.e. in organizations where public relations is sublimated to another function such as marketing or human resources, then public relations loses its unique and proactive role in strategic management (Grunig, 2006). A second key practice in public relations is that of relationship management.

**Public relations uses relationship management.** Relationship management is a main theoretical tenet in the practice of effective strategic public relations (D’Aprix, 1984; Grunig, 1993). Ihlen (2005) further confirmed that public relations has evolved to be relationship-centric. Relationship management uses strategic communication and feedback as a mechanism to communicate and learn from stakeholders. As such this practice uses the public relations function to manage the relationships between an organization and its key publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). In addition to environmental scanning to detect emerging issues, this self-reflexive and recursive process permits organizations to determine performance gaps and correct them. This provides a means of continual improvement for the overall functioning of the organization. Another best practice in the public relations field is symmetrical communication.

**Public relations uses symmetrical communication.** Symmetrical communication is a communication and listening model and includes maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on an organization’s publics who are situated within the constantly evolving environment in which that organization operates. Grunig posits that public relations adds to value to an organization when it uses also symmetrical communication to develop and cultivate relationships with strategic publics. According to Grunig (2006, p. 158),

> If it [public relations] develops good relationships with strategic publics, an organization is more likely to develop goals desired by both the organization and
its publics and is more likely to achieve those goals because it shares those goals and collaborates with publics.

One of the first public relations theories to be widely disseminated in journals, and remains a core tenant in textbooks, is a four-model typology of public relations practices. This model culminates with the two-way symmetrical model of communication as being the most desirable practice of public relations. Created by Grunig and Hunt in 1984, this model has been widely used in public relations theory (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012, p. 52) and emphasizes the boundary spanning and feedback roles of public relations within organizations. The Excellence Study uses this model of public relations as its primary theoretical base regardless of whether public relations is practiced externally or internally.

**The 12 Attributes of Excellence as Determined by the Excellence Study**

The Excellence Study also examined how scholars of managerial excellence defined and identified excellence. The researchers isolated attributes of excellence which they discussed regarding their relevance to the practice of public relations. The 12 attributes are: a) human resources; b) organic structure; c) internal entrepreneurship; d) symmetrical communications systems; e) leadership; f) strong and participative cultures; g) strategic planning; h) social responsibility; i) support for women and minorities; j) quality as a priority; k) effective operational systems; and l) collaborative societal culture. It is upon three aforementioned key practices as found in the Excellence Study, and to a more minor level its 12 attributes, that form the underpinnings of this dissertation’s research as these are the generally accepted theoretical base explaining how public relations should function and providing definitions of the frames and functions used in the field.
The Importance of Examining Internal Communication

Generally, most public relations work is perceived as externally focused due to the large quantity and diversity of external stakeholders. Internal publics are also diverse and can be large groups as well. The *Excellence Study* asserts that the internal communication function falls under the domain of the public relations unit (Grunig, 1992b, Grunig et al., 1992). Internal communication may be referred to by different names including employee communication (Argenti, 1998; Frey 2004), internal public relations (Wright, 1995), staff communication (Stone, 1995), and internal marketing (Hwang & Chi, 2005). In this research it will be referred to as internal communication and defined as the purposeful “exchange of information both informally and formally between management and employees of an organization” (Hayase, 1999, p. 2).

Internally directed public relations efforts can provide key strategic information about internal organizational issues. Data from these efforts can be used to guide organizational adaptation based on communication with employees who are one of an organization’s key stakeholders (Berger, 2008; Burton, 2011; Harkness, 1999; Therkelsen & Fiebich, 2003). Targeting internal publics for relationship management is valuable because the behavior of employees can directly impact external perceptions of an organization (Grunig, 1992b). It is known that organizations that effectively communicate with stakeholders develop better mutually beneficial relationships. This occurs because the organization and the stakeholders understand each other and acknowledge diverse points of view. Another benefit is that those involved and are less likely to behave with negative actions toward the other (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Employees can be a crucial part in facilitating such efforts.
Other Benefits of Internal Communication: Impact to Reputation

Public relations theory states that employees are often ‘ambassadors’ to external stakeholders as they represent an organization and its image (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004; Yang & Grunig 2005). When the internal publics’ needs for information are satisfied those employees are in a better position to serve the needs of the organization’s external publics (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003). Employee actions have direct associations with external stakeholders’ perceptions. As such, highly committed and engaged employees can publically share information about the organization that ultimately impacts external public relations efforts that contribute to the positive reputation and brand of the organization (Caillouet & Allen, 1996; Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001). There are other benefits to cultivating relationship management and internal communication.

Other Benefits of Internal Communication: Increases Employee Commitment

An additional benefit resulting from the relationship management of internal publics is that it can lead to beneficial increases in employee organizational commitment (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 1991). Organizational commitment is important to organizations for several reasons including employee persistence, dedication, and productivity. Guzley (1992) found a greater degree of employee satisfaction occurring with increased communication results in a greater amount of organizational commitment. Employees with higher degrees of organizational commitment demonstrate greater persistence and retention (Eisinga, Telken, & Doorewaard, 2010; Johnson & Chang, 2008; Mathieu & Zakac, 1990; Putti, Aryee, & Phua, 1990). Employees are more engaged and productive (Clampitt & Downs, 1993) and are more satisfied, dedicated, and loyal to their place of employment (Guzley, 1992; Mathieu & Zakac, 1990). This can also lead to increased effectiveness and engagement.
Other Benefits of Internal Communication: Increased Effectiveness and Engagement

Although strategic communication capital is an intangible asset (Hartman & Lenk, 2001; Keenan, 2000; Malmin, 2007; Matos & Nobre, 2009), deliberately planned and strategic communication can increase the effectiveness and engagement of employees in their jobs (Guzley, 1992). Increased engagement can provide a sense of identity (Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001) and expanded personal satisfaction for the employee resulting in a mutually beneficial employer/employee relationship ultimately culminating in elevated productivity, and external prestige (DeRidder, 2004). Satisfied employees can also lead to satisfied customers or external audiences.

Other Benefits of Internal Communication: Employee Satisfaction Impacts External Customer Satisfaction

The return on investment in good internal communication is not limited to increased productivity and better quality of work. Using internal communication is valuable because the behavior of employees can directly impact external perceptions of an organization (Smidts et al., 2001). Although institutions of higher education generally do not refer to students as consumers, students do show consumer characteristics such as heavy usage of both word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth research regarding college selection and good word-of-mouth is valuable (Lehmann, 2017). In addition, often the public judges an organization based on interaction with employees and a Northwestern University study found that there is a direct link between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction, and between customer satisfaction and improved financial performance (Northwest University Forum for People Performance Management & Measurement [NUPPMM], 2004).
Problem Statement

Public relations offers a frame for understanding the role of internal communication in organizations (Grunig, 1992b). With limited research regarding the practice of public relations in the higher education context, it is difficult to establish a reliable understanding of just how public relations, via internal communication, is actually carried out at colleges and universities. This limited picture of public relations practices within a higher education context makes it difficult to establish a frame for common practice, which is needed before further studies can begin to tease out most effective practices for public relations practitioners in higher education.

Because of the lack of research regarding the actual approaches and practices of public relations practitioners in this context, it is important to investigate the phenomenon on a deeper level. Specifically, the extant research offers very little understanding of how senior level public relations practitioners in higher education think about, develop, and carry out internal communications. We do not know how public relations practitioners in the higher education context regard the knowledge and practice of the aforementioned three main tenets of the Excellence Study. We do not know the internal environment in which relations practitioners in higher education operate and to what extent those practitioners feel their environment incorporates the Excellence Study’s attributes of excellence. Additionally, it is not understood if, and how, higher education practitioners of public relations are aware of (or use) internal communication as a strategic means to influence external relationships.

This research study seeks to gain a better understanding of how senior level public relations practitioners in higher education plan, execute, and evaluate internal communication to employees. It inquires how senior level higher education public relations practitioners interact with the other on-campus potential sources of internal communication. It gathers data regarding
the practice of public relations as a strategic management function, using relationship management, and with regard to use of symmetrical communication. In addition, some demographic data was gathered regarding educational and career paths of the public relations practitioners in the study to see if there was a commonality to their educational background and if they were members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) or held an accreditation in public relations (APR) from that organization.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education regarding their processes and practices for internal communications with particular emphasis on the processes and strategies for communication with employees. Understanding was be sought regarding the practitioners’ beliefs and practices regarding: (a) public relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment.

Inquiries were made regarding awareness of the internal environment findings of the Excellence Study, i.e., to what extent do those practitioners feel their environment incorporates Grunig’s 12 attributes of excellence. And, do these attributes inform practice, or are they even relevant those who participate in the study? This study examined common and unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best practices, and if they coordinate internal communication with other entities within their university or find that those entities encroach on the public relations function. Finally, demographic data was gathered regarding educational and career paths of the public relations practitioners in the study to see if there was a commonality to their educational background and if they were members of the Public Relations
Society of America (PRSA) or held an accreditation in public relations (APR) from that organization.

The overarching question that guides this study is: how do higher education senior level public relations practitioners develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees? To achieve an in-depth understanding, this study will be guided by the following questions:

RQ 1. What are the internal communication processes/practices of the public relations function in higher education as described by the senior level practitioner?

RQ 2. What are the practitioner’s processes/practices regarding

(a). public relations as a strategic management function, per the *Excellence Study* findings, in a higher education context;

(b). the role of relationship management within public relations per the *Excellence Study* findings, in a higher education context;

(c). if symmetrical communication per the *Excellence Study* findings, is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment in a higher education context; and

(d). To what extent, if any, does the environment include the 12 attributes of excellent management per the *Excellence Study* findings?

RQ 3. How do senior level public relations practitioners in higher education describe the internal communication practices by other entities in the organization such as the human relations function?
Overview of Study Methods

This study used a qualitative interview approach to investigate the public relations function within six public or private liberal arts universities located in Michigan and Ohio. A listing of the senior level public relations practitioners for such universities was obtained from the websites of the regional public universities located Michigan and Ohio. Further rationale for this very specific context is detailed in the methodology section of this document.

Significance

With respect to normative theory in public relations, Grunig said that “positive research can strengthen normative theory by revealing examples of practitioners who actually practice as the normative theory specifies, by showing that this practice is effective for the organizations that employ them, and by showing that the normal practice is socially acceptable” (Grunig, 2000, p. 24). This study looked at normative theory in the public relations context of higher education, an environment that has not been broadly examined. It gives voice to a small group of senior level public relations practitioners in higher education, who are a group not well represented in the literature.

Studying internal communications is important to the field of public relations in general because it adds to a paucity of information in this topical area. Internal communication research, when compared to the vast amount of research in external communication, falls short in depth and breadth. Specifically, there are scant studies that study internal communication in a higher education context. Missing in the current literature in the higher education context is any examination of internal communication processes and practices; how senior level public relations practitioners describe best internal communication processes and practices; and, whether the
internal communication function in higher education is shared with, or encroached upon, by other entities.

Finally, there is a scarcity of knowledge in the higher education context of the educational backgrounds, or career paths, of senior level public relations practitioners. Although one can earn a degree in public relations, the profession is not licensed and is non-regulated. Practitioners in higher education may have experienced a variety of career paths, professional experience, and educational backgrounds. This variation could impact the way public relations practitioners perceive their roles. This research will have significance both for practitioners in the higher education context and for professional public relations and communication-focused organizations.

University and college leadership and public relations staffs would be interested to learn if theory and practice are similar or divergent as well as seeing if there are best internal communication practices in this context. This could inform the strategic planning aspects of governance and relationship building with a variety of stakeholders (Higgins, 1983). The Institute for Public Relations, the International Communication Association, the International Association of Business Communicators, and the Public Relations Society of America and their members, and especially the education subset of membership, would be interested in what this research may discover as there is scant prior research in this very specific area to date. In addition, the Association of Communicators in Education (CUPRAP) as well as The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), both professional organizations whose mission is to improve higher education would have interest in these findings.
Conceptual Framework for the Study

Three propositions within public relations theory form the main conceptual framework for the proposed research: (a) that the public relations function is a strategic management function, (b) that relationship management has a critical role within public relations; and (c) that symmetrical communication is a best practice in public relations as it functions to cultivate relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment (Grunig, 2006). These propositions overlap to form a basis for internal communication (IC), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Within the context of a university are three public relations theories with respect to the practice of internal communication. These are seated within a larger context of attributes that contribute to best practices in public relations.
We do not know how senior level public relations practitioners in higher education perceive and conceptualize internal public relations in general. It is also unknown how well public relations in a higher education setting functions, with respect to strategically communicating with employees; and how this impacts engagement levels that can result in greater levels of employee organizational commitment. This study responded to the researchable problem by profiling senior level public relations practitioners in higher education and their processes and practices for internal communications with particular emphasis on the process and practices for communicating internally with employees.

Limitations and Delimitations

Bias can be a limitation to research. LeCompte (1987) said that bias may be attributed to one’s identification with a specific research focus at a particular time. It can also come from a devotion to a particular intellectual paradigm as well as professional experiences. As the researcher of this study, I am cognizant of possible bias in my support of the theory that public relations is most effective when it is a strategic management function (Grunig, 2006), as is taught in public relations courses in most American universities. I am open to the fact that practice does not always follow theory. For me, the purpose of this study is to determine real world usage of the public relations function vis-à-vis higher education.

One way to mitigate any biases is to write an epoch, and to bracket my experiences, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Creswell, 2007). A second way to control for bias is to permit interviewees to review the reflective writings of the interview sessions for accuracy of themes and meaning. A third control is to work closely with those on my committee or a ‘critical friend’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) as they review my work and provide feedback in this area. All of
these strategies were used in this research in to aid me in acknowledging, and reducing, my personal biases within the research project.

There are limits to this research. This research proposal is narrowly focused. It examines public relations functioning only within the context of higher education in a small sample of public and private universities in two states. It examines a purposeful sample and may not be generalizable to other contexts or types of higher education. It is hoped that this project’s data and conclusions will provide a platform for deeper future research of the public relations function in higher education. Perhaps this study will inspire the creation of additional ‘branches’ of inquiry in this area of study or in other contexts.

In summary, the decline in goodwill towards institutions of higher education for a variety of reasons from a variety of stakeholders is resulting in increasing pressure for greater transparency and engagement with those stakeholders by colleges and universities. As a boundary spanning function public relations can identify, establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships and communication between institutions of higher education and its publics. One of the seminal research studies in public relations, *The Excellence Study*, established the paradigm for excellent public relations practices within organizations. However, few studies of how public relations actually functions within the context of higher education exist. There is no frame for common practice. This work examines the phenomenon of how public relations is practiced in a higher education setting in order to add knowledge to the paucity of information in this very specific context.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is necessary in research as it helps to establish a strong theoretical basis for the proposed research. It delineates gaps in the research in an area and is the foundation for the argument that a subject area has merit and should be studied. The literature that informs this review includes general concepts regarding higher education, its history and the environment in which it operates. Seminal public relations theories and the Excellence Study are reviewed to show the foundation of the profession as well as a review of public relations in the higher education context. The section concludes with an overview of internal communication, organizational culture, and employee commitment and engagement as these disciplines, although not directly related to public relations, are impacted by its practice, and that, in turn affects the organization as a whole. We begin with a brief review of higher education in the United States.

**Brief History of Higher Education in America**

Historically, many American institutions of higher education set as their mission to not only prepare students to obtain a degree or train for a profession, but to serve to advance the public good. Historically, higher education has seen as its purpose “… a civic mission to prepare students for active participation in a diverse democracy and to develop knowledge for the improvement of communities” (Checkoway, 2001, p. 125). This has resulted in geographic areas congruent with colleges and universities that have a greater quality of life for residents – a highly desirable characteristic.
Studies have shown a correlation between higher education, economic growth, and family values that are good for society (Porter, 2002). Societal benefits, in addition to tax benefits, also include decreased reliance on governmental financial support, increased consumption, greater workplace productivity, and workforce flexibility (Baum & Payea, 2004; Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 1998).

These societal benefits have an increasingly positive impact on the United States as more occupations evolved to require college degrees for managerial or technical workers or postsecondary training for other types of workers (Holzer & Lerman, 2009). Enrollment in U. S. higher education institutions is expected to increase from 20.4 million students in 2009 to 23 million by 2020 – a 13-percent increase in only 11-years (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2011). Although the growth of students enrolled in colleges and universities has a positive societal impact and numbers of college degrees are more prevalent, higher education has become more scrutinized over time and distrust in this institution is increasing.

**Current Environment in Higher Education**

There is an escalated distrust of higher education, and even the value of a degree, found in an increasing variety of publics (Abdul-Alim, 2010; Anderson, 2012; Burke, 2002; Bok, 1992; Callan & Immerwahr, 2008; Cook, 2012; Dennis & Lamay, 1993; Greer, 2013; Higher Education, 2012; Immerwahr et al., 2010; Kelderman, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2017, 2018; Phair, 1992; Reynolds, 2012; Ruppert, 1995; Washington Partners, 2015). According to a 2017 Pew research poll, while a slim majority of the public (55%) continues to say that colleges and universities have a positive effect on society a majority of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (58%) have expressed that they believe higher education has a negative effect on America. This is an increase of 13-percent from the same
2016 survey conducted one year earlier among this group. As a contrast, most Democrats (72%) say colleges and universities have a positive effect on society which is little changed from previous polls (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2017).

A 2014 Gallup-Lumina Foundation study found that eight in 10 persons surveyed agreed, or strongly agreed, that higher education must evolve to better meet the needs of today’s students (Gallup-Lumina Foundation, 2014). While the public believes in the importance of higher education it has indicated it holds the perception that the ability to obtain a degree is becoming less and less attainable for a variety of reasons (Immerwahr; Johnson, Ott, & Rochkind, 2010; Reynolds, 2013, August 5). Increases in consumerism with respect to higher education are also a long-term trend (Peyronel, 2004; Sessions-Stepp, 2003). Costs are seen as poorly managed.

Roush says that higher education has become the ‘poster child” for out-of-control costs because tuition increases have far outpaced increases of the overall cost of living, while administrative costs have been steadily growing much faster than the costs of teaching and research.

**Grave Financial Concerns**

At Michigan State University (MSU) students meet weekly to examine financial documents that detail the university’s spending. MSU student Brigid Kennedy explains, “people just don’t have an understanding of where the money was going, and now that they do it makes them really angry” (Marcus, 2018, March 29, ¶ 8). This is “fueling a spiraling cycle of scrutiny” of colleges and universities (Marcus, 2018, March 29, ¶ 7). Also examining higher education finances is the Roosevelt Institute (RI) which is affiliated with the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum and focuses on economic policy. RI has members on 120 American campuses who have found that 19 public and private universities lost a collective $2.7 billion dollars as of 2016 via interest rate swaps (Russel, Sloan, & Smith, 2016). These swaps
occur when a university issues bonds to raise funds to pay for large projects like a new building. The universities pay lending institutions a fixed rate of interest on the bonds and the banks pay the universities at a variable rate. However, this is a gamble based on the health on the overall U.S. economy. This arrangement works well if the variable interest rates is above that of the fixed rate. If the variable rate falls below the fixed rate however the university loses money (Russel et al., 2016).

During the most recent U.S. recession interest rates plummeted and have not recovered as quickly as has occurred in past economic downturns. Although MSU claims its losses are much less Kennedy and her peers who are examining MSU’s financial records say that falling interest rates cost MSU $130.3 million in 2016. This included nearly $18 million in termination fees “That’s just a strange bet to make as a public institution” said Walter Hanley who is also a member of the MSU student research group (Marcus, 2018, March 29, ¶ 15). They contend facts like they are uncovering are not going to help improve the public perceptions of colleges and universities.

The RI report on the financialization of higher education reflects on this same trend (Russel, Sloan, & Smith, 2016, p 2) and states that higher education in the U.S. is in a state of crisis and it needs to be careful of potential conflicts of interest in financial deals as well as the lack of transparency. In some situations, the decision makers at the lending institutions are also members of the board of directors (or regents) at the colleges and universities who are accepting the bonds and associated interest rate swaps.

Universities, which once were given the benefit of the doubt by the public, are seeing that same public’s confidence in higher education decline. A 2012 Lumina Foundation research survey concluded that Americans indicate they are ready for a redesign of higher education and
they are “open to new ways to make higher education attainment accessible and affordable for all” (Lumina, 2013, p. 9). According to research by the Young Invincibles while the number of individuals among all groups with college degrees increased from 1974-2015, racial disparities have widened (2017). In 1974, 14-percent of White students, 5.5-percent of African American students and 5.5-percent of Hispanic students had graduated from 4-year colleges or universities. By 2015, those respective percentages were 36.2 (White), 22.5 (African American) and 15.5 (Hispanic). While more African American and Hispanic students did earn degrees, the inequality gap between those two groups and that of White graduates had increased (Young, 2017).

A 2016 survey by Public Agenda says that confidence in higher education is waning. Seventy-one percent of those polled said that colleges are wasteful and inefficient in how they spend their money (Public Agenda, 2016, p. 2). When asked if colleges care about education and making sure students have a good experience, only 34-percent agreed with that statement but when asked if colleges today are more like businesses and care mainly about the bottom line, 59-percent agreed (Public Agenda, 2016, p. 6). The New American group conducted research on the state of higher education in the U.S. in 2017 and found that seventy-five percent of those surveyed agreed that the U.S. higher education system is not functioning fine the way it currently operates (Fishman, Ekowo, & Ezeugo, 2017). Fifty-eight percent said that overall colleges and universities put their long term business interests ahead of those of their students (Fishman, Ekowo, & Ezeugo et al., 2017). This perception seems consistent as a 2010 joint study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda found that six out of 10 people believe that colleges operate more like bottom-line focused businesses rather than keeping true to the mission of providing good educational experiences for students (Immerwahr et al., 2010). Immerwahr et al. added,
These findings suggest that many Americans are becoming more skeptical about whether colleges and universities are doing all that they can to control costs and keep tuition affordable. It may also indicate that Americans will be increasingly less receptive to the argument that higher educational institutions need more money to continue to provide high quality services. (2010, ¶ 3)

**Educators Examine the Environment**

The issue of declining public trust dates back decades and in 1993, the American Council on Education (ACE) was concerned enough to request that research be conducted on public perceptions of higher education. The research noted several trends: (a) higher education does have a large reservoir of public goodwill but it is eroding; (b) higher education degrees were perceived as essential to success in career and life; (c) the public is very concerned about the escalating costs of a college education and that it may be becoming out of reach for the middle class; and (d) and increasingly, the public believes the government should involve itself in the solution either as a funder, or controller, of higher education costs (Harvey & Immerwahr, 1995).

In 2004, the University of Scranton conducted a similar study on public perceptions of higher education. Their report found that although the overall responsibility for higher educational success falls primarily upon the student, there were grave concerns about higher education in three areas. First, higher education funding issues are a point of contention. Second, Americans do not understand the internal administration workings of higher education and are concerned with what they perceive as politically hot items such as tenure and diversity. Third, the study concluded that the perception of diminishing access to a college education is a key concern (University of Scranton, 2004). A Gallup-Lumina Foundation (2015) study indicated that the findings of the University of Scranton are still valid.
The Association of College Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) also commissioned a study in 2014 to gauge the public’s perception of higher education. Their key findings included that 62% of Americans believe higher education leaders are doing a poor job demonstrating that a college degree is worth the time and money (Innovate, 2014, September 14). The study also found that six in 10 persons believe institutions of higher education are becoming places of political correctness and intolerance, while 71% say that the tenure system is a significant contributor to higher college cost and a lower quality of education (Innovate, 2014, September 14). More recent research indicates that the public has begun to question the value of a college degree.

Is a Degree Still Valuable?

Decades of increased higher education costs were bearable during good economic times, but beginning in the 2008 economic downturn, media stories increasingly questioned the value of a college degree (Farrell, 2011). “Recession-scarred parents and their students are dismayed at the soaring cost of college. The inflation-adjusted tuition and fees in 2010-11 at a public university is 3.59 times the tab in 1980-81” (Farrell, 2011, p. 2). The Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic Trends asked ‘is college worth it?’ in their study and 57-percent of the 2,142 persons surveyed said that the U.S. higher education system is not a good value for the money spent on it by attendees and their families (PRC, 2011, ¶ 1). The study data indicated that in 2014, 89-percent of respondents said college is becoming too expensive and out of reach for the middle class (Innovate, 2014, September 14). It is not just the cost of higher education that the public questions, many are asking about the length of time it takes to get a degree.

Other Public Criticisms

Some critics have even questioned ‘why four years?’ – as this is a seemingly random number. “…four years is ridiculous. Assuming a semester system with four courses per semester,
four years of work means thirty-two semester-long courses…. even medical school and PhDs
don’t require four years of course work” (Murry, 2008, p. 10). The increase in MBA degrees
over the last decades has prompted some to posit if a college degree is not only a poor
investment but also “leading to major fissures in the social compact between those who run Wall Street and the rest of us?” (Cohan, 2011, p. 13). In addition, the perception that technology threatens white-collar jobs, in the way blue-collar jobs were in peril in the 1980s, has resulted in more people questioning the practical value of a college education (Farrell, 2011). Coverage of scandals and bad decision making at colleges and universities has not helped increase confidence in institutions of higher learning.

**Media Skepticism and University Scandals Abound**

Not only is there greater scrutiny and skepticism by the public; but the pessimistic themes and negative news stories found in the media regarding institutions of higher education paint a grim picture (Cohen, 2011; Dennis & Lamay, 1993; Farrell, 2011; Murry, 2008; Sessions-Stepp, 2003). Peyronel has characterized this as *intense* media scrutiny (Peyronel, 2004). All this negative coverage can result in a drop in applications. When *Rolling Stone* reported hazing issues at Dartmouth University in 2012 that institution saw a reduction in applications by 14-percent (Kingkade, 2016, July, 08). Research indicates that the greater, and more, long term the media coverage of a scandal results in a larger percentage of reductions in applications (Luca, Rooney, & Smith, 2016). But not only the amount of scrutiny should be of concern, the content and tone of the media coverage is troubling.

Media coverage includes stories of campus shootings, academic and athletic scandals, and fiscal or research mismanagement (Bok, 1992; Callan & Immerwahr, 2008; Dennis & Lamay, 1993; Hardwick, 2014; Phair, 1992, Sessions-Step, 2003). According to Sessions-Stepp
(2003), examples include “Charlotte Observer coverage of how corporate grants raise questions about the neutrality of college research. A Sacramento Bee investigation into sex crimes on campus, a Houston Chronicle crusade to uncover how university investment funds are run” (p. 20).

There are also examples of college and university presidential conduct that have hurt the collective reputation of higher education. Two examples of presidents who had to leave their positions due to scandal include Eastern Michigan University’s president, who was fired as a result of a federal report revealing his part in the cover up of the rape and murder of a student, and Hillsdale College’s president, who resigned after revelations of an affair with his daughter-in-law and her (post revelation) suicide (de Vise, 2011). National attention is also focused on high profile stories of violence such as the shooting deaths at Virginia Tech and subsequent criticism that the university did not handle the situation correctly (Hotchberg, 2007).

Sports violations that garner much public attention are prevalent. According to the Division I Committee on Infractions, between the years of 2006 - 2015, sports violations of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules were investigated at 114 of the 351 universities in the NCAA’s Division I level (Lederman, 2015, Lederman 2016). Of these 96 were found guilty of violations and sixteen institutions were censured for multiple infractions (Lederman, 2015). This would have included the Duke Lacrosse false rape issue (Prager, 2007) followed by the Penn State Jerry Sandusky sexual misconduct scandal which has cost that university a quarter billion dollars and incalculable reputation damage (AP 2017).

Ohio State University’s (OSU) ‘failure to monitor’ problem with a football booster resulted in scholarship and post season bowl game ineligibility (Ludlow, 2011). And OSU was again in the news recently when their head football coach was suspended for incorrectly handling
abuse allegations against a former assistant coach (Kirshner, 2018). An additional Ohio higher education problem that garnered national attention occurred when OSU announced it would pay the federal government $268,000 and replace OSU’s clinical director. This occurred because OSU took proficiency testing samples that were sent to OSU for testing and ‘subcontracted’ them out to the Mayo Clinic and other laboratories. Federal law specifically prohibits this practice (Sutherly, 2013).

**Increased Rigor Expected With Less Funding and Tenured Staff**

In addition to a decline in trust, the higher education environment has become one where increased rigor and effectiveness is expected while budgets and federal grants, tenure-track hiring, and, in some cases, amount of degree programs are decreasing (Abdul-Alim, 2015; Chin, 2010; Daughdrill, 1994; Hamermesh, 2011; Hardwick, 2014). For example, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce gave colleges and universities in the state of Ohio a mediocre report card regarding postsecondary education. The four main graded criteria were student success (‘C’), efficiency and effectiveness (‘C’), meeting labor market demand (‘B’), and transparency and accountability (‘C’) (U.S. Chamber, 2012). The state of Michigan earned the following scores: student success (‘B’), efficiency and effectiveness (‘C’), meeting labor market demand (‘A’), and transparency and accountability (‘F’) (U.S. Chamber, 2012). But not only is what is reported by the media about higher education a concern, some researchers believe that it is shaping public opinion against both higher education and intellectuals.

Claussen (2011) says we should be very concerned that the future of higher education is dependent on mass media and that public opinion is largely influenced by that same news media. Claussen, author of *Anti-intellectualism in the American Media* found that U.S. news media cover higher education but the stories they tell do not report on core functions, i.e. actual
education programs and outcomes. Instead, his data indicated they report on topics like tuition increases, sporting victories and occasional feel good stories of very unique students like a 14-year old being admitted to an ivy-league university (2011). Other researchers have seen similar trends with regard to the media’s agenda setting of an anti-intellectual/anti-higher education paradigm (Bloom, 1987; Jacoby, R., 1987; Jacoby, S., 2009; Posner, 2003). Claussen posits that not only is substantive higher education coverage not occurring but the coverage that exists is slanted and anti-intellectual. It portrays higher education, and those who work at colleges and universities, in ways that are explicitly or implicitly negative and he argues this has added to the decline of trust and support for higher education (2010). Another factor challenging the paradigm of traditional U.S. higher education is increased competition by for-profit colleges and open online courses.

**Increased Competition Is Occurring**

In the last decade student enrollment has increased sharply at for-profit educational institutions and traditional colleges and universities have faced competition from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Anderson, 2012; CFAT, 2011; Daughdrill, 1994; Dennis, 2012; Ewell, 2014; Hamermesh, 2011; Lam, 2015; Leland & Moore, 2007; Shaw, 2014; Wilson, 2010). In 2015, there were 3,200+ for profit colleges in the U.S. (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2016) and in 2018 there are over 800 universities offering 9,400 MOOC courses with an enrollment of 78 million students (Lederman, 2018).

We had a nice, protected status until the late 1980s when a series of unrelated incidents from misreporting the use of government funds to scientific fraud, animal welfare, and so-called tuition price-fixing began to undermine public
confidence in higher education. Now we have to begin work on the long road back toward (regaining) public trust. (Phair, 1992, p. 3)

Historically higher education has been able to elude rivalry and competitive disruption due to their prestige and hegemony of the education marketplace. Aiding this is that it is difficult to measure the quality of the end product in higher education. In the absence of comparable measures of what those higher education institutions produce for students they are provided with a natural advantage. But, that is being challenged. “Now with more focus on outcomes and the steady improvement of low-cost online learning technologies the prospect of competitive disruption is real” (Christensen & Eyring, 2012, p. 1).

**What This Means for Higher Education**

All of this points to the fact that institutions of higher education need to better communicate their successes, advantages, innovations, positions on various issues or news items, finances, and programs to the public. Use of mass media is often seen as the prime way for institutions communicate their ‘stories’ to their various publics. However, working with the media has its drawbacks. The media can filter news to fit their agenda and many media outlets have not generally had positive coverage of higher education in the past decades, add to that a prolific stream of negative news occurring on campuses such as financial or administrative problems and crime related scandals that are all publically reported. Peyronel (2004) states that, “At times, the relationship between higher education and the media has been so adversarial that some have advocated abandoning media relations and placing more emphasis on direct communication with students, alumni, and other key publics” (p. 268). Because institutions of higher education need a means of advocacy and communication to tell their side of the story and
mitigate problems and misperceptions, they should reexamine their use of the public relations function.

**The Role of Public Relations and the Excellence Study**

Much of the literature on public relations (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985; Smith, 2002; Wilcox & Cameron, 2007) describes public relations as a strategic means by which an organization communicates on a two-way basis with its publics. It places emphasis on building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its various stakeholders. The longitudinal seminal research study that has the greatest impact on the public relations field is called the *Excellence Study*. James E. Grunig and five co-researchers conducted it from 1985 to 2000 and have written extensively about their findings (Grunig, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1993, Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Grunig & White, 1992; Grunig, Dozier, & Grunig, 1994; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; 2006; Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; Grunig, et, al., 1991).

The *Excellence Study* research team tested their ideas using a questionnaire administered to 327 organizations that included corporations, governmental agencies, and non-profits located in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States with 292 CEOs or other executive managers and 4,631 employees (an average of 14 per organization) participating (Grunig & Grunig, 2002). The findings that emerged from this research became the foundation for public relations theory.

“The *Excellence Study* produced a general theory focused on the role of public relations strategic management and the value of relationships with strategic publics to an organization” (Grunig, 2006, p. 151). The *Excellence Study*, sometimes referred to as the Excellence Theory, explains how public relations should be structured and managed to provide its greatest value to
organizations and publics. It produced an explanation of not only the value of public relations but how the function should be organized, structured, and practiced. “These principles provide a theoretical benchmark for auditing the quality of a public relations unit” (Grunig & Grunig, 2002, p. 34).

The *Excellence Study* provided the empirical underpinnings to the theories that public relations contributes value to organizations, publics, and society. Three theories from the study that have relevance to this study are (a) that the public relations function is a strategic management function; (b) role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) how symmetrical communication is a best practice in public relations for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment (Grunig, 2006). It is upon these theories that this study drew as they are the generally accepted theoretical base explaining how public relations should function. The *Excellence Study* provides definitions of the frames and functions used in the field. With respect to the end result of the *Excellence Study*,

The theoretical edifice…both describes and prescribes the role of public relations in strategic management. It is a general theory that explains how the function should be structured and managed to provide the greatest value to organizations, publics and society…. each of the components of the general theory is logically related to the others and together they produce a strong structural edifice that can be applied in both research and practice. (Grunig, 2006, p. 154)

The *Excellence Study* demonstrated that organizational leaders believe fundamentally good public relations departments are distinguished by participation in strategic management, symmetrical two-way communication, and that public relations managers should proactively
plan and lead instead of performing as technicians operating from a primitive press agent model (Grunig, 1992c). In this primitive model information is simply disseminated from the public relations office with no true strategic plan and no process for two-way communication with feedback from its various publics. By contrast, proactive and strategic public relations function engages in continual environmental scanning and strategically monitors the environment of that organization, both internally and externally. Public relations gathers data and strategically responds to changes occurring in the environment with various publics or stakeholders (Grunig 1992b; Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2011). Within the public relations function are two different schema. One of these is a managerial schema and the other is more of a clerical or technical frame of operation.

**Public Relations Roles: Manager or Technician**

Dozier (1983) conducted studies regarding the role of public relations managers as opposed to that of public relations technicians. Although public relations professionals in the course of their positions can operate as either a technician or manager, they tend to predominately operate within the schema of only one of these roles (Dozier & Gottesmann, 1982). Technicians “carry out the low-level mechanics of generation communication products that implement policy decisions made by others” (Dozer, 1983, p. 14). Technicians are only concerned with day-to-day clerical operational matters (Botan & Hazelton, 2009; Dozer & Broom, 1995). Examples of this behavior are sending out press releases and writing articles.

By contrast, managers view themselves, and are viewed by others in the organization, as experts who are held accountable for their policy decisions that affect the entire organization. These manager practitioners facilitate communication between management and its various publics as well as using rational public relations problem solving processes to help make
strategic recommendations and decisions (Dozer, 1983, p. 14). Resultantly, the level of involvement with decision-making indicates what kind of power and influence the public relations practitioner has. Those who engage in strategic planning and issues management are the kind of practitioner serving in the stronger manager role (Kelly, 1994).

Clearly managers serve a more influential and powerful role than that of the technician as power can be defined as the ability to problem solve and evoke change in others (Lauzen, 1994). Technicians do not evoke change; only manager practitioners do this. Lauzen says a result of the power residing in the public relations manager role enables practitioners to gain strategic power intra-organizationally (Lauzen, 1992, p. 63). This results in placing the manager practitioner in an optimal position to contribute to organizational goals.

**How Communication Programs Should Operate in Order to Contribute to Organizational Goals**

The *Excellence Study* set forth a normative theory describing how communication programs should be practiced and in what optimal environment they should operate in order to contribute to organizational goals. The researchers isolated the attributes of excellent management in organizations and then discussed these applications with respect to the practice of public relations. The *Excellence Study* contains within it the following 12 attributes: a) human resources; b) organic structure; c) internal entrepreneurship; d) symmetrical communications systems; e) leadership; f) strong and participative cultures; g) strategic planning; h) social responsibility; i) support for women and minorities; j) quality as a priority; k) effective operational systems; and l) collaborative societal culture. These attributes also help to inform the interviewing portion of this research.
Human Relations

The human factor in any organization can greatly impact the success of that entity. Kanter (1989) said that the human factor is a variety of balancing acts centering on personal responsibilities and relations, “…balance can come from better personal time management better organizational system and better institutional supports” (Kanter, 1989, p. 297). For public relations, Grunig (1992c) posits that the use of humans as resources can help to contribute to excellent public relations by fostering the kind of organization in which people have more autonomy, morale is better and the culture is more participative. Specifically, internal public relations communication, as will be delineated later, helps organizations tap into the quality of their human resources, i.e. employees.

Organic Structure

Organic structure is how an organization is structured to achieve tasks and goals. Some are formal and stratified; others are less complex and not very bureaucratic. Grunig (1992c) states that the essential difference between organizations is to what extent do they offer autonomy and allow employees to participate in the management of the organization. Encouraging entrepreneurism in an organization is another description of this attribute. Although structure alone cannot predict the excellence of public relations, the Excellence Study revealed that excellent public relations most likely would not function well in an overly bureaucratic and mechanically structured organization. The research team determined that “excellent internal communication is so entwined with organic structures that the communication system is actually a structural characteristic of the organization” (Grunig, 1992c, p. 229).
Internal Entrepreneurship

Internal Entrepreneur (IE) is a term that describes entrepreneurs who work inside an organization (Pinchot, 1985; Schawbel, 2013). Organizations that allow their employees to be IEs and take risks, such as pitching new ideas to management, have found this was not only good business, but employees in IE environments can be retained as they continue to enjoy the challenges of their positions, stay engaged and see a real return on their efforts (Schawbel, 2013). Peters has said of business that chaos is everywhere (1997). Kline and Saunders (1993) liken the business world to being permanently in white water that is tumultuous and unpredictable as well as exciting and risky. They argued that the time has come to cultivate the art of risk-taking everywhere.

“Without intelligent risks, success becomes impossible and the greatest risk is in attempting to avoid all risks, for such strategy is worse than unrealistic; it is futile” (Kline & Saunders, 1993, p. 89). Peters speaks of a ‘curiosity worker’ who can use their talents to benefit the organization as well as their own personal growth. Peters based his idea on Einstein’s notion that curiosity is more important than knowledge (Peters, 1992). Grunig (1992c) posits that use of human resources, organic structure and excellent communication systems are essential for entrepreneurialism to function and public relations is a key tenant in that system.

Symmetrical Communication Systems

Excellent organizations are very much in touch with their internal and external audiences. Symmetrical communication allows for the back-and-forth flow of information to learn how publics perceive an organization and to determine what results may occur from organizational policies or actions. With this information, the organization is willing to make adjustments to policy based on what feedback it gathers from those publics (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985,
This is where public relations strongly asserts the value of relationship building and engagement as well as creating policies or actions that are mutually beneficial between the organization and its publics (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012.) The Excellence Study uses this public relations model as its primary theoretical base and recognizes that public relations practitioners need to work for, as well as being, leaders.

**Leadership**

Burns (1978) notes that leadership is an aspect of power but it is not simply wielding power. Leadership is not of things but it must be viewed as relationships. Grunig (1992c) expounds on this by stating that excellent leaders rely on networking, and manage by walking around their organizations and interacting and communicating with all levels of personnel. Peters (1987) concurred saying that creating an inspiring vision and being ‘out and about’ replaces control by written policy handed down from the top floor of headquarters. Leaders set the tone so that the loose-tight characteristics of an organization allows for its mission to be carried out. “Leaders are leaders, that is, because they set a vision and then empower everyone in the organization to participate in shaping and implementing that vision” (Grunig, 19992c, p. 234). In excellent organizations where public relations works with the CEO and the dominant coalition, public relations can actively facilitate the sharing of vision and strategy within the organization and to its external stakeholders. Public relations can also communicate to top management how well the vision is carried out by environmental scanning and obtaining feedback from both internal and external audiences. This can help to cultivate a participative culture in an organization.
**Strong, Participative Cultures**

When groups begin to share, they become committed and invested in their common vision. This results in co-creation and a paradigm shift to a more participative culture. According to Komives and Wagner (2009) “Knowing they [employees] have the same goal in mind, they are able to proceed together to co-create solutions…when both sides participate in co-creating solutions, they both become responsible for carrying out those solutions” (p. 186). In a similar way, Ouchi’s leadership Theory Z advocates collective decision making with individual responsibility to achieve the outcomes of decisions. Another way of looking at it is that Theory Z sees the organization as a family fostering cooperation and collectively supporting organizational values (Nichols, McHugh, & McHugh, 2016). Bolman and Deal (2008) also advocate for a strong, participative culture that empowers everyone in the organization. In a very similar way, public relations fosters a co-creational and participative process with both internal and external stakeholders to support the mission of the organization while helping to move the organization towards its goals. Public relations can also be a key function in strategic planning.

**Strategic Planning**

Grunig (1992c) said “Excellent organizations strive to maximize the bottom line by identifying the most important opportunities and constraints in their environment” (p. 237). Strategic planning is an analysis of both the economic and socio-political environments facing an organization and it includes values in the formulation of company strategy (Marx, 1990). Nickels, McHugh and McHugh (2016) defined it as the planning done by top management that “determines the major goals of the organization and the policies, procedures, strategies, and resources it will need to achieve them” (p. 185).
Grunig (1992c) suggested that the public relations function consists of scanning the environment for emerging issues while analyzing the forces that are most likely to have an impact on the organization for which the public relations practitioner works. By examining political and social issues the public relations function can propose programming and policy that will advance the interests of both the organization and concerned stakeholders. David Drobis of Ketchum Public Relations noted that the public relations function can significantly contribute to an organization via strategic thinking and planning (Drobis, 1991).

Marx (1990) argued that as American corporations became more sophisticated in their strategic analysis they have set their strategic focus on only the economic values of such planning, or limited it to only including business values that comprise the company’s culture. He posited that there needs to be better integration of strategic business management with the public relations function. Marx argued that the main reason cited for not doing this is that there has been a shift in strategic planning that decentralized it and moved it within strategic business units (SBUs) while public relations was concurrently becoming more centralized and moved away from interaction with the SBUs. Marx asserted that the separation of business planning from public relations is traceable to the 1960s when a ‘wave’ of social regulations was occurring regarding safety, environment, health and energy. “This onslaught of social regulation made the importance of social values, attitudes and objects to the firm’s economic success crystal clear, as it did the importance of an effective public affairs program” (Marx, 1990, p. 11).

As a result, the role of public relations took on increased emphasis in “the insulation of the company from what was thought to be sporadic governmental intrusions into traditional business planning and decision-making” (Marx, 1990, p. 11). Marx countered this is not in the
best interests of business because public relations and strategic business decision makers should be partners at the management table, not opponents.

Marx cited General Motors as an example of a corporation that has integrated the public relations function and the business planning functions at leadership levels (1990). Each of type of General Motors’ staffs is required to produce long-term strategic plans created in a format that closely follows that of the strategic business units. The public affairs staff participates in joint meetings with the strategic business planners to review all major public policy issues that could impact the business interests of General Motors. These meetings provide a forum for identifying and prioritizing issues that leads to the proactive development of organizational structures, systems and policies linking the public affairs and strategic business planning functions and direct their responses. Management demonstrates its commitment to this partnership by supporting and implementing their recommendations and because the CEO is the leader of the dominant coalition and is in a key position to support the excellent use of the public relations function. Public relations also has a role in corporate social responsibility of an organization.

**Corporate Social Responsibility**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a corporation being a good citizen and is demonstrated by the concern businesses have for welfare of society. This is ethical behavior and is based on a commitment to integrity, fairness, and respect (Nickels, et. al., 2016). CSR is a company’s commitment to operate in an economically and sustainable manner, while acknowledging the interests of all its stakeholders including employees. It is a way organizations integrate social, environmental and economic concerns into their values, culture, decision making, strategy and operations in a transparent and accountable manner and thereby establishes better practices within the organization that creates wealth and improves society (Canadian
Business for Social Responsibility [CBSR], 2005). CSR has increasingly been viewed by organizations as important, adding both to an organization’s reputation and to its economic bottom line. CSR has several aspects that also are areas impacting the work of the public relations practitioner: philanthropy, social initiatives, responsibility, and policy.

Corporate philanthropy is the “long-term socially responsible contribution of dollars, volunteers, products and expertise to a cause aligned with the strategic business goals of an organization” (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012, p. 466). Ronald McDonald Houses permit families of ill children a free place to reside long term as a family while their child undergoes treatment at local medical facilities. McDonalds pays for the building, maintenance and staffing of the homes. Social initiatives are aligned to a company’s competences. For example, since 1988, Anheuser-Busch has donated more than 67.5 million cans of drinking water to victims of U.S. natural disasters (Anheuser-Busch, 2009).

Corporate responsibility encompasses policies such as making safe products and being good environmental stewards in which the company acts responsibly within society (Nichols, McHugh, & McHugh, 2016). Corporate policy also includes positions taken on social and political issues. An organization that exemplifies both the example of corporate responsibly and corporate policy is Tom’s Shoes.

Tom’s Shoes donates a free pair of shoes to a needy child for every pair purchased. Their shoes are made from earth-friendly and natural materials and they work with manufacturing facilities to define appropriate business practices including the prevention of slavery and human trafficking within their supply chain. The employees at Tom’s Shoes also benefit from CSR as they have good benefits and also have opportunities to train to advance and improve themselves via opportunities that are facilitated due to increased sales of shoes.
Public relations and CSR have similar objectives as both entities are seeking to create mutually beneficial relationships among key stakeholder groups. Public relations can manage CSR by using its communication and strategic planning skill sets to accomplish this. Grunig (1992c) stated that excellent public relations can balance the private interests of an organization with that of society and does so via strategic planning, relationship building and the symmetrical communication processes. Public relations can also impact diversity in an organization.

**Support for Diversity**

According to the Center for American Progress (Burns, Barton, & Kerby, 2012) businesses that recruit from a diverse workforce are better able to gain unique talents needed to compete in an increasingly competitive global economy. By empowering persons of different backgrounds, skills, and experiences, businesses and genders are better able to have the synergy to create innovative and unique solutions needed to manage organizational issues. Businesses that embrace diversity also gain significant increases in productivity and job performance. Findings support that a diverse workforce drives economic growth, as more women, racial and ethnic minorities, and gay and transgender individuals enter the workforce. The *Excellence Study* found that organizations that value the contributions of diverse populations are more likely to have excellent public relations than businesses that do not embrace diversity (Grunig, 1992c).

Public relations can also provide a means for assisting with continuous quality improvement in an organization.

**Continuous Quality Improvement**

Kaizen is a Japanese word that means continuous improvement. A Kaizen event is a “focused and structured improvement project, using a dedicated cross-functional team to improve a targeted work area, with specific goals, in an accelerated timeframe” (Farris, Van
Aken, Doolen, & Worley, 2008, p. 10). The main tenant in Kaizen is that regardless of context, quality is continually improved. Kaizen programs use cross functional teams, whom are empowered to make decisions that not only make products and services better for external stakeholders, but create a cooperative internal organizational atmosphere and culture. Employees certainly are a part of this (Imai, 1986). Grunig (1992c) posited that in the practice of excellent public relations, every process should be continually improved upon. As communication plays an essential role in cultivating corporate climate and public relations spans boundaries, certainly internal public relations can add value to organizations in this context. The use of public relations can benefit organizations in other ways has well.

Effective Operational Systems

The Excellence Study found that excellent organizations have functional systems and procedures in place for day-to-day operations and for the use of human resources. Likewise, public relations departments must develop standard procedures and systems to monitor the progress of their department with regard to supporting an organization’s goals. One area where the internal communication provided by the public relations department can be beneficial is that “public relations, through its internal communication function, should do research to determine when employees believe operations systems and control inhibit their productivity, their ability to innovate, and the quality of their work” (Grunig, 1992c, p. 245). Just as public relations can ‘take the pulse’ of external audiences and adjust policies, it can do so for internal audiences as well. Certainly this works best in an organization with a collaborative social culture.

Collaborative Social Culture

The final attribute for an excellent organization is that it permits a collaborative social culture. This includes emphasis on trust, participation, and mutual responsibility. Management
alone cannot make a company successful. It needs the diversity and cooperation from all levels of employees. As part of collaboration, public relations function with its use of symmetrical communication with feedback and its emphasis on relationship building can proactively collaborate with various stakeholders to monitor issues before they become problems (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). Of collaboration and public relations Grunig (2000) stated, “I maintain that the most important of these values should be collaboration. I believe public relations will have its greatest value to client organizations, to publics and society if it views collaboration as the core of its philosophy” (p. 3). While there is a much research concerning external public relations and communication in higher education contexts, we do not know how public relations functions with respect to internal communication as utilized by senior level leadership in higher education.

Impact of the Excellence Study on the Field of Public Relations

No other public relations study has been so well documented and studied. The Excellence Study itself has been examined by researchers with regard to its impact on the practice of public relations (Huang & Lyu, 2013). From 1992 to 2011, this seminal study has shown a ‘sustained increase in citation over the past 20-years.” (p. 356) Scholarly, English language peer reviewed journals citing the Excellence Study during this same time were the Journal of Public Relations Research, Public Relations Review, the Journal of Communication Management, the International Journal of Strategic Communication, Public Relations Journal, the Journal of Promotion Management, Corporate Communications: An International Journal, the Journal of Public Affairs, Communication, South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research, the Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Marketing Communications, Corporate Reputation Review, and the Journal of Media Ethics (Huang & Lyu, 2013). Citations of the Excellence
Study across disciplines were also examined. The study was cited in the following disciplines: advertising and public relations, business and economics (including management, marketing and purchasing), communications, public administration, sociology, law, and philosophy (Huang & Lyu, 2013).

Key word searches of all the citations of the Excellence Study provided a list of overarching themes and sub themes. Key themes were: public relations, communication, organization, management, relationship, crisis, ethics, stakeholder, employee, Internet, and corporate responsibility. Sub-themes included corporate communication, communication management and integrated communication among others (Huang & Lyu, 2013). “…Journal publications represents the actual work done in a certain field, then these key themes provide a comprehensible picture of the influence of the Excellence Study on scholarship…” (p. 362)

Also the impact of the Excellence Study is not confined to the United States. Of the 1,862 scholarly research citations examined, 385 were in published in non-English language publications in 24 languages that included Afrikaans, Bahasa Indonesian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lithuanian, and Malayan. Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovene, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, and Ukrainian. Geographically the publishers of the journals that cited the Excellence Study were located in 15 different countries: United States, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, Canada, India, Korea, Romania, Nigeria, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, and Malaysia. Books published about the study were also in 14 countries: Canada, German, Australia, India, Finland, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Italy, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom as well as the United States (Huang & Lyu, 2013).
Although the rise in citation of the *Excellence Study* may be explained as the result of the increasing numbers of journals, it essentially means that the *Excellence Study* remains an important part of the public relations literature. Moreover, it is also reasonable to conclude that increasing citations in dissertations/theses imply that the *Excellence Study* will continue to be influential for the next generation of scholars. (Huang & Lyu, 2013, p. 369)

**Public Relations in Higher Education**

The public relations function has been utilized by higher education since the 19th century. In 1897, the first higher education publicity office was established at the University of Michigan. Others soon followed at Harvard, Yale, and Columbia (Cutlip, et. al., 1985). Today, there is some manifestation of a public relations or public affairs administrative function at nearly all United States colleges and universities.

The overarching goal of public relations in higher education is to facilitate public understanding of the college or university and advocate for its aspirations with respect to the various dynamic publics who are that institution’s stakeholders (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001). Other general goals of public relations in the higher education context include governmental relations, internal audience support, and recruitment and development assistance.

Much of the literature on public relations in higher education (Cutlip, et, al, 1985; Smith, 2002; Wilcox & Cameron, 2007) describes it as a strategic means by which an organization communicates on a two-way basis with its publics and they place emphasis on the building of mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its various publics. Early research showed that the public relations function in higher education did not necessarily fulfill its strategic function (Higgins, 1983). Sands found that … “senior public relations administrators
are largely viewed as technical experts - and not necessarily as key members of the university’s senior management team” (2003, p. 33).

Hale (2001) and Sands (2003) asserted that higher education public relations practitioners must become more involved in institutional decision-making and setting institutional policy. Sands’ research found that the organizational position of the public relations practitioner is most effective if a direct report to senior management, a finding similar to that of the Excellence Study. According to Wilcox and Cameron (2012) the public relations staff should attend all top-level meetings involving the president and other administrators. This is recommended so that the public relations function can learn the background and circumstances of decisions made and lend counsel. The public relations practitioners then can satisfactorily develop action programs and respond to questions from various stakeholders using primary information from the dominant collation. This empowers them to expertly function as the voice of the administration.

Whether it is a public dismissal of a trustee, a poorly spoken public remark by a president, a student protest, a strike by employees, visits by controversial or unpopular speakers, or highlighting of the many accomplishments of employees, students, and alumni, institutions of higher education should be strategically and proactively working to promote, advocate for, or protect the organization and its employees via public relations. Not all public relations advocacy and relationship building is external though. Public relations also uses internal communication to fulfill its role and mission.

**Internal Communication**

Although organizations need to maintain an external focus, they also need to inform and engage internal stakeholders. “Diverse organizations must also find effective ways to move information across their business units, breaking down the structural silos that they unknowingly
build around departments” (Whitworth, 2006, p. 206). The benefits of internal (or intra-organizational) communication to employees is its impact on organizational effectiveness, corporate culture, competitive advantage, trust, and external prestige (Eisenberg, 1983; Holtzhausen, 2002; Hoogervorst, 2004; Mazzei, 2010; Pincus, Knipp, & Rayfield, 1990; Ruppel & Harrington, 2011; Smidts et al., 2001; Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009).

Mazzei (2010) defined internal communication as “the communication flow among people within the boundaries of an organization” (p. 221). Welsh and Jackson (2007) supported a stakeholder approach, stating that internal communication “is a strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels of the organization” (p. 183). Freeman (1984) expands on that idea in that internal stakeholders can support external stakeholders. “Internal stakeholders must be seen as the conduit through which managers reach other external stakeholders” (p. 218). Public relations scholars have specifically noted the role of internal communication as both a relationship management and commitment-building tool (Cutlip et al., 2006; Grunig, 1996; Jo & Shim, 2005; Ledingham & Brunig, 2000). But not all audiences are the same.

**Internal Stakeholders Are Not Homogenous**

Public relations practitioners need to be mindful that internal stakeholders may be interrelated, but are not a homogenous mass (Jones, 1995; L’Etang, 2005; Welsh & Jackson, 2007). Internal audiences can fall into groups and subgroups. These can be classified by demographics or occupational classification. For example, higher education internal stakeholder groups may be: hourly or salaried, academic support, administrative, academic, or research-based. Cheney and Christensen (2001) have said structural levels can also be used to classify internal stakeholders. They suggested the categories of strategic management, day-to-day
management, and team and project management. Welsh and Jackson (2007) suggested the following classifications: all employees; strategic management (dominant coalition, top management, or strategic management such as CEOs or senior management teams); day-to-day management (supervisors, middle managers, directors, department heads, team leaders, division leaders, CEO as line manager); work teams (departments, divisions); and project teams. As with any profession, there are certain skill sets that enable practitioners to accomplish their communication goals regardless of audience.

**Skill Sets for Internal Communications**

Internal communication is complex (Smith, 2005) and as such communicators who want to address internal stakeholders need to have certain personnel skills as well as technical skills. Personnel skills can include such adeptness as sensitivity and an understanding of how diverse people in organizations will react, or behave, in various cultural situations (Chalmers, 2008). It has been suggested that ‘rational’ decision making theory may not be nuanced enough to help a communicator navigate the convoluted maze of interpersonal, political, and ethical situations that may occur within complex organizations (Conrad & Poole, 2005). Communicators must be competent in influencing and coaching employee attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Strauss & Hoffman, 2000) in order to gain buy-in for ideas and initiatives. Practitioners must also be able to analyze the political, cultural, and relationship facets of an organization as well as situational or environmental facets. They must plan for interaction with diverse groups (Welsh & Jackson, 2007) and continually research and interact with employees to ensure they are abreast of what employees want (Farrant, 2003). They must also be part of the strategic coalition to have firsthand knowledge of the organization’s strategy and business plans (Welsh & Jackson, 2007).

“Practitioners, it would seem, need to understand how organizational processes work, how to
undertake effective organizational environmental and cultural analysis and how to ensure the flow of two-way communication in organizations” (Chalmers, 2008. p. 8).

Technical skills include designing and writing messages, ability to perform basic informational research, skillful decision-making, media management and change management (Smith, 2005), and knowledge of technology (Chalmers, 2008). Use of technology includes communication channel choice and the ability to know when an organization is ready to adapt new technology. Competent communicators know how to balance technology and humanity (Keenan & Hazelton, 2006).

**Internal Communication Impacts External Communication**

According to Rhee (2004) the adequacy of internal communications may have an impact on employee-public relations. Internal publics are targeted for relationship management because the behavior of this internal audience can directly impact external perceptions of an organization (Gruing, 1992b). Public relations theory states that employees are often ambassadors to external audiences of an organization and its image. Employees therefore impact the reputation, or brand, of their organization (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Grunig, 1992b).

This is of interest to organizations because if organizations take into account internal communication with employees, then when those same employees find themselves in an interpersonal situation with an external public, they have sufficient communication resources and access to information. This allows them to express informed opinions and facts regarding the organization. If they are ill-informed the results of such interactions with external publics could be detrimental to the organization. “Some companies spend millions on charitable endeavors in order to build a good reputation their communities, not realizing that individual employees can undermine that reputation every time they open their mouths about the organization” (Crescendo,
2005, p. 10). This potential for external reputation harm is a concern to public relations practitioners. But it can be mitigated by a well-planned internal communication program.

**Internal Communication as an Element of Public Relations**

van Reil (1995) categorized that internal communication is positioned in the public relations function. This is an apt fit as public relations practitioners can use many of the same managerial, personnel, and technical skills needed to work with external stakeholders for use with internal audiences. This includes using two-way communication. The two-way model of symmetrical communication identified in the *Excellence Study* desires to balance the interests of the organization and its publics, based on research and communication as well as managing conflict with strategic publics (Grunig et al., 2002). That study also said that the content of the communication must meet the “employees need to know, rather than management’s need to tell” as even mediated communication can be symmetrical (p. 487).

Working strategically with the dominant coalition, public relations can send key internal messages to employee stakeholders via controlled media. Controlled media are media in which the sender has total control over the frequency, content, and placement of the messages. There is direct sender-to-receiver communication and there are no gatekeepers who can change or distort the message. Examples of controlled media may include Intranet sites accessible to employees, direct-to-employee email messages by the organization, social media controlled by the organization, or even employee newsletters. Face-to-face communication is also a form of controlled media. Controlled communication in controlled media occurs when public relations practitioner decides on content, format, and mode of delivery (Welsh & Jackson, 2007). An example of uncontrolled media with a gatekeeper is to have the public relations practitioner disseminate information via news media. This is then edited by news media staff who are not
members of the organization that released the information. They control what content and how much of the message as well as the tone of the message that is made available to the audience.

Grunig (1992) has stated that the ideal model of public relations is a two-way symmetrical communication. This kind of communication is balanced between the sender and receiver in that there is a flow of the messaging back and forth between the two. This on-going dialogue allows for adjustments to the public relations messaging based in the feedback from those stakeholders to whom the messages are directed. As part of continual two-way communication the public relations function should periodically survey employee preferences for the amount of information needed by employees to avoid information overload as well as determining the topics of information most desired by employees. The public relations function would analyze this data when planning internal communication.

Jackson and Walsh (2007) posited that there are four main goals in internal communication. First, it will contribute to internal relationships that will be characterized by employee commitment. Second, internal communication promotes a sense of belonging to employees. Third, it develops employee awareness of change. Finally, internal communication helps employees understand the need for the organization to evolve in response to its environment. The concept of employee commitment is an important one to organizations and internal communication can help solidify this. However, there is a potential threat to the excellent operations of the public relations function and that is the possibility of encroachment.

**Encroachment as a Threat to Public Relations**

Lauzen defines encroachment as the “assignment of nonpublic relations professionals to manage the public relations function” (1992, p. 61). She provides as examples public relations roles being filled by lawyers, financial experts, and marketing personnel. Encroachment occurs
when another part of an organization acts in place of public relations performing duties traditionally associated with the public relations’ domain. An external communication example of this would be when a corporation’s representative from research and design directly contacts and discusses the latest technological advancements of that organization with the media. This is not to say that research and design expert can’t talk to the media; certainly they can, but, the process of contact and cultivation of the media relationship would is traditionally first performed by the public relations function. Then the research and design person would be briefed and possibly given media relations training before speaking to the media. An internal example of this would be if a department or college in a university released an organization-wide communiqué to all university employees. For example this can occur in higher education when campus wide emails are sent out regarding new building construction or parking information as communicated by the facilities or plant department.

Several studies have shown that the university fundraising function can encroach in the public relations area or even subjugate it (Kelly, 1991, 1993, 1994). Kelly concludes that encroachment or subjection by fundraising units, such as alumni relations, forces public relations to substantially redirect its resources to serve a single public. This can also cause confusion if competing messages are being sent by the fundraising unit and the public relations function. Kelly states this effectively places environmental blinders on the public relations function and restricts the other publics they should be serving. “Systems theory suggests that such an imbalance eventually will result in dysfunctional organization susceptible to crises involving strategic publics other than donors” (Kelly, 1994, p. 4).

Other studies have examined encroachment by marketing into the public relations domain (Buffington, 2004; Cutlip, 1992; Laborde & Pompper, 2016: Lauzen, 1991; Lauzen 1992; Lee,
Jares, & Heath, 1999; Hutton, 1999; Swanger & Redgers, 2013; Wilson, Callister & Seipel, 2018). Cutlip posits that there is evidence indicating a movement to merge public relations into marketing. He cites that the textbooks of marketing expert Phillip Kotler who posits that organizations should shift from ‘marketing’ to ‘social marketing’ and that in this evolution the title of public relations should be abandoned in favor of marketing as well as being a part of the marketing department (Cutlip, 1992, p. 27). Cutlip says, “Professor Kotler blurs the two functions and his definition of marketing reads as though it were public relations” (p. 28). As with Kelly’s environmental blinders, subjugation removes public relations from its place of being a boundary spanning function and serving multiple publics on behalf of the organization. While supporting the marketing of an organization’s goods and services is one of the functions of public relations it certainly is not the only goal of the public relations department (Cutlip, 1992). Whereas, marketing’s main goal and focus is to communicate to consumers. Kotler (2017) defines marketing as

…the science and art of exploring, creating, and delivering value to satisfy the needs of a target market at a profit. Marketing identifies unfulfilled needs and desires. It defines, measures and quantifies the size of the identified market and the profit potential. It pinpoints which segments the company is capable of serving best and it designs and promotes the appropriate products and services (¶4)

Note that the substantial difference between marketing and public relations is that marketing is concerned with a single public – consumers – and public relations is concerned with multiple publics and stakeholders (Cutlip, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 1991). Overall, Lauzen agrees with Kelly and Cutlip as she reiterates that subordination of the public relations function
to another organizational unit gives far more weight to one stakeholder group at the expense of
other strategically important publics. This in turn leaves the organization vulnerable to loss of
support or even attack by other valuable publics’ whose relationships have been ignored (Kelly,
1994, p. 3). In addition to public relations constructs and theories another schema that impacts
communication to employees is how committed they are to the organizations that employ them.

Employee Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is an important institutional-related concept because it has
provides support for various work-related outcomes such as job performance and satisfaction,
and decreased absenteeism and turnover (Eisinga, Teelken, & Doorewaard, 2010; Mathieu &
Zajac, 1990). Organizational commitment is considered to be “the bond or linking of the
individual to the organization” (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990, p. 171). Employees with appreciable
degrees of organizational commitment have greater persistence and retention and increased
levels of job satisfaction. In addition, they are more committed and loyal to employers, feel they
are valued by the organization, and resultantly have a greater stake in it as well.

Porter, Steers, and Mowday (1974) define organizational commitment as “the strength of
an individual’s identification with, and involvement in, a particular organization” (p. 604). They
posited that organizational commitment is composed of three factors: (a) a strong belief and an
acceptance of the goals and values of the organization; (b) an inclination to employ effort on
behalf of the organization; and (c) a desire to remain in that organization. Salancik (1977)
concluded that commitment can be classified in one of two ways. The first, attitudinal
commitment, relates to the process by which employees identify with the values of the
organization and desire to maintain themselves as a part of that organization. The second form of
commitment is behavioral commitment. This in contrast to attitudinal commitment as it refers to
how an employee’s past behaviors attach or bind them to the organization. Both of these variables form the psychological bond of the employee to the organization (Mottaz, 1988).

**Benefits of Organizational Commitment**

Clearly, increased organizational commitment has beneficial results for organizations as a whole. A more insightful understanding of organizational commitment could lead to better work related processes that benefit the institution, employees, and society. Mathieu and Zajac (1990) posited that the benefit to organizations that value commitment among their employees, is that it reduces withdrawal behaviors such as lateness and turn over. In addition, committed employees may be more likely to engage in entrepreneurial behaviors such as creativeness or innovativeness that can make an organization more competitive (p. 171). Angle and Perry (1981) found that more committed employees desire to remain with an organization. This is a clear relationship between an employee’s motivation, level of participation, and fulfillment of organizational objectives. Willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization and the belief in and acceptance of the organization’s goals, in combination, have implications for the member’s motivation to produce for the organization in accordance with the explicit organizational mandates and desires (p. 2).

Porter et al. (1974) concluded that individuals with greater levels of organizational commitment have a tendency to remain with an organization. Therefore, organizational commitment may be a strong predictor of potential turnover. Society can benefit from this concept as organizations that employ a workforce with greater levels of commitment may have a better return on their investment in the employees through their increased productivity and work quality (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Organizational commitment can be further delineated into scales of commitment.
Types of Organizational Commitment

Meyer and Allen (1991) building upon Salanick’s earlier two component work, created a three-component model of organizational commitment that examined the affective, continuance, and normative scales of commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). In their model they posited that commitment is a psychological state and is comprised of various components such as (a) desire as an affective commitment; (b) need as a continuance commitment; and (c) an obligation as expressed as normative commitment. Affective commitment is an attitudinal variable. It relates to an employee’s identification, involvement, and emotional attachment to their institution. Employees with greater levels of affective commitment remain with their employer because they want to.

Continuance commitment weighs the costs associated with leaving an organization. An example of this would be the costs associated with starting a new job, such as relocating. Employees with high levels of continuance commitment stay with an organization because they feel it is too costly on some level to depart. They feel that they have to remain. Employees with increased levels of normative commitment remain with employers as they feel an obligation and they are of the opinion they need to remain.

Only one of the three kinds of organizational commitment can be influenced by employers and that is the affective (desire) commitment. This is important as it could help organizations retain better employees which eventually benefits them allowing for the recruitment of higher quality employees (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In the case of professors, perhaps this would impact their quality of work and could result in attracting a better class of students. That, in turn, could help to increase the prestige and reputation of the college. This results in re-starting the cycle over by helping to recruit and retain good employees.
The antecedents of the three variables of organizational commitment inform us that of the three types of commitment, employers may have the greatest impact on the affective variable. Continuance commitment results from perceived costs to the employee if they leave the organization. Generally, these variables are of a more personal nature and the employer would not have extensive impact here. For example, two of the variables at play with continuance commitment are age of the employee and length of service with the organization. The employer can change neither of these variables.

In normative commitment, a more theoretical construct, the feeling of remaining with the organization is a result of internalization. This internalization is a result of family or cultural pressures or other outside factors. Again, the employer generally cannot influence these variables. It may be possible, however, to adjust the situation surrounding an affective variable.

Mowday et al. (1982) said that structural characteristics, job-related characteristics, work experiences, and personal characteristics are the precursors for affective commitment. It is the affective kind of organizational commitment that is of most interest here as it is the one variable that organizations can manipulate. Meyer and Allen (1991) described the affective attachment mode of commitment as “partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values, and to organization for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth” (p. 64). It is asserted that commitment is a psychological state that both characterizes an employee’s relationship with their organization and has implications regarding that person’s desire to remain or leave an organization.

Pettit, Goris, and Vaught (1997) found that organizational commitment was a strong predictor of organizational satisfaction and used a regression analysis to explore the influence of organizational communication and both job performance and satisfaction. In a higher education
context, Eisinga, Teelken, and Doorrewaard (2010), in their study of European university employees, found that there was a positive connection between organizational commitment and job performance. There is research that relates communications as a factor impacting organizational commitment.

**Communication Links to Organizational Commitment**

Guzley’s (1992) research on organizational climate and communication climate as predictors of commitment to an organization concluded that communication is a variable that can predict organizational commitment. She concluded employees’ perceptions of organizational climate and communications climate had a positive correlation with their level of organizational commitment. Guzley defined communication climate separately from organizational climate in that communication climate includes only the phenomena that are explicitly communicative, e.g. accuracy of information being disseminated in the organization. Guzley states, “by virtue of being the medium by which organizational work is accomplished, communication is related to organizational climate” (p. 383).

Pace (1983) concurred saying that overall organization climate is formed from employees’ perceptions of organizational life. This could include the perceptions of the adequacy or inadequacy of information flow. Pace stated that organizational climate and communications climate are two different entities as that “some perceptions directly involve the climate in which the communicating occurs. This is called the organization communication climate” (p. 126). Further studies by Poole (1985) and Welsch and LaVan (1981) also support the notion of communication climate as a separate object. In Welsh and LaVan’s (1981) research they isolated five organizational climate variables. These were communication, decision-making, leadership, motivation, and goal setting. All were positively related to organizational commitment but the
relationship between the communication variables studied (acceptance, accuracy, and directional flow) was much stronger than all other variables. It accounted for a 38% variance in commitment (Welsch & LaVan, 1981).

Similar to Welsch and LaVan’s findings regarding communication variables of acceptance, accuracy, and directional flow being positively related to organizational commitment, O’Connell (1979), listed the following factors as being related to communication: superior-subordinate communication, quality of information, superior openness/candor, opportunities for upward communication, and reliability of information. Trombetta and Rogers (1988) also examined the relationship between organizational climate and communications climate variables. They investigated participation in decision-making, communication openness, and information adequacy. Information adequacy is the degree to which people got the information they desired verses what they actually received. In their study, the variable of information adequacy was the significant predictor of commitment (Trombetta & Rogers, 1988). Clearly, as the public relations function is grounded in sharing information this finding indicates that the public relations function helps or hurts information adequacy which in turn impacts organizational commitment.

Buchanan (1974) found that there are other variables affecting organizational climate and communications climate, such as length of tenure at an organization. Buchanan informs us that time with an organization impacts organizational commitment. He found that for managers within their first year of service, organizational commitment was predicted by perception of the job as challenging and by group attitudes toward the organization. For employees in their second through fourth year, self-image, reinforcement, and personal importance predicted organization commitment levels. For employees having had their position for five years or more,
organizational commitment was predicted by group attitudes toward the organization, expectation realization, and work commitment norms.

**Communication and Organizational Commitment**

Guzley (1992) used Buchanan’s (1974) information as a cornerstone for her research. Noting that decision-making and accuracy of information has been positively linked to organizational commitment, she noted that tenure should moderate the relationship between organizational climate, communication climate, and organizational commitment. She posited that persons employed for less than one year would be expected to have less need for participation in decision-making and a greater need for accurate information. This would differ from those persons employed by the organization for periods longer than one year.

Guzley’s (1992) methodology was to measure organizational commitment by the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire developed by Porter (1974), and to measure organizational climate with an organizational climate measure developed in 1972 by Taylor and Bowers. Finally, she measured communication climate with the Communication Climate scale as developed by Dennis (1974). Length of employment was measured with a single question asking respondents to indicate in years and months how long they had been with their current employer (Guzley, 1992).

Participants in the study were employees at a large service organization in the United States. Surveys were distributed to 37 employees and 68% completed them for a total of 250 instruments. The population of respondents was 99 males and 138 females of the 237 who indicated gender. Average length of employment was 4.6-years with median at 3.9 and mode being 2.0 (Guzley, 1992). Guzley had four hypotheses and each received support. Her first hypothesis predicted that the more favorable the perceived organization climate, the greater level
of organizational commitment by employees. This received strong support with organizational clarity being a predictor of commitment in the overall regression analysis.

The second hypothesis predicted that a more favorable perception of communication climate, resulted in a greater level of organizational commitment by employees. This was also supported. Participation in the communication climate was the predictor of commitment in this regression analysis.

Guzley’s (1992) third hypothesis, that length of time (tenure) moderates the relationship between organizational climate and organizational commitment showed support. In the regression analysis organizational clarity was shown to be the significant predictor of organizational commitment of employees in early and mature stages of employment. Guzley posited that employees in years 2-5 did not have this significant predictor and points to Buchanan’s work to explain why. Buchanan (1974) posits that employees in the second stage of tenure have not completely invested themselves in the organization but are working toward achievement and recognition.

Guzley’s (1992) fourth hypothesis that length of employment moderates the relationship between communication climate and organizational commitment was also supported. Participation emerged as the significant predictor of commitment for employees in stages two and three. She posits that participation in goal setting and decision-making may not be significant for new employees as they spend their primary year learning tasks and basic skills and procedures. Guzley’s work suggests that organizational clarity and participation are predictors of organizational commitment and that employees will maintain their commitment to the organization if they sense some form of clarity, or orderliness, exists to explain or inform work activities, goals, and objectives. According to Guzley (1992):
Employees apparently will also maintain their commitment to the organization if they are allowed to participate in making recommendations and in decision-making, and if they perceive that management shares accurate information with them. (p. 398)

In addition to the communication relating to job satisfaction, it is a presupposition that as communication forms the basis of information gathering this could also support the research that indicates that participation in decision-making is related to organizational commitment (Han, Chiang & Chang, 2010; Muindi, 2011). Communication relates to job satisfaction and there is research to support this.

**Communication and Job Satisfaction**

Pettit, Goris, and Vaught (1997) concluded that the variable of communication plays a major role in job satisfaction and this relates back to organizational commitment. Other researchers have also substantiated the general link between communication and job satisfaction. King, Lahiff, and Hatfield (1988) found that there is a consistently clear and positive pattern of relationships between an employee’s perceptions of communication and their job satisfaction. Pincus (1986) found that communication is related to both job satisfaction and job performance. Additionally, his research indicated that communication from top management is important. Pincus’ research found that top management communication is substantially related to both job satisfaction and performance for employees.

Trombetta and Rodgers (1988) found that that information adequacy within communication is related to commitment. Their study found that communication openness is related to job satisfaction, and they concluded that varying levels of information adequacy and communication openness can lead to varying levels organizational commitment.
This finding reemphasizes the vital role played by organizational communication in organizational members’ satisfaction with and performance on the job. The evidence generally supports previous research, which has pointed to a close association between employee’s perceptions of different forms of communication and satisfaction. (p. 412)

Not only does communication impact job satisfaction, it influences productivity.

**Communication and Productivity**

Clampitt and Downs (1993) studied employee perceptions, communication, and commitment, and examined employee perceptions of communication satisfaction with regard to productivity. Clampitt and Downs sought to understand how organizations might moderate the link between communication and productivity. Eight dimensions of communication satisfaction were investigated: communication climate, supervisory communication, organizational integration (to what degree do individuals receive information about the immediate work environment), media (communication vehicles) quality, co-worker communication, corporate information, personal feedback, and subordinate communication.

Using a communication satisfaction questionnaire, Clampitt and Downs concluded that employees perceived that “communication factors impinged on their productivity in a variety of ways. The degree of impact and the reason for the impact varies” (p. 25). In addition, they noted that the type of organization moderated the link between communication and productivity. Their work supports the idea that organizational commitment is related to job satisfaction and that job satisfaction is related to communication quality and communication climate. Therefore, communication quality and communication climate are related to organizational commitment.
As prior research indicates, organizational commitment is an important institutional-related concept shown to provide support for various work-related outcomes such as performance, job satisfaction, and absenteeism. Therefore it is of interest to organizations as communication climate impacts organizational commitment. Communication is also important in and of itself as it is a capital asset to an organization and has manifest value.

**Communication as Capital**

Researchers assert that communication is a strategic intangible asset with capital value (Hartman & Lenk, 2001; Keenan, 2000; Malmelin, 2007; Matos & Nobre, 2009). Intangible assets do not have a physical presence, such as equipment would, but they generate value. Matos & Nobre (2009) said “intangible assets are classified into four basic categories: environmental, structural, relational, and intellectual. Categories include such factors as technology, innovation, design, patents, communication, and reputation (p.17).

According to Malmelin (2007) communication is an integral part of the management of an organization because it helps to build, or increase, an organization’s intangible assets. It is a function that involves the whole organization. It is also seen as an organization-wide process that is managed by communication professionals such as public relations practitioners.

Since all parts of the organization are involved in communication, it is important that it has in place the necessary mechanisms for planning and coordinating communication. The integration of communication is about maintaining a strategic balance between the various aspects and channels of communication. It requires a sensitive and perceptive analysis of consumers and various stakeholder groups as well as an inclusive planning effort. (Malmelin, 2007, p. 305)
In this role communication professionals find themselves increasingly called upon to form their messages in a more analytical and strategic way. Malmelin (2007) specifically addresses the human capital function within this larger communication system. “Communication competence is critical to business survival because every contact with customers and stakeholders reflects upon the company’s brand and reputation” (p. 304).

Matos and Nobre (2009) posit five ways in which to examine communication capital. It can be studied through the various framework of accounting, marketing, managerial, symbolic, or relational. Of these frameworks marketing, managerial, and relational most undergird areas of responsibility for public relations practitioners. The marketing approach considers communication as a tool to support strategic plans and thinking as well as being used in branding, advertising, and public relations (Crozier, 2006). As a managerial approach, communication capital is viewed as an organizational resource that is manageable and can be used to improve personnel, products and services, and/or processes. It has business value and is used in the best interests of both internal and external stakeholders. As a relational approach Matos and Nobre (2009) describe communications capital as “communication understood as the channel through which people establish and develop relations between themselves, a way to harmonize interest, and coordinate actions” (p. 9).

Matos and Nobre (2009) posited the components of a communication capital model, and integrated both internal and external communication with relational aspects of communication. They said communication capital was a resource for all concerned with an organization, be they internal or external stakeholders. Matos and Nobre said that communication capital composes the communication system, communication competencies, and relationships and in turn each of these include both inter-organizational interactions and relations with stakeholders outside the
organization. Aggestam (2006) has said that communication capital is what is said to whom, how, when, why, and to what effects. Communication capital for him is what the persons from the organization say as well as what they do together.

Harman and Lenk (2001) said that very strategic and purposeful communication is created when leaders understand that communication is capital; comprehend the cause and effect between communications activities; and know how communication impacts the ability to achieve an organization’s strategic goals. “The integrated nature of strategic communication enhances the internal constituents’ ability to participate in the accomplishment of the organizations’ goals” (Hartman & Lenk, 2001, p. 147). Argenti (1998) added that communication of this nature is key in impelling employees to become more productive and that this kind of interaction grants management more credibility with employees. Employee satisfaction with the communication relationships at a place of employment is important as well.

**Communication Relationship Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment**

Putti et al. (1990) studied the organizational process of communication as it relates to employee satisfaction with communication relationships. Communication relationship satisfaction (CRS) is the level to which available information in an organization fulfills the employee’s requests for information. This can pertain to the employee’s tasks or role or simple information that allows him or her to be informed about the organization and its activities. Putti et al. (1990) said that communication relationship satisfaction is the “overall degree of satisfaction an employee perceives in his total communication environment” (p. 45).

The work of Putti et al. (1990) explored the relationship between communication relationship satisfaction and attitudinal commitment. CRS was measured using an instrument developed by the International Communication Association. The scale examined four
dimensions: supervisor relationship, top management relationship, organizational influence, and co-workers. The results indicated that the global measure of CRS indicated a strong correlation with the variable of organizational commitment. Top management showed an even stronger correlation with organizational commitment than the global measure of CRS. Supervisor relationships indicated a moderately strong correlation with organizational commitment (Putti et al., 1990). This indicated that employee satisfaction with the amount of information provided to them may impact their sense of commitment to the organization.

Being mindful that top management showed an even stronger correlation with organizational commitment than the global measure of CRS, this indicates that shared information imparts a sense of belonging to, or identification with, the institution. “This implies that top management activities by way of communicating organizational polices and providing a shared values system are important a commitment enhancing mechanisms” (Putti et al., 1990, p. 50). Communication from top-level management impacts an employee with respect to organizational commitment.

Cheney (1983) commented that internal organizational communication materials such as newsletters and other kinds of promotional pieces can be a powerful strategy in facilitating identification with the workplace. Employees who are inclined to identify with an organization will be open to persuasive efforts within that organization. This has implications for management in that internal communication is of strategic importance vis-à-vis the amount and quality of available information is important as that strategic information not only informs practice and policy, but encourages a sense of belonging to, and identification with, the values and objectives of the organization.
Chapter 2 Summary

Higher education is still perceived as a public good, even though that pool of goodwill has been eroding over the past 30-years. Institutions of higher education need to address the public’s declining trust, calls for increasing transparency and concerns that secondary education has become too costly and out of reach for the middle class. Clearly, higher education has not robustly been actively gauging public perceptions nor attempting to engage stakeholders in two-way communications in order to better facilitate relationships and mutual understanding. Public relations practitioners have the training to facilitate such boundary spanning roles between an organization and its publics.

The Excellence Study placed the practice of public relations in an organization as a valuable strategic management function emphasizing role of relationship management within that function. It delineated how symmetrical communication is a best practice for cultivating relationships to maintaining a feedback mechanism. This mechanism allows for adjustment of organizational strategies based on relationships with various stakeholders. The normative theories from the Excellence Study posit how external and internal public relations can contribute to an organization’s goals and add value to it.

With regard to the importance of good internal communication, it has an impact on organizational effectiveness and is a tool for relationship management and commitment building between management and employees. Internal communication relationships such as those managed by public relations are important as they relate to employee satisfaction with the organization and commitment to it as well.

Overall employee satisfaction with communication impacts their sense of commitment to that organization. Research has found that strategic communication can foster a sense of
belonging and identification of employees with the values and goals of the organization. This can affect public perceptions of the organization and can impact the organization’s financial line.

Therefore, it is valuable to study public relations in the higher education and to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education regarding their processes and practices for internal communication with particular emphasis on the processes and strategies they use with employees. Data from this research could add to the paucity of research in this area.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education regarding their processes and practices for internal communications. It places particular emphasis on the processes and strategies for internal communication with employees. It examines common and unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best practices, and if they coordinate internal communication with other entities within their organization or if encroachment may be occurring. Understanding was sought regarding the practitioners beliefs and practices regarding: (a) public relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment (Grunig, 2006). Finally, some demographic data was gathered regarding the career paths and education of the practitioners.

The overarching question that guides this study is: how do higher education senior level public relations practitioners develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees? To achieve an in-depth understanding, this study was guided by the following questions:

RQ 1. What are the internal communication processes/practices of the public relations function in higher education as described by the senior level practitioner?

RQ 2. What are the practitioner’s processes/practices regarding
a. public relations as a strategic management function, per the *Excellence Study* findings, in a higher education context?

b. the role of relationship management within public relations per the *Excellence Study* findings, in a higher education context?

c. if symmetrical communication per the *Excellence Study* findings, is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment in a higher education context?

d. To what extent, if any, does the environment include the 12 attributes of excellent management per the *Excellence Study* findings?

RQ 3. How do senior level public relations practitioners in higher education describe the internal communication practices by other entities in the organization such as the human relations function?

**Methodology and Research Design**

This study used a qualitative interview approach to investigate the public relations function among senior level practitioners within five to six public or private liberal arts universities located in Ohio and Michigan. A listing of the senior level public relations practitioners for universities in those states was obtained from the websites of each of those universities.

In situations where motives, attitudes, beliefs, and values direct much, if not most of human activity, the most sophisticated instrumentation we possess is still the careful observer – the human being who can watch, see, listen, question, probe,
and finally analyze and organize his direct experience. (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 213)

This research was constructed via qualitative interviews with purposive sampling “based on specific purpose rather than randomly” (Tashakkori & Teddle, 2003, p. 713) to examine the internal public relations processes at institutions of higher education. It explored the value and processes of internal communication as described by the senior level public relations practitioner at each higher education institution. Research in this area uncovered commonalities (or uniqueness) in process or and attempted to obtain information regarding best practices for internal communication within the context of higher education by examining perceptions of internal communication as related to employees as described by the actual public relations practitioners.

Qualitative interviewing research methodology is a good fit for this research topic. Other names for qualitative interviewing are intensive, in-depth, depth interviewing, unstructured, nondirective, or free interviewing. Related terms are conversational interviewing and narrative interviewing (Weiss, 1994). Weiss stated he was “particularly struck by the density of information provided by qualitative interview studies and by their usefulness for understanding the complexities of respondents’ experiences” (Weiss, 1994, p. vii). “Qualitative, in-depth interviews typically are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101).

Qualitative research is conducted in a natural setting and is descriptive (Bilklen, 1992). “Listening to the lives of others, then, is a curious kind of voyeurism. It is like having many lives by proxy. Vicariously the interviewer lives the memories told through anecdotes” (Schostak, 2006, p. 1). This allows the researcher to capture detailed and rich naturally occurring data and
make robust inferences. This can aid researchers in gaining an in-depth understanding of the meanings of a situation as well as the situation itself to those who are immersed in it (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

…the interview can be described in term of individuals directing their attention towards each other with the purpose of opening up the possibility of gaining an insight into the experiences, concerns, interests, beliefs, values, knowledge and ways of seeing, thinking and acting of the other. (Schostak, 2006, p. 10)

The individuals being interviewed all share common characteristics that bind them together such as being members of a group or exemplifying a specific phenomenon. This group is referred to as a quintain and refers to the collective target used when neither program nor phenomenon are not “a big enough word” (Stake, 2006, p. 6). The quintain is a condition to be studied….“a target, but not a bull’s eye. In program evaluation, we may call it an evaluland, in music, it may be a repertoire” (Stake, 2006, p. 6). The public relations practitioners to be studied yielded data regarding complexity and their situational uniqueness under the umbrella of the quintain (Stake, 2006). In particular this kind of qualitative interview research uses several key participants and is descriptive in nature so as to portray a description of the phenomena (internal communication with employees) within its higher education context (Merriam, 1998). There is cross participant analysis with emphasis on the quintain.

This research examined communication structures or processes, or lack thereof, as utilized by university public relations departments regarding internal communication, as addressed both by interview questions and a review of an organizational chart for each university. This study explored the perceptions of internal communication as described by the senior level public relations practitioner at each university. Understanding was sought of the
practitioners’ beliefs and practices regarding: (a) public relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment.

The participants in this study were purposefully selected, not a random sampling. Creswell (2007) defines purposeful sampling as selecting individuals and sites that “purposefully inform an understanding of the research phenomena” (p. 125), and states that purposeful selection of nonrandom participants and sites can help the researcher understand the problem they are studying (Creswell, 2007). The participants in this kind of purposive study are considered elites. Interviewing elites is advantageous in that they are considered well placed and informed in an organization or community. They are selected based on their expertise in areas relevant to the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Because elites are considered influential, prominent and well informed, they can provide an insider’s overarching view of an organization.

Although the majority of data will originate from interviews of elite informants, data was collected and analyzed from documents such as organizational charts (Stake, 2006).

**Context, Population, Recruitment, and Sampling**

The recruitment of the senior level public relations practitioners was purposeful and based on a criterion sampling. The criteria for this research is that participants must be senior level public relations practitioners with at least two years of experience in their current position. It is felt that a two-year minimum is needed in that the practitioner will have seen two fiscal and calendar year cycles and would have a better idea of the nuances of the position verses a person who has been on the job for less time.
The target number of senior level public relations practitioners studied was six from both public or private universities located in Ohio and Michigan. State and private liberal arts universities were selected as the researcher has both attended, and worked for, such thus having a working knowledge of them.

The collection of data began by identifying the possible universities from a larger pool as classified by Ohio Public Universities Admissions Council (OPUAC), Michigan Association of State Universities (MASU) and a listing of private universities in Ohio can be found at the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Ohio (AICUO) and Michigan’s Independent College and Universities (MICU) websites. These organizations provide data that used to determine public university sites that meet the criteria of having over 12,000 students and private universities with student populations in excess of 1,000.

This was the potential pool of participating institutions from which the researcher recruited potential study participants for interviews. Preference was to interview the senior level public relations practitioners in person but if that was not possible, phone or Skype (video feed via Internet) interviews were conducted. Computer mediated interviewing was only used for one participant. Due to the specialized parameters dictating who can participate in this particular research, participants were selected via criterion sampling technique from only participants who had served in his or her current position for two years or more. This information was readily available in the biographies or curriculum vitae posted of each practitioners on their university’s website as well as being verified by participants.

Access to participants was challenging, as the group of participants needed for this research had time constraints due to the nature of their positions. Relationships needed to be established to gain trust with these elites so they could be convinced of the value of this research.
There was little difficulty in directly appealing to this group to participate in the research, even though initially I worked through some gatekeepers such as administrative assistants. Smaller universities were quicker to respond to requests for participation. It took considerably more time to secure participation from participants at larger universities.

This research sample was large enough to control for key informant bias (Creswell, 2007). Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) stated that it is not necessary to interview many key informants but that it is critical to find essential informants to obtain well-informed information. The methods outlined earlier resulted in such informants and data. Once a list was determined of universities with public relations practitioners that met the research criteria cards with the university’s names on them were placed in a large manila envelope; each card was randomly drawn and the university’s name listed in order of contact.

Recruitment began with letters of introduction sent to the senior level public relations practitioners at the first six institutions randomly drawn. The letter described the nature of the research; time needed for it, and the benefits of participation. It also informed the potential participant that a follow up call and e-mail by the researcher would take place within five business days of the letter’s postmark.

Contact with the potential participants was made in an attempt to answer questions about the research and for recruitment purposes. If I was unable to obtain six participants in the first ‘wave’ of this process, then the next senior level public relations practitioner from the numbered list was contacted in the same manner, and the next, and so on, until there were six senior level public relations practitioners who had been recruited and signed the consent document. Then data collection of documents began for each participant’s university. Interviews followed shortly after this process.
Data Collection and Instrumentation

Two additional types of data were collected in addition to interviews. Organizational charts of each university were obtained as well as biographical documents or curriculum vitae of each participant. In addition to the interview data this other information was gathered to make sure that participants were who they said they were with respect to where their function sits within the organization; especially in relationship to the dominant coalition and the president of the university. It was also useful in the collection of educational and career background information. The information gathered from these disparate pieces of research was synthesized to identify meaningful themes. This kind of data collection provided robustness of sources (Yin, 1993).

With regard to documentation showing reporting structure. Data was gleaned that provided insight on several questions. For example, where is the public relations office situated within the organizational chart? What is the reporting structure of the department? Does it appear that the senior level public relations person is a direct report to the president? Is public relations a stand-alone operation or is it placed under the jurisdiction of another kind of entity such as marketing or human resources? Do other departments show a communications function? All of this information illustrated how the department functions and was bounded.

The second kind of data collected was participants’ curriculum vitae or biographical summaries. This provides educational and professional experience information as well as allowing for another means to check that the participant had been in the current position for at least two years. Biographies or curriculum vitae were required so that data could be gathered regarding the practitioners’ career path and educational attainments. Both the organizational
charts and biographical data help to provide ‘robustness of sources’ that is important in research (Yin, 1993).

In advance to interviewing, I conducted an epoch consisting of deeply reflective self-examination of her preconceptions, biases, and experiences relevant to the area of study. This culminated with my writing a full description of my reflections. This helped “to gain clarity from her own preconceptions” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 104).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior level public relations practitioners were conducted via open-ended questions. Semi-structured questions elicited the data desired; each interviewee was expected to have had unique experiences, and special stories to tell. The semi-structured interview questions allowed follow-up questions that permitted deeper probing into an area of interest (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). This flexibility permitted participants the ability to richly and fully describe the internal communication process and general information about the public relations function in as much depth as desired.

Data was collected regarding: (a) how the public relations function is structured, (b) how it operates, and (c) how strategic and important decisions are made and communicated by senior leadership and how they are communicated to the internal audience of employees. Understanding was be sought regarding the practitioners beliefs and practices regarding: (a) public relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment (Grunig, 2006). Finally, some demographic data was gathered regarding the career paths and education of the practitioners.
Although the majority of interview questions were open-ended, it was necessary to ask some closed-ended demographics questions. Examples include: title, time in the position, career path, and educational background. This information was used to compile a demographic snapshot of who comprised those senior level public relations practitioners at the participating institutions.

All interviews were audio digitally recorded in person. One interview was conducted by Skype. At the completion of each interview I took notes as to my initial impressions and ideas. I then transcribed and reviewed the digital recordings in preparation for analysis and a possible second stage of interview should there be a need to ask the interviewees for clarification of any items. Second interviews were not needed and the only follow up with participants was a second request in one case for a curriculum vitae and thank you letters mailed to each as well as an electronic copy of the actual interview transcript with a note asking if they would kindly read it over and please contact the researcher if there are items that needed correcting, editing, or they had more information to add at that time. None of the participants made any changes to the transcripts.

According to Bogdan and Bilklen (2003) “scientific research involves rigorous and systematic empirical inquiry that is data-based” (p. 37). Qualitative research meets those standards. Qualitative data collection methods for this research project will include observations of the working environment of the public relations practitioners, interviews, and archival analysis of internal communication items such as employee newsletters or memos, or reports.

Participants were assured of confidentiality. The optimal setting for the interviews was in the offices of those being interviewed. This is preferred, as it allowed the researcher to glean
additional insight into the participant by seeing his or her environment. However, in one case the interview occurred, and was recorded, via Skype.

Once potential participants decided to participate and signed the consent form, interviews took place within an agreed-upon date that was within 5-15 business days from initial contact. Email reminders were sent to the participants the day prior to each scheduled interview. These contained confirmation of the date, time, and phone number or Skype details required for the interview, as well as the interview protocol for all questions that were to be asked of each senior level public relations practitioner.

Interviews with senior level public relations practitioners were scheduled at a time that is convenient for them. Participants will took part in a 60-90-minute interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, member checking was used to verify that the recorded transcripts were accurate. Each participant was sent their interview transcript prior to the analysis process and were asked for their final input regarding to accuracy and meaning and maintain their trust. No participants requested any changes to their transcripts.

As the researcher, I have fulfilled all the requirements of Western Michigan University’s Human Subject Review Board (HSRB). This research has been ruled exempt. Even though it is exempt, I adhered to certain protocols. Prior to the interview with each senior level public relations practitioner I read and reviewed the consent document outlining what participation involved. Upon decision to participate he/she signed consent form. I ensured that participants are protected, and adhered to this protocol of informed consent. The following are the contact documents provided in the appendices of this dissertation:

Appendix A – Requesting Participation Letter

Appendix B – Consent Document
Appendix C – Confirming Interview place/time via E-mail

Appendix D – Interview protocol

During the data collection period participants were asked to describe most vividly the processes of how the public relations office functions and how it communicates to internal stakeholders such as employees. Descriptions of processes, procedures, and relationships were sought. An attempt was made to use as many direct quotes as much as possible as those richly capture and describe the processes and experiences.

**Validity and Elimination of Bias**

Measures were taken to assure the validity of the research. Johnson (1997) has said that when researchers in the qualitative tradition speak of validity, they are referring to research that is plausible, credible, and trustworthy – that is research that is defendable (p. 118). Creswell (2007) considers validation in qualitative research as “an attempt to associate the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (p. 206). Among Creswell’s list of validation strategies that can be used are peer review, clarification of researcher bias, and participant member checking. He recommends that at least two of these procedures be used in any qualitative research. My research includes peer review, clarification of researcher bias and participant member checking.

Peer review is the discussion of the researcher’s findings with other people who will be skeptical and play the ‘devil’s advocate’ challenging the researcher to provide evidence for conclusions, such as committee members (Johnson, 1997). Clarification of researcher bias, or reflexivity, involves the researcher critically self-reflecting on predispositions, past experiences and being cognizant of how those may impact the research. Once self-reflection is complete, bracketing will occur. Bracketing is where the researcher ‘suspends’ their biases and
assumptions in order to observe and unfiltered phenomenon (Gearing, 2008, p. 63). This is followed by writing researcher memos to document the evolution of their beliefs and biases during the research process. Member checking occurs when participants are permitted review their transcripts for accuracy (Johnson, 1997).

An important factor in the data-analysis portion of a qualitative study is that the researcher is the primary means of data collection. The direct involvement of the researcher in the data collection and analysis is one of the key challenges of qualitative research. The research must be designed to limit the researcher’s impact on the data and the researcher will make every attempt to limit the impact of any bias that may exist. The aforementioned safeguards are being built into the process of research so that bias will be minimized. This ensures that interpretation of data is a true reflection of that of the voices of the participants (Keyton, 2006).

**Data Analysis**

Capturing of salient points of data from the actual transcripts of the interviews and clustering them assisted in creating conformability in the research. From there the analysis proceeded to confirm both the segments of meaning (or codes) in their original form and the groupings for those segments or codes of meaning until the data was fully mined for codes (Saldana, 2009). This means I exhausted possibilities for grouping the codes. Once this point of distillation with the data was reached then assigning possible themes and subthemes associated with the groupings of coded meaning segments occurred. Themes were also exhausted. In presenting the results of this process, the researcher explains the logic used to interpret the data within the analysis (Saldana, 2009). The data was interpreted through the theoretical lens of public relations theories detailed in this document.
When the researcher is transparent with respect to their views on the subject matter, as has already been stated this will be included in the research process via bracketing as this mindfulness exists throughout the data collection and interpretation stages of the research. This assists the researcher in being continually aware of the steps needed to assure that trustworthy research has taken place and that I remain open to alternative forms of interpretation of data and themes.

Following the completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed word-for-word. Participant anonymity was assured due to confidentiality of data. All researcher transcribed digital files do not include any identifying materials or names. Upon completion of this dissertation the digital recordings will be provided to my advisor to be stored on secured drive. Any written notes that were created during the interviewing sessions will be scanned, converted to PDF files and stored on the same drive as the digital recordings. The original notes will be shredded or burned.

According to Keyton (2006), one of the first steps in qualitative data analysis is to “capture your reactions to and impressions of the people, setting, and interactions” (p. 290). Although not part of the actual data, this memoing helps researchers to seize first impressions and reflections about the participant, the setting, interactions, or other impactful ancillary information. I memoed after reviewing each state university’s website and again after each interview. Memos aided by capturing impressions and this can reminded me of how one needs to be cognizant of actions and must make sure biases are not influencing what I observed. It also captures ideas for emerging questions that were not asked at that time.

Once data was collected from the interview participants, it was transcribed in preparation to draw empirically based conclusions. After transcription it was sent to the participants for
member checking. This was done to determine if there are any revisions or additions to the data. All data has been approved without changed by the participants and was been coded for segments of meaning in an emergent analysis. Data exists in a Word document with a sequential number assigned to each line of text. Data was read/reread and highlighted for code sentences which are sentences that contain segments of meaningful information. Highlighted segments of meaning were cut and pasted into spreadsheets containing a participant code, line numbers, and in vivo codes (as highlighted in the word document). In the analysis phase, I extended beyond the raw data to systematically “identify key factors and relationships among them” (Wolcott, 2001. p. 10).

In the final stages of interpretation, I was guided by the theoretical public relations framework to make sense of the public relations entity and its processes in an attempt to extend the analysis. Evidence from documents and observations was also categorized, analyzed and discussed in conjunction with the interviews. Once all salient information was extracted from all interview transcripts it was physically cut into strips of paper and manually sorted into clusters. Clusters were further examined and sorted ‘down’ to themes. Items that fell outside of any of these emergent themes (orphan data) were bracketed for later examination. Once themes were exhausted, the orphan data was reexamined once more to make meaning and possible categorization of it. If it was determined to not fall into any of the themes orphan data was retained but put aside. Once all themes were emerged they were placed in a spreadsheet with cross tabs of the participants. This will allowed for a graphic representation of the frequency of the data. It should be noted that according to Saldana (2009) data analysis is a continual cycle. I was aware that this is a recidivist process and agrees with Merriam (1998) that one checks, verifies, test, probes, and confirms collected data as an ongoing ‘as-you-go’ process. Although
only six persons were interviewed this was deep enough to obtain a saturation of themes even without additional document analysis.

**Researcher Information**

I am a doctoral student in a higher education leadership program and am an adjunct professor at a private university in Ohio. Prior to my current position, I was a professor of public relations and advertising for 12-years at a public university in Michigan. I had prior professional experience in public relations and communications or marketing positions having been employed in a variety of industries, both non-profit and for profit and in higher education. My educational experience includes attending a small, private liberal arts university for my first two years of college and then completing my bachelor’s degree at a large, public university. I attended a large public university for my post graduate degree as well.

I have strong opinions that mirror that of the findings of *The Excellence Study*. I have observed in my work that often employees in all types of organizations do not receive timely and adequate internal communication and this causes frustration that results in a decrease of organizational commitment. I have first-hand experience in this in a higher education context and would hope my research can help those senior level public relations practitioners to self-reflect on the internal audiences they serve.

**Chapter 3 Research Methods Summary**

The purpose of this study was to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education and their processes and practices for internal communications with particular emphasis on the process and practices of internal communication. My study documents how senior level public relations practitioners in higher education think about, develop, and carry out internal communications with employees. Information gathered encompasses common and
unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best internal communication practices, and how they judge the effectiveness of their internal communications with employees.

It is desired that in profiling senior level public relations practitioners in higher education with respect to documenting in their words their processes and practices for internal communications that I can uncover information regarding common and unique elements of practice, how they define best practices and judge the effectiveness of their internal communications with employees. It is hoped that by documenting their perceptions that is of interest to those who study public relations, internal communication, and higher education. This work will add to the paucity of public relations research in this specific context, perhaps opening up a line of inquiry that can be further studied.
CHAPTER 4
INTERVIEW SUMMARIES

Purple University Interview Summary

This university is located in a medium sized town of 25,000. The nearest large city is 15 miles away. This medium-sized private university has been operational for 175 years. It is a four-year, liberal arts institution that has approximately 2,200 undergraduates and approximately 150 graduate students. Purple University has approximately 250 faculty with more than 130 having a terminal degree. The total number of staff/administration is approximately 300. It is a non-union environment.

The senior level public relations practitioner at Purple University is the Vice President for Marketing. Ann is a graduate of Purple University and has spent the majority of her career there. She has advanced to positions of increasing authority over her 20-years at Purple University. Ann began at Purple University in the department of communication, next moving to the office of public affairs, and to her current position in the office of marketing. She also has been a staff writer at a daily newspaper. Her undergraduate degree is a B.A. in mass media communications and she holds a M.A. in journalism. Ann is not accredited in public relations by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and is not a member of the PRSA.

Internal Communication Process and Practices

Ann was asked to describe the internal communication processes and practices in her office. She and her team use several different vehicles to facilitate internal communication at Purple University. The first is a weekly email communication that contains ‘nuts and bolts’
information that provides staff and faculty with information needed for day-to-day operations. It also includes some information that is marketing orientated as it is hoped that recipients will share the marketing information with others outside the university. Said Ann, “I don’t think we are different from any other college or university in that faculty and staff think that internal communication can be improved upon” (Line 8).

This weekly e-mail from Ann’s office is the main form of communication with internal audiences at Purple University. “A lot of these efforts are because we are working within the confines of our existing email system. We are exploring other options for distribution systems that may be more efficient, may even allow people to opt into certain categories of email and out of others” (Line 44).

The second most popular process of internal communication at Purple University involves making sure that all external announcements that will be sent to media are released to internal audiences first. Ann said, “Another thing we implemented a couple of years ago that we weren’t always very good at, but I think we have gotten much better at, is making sure that when there are major external announcements that those go internally to campus constituents first. We don’t feel our faculty and staff should be hearing about it in the local newspaper” (Line 49).

Third, Ann’s office is also responsible for the internal web portal available to all employees. It contains policies, forms, and other internally used documents. It is primarily used as a repository for information.

We have not gotten to the point where people come to the portal regularly to see what’s new and what has been updated. How it is frequently used is that we store things there and if we need to bring attention to it we send out an email and a link is provided to access the information the portal. (Line 70)
Ann and her team have been researching e-net sites. This would be an external news site that allows people internally to send news to it. Ann’s office would curate the site. She is currently exploring a model used by Elon University in North Carolina. In 2018, Purple University will overhaul their website and hope to have an e-net in place by 2019.

As a fourth method of internal communication concerns the President of the university. He often sends communication on his own, but consults with Ann first. This ensures she is informed of what is being released. “He is very good at communicating. He sends updates of board meetings, addresses local, regional or national issues that impact our campus community. People respond well to his communications” (Line 55).

Ann stated that the size of the university also has an impact on the level of internal communication. When Ann was a student at Purple University over 20-years ago, it was smaller. However, enrollment has doubled in that time and the administrative and faculty side of the university has also expanded. “There has been a lot of growth in a short time and it has presented some challenges as people adjust to that” (Line 283). The university is now big enough that her team must be very intent on making sure people know what is happening across campus. She said,

Departments don’t always talk to one another and don't share news. But we are still small enough that when we do share news like our physician’s assistant (PA) program is number one in the state; people say ‘wow’ and they email or call the head of the PA program to congratulate her. (Line 289)

Ann adds, “I do think any time you are sharing information that can improve word-of-mouth communication, you are doing a good thing (Line 290). Ann said that the university had, in the last year or so, pondered if they should bring on a consultant to help with internal
communication. Her department had been having a lot of discussion about how internal communication and campus morale are so closely tied to each other. She said,

   We have had a lot of change on campus recently so there is a lot of change fatigue. In the past five years we restructured our general education curriculum. We changed from a three to a four credit hour system that wiped our faculty members out. But no one else has come back recently and said we really need this consultant, so maybe they are giving us an inch to see what we can do on our own. (Line 437).

Obtaining Communication Feedback From Employees

   When asked how she gathers feedback from employees regarding her internal communication efforts, Ann replied, “We conduct pretty significant market research every three years. We are due again in 2019. We include our internal audience in those efforts and there are specific questions asked about internal communication in that survey” (Line 93). Quantitative data from the 2016 survey helped to identify areas that needed to be explored in more depth and was followed up with qualitative research via focus groups.

   In conjunction with the aforementioned survey, a third party provider administered a Quality Culture survey in 2016. This was specifically conducted just prior to the university’s strategic planning process. As part of the strategic planning process a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis was conducted that focused on both internal and external communication.

   When asked about using social media as an internal communication tool Ann had data to support her decision for not doing that. She said, “We had discussion about it. But, when we look
at the market research and the preferred methods of communication, social media did not rise to
the top of the list in terms of what people need to know in order to do their job” (Line117).

Ann and her team also track emails opened and click through rates for internal messages.
“Interestingly we have been very consistent with those data across the past few years. I think
every year that we expect to see a dip, but, even among students we have seen an increase in
open rates” (Line 131). “I think email is the most practical means of communication and also is
the easiest for people to ignore or choose to pay attention to” (Line 135). Ann knows from her
focus group data that email is the preferred method of communication according to both
employees and students at Purple University. “They recognize their different communication
tools and how they want that tool to be used. Social media is not the place where they want
people pushing day-to-day information. It is a place to interact with your peer group” (Line 132).
Ann added that her research data indicated that at Purple University texting is perceived as
intrusive as well.

**Describing Strategies and Best Practices for Internal Communication**

Ann describes her strategies and best practices for internal communication and can
support her statements with data. When she wanted to know faculty and staff perceptions on
internal communication efforts, Ann and her team conducted focus groups with nearly 70
employees in 2016. This resulted in a five-year plan of improvement regarding internal
communication.

Some changes that will result from that research are that the current long form weekly
news digest email will now be a shorter, daily, and bulleted email that will be a much quicker
read. Another change is that there is a greater differentiation between emails coming from the
Office of Marketing that are day-to-day pieces with information to help staff such as parking info
during events or construction verses any marketing-themed emails sent to staff. “So, we are really separating what people need to do their jobs from the more promotional information that we want them to be aware of as well” said Ann (Line 31).

Email will also evolve so messages are better categorized. Categories can include presidential announcements, event or Human Resources information. They will even have different email addresses associated with them such as events@purpleuniversity.edu for event related emails. “That way if people are interested in events they can click on it. If they are not, then they can drag it to their junk folder and never see it” (Line 40).

When asked about her overall internal communication strategy, Ann said it is still too undefined for her liking but good strides are being made to fix it. “I wouldn’t say we have a documented strategy for how we do this. I would like to see us get to the point where we really have something on paper” (Line 145). She believes that there is a good start on this based on the goals they have for improving several of the communication vehicles and systems.

“I think overall in terms of best practices one of the best things we did was make the decision to inform internally first on major news before going external with it. I won’t say that is a perfect science because it does mean that the end user has responsibility to see the mail, recognize that they received it and read it before they read that news elsewhere. That doesn’t always happen” (Line 152).

Ann also thinks Purple University is getting better at understanding that there are times when a message is important enough that email is not the appropriate communication vehicle. For example, in a discussion regarding how to communicate policies to employees she wondered whether there are certain policies that are so important that the leadership of Purple University
Ann ponders if it more appropriate to send this by email or are some things better delivered in person?

Ann also considers how to take advantage of ‘in person’ times such as the occasions when staff is collected together such as during compliance training days or during the annual state of the university address. “There is a lot to be said about face-to-face interaction. I think there was a trend for new gimmicky tools and easy ways of pushing out information but sometimes you have to go back to those personal ways of delivering information” (Line 175).

“One of the things I think we are missing here is that internal communication does not land in one particular place or with one particular person” (Line 180). She notes that she is aware of several other colleges and universities that have created internal communication manager positions. She says that Purple University is not ready for that yet. “The President has a role in it. Human Resources have a role. Our office has a role. Other offices have the ability to contribute when they can send campus-wide emails. I don’t know if that makes it a bad thing. It just makes it more challenging to really develop a strategy for how you do it across the board” (Line 186).

**Decisions Regarding What and When to Communicate to Employees**

Ann said when decisions need to be made that employees be informed of an institutional matter sometimes that information is disseminated from her office but there are other persons/entities who can also communicate directly with employees. “It is a bit of both. In most cases if it is a major institutional matter we are going to play a role in it” (Line 214). Sometimes this may mean she is writing the content and at other times she may be editing what had been drafted by a department head, another Vice President, Provost or Dean.

Occasionally, communication will be released from Student or Academic Affairs that was not shown to the Office of Marketing first. Most of that kind of information is related to parking
lot closures, campus security or other announcements of general information. Sometimes faculty news will be released to internal audiences from Academic Affairs. Human Resources releases birth or death announcements to employees. However, if any of those units have significant news they will utilize the services of the Marketing Office and have their information reviewed and released by Ann’s staff. One exception is the Athletic Department.

The Athletic Department has a sports information officer who reports to the Athletic Director. He handles all of the dissemination of athletic information. The Athletic Department’s sole campus-wide internal communiqué is a once-per-semester email that informs professors of the student athletes’ travel and excused absence schedule.

**Effectiveness of Best Practices**

When asked how she judges the effectiveness of her best practices in internal communication, Ann talks about data supporting conclusions. Her internal market research and the Quality Culture survey are both conducted by third parties. When Purple University conducts focus groups, those are managed by an internal team. “I think looking at results and identifying where improvements have been noted and where areas of concern might lie are the key ways that we can evaluate effectiveness” (Line 246).

One of the key findings from the focus groups was that be a specialized internal communications strategy is needed for two unique internal audiences. Both the physical plant and security teams have unusual communication needs. Most staffers in those areas are out on campus all day long and don’t sit at a desk. They rarely look at their email.

Many of them do not even check their university email account regularly because they have to take extra steps to access technology. For them it is cumbersome.
Relying on email to get them information is a big misstep. That was an epiphany moment. (Line 251)

Another theme that surprised her was the amount of positive response in favor of using electronic bulletin boards. Ann said, “That shocked me. We have internal digital displays on campus that I could never make a decision about whether they are good or not – if people pay attention to them” (Line 261). Ann noted one other finding from the research that was also supported by personal experience by her team, is that the main Purple University website is not user friendly and has severe navigation issues. “We have a horrible search tool and are migrating content management systems in the next year. We knew it was a problem but are happy to say we are working to remedy it” (Line 258).

The Relationship Between Internal and External Communication

When asked if she thought there was a relationship between internal and external communication, Ann replied that she absolutely believes that. Her rationale is that internal communication increases satisfaction with your job. If you are satisfied with your job you are more likely to say positive things about the university to outside audiences and be a good ambassador for the institution.

Employees as Ambassadors for the Institution

Institutional ambassadors are very important to Purple University. As Ann and her eight-person team do not have the budget or resources to grow visibility on their own, she recognizes the need for employees to be ambassadors for Purple University. “Anytime we can use audiences as extension of our reach it is really critical that faculty and staff are a part of that” (Line 301). Because Purple University has limited funds and staff, Ann’s approach is to use a combination of paid and grassroots outreach.
We are a small private institution and will never have the marketing budget of a large state school but we sit in between a number of state institutions and so it is a battle we can’t win. We have to find more creative ways to expand visibility and having your own people talk about the institution in a positive way is really important. (Line 271)

Ambassadors are key to Ann’s public relations program. “I think that some communications that we send out about the feel good things – look at what our engineering program did – look at what this student is dong over here – gives them the fuel to then be able to share those good stories” (Line 277). She believes there are many ways to use staff as ambassadors including via social media. “We encourage a lot of people to share things on social media. We may actually create some paid social media ambassador positions for departments in the future” said Ann adding, “the potential reach of the social media posts when shared and shared can be pretty impactful” (Line 314).

Ann pilot tested an ambassador program with alumni this year that she will test with employees in 2018. Buzz Boxes are little purple boxes filled with branded giveaway items like pens or magnets, view books, and instruction sheets. Ann selects alumni in specific markets and sends them a Buzz Box. “We tell that person to find two high school juniors or seniors and share the view book with them and tell them about your Purple University experience” (Line 306). The potential student is given a book and branded item. Pens are included in the boxes and Ann encourages those to be left by the alum in public places. Ann is excited to roll out the program to employee ambassadors in the next year.
Others in the Institution That Conduct Communication to Employees and a Description of Those Internal Communication Practices

When asked who else in the institution conducts communication to employees and to describe those practices, Ann said that communications to internal audiences are released from the Office of the President, Student or Academic Affairs, Human Resources and the Department of Athletics.

Human Resources releases birth or death announcements to employees as well as information related to benefits. When communication materials are more strategic, or a longer campaign is needed, Human Resources will work under the guidance of the Office of Marketing. For example, Purple University is becoming a tobacco free campus and that communication campaign will be drafted and strategically planned by Ann’s office in cooperation with Human Resources staff. “We have also been in conversations with them about in the future incorporating things for them into our new daily emails” (Line 339).

Athletics releases sports related information. Student Affairs sends out information related to students such as events. Academic Affairs sends out course and programming information to various internal audiences. Individual units generally communicate directly with employees on unit-related matters.

Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in Higher Education

Ann views public relations as a strategic management function. “We are the keepers of the identity, said Ann, adding,

I have been in this role for eight years and for 19 (years) my predecessor reported to the President. But that is not always the case in higher ed. A lot of
small privates (colleges) still report up through Advancement or Enrollment.

(Line 344)

Being placed in nonstrategic positions in the Development or Enrollment offices is not a good fit according to Ann because there is confusion as to what Marketing does verses what Advancement or Enrollment is responsible for. “To me we are laying the groundwork and our job is to grow visibility and improve reputation. We lay the foundation for Enrollment” (Line 350).

Ann said that her office is not always considered a revenue generator but she believes they are getting to that point where people recognize that what they do is invaluable to the revenue generators. “Certainly either one of those operations could do their job without us but it would be that much more difficult to accomplish goals without having some kind of general awareness” (Line 361).

Ann was part of the management team that drafted the 5-year strategic plan for the university. She made sure that the university’s brand plan coincided with the strategic plan and vice versa. Being included as part of the strategic management team allowed for her to represent and reconfirm the direction of the brand as well as to revise any messaging strategies needed for reinforcing the overall strategic plan.

Beliefs and Practices Regarding Symmetrical Communication

When asked if symmetrical communication at Purple University is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to make adjustments in public relations strategies Ann replied she has a good informal symmetrical communication system. “I think when things go awry, or when things are not working exactly the way people hope them to they do not hesitate to share that – emails…all kinds of communication” (Line 421). She also believes
‘no news is good news’. Regarding a more formal symmetrical communication system Ann expressed that one still needs formal mechanisms to make you can still ‘capture the big picture’ (Line 425).

Ann values cultivating and maintaining relationships very much.

I have been sharing a lot of this with my staff, in terms of relationship building, when you build solid relationships with people small things don’t turn into crises. So, if you have a good relationship and something isn’t working out quite the way someone expects they’re much more likely to come to you in a much more congenial way and talk through the issue. Whereas if that (relationship) doesn’t exist then something small turns into a huge problem. (Line 427)

**Red University Interview Summary**

This small university is located in a city of 70,000 and has been operational for 125-years. It is a four-year private liberal arts institution that has approximately 1,400 undergraduates, approximately 350 graduate students. This university employees approximately 100 faculty. The total number of staff/administration is approximately 120. It is a non-union environment.

The senior level public relations practitioner at Red University is David. David has been the chief of staff and chief marketing officer at Red University for approximately 4-years. Prior to that he was in a similar position at a comparable-sized private four-year liberal arts university for over 20-years. He obtained his undergraduate degree from that same university. David also has served in positions of college relations, public information officer, and strategic planning as well as institutional advancement. Very early in David’s career he was a journalist and freelance writer. David’s undergraduate degree is a B.A. in communication. He does not have a graduate
degree or post graduate work. He is accredited in public relations by the PRSA and is a member of the PRSA.

**Internal Communication Processes and Practices**

When asked about the internal communication processes and practices that occur in his department, David provided background context first. When he came to Red University he recognized that they did not have any formal goals or processes with respect to internal communication. This differed from his previous position. He drew upon his experience to facilitate changes regarding internal communication at Red University, factoring in his knowledge of its unique culture.

David noted that Red University has a deep, oral tradition for internal communication. “If you don’t tell people they don’t think they have heard it even though they have 14 emails on it. So, we reinvented a series of traditional oral presentations” (Line 9). The first oral tradition revived was a series of brown bag lunches with Vice Presidents from the different areas of the university. Each would present information about his or her area once per semester. The Vice President would then take questions and hear comments from attendees. “They were actually pretty poorly attended. You know we have 250 employees and if you had 10 (there) you were lucky” (Line 15). David and his staff discontinued the brown bag lunches after a survey reinforced why employees were not attending the programs. “It was pretty consistent feedback. They all said the same thing. They appreciated the effort but for whatever reason they did not feel they had the time to attend” (Line 32). David was pragmatic about survey results. “I don’t mind that, but at the same time you can’t complain later that you don’t know something or we don't share if you don’t put the effort in” (Line 35).
Undeterred, and still desiring to offer this kind of oral internal communication at Red University, David and his team tried a different tactic. This time the idea was to have each Vice President spend time in the staff meetings of all other Vice Presidents. Vice Presidents would then be expected to return to their areas and brief their own staff who in turn would brief anyone who reported to them. “The idea here was cross communication. I’ll go to each of the other Vice Presidents’ meetings and they will come to mine. People might be more comfortable if they are in their offices and they are able to ask another Vice President questions” said David (Line 18).

The Vice Presidents’ meeting tactic is also used in conjunction with a second orally-based communication event David called a community forum. The community forum is a twice-per-semester panel meeting. It is open to all faculty and staff. The President and Vice Presidents present updates regarding their specific areas and then they respond to attendees’ questions.

A third oral internal communication option that David introduced to Red University is open office hours for the President of the university. Once per week the President dedicates open door time for anyone – staff, faculty, or students – who wish to address issues with him. “In the beginning it was spotty and no one came. But over time people got comfortable with it and we usually have a people waiting in the hallway to meet with him” (Line 25).

The President and the senior staff are very determined to improve internal communication. Their 2017 spring retreat specifically focused on internal communication. As a result of that retreat the senior staff team, comprised of the President, Provost, Chief Financial Officer and Vice Presidents of Advancement, Student Life, Admissions, Human Resources and Communication, meet every Thursday to revisit internal communication progress. “It’s clear we needed to go back out and end every meeting with ‘what do we need to communicate about this meeting?’ Not minutes, but what are the things we need to tell people we are working on –
takeaways” (Line 52). David emphasized, “Let me make it clear. Your role as a Vice President is for you to go back to your division and talk about these things with your staff” (Line 53).

Starting in fall 2017, to help facilitate those supervisor/subordinate discussions and foster better internal communication, David will produce notes after every meeting to send out to faculty and staff. “They will say ‘here are the things we are talking about, the issues in front of us, more information to come from your Vice President and in the cross-departmental meetings and in the open forums’” (Line 58). “We have worked very hard to add the oral component. Even at an institute of higher learning they don’t read email’” (Line 31).

David has data to support the theory that Red University employees are reticent to read email. At the end of every school year he surveys the faculty and staff asking them to tell his team what is working and what is not a good form of communication. Although he is wary that faculty and staff do not read all their emails, David created a daily, succinct 300-word e-news brief that is aligned with positioning statements and talking points on any issues that need to be addressed. It is sent to all staff and faculty. “It’s made to reinforce our brand with our core group so that they can be brand ambassadors” (Line 9).

Another non-oral internal communication item is a printed ‘momentum’ poster. This piece is created and distributed in the fall and contains information that highlights what progress has occurred since the end of the previous school year. It includes such information as renovations or the introduction of new programs and other interesting numbers and facts about the university. “It's ‘here is the good news’ and we want people to actually put them up in their offices. It is poster sized and we do see them hung up around campus” (Line 127).
Obtaining Communication Feedback From Employees

To obtain communication feedback from employees, David and his team conduct an annual survey concerning internal communication. The faculty chair, acting as an impartial third party, conducts it. Said David, “We do a survey specifically on internal communication and ask them a series of questions about what we have attempted in that year and if it suits them. We ask for directives and suggestions for something better” (Line 42). The faculty chair transcribes the data and presents it to David and his team. “I think people here know there is an effort being put forth every year and that we are trying to work hard at internal communication. You have to keep naming it. You have to keep telling people” (Line 47).

Describing Strategies and Best Practices for Internal Communication

When asked about describing his strategies and practices for internal communication David replied, “I think it is focused on the word ‘intentionality’. You can’t assume people are hearing, listening, and paying attention. You can’t assume they know” (Line 73). He adds he is still stunned sometimes regarding a lack of awareness. “I shouldn’t be, but, after 30-years in the business I am still stunned when I find out things people are still surprised by and I start to think about their day-to-day and it’s not on their radar screens” he said (Line 75).

David and his staff meet weekly to discuss internal communication. “My system is to have an intentional internal communication plan that is well thought out” he said (Line 78). He and his team discuss what messages must be shared with campus each week and what are the best vehicles to convey those messages. They consider social media, website, news briefs, and email as well as what is better said in person by the President in various kinds of meetings. “You need to think about internal communication. It is also a huge morale issue. Some people will pay attention and be on top of it, some at the other end of the scale will know nothing. It is the 80-
percent in the middle we hope to move the dial up on” (Line 93). His process, he reiterated, is to be very intentional and focus on the things that define Red University such as integration of faith, academic excellence, community, and hands-on learning.

**Decisions Regarding What to Communicate to Employees**

Continuing to drive back to Red University’s key messages, having an ear to the ground, and understanding where there is confusion helps David and his team decide what to communicate to employees. Knowing what is news also is considered. In fall 2017, Red University will break ground on a new athletic complex. It is part of a larger campaign, but already David senses confusion and knows that his messaging needs to be clearer. “It's the first thing for the new campaign and already it is seen as ‘athletics’ and why did they start with just athletics?” (Line 138). “Truth be told it is not just an athletic thing” (Line 139). Anyone associated with the university can use the facilities. It is a venue for recreation, intermural and free play. It will be a building and park and is open to non-athletes. David and his team will be working on how they want to change the employees’ incorrect perception of the new building via internal communication. He indicates there is not a formal written policy regarding internal communication at Red University. Generally, items are discussed in the weekly senior staff meeting or in David’s many day-to day discussions with the President.

**President/Other Entities Indicating When Employees Should Be Informed**

Of all the offices and units on campus, David works most often with the direction of the President regarding when employees should be informed. David’s office shares a common wall with the President’s Office. “He’s right there (points to wall) and that is why my role as Chief of Staff and Vice President of Marketing and Communication is so connected to him” (Line 156). When David first accepted his position at Red University his office was across the campus. The
President asked him to move to his current location saying that symbolically is was very important that he be next to the President’s Office. David’s office being the one most closely located to the University President’s Office is very intentional. “I think the proximity of the offices tells you the priority – it is meant to” (Line 157).

David adds that his office’s location certainly facilitates his communication with the President. They meet officially every Monday to discuss internal communication but the proximity of the offices allows for many informal conversations each week as needed.

“Sometimes that is a two-second conversation and sometimes it is an hour conversation. It just depends on what’s going on” (Line 176). He said that the President understands David’s role as the Chief Marketing and Communications Officer and there is not a formal process in place for what the President wishes to be communicated to staff. The process is an on-going, informal one that allowing for quick decision-making and adaptation.

David said he has reported directly to six presidents so far in his career and that in his job you must be able to ‘speak the truth to those in power’. Not every president he worked for wanted to hear bad news or unfavorable information. “So, after a while I would say to that president if you want me to stop telling you this say so and I probably should go do something else if you don’t need me” (Line 269). His current president is not like that. He adds, “Thankfully he is the one who listens. You can tell sometimes he is not happy about what we have to tell people about bad things but that is just the way it is. That is the position” (Line 273).

**When Employees Need to Be Informed Is Communication Disseminated From University Communications or Elsewhere?**

When asked if employees need to be informed of an issue is that communication disseminated from University Communications or elsewhere, David said that University
Communications has gotten very good in informing other entities on campus about what his department does and how they serve everyone at the institution. This helps to ensure messaging is consistent. David refers to any work that he does with other departments as working with his ‘clients’ in the same way one would hear an outside public relations or advertising agency refer to their customers. This emphasizes that David sees his department as a service to all on campus who need to communicate either internally or externally.

Generally, most internal communication information that is disseminated campus wide comes from David’s office. But sometimes clients like Human Resources use his services to craft messages targeted to faculty and staff and disseminated directly from the Human Resources office. However, because Human Resources partners with University Communications the messaging has consistency. This is also the case with the Student Affairs Office and messages to another internal audience: students.

Occasionally, at Red University a ‘rogue’ message may be released to internal audiences as all departments have full access to employee and staff email lists. David mentions that recently a message was sent from the Physical Plant to all employees regarding construction-related road closures on campus due to the new athletic facilities. However, the Physical Plant did not work with, nor inform, David or his staff prior to sending the message. “I had to call that (Physical Plant) person and say ‘you know I will do this for you, all you have to do is tell me and I will communicate it as part of the larger communication plan about the athletic complex’” said David (Line 189). He added that what that person did by not working within the internal communication system “is confuse the heck out of everyone who are now wondering what are you talking about? This is just not their job. It just created tons of chaos” (Line 198). David then spent the evening crafting a communication piece that explained the project along with drawings
and photos to add to the ease of understanding. He sent it out to all faculty and staff. However, he adds that this kind of rogue message is the exception; “Most of the time it goes through us” said David (Line 201).

**The Relationship Between Internal and External Communication**

David perceives internal and external communications as being related. “They are absolutely two sides of the same coin” (Line 219) His department works very intentionally at internal messaging but as the same time messaging has to match up with what is being communicated to external constituent groups. He does not spend a lot of time when writing something or putting together something thinking what is the outward facing message? What is the internal facing message? He is simply trying to communicate with people. “I want to share it internally with the group first and I want to tailor it to their understanding of the place. I will then spend more time with an external audience because they don’t know as much as the internal audience does. But internal and external are absolutely intertwined and directly tied together” (Line 224).

**Perceptions of How Employees Feel About the Content of Internal Communication**

When asked his perceptions of how employees feel about the content of internal communication he said that he thinks employees are seeing the continual improvement. David bases his opinion on surveys, focus groups and in speaking to others on campus about internal communication. He provides context recalling that several years ago when he first came to campus, Red University had experienced six years in a row of declining admissions. There had been layoffs and budgets were very tight. “People were saying it was never going to be right here ever again” (Line 238).
David has known since those first few weeks in his position that internal communication needed improvement. This also included being transparent with internal audiences and sharing both good and not so good news in a candid manner. He has spent a lot of time talking to staff and faculty and openly sharing what might be considered bad news. In his opinion he built his credibility by communicating both positive and negative news to them. As enrollment issues were resolved and a steady stream of internal communication remained, employees began to respond to that.

David does not shy from telling it like it is. “You gain credibility with people and you gain respect. It is your job to say ‘here is where we are at risk and here is what is not working’” (Line 261). As an example of this he recalls that during those early years traditional enrollment increased but enrollment in adult learning programs floundered. “I got up and said we had a catastrophic year in adult education. Numbers are numbers and they will see the numbers. Why not label it and tell people where it went wrong as far as I can tell?” (Line 248). He advocates for telling people news in a direct, specific and confident manner and not to play games for that results in a loss of credibility and trust that you can never regain.

Employees as Ambassadors for the Institution

David certainly thinks of staff and faculty as ambassadors for Red University. “Right now we are trying to get them to see themselves that way” (Line 280). In 2016, David and his team introduced a custom computer application that could be downloaded to a smartphone. The Majors App allowed anyone to accessing it to click on a major and four simple talking points would appear. These provide the person reading it highlights or points of interest about that major. David gave as an example perhaps that a person working in dining services on his campus may not know anything about its biology department. But, if you were asked by friends or family
about that major, you could quickly find information on your phone. If you looked up biology, one of the points would be that students are required to have an internship and in 75-percent of cases they were hired by their internship after graduation. The app was moderately successful. Of the 225 faculty and staff who could have downloaded it, 60 did and 16 were regular users. David plans to reintroduce it in fall 2017.

“We will hit it again and say here is what you can do to help the institution. We have been very deliberate and intentional about it” (Line 111). David often hears from faculty and staff asking what they can do to help promote Red University and he has many tools on hand to share with them. He tells them they can share the virtual tour, sign family members up for the daily news brief, link the virtual tour with their email signature, and ‘like’ and share social media posts. “People assume that communication just occurs and it is someone else’s job. You just have to get them into the system of thinking they play a role in it” (Line 113).

David and his staff believe so deeply that employees have a role as ambassadors that they help train any interested staff members in an ambassador program that helps Admissions. The Partners Program allows any interested staff and faculty to play a more formal role in recruiting students. The University provides the training and reaches out with some unique approaches.

Just prior to fall 2017 there were nearly 300 students who had been admitted to Red University but had not enrolled yet. Participants in the Partners Program were asked to send handwritten letters to students on the list telling them about Red University.

You know how many kids get a letter from the librarian? They are used to getting letters from admissions councilors, a coach or financial aid. But here is a letter from the librarian who says ‘I have been at Red University for 25-years and
love it, and don’t worry when you walk in the library as you will have my personal attention’. That’s meaningful, that’s powerful. (Line 297)

**Others in the Institution That Conduct Communication to Employees and a Description of Those Internal Communication Practices**

Other entities in the institution that can conduct communication to employees include: Human Resources, Student Life, and Athletics. But these units also have relationships with David’s department and utilize the services offered by his office. On their own however, Human Resources will send out messages such as retirement counseling meetings or health care signups. The Office of Student Life spends a considerable time with student communications and not internal messaging and utilize David’s team. The Sports Information Office has a Sports Information Director. He attends staff meetings with David and his team to ensure communication through athletics is reflects, and is consistent with, overall university communications efforts regardless if the audience is internal or external.

University Relations meets weekly with the Admissions Office and the Advancement Office to discuss what is being communicated to current students, prospective students and alumni. For all those offices their communication is processed through University Relations. Individual programs and departments will also utilize the expertise of University Relations. “It is not to say they (the Nursing Department) do not send emails out to their nursing faculty – of course that occurs. But when writing to the whole campus they tend to use us. I think they see us as a tool to use not a hurdle” (Line 316).

With regard to the Human Resources (HR) function, University Relations desires that communication coming from HR be more than just informational. David wants to position Human Resources as a resource for employees. David said that his office has developed a
strategic relationship with Human Resources. For example, in 2017 University Relations worked with Human Resources to plan a faculty and staff picnic. Human Resources sponsored it, collected the prizes, and sent out all of the communication, which was crafted by University Relations. “We have thought very intentionally about making sure people get more from Human Resources than healthcare info. We want them to see Human Resources as a resource” (Line 337).

**Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in Higher Education**

When asked about public relations as a strategic management function in higher education David replied, “I think most schools are understanding that communication is not something you put under the Advancement or the Admissions person. It is someone that needs a seat at the management table” (Line 254). He feels that most schools have evolved to value communication as its own specialty. Having been in higher education communications for over 30-years, David started out as a lower level public relations person. At one point he found he was often requested to attend senior level management meetings at his former ‘Other’ University. “I worked for a President who said ‘we always bring in David to talk about something related to marketing. Why don’t we just add him to the senior staff level” (Line 350). Prior to that David had a position where all his work was filtered up to the President from David’s supervisor who was a Vice President. Said David, “That was awkward because sometimes the President and the Vice President did not agree on what we had to communicate” (Line 358) and David was stuck in the middle.

Although much progress has been made regarding the positioning and functioning in higher education of communications/university relations at a strategic management level, David
believes some persons in that role are still placed under the wrong discipline and not permitted to sit on the same level as the senior staff.

There are two 800-pound gorillas at the institution these days. One is the Vice President for Admissions and the other is the Vice President for Advancement. If you work for them you will spend the bulk of your time with that as your focus and those are really different audiences. So, I think the communication structure should report to the President. It's the right thing to do and I think consistent with where most places are going. (Line 373)

**The Role of Relationship Management**

When asked if relationship management is important to the role of public relations David emphatically agreed. “It’s everything. We are not IBM. We are a small, private liberal arts institution and relationships are everything here” (Line 385). He stated that those in his position must be credible and genuine. If you are not, “people sniff you out immediately. You can’t be slick in this role” he said (Line 387). David works hard to establish good rapport and trust with gatekeepers in various departments. “I have been here only three years but my relationships with the gatekeepers of the various offices is good and they are pretty good about telling me if people don’t understand why we are doing this or that” (Line 146).

David and his staff spent time at their last retreat discussing where those less than desirable relationships are found around campus. “You can’t just assume it is Mary Poppins and everyone gets along with everyone else” (Line 398). Currently, his team struggles to work well with the Physical Therapy Department. “There is something there and we don’t quite mix. We are going to work at it. We are going to devote time to it” he said (Line 392). He and his team have identified people where the relationship is not where it needs to be. “You have to do that
and it sometimes stinks because relationships sour for a reason; things happen and sometimes
people don’t work well together. But you can’t ignore it” (Line 395).

Beliefs and Practices Regarding Symmetrical Communication

“We work really, really hard on that” (Line 409) David replies when asked if
symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback
mechanism to adjust strategies. “It has to be asking people – we do a survey in our alumni
magazine – tell us about the magazine, what do you want to hear? We survey our faculty and
staff and we survey our students. We survey even the groups we bring to campus” (Line 411).

David also tracks communication perceptions with the President’s Advisory Council. The
Council is comprised of persons from the general public. It holds three meetings a year. In the
spring meeting members are surveyed about their experience of serving on the council. They are
asked by David things like “was this worth your time? You devoted 2 hours on a Friday, three
times – that's six hours or a day of your work – for us – was it worth it? What would you like to
hear or not hear anymore?” (Line 400). While technically these persons are not employees of the
University, they are a valued internal audience of volunteers and their input on communication is
also considered important to David. In general David is always seeking additional data to
improve internal communication efforts,

You have to be willing to ask people are they hearing you? What are they
hearing? Where is it falling short and then respond. It has nothing to do with me;
it has to do with the field. The field has to be such that you communicate and
when you communicate with people you are getting information back and you are
not just telling people things. (Line 418)
Gold University Interview Summary

This medium university is located in a suburb of approximately 18,000 and has been operational for 60-years. It is a four-year, private liberal arts institution that has approximately 2,300 undergraduates and 600 graduate students. This university employs approximately 140 faculty with 75-percent having a terminal degree. The total number of staff/administration is approximately 130. It is a non-union environment.

The senior level public relations practitioner at this university is Beth. Beth has been at Gold University for ten years and is the Director of University Relations. Prior to her position at Gold University Beth spent one year at another small four-year liberal arts university in a similar position. Other past experience includes working as a communication specialist for a medium sized urban public school district, as well as positions as an event coordinator, assistant supervisor at a small advertising agency, a marketing representative and as a convention sales manager at a county visitors and conventions bureau. Beth holds a B.A. degree in communication management and has no post graduate work. Beth is not PRSA accredited, nor is she a current member of the PRSA, but has belonged in the past.

Internal Communication Process and Practices

When asked to describe the internal communication processes in her domain Beth said, “We are very much a grass roots kind of effort. Process depends on the situation” (Line 4). As part of the office of Integrated Marketing and Communication, Beth’s efforts continually reflect the Gold brand. “A lot of the news I am generating is with a marketing slant. It is more about getting new students and furthering Gold University as a brand in the market” (Line 5). She noted that internal communication from her office most often reflects events, new program promotion, or reporting on something good done by faculty or students.
Beth’s processes are on a case-by-case basis, as no written protocol exists. Her office will release information to internal audiences regarding certain new hires if they are at a director level or greater. New hires of employees below the director level are released internally by the Human Resources department. Beth also takes direction on what information to release from the University’s President. “Really whatever the President wants is there. He is the man I report to and get my direction from” (Line 22). Beth’s office also updates Gold University’s website.

At Gold University mail is the main form of communication to faculty and staff. Social media can be used to cross promote in conjunction with email notices. “We will send things out on email and we will put it out on our Twitter account, Facebook and Instagram. But, sometimes we only put info out on social media and not send an email because faculty and staff just get flooded with emails” (Line 66).

We also just make announcements on the (University’s) home page and tweet it” said Beth (Line 68). The Office of Integrated Marketing and Communication produces an e-newsletter that is sent out quarterly to both internal and external audiences. Beth said, “All of our news is sort of gathered and saved for the quarterly e-newsletters and for the Gold News publication” (Line 73). The Gold News publication is a print piece that is published three times per calendar year. It is distributed to faculty, staff, donors, alumni and students.

Individual schools and programs at Gold University also produce newsletters that are sent to both internal and external audiences. Some of those newsletters are managed by the office of Integrated Marketing and Communication, but others are created and distributed by the individual schools or programs.
Obtaining Communication Feedback From Employees

When asked by what means Beth obtains communication feedback from employees she indicated that because Gold University is a small institution it is easy to obtain feedback from internal audiences by simply talking with them. More data is collected during the yearly survey regarding the university’s website. That survey asks internal audiences what topics they would like to see covered more or less in that vehicle. “I do speak with the Deans or the school chairs talking about what kind of information they would like to see. It is very personal and it is all about relationships” she said (Line 34). Beth also emphasized she has an open door policy and that staff and faculty are encouraged to talk to her if they have issues or concerns. “Believe me they will call us if they have issues. As a formal process we have not really put one into place – of feedback, but they know where to find us and like I said, they will let us know” (Line 37).

Describing Strategies and Best Practices for Internal Communication

In describing the strategy and best practices for internal communication at Gold University, Beth indicates there is not written policy and each is conducted based on a case-by-case basis. Beth said, “We get involved with it if involves the community or is something internally we feel everybody needs to know and it needs to be conveyed with one message, one voice. If you have several groups working on something, we will funnel it though our office so it is coming through us” (Line 43).

Decisions Regarding What and When to Communicate to Employees

When asked how she makes decisions regarding what to communicate to employees Beth replied she is usually told what to communicate to employees. The President of Gold University will often tell Beth what he wants released or promoted internally. Her office may craft the pieces but it would be under his review and direction. In speaking of internal audiences Beth
said, “It really just depends on the message. They will look at something from the President before they will look at something from our office. If it is really important, then, it should come from the President or a Dean because they [employees] will read it” (Line 57).

If the information is simply promoting an event on campus or informing of a visiting dignitary then it most likely will come from the marketing office. “It’s more of an FYI kind of thing. We do post things on our website and hope people are reading it and getting information that way” (Line 62).

**Effectiveness of Best Practices**

Beth relies primarily on word-of-mouth to judge the effectiveness of her best internal communication practices. “If I hear people talking about something then I know they read it somewhere – saw it in a publication or on the website. If we have events, we judge that by attendance and who is there” (Line 107). She also gauges the success of internal communication by her relationships. “Internally it really is just relationships – all about relationships – getting feedback from different faculty members, or Deans, or the Provost or President about how we are communicating and if we are doing an effective job” (Line 115).

Sometimes her office is approached by staff or faculty with a story or idea that for whatever reason, cannot be used. She relies on her relationships to help facilitate understanding. Said Beth, “Sometimes it is having to tell people ‘no’. But at least we have garnered their feedback and listened to what they have to say and then we can explain our position” (Line 124).

**The Relationship Between Internal and External Communication**

When asked if she thought that there was a relationship between internal and external communication, Beth replied that they go ‘hand-in-hand’. Said Beth “I would say that they support each other because a lot of the time we use our internal people to communicate
externally if that makes sense. There is a lot of overlap” (Line 132). She mentions as an example a new building that is currently under construction on campus. She has heard a lot of talk about the building from staff and faculty. She also knows that the project is of interest to Gold University’s external audiences too. “Externally, if you have people asking questions about something new happening on campus we want to make sure our internal audience is able to answer that and articulate the brand and mission of Gold University” said Beth (Line 134).

President/Other Entities Indicating When Employees Should Be Informed

Most strategically Beth meets with the President formally on a monthly basis and informally as needed. “It is good because when you have a President who is so tied to the university and knows its pulse, what attracts students and donors, what news should go out, and has a grasp of the brand; people will often share news with him that they don’t think to share with me” said Beth (Line 224). Adding, “And really whatever the president wants, anything the president wants we are there. He’s probably the man I report to and get my direction from” (Line 21). If it’s something to do with the general community usually the president will tell us to get word out for him” (Line 52).

Her meetings also have helped her better understand what is important to the President and it assures that her office helps the University speak with one voice.

She contrasts her role at Gold University with a position she held for a year at another similar university where she did not have access to the President. She held the same position and title as her role at Gold University but at ‘Other’ University she never had direct contact with the President. Although Beth requested meetings several times she was always told ‘no’ and that meetings between the President and someone in her position were just not permitted. Said Beth,
I was working in a vacuum. I was extremely hard to know what was important to that leader and institution – horribly difficult. I never even met the President of that university. She would only speak to her Vice Presidents and no one under that level. If I had anything I needed to bring to her I had to go to my Vice President and then he would present to her. I did not have that pipeline and was getting all my information fed to me from the Advancement Office. (Line 235)

It was a non-strategic position but Beth was expected to work strategically to raise alumni funding for that university. This set her up for conflicts with the Admissions Office. Admissions would run their own recruitment campaigns and promoting a message that was different from that of the Advancement Office, where Beth’s position was placed. She also was unable to promote events on campus. Said Beth, “I particularly found it frustrating because there were things happening on campus and I had no idea they were happening. It was really difficult” (Line 249).

**Perceptions of How Employees Feel About the Content of Internal Communication**

When asked her perceptions of how employees feel about the content of internal communication, Beth indicated that there is sometimes a misalignment between what the various units on campus and her office with respect to what they report on from those units. She thinks that this is because the office of Integrated Marketing and Communication looks at the institution as a whole; while the department or program heads are seeing their single entities. This causes a natural tension. She wishes the perception of her office’s work were better. Said Beth,

I am sure if you asked them they would say that they wish you would cover the division of math more or do more stories on education. We try to be fair and make sure we are
not overemphasizing one program over another. But, there are those that are more interesting to the public or internal audiences. (Line 146)

The office of Integrated Marketing and Communication does try to balance individual expectations versus those of the greater university. “While I do get feedback, part of my job is controlling those expectations. I hear your story and it's a great story but here is why don’t use it and the reasoning for that decision” said Beth (Line 152). Her judgment of the general perception of the staff and employee opinion of internal communication efforts is that her office falls in the middle. Beth is sure that “Some are ecstatic with the work we are doing and there are others who feel they are not getting the attention they deserve. I am not sure if we could ever find the common ground” (Line 155).

**Employees as Ambassadors for the Institution**

Beth said empathically that she believes employees are ambassadors for her institution. She said, “I absolutely do and I learned early on in my career in a city school system that ‘what you say matters’. You can have the best marketing campaign and running the slickest commercials with the best message but if your internal audience is out there bashing your institution or going against the brand, you will never recover from that” (Line168). Her office at Gold University tries to empower employees by providing the knowledge so that they can go into the larger community and talk about Gold University and enforce the brand. This strategy is very important to her as she says, “it is authentic and I think more and more people are suspicious of ads and the message they are seeing on Facebook but when they talk to a real person - that is extremely important” (Line 171).

She said that opinions by real people and word-of-mouth carry a lot more weight than advertising or an article in a newspaper. Said Beth,
It’s not to say we don’t have problems here or have things come up that are issues. But just giving internal audiences the knowledge to say ‘this is our mission’ and having them as ambassadors – that's public relations, so yes, I think that’s extremely important. (Line 175)

**Others in the Institution That Conduct Communication to Employees and a Description of Those Internal Communication Practices**

When asked who else at Gold University conducts communication to employees Beth indicated there are several other groups on campus that do such. Beth said,

Human Resources will reach out to faculty and staff if it is a Human Resources issue, Advancement will send out if it is a fundraising opportunity and Alumni [Relations] if it is an alumni related situation. We do empower them to send their own messages but I think there is an understanding among the departments that they need to keep the messages to a limit. (Line 97)

However, Beth is not sure that all entities are limiting their messaging. “I am not sure if everybody follows through on that but we try not to flood everybody with email every day. Email is the main form of mass communication on this campus” said Beth (Line 102). She also indicated that flyers could be posted around campus for communication to internal audiences as well. Also, there is one electronic bulletin board at one end of campus that can run limited messaging. But it is not a programmable multi-colored LED board. It has only yellow letters and can only show a handful of words at a time before scrolling. The font size is small so it has very limited readability.

When asked to elaborate on the internal communication practices by other entities at Gold University Beth reflects that she has been in her current position for over five-years as have
some of her peers. Said Beth, “I think we are a well-oiled machine these days as we have a lot of veterans in high level positions and they know when it is appropriate to send messages out” (Line 193). When Beth first started at Gold University everyone was sending out so many internal email messages that it was overwhelming. She reiterates that historically email has been the go-to form of presenting any materials to internal audiences. But at times at Gold University it has been over-used and then loses its impact. She said that time has taught communicators at Gold University what is important to communicate and what is not that pressing. Non-pressing items can be saved for a different form of communication that may be published at a later date or online.

Another form of internal communication that occurs on campus is a group meeting with the President of Gold University. The Office of the President holds internal town hall meetings after each board meeting. Employees are encouraged to attend and they are free to ask questions. “He doesn’t hide anything. He puts it all out there, good or bad news and they have the ear of the President” said Beth (Line 201).

Other entities that communicate directly to internal audiences include Finance, Information Technology, Student Affairs, Campus Police, Campus Ministry as well as any division chairs or faculty. “We really have processes in place – maybe not a written down. But we all know our place. I think we do a good job” said Beth, (Line 208).

**Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in Higher Education**

When asked if she sees public relations as a strategic management function at Gold University Beth replied it is extremely important that it functions on a managerial level as her office works with everyone on campus. “I think that the more we are utilized, the better it is for the institution. There are times that some (staff or faculty) will call us in when they want some
advice about something or some help crafting a message” Beth said (Line 214). This is important because the university needs to be speaking with one voice, in good or bad times, and using the same language according to Beth.

“The marketing side of it helps to get stories out about alumni that donate, that helps Advancement. We are attracting students here through Admissions so really we touch on all areas of the university” said Beth (Line 215). Beth is dismayed when she hears of institutions of higher education cutting marketing and public relations staff. “Because really that is your army out there; the one giving out your message. Everyone else is busy doing their thing and we are here to funnel all the news out” said Beth (Line 222).

Beliefs and Practices Regarding Symmetrical Communication

For Beth keeping the lines of communication open helps to facilitate symmetrical communication. “We try to keep relationships flowing both ways and meeting with Deans and key faculty members, staff and Provost to regularly get their feedback” said Beth (Line 124). She tries to get feedback and be responsive even if the event or news is not something her office can promote for whatever reason. Beth also indicated is also strategic to use symmetrical communication so that she can gauge how well her communication efforts are succeeding. Said Beth, “I think it is really important to be listening to the audiences that we are trying to communicate to because at some point if they are not hearing what they think they should be hearing, then they are going to tune you out” (Line 268).

Beth knows that she needs to not take the criticism personally. Said Beth “I do respect feedback and try to not get my feedings hurt. You have to have somewhat of a thick skin” (Line 269). She adds, “But I do think it that having two-way communication is important” (Line 274).
Blue University Interview Summary

This large public research university is located in a large urban center of approximately 120,000 and has been operational for 200-years. It has approximately 29,000 undergraduate students and approximately 15,000 graduate students. It employs approximately 7,000 faculty, a majority of which have terminal degrees. This institution has approximately 14,000 staff/administration. Some employees have representation by various unions.

Charles has been with Blue University since 2009 and is the senior level public relations spokesperson at that university. His current title is director of public affairs and internal communications. Prior to his time at Blue University, Charles was an editor and journalist for a large urban daily newspaper. He also advanced to a public relations associate director capacity at that newspaper. Charles holds a B.S. in both journalism and English as well as a M.S. in Administration. Charles is not PRSA accredited, nor is he a member of the PRSA

Internal Communication Process and Practices

In describing its internal communication processes and practices Charles explained that there are nearly 20 schools and colleges as part of a very large and decentralized university. In speaking of the various units Charles said, “In some ways those units communicate to their employees directly, not necessarily everything flowing directly through central communication of which I am a part of” (Line 7). The general internal communication philosophy of Blue University is to use multiple channels to reach employees. For this there are two prime communication vehicles used; email and use of a weekly printed newspaper.

A benefit of email is that it can be very specifically targeted and is a quick way to reach out to internal audiences. “We send email messages directly to our employees. We can segment by faculty, staff, campus, or particular college or school in that way” said Charles (Line 12).
Since the late 1800s, The University News has been, and remains, the main and official institution’s news outlet and is directly supervised by Charles. University News is printed each week and on every Monday and delivered to 120 locations across the main campus and some locations off campus in the community surrounding the university’s main campus. The newspaper is also provided to all satellite campuses for Blue University across the state and mailed to over 7,000+ Blue University retirees. In addition to having faculty and administrative staff who work for Blue University, there is a health system run by the university and those 23,000+ employees also are included in communication efforts by Charles and his staff receiving bulk delivery of the weekly newspaper for distribution in the health facilities as well. The University News edition has an online edition too. It is updated on a daily basis.

For the past decade, supplementing the once-per-week printed newspaper Blue University has distributed an internal daily email containing updated news and embedded story links that take the reader to the online University News site. “There are three ways that people can get news that is in the University News; through the print edition, through the website or the stories we highlight each day in our email” (Line 22).

Charles is able to track usage data via the click through rates on the daily email to see which stories are most read. He also tracks the metrics from the website of University News. “We know it's a very effective means of communication with our employees. Then we also push out those stories to the (external) media as part of our central communications and to the social media channels” said Charles (Line 30).

He notes that although these print, web and social media communication vehicles are primarily used to communicate with internal employee audiences they are also monitored by the media. Said Charles, “We have regular news media who cover the university both in the city here
and regionally” (Line 34). The communication efforts from Charles’ office are also followed by, and reported on, by the University’s daily student newspaper in its associated print, web and social media vehicles.

**Obtaining Feedback From Employees**

Blue University obtains employee feedback regarding internal communication efforts in a variety of ways. “We find our employees are not bashful about telling us what they think about our communication and whether they are effective or not, whether they know about something or not” said Charles (Line 44). This is one reason Charles advocates using multiple communication vehicles. Continual checks of open rates with emails as well as click through rates of both website items and from targeted emails help him to have a ‘pulse’ of what channels are most popular. Commenting is permitted on stories and that is monitored as well. “We get feedback from our employees posted on our website and anecdotally we know employees are curious and they ask questions” said Charles (Line 48).

The Office of Public Affairs and Internal Communication also hears back from supervisors and unit leaders in the field. “Supervisors tell us if something generated quite a bit of conversation in their units or whatever it might be and some units have their own communication and we stay connected to them” said Charles (Line 50). He cites as an example Human Recourses. That office sends out a lot of employment and benefit messaging to employees. Charles stays in close contact with their staff and will carry Human Resources messages in the *University News* even if Human Resources is sending targeted emails to employees on that same item. This is in line with his philosophy to send out the same news in multiple ways to better ensure it will be consumed by employees. The *University News* also accepts paid advertising and
Human Resources is a major advertiser. “We carry their message and editorial content as well as their advertising” said Charles (Line 57).

**Describing Strategies and Best Practices for Internal Communication**

In describing the strategies and best practices for internal communication Charles advocates for using many ways to reach out to his audiences. “I just emphasize multiple channels” he says (Line 63). Charles cautions that not all universities are doing this. Contrary to his practice, many of his peers at universities and colleges are cutting back on the diversity of communication vehicles used. He said,

I just read this week that two more universities have ended their print publications – I get that from a cost perspective – but we find that we have a lot of employees who are not in front of computers for their work so we think it really import to continue to put messaging in front of them not just to have an online news presence. (Line 67)

He understands that not all of his internal audience has the time, or the opportunity, to read electronic news during their time at work. For example, half of the Blue University’s workforce is employed at the university’s health system. For these 23,000+ employees who work with patients all day, they may not have the ability to log onto a computer and read *University News*. Charles makes sure that the print edition of the *University News* is delivered to the hospital and clinic system in a very specific manner. “We distribute it internally so it actually gets in the break rooms where the nurses and doctors, when they have 10 minutes, put their feet up and they have something to read” he said (Line 76). In a similar way editions of the *University News* are delivered to the university employees at the bus garages at the various campuses. Said Charles,
We think that by communicating with our employees on a regular basis shows them we want them to be informed. We care about them. We recognize that they are not able to look at the online publication and we make sure the print edition gets to them. (Line 83)

Interestingly, several years ago in a cost cutting move, mailing of the University News to retirees was stopped. Retirees were not happy. Charles quickly and clearly heard that this decision was not appreciated. He said, obviously retirees are not online as much as other audiences so we had to come up with a plan to bring it back” (Line 89). The printing costs were not that expensive but the mailing cost to 7,000+ retirees was prohibitive. Charles and his staff created a plan to increase the advertising support and that resulted in achieving the goal of completely covering the costs of printing and mailing the University News to retirees.

Charles told his advertisers that the University News retirees had exceptional demographics that advertisers desire to reach—educated persons who primarily remain in the area and each having a steady income. He also noted that that the number of retirees increases every year. Said Charles, “Our advertisers tell us they get results so that has helped not only support our operations but he whole idea of making the print edition available, which is, we think, an important way to connect with employees” (Line 104).

**Decisions Regarding What and When to Communicate to Employees**

Blue University has no formal written policy regarding what to communicate to employees. According to Charles Blue University is too large and decentralized for such. Charles added,

We are a public university and we take that seriously, wanting to be open and transparent to our employees. We are always talking about information that
might be available to the public and likely to be covered in the local news media, but we want our employees to hear it from us as well. We don’t want the only voice being the outside perspective. We fight hard to inform employees first.

(Line 110)

President/Other Entities Indicating When Employees Should Be Informed

Charles was asked if the President or other entities indicate when employees should be informed of news and information. Although the Office of Communications works with the President, in most cases Charles indicated that decisions to release information are made at a level lower than the President. The Vice President of Communications makes the majority of the decisions. Charles reports directly to him. Human Resources also can send out its own information to employees at its discretion.

Others in the Institution That Conduct Communication to Employees and a Description of Those Internal Communication Practices

Charles confirmed that Human Resources, University Health Services and the Athletic Department do communicate directly with employees. Individual units also communicate directly with employees.

Effectiveness of Best Practices

Charles was asked how he judges the effectiveness of his best practices. There is a combination of measurable things at Blue University that inform best practices. Charles gathers data regarding clicking through on web articles, counting the number of persons who have read or shared a story, reading comments on stories and looking at website metrics showing traffic data, how long people are on the site, what links did they share as well as what is the most popular or trending story of the day is for University News.
Anecdotal evidence is also gathered by informal talks with various units and schools on campus as well as looking at effectiveness of advertising. According to Charles, lots of units use advertising to promote special events, lectures, visiting scholars who may be showing a film or giving a talk. They gauge attendance at these events and give us feedback by advertising and renewing their contracts for the next year as a vote of confidence. (Line 130)

He indicated that a number of advertisers have told him they had doubled their business with university employees as customers once they started running ads in *University News*.

**The Relationship Between Internal and External Communications**

When asked if he thinks there is a relationship between internal and external communication Charles said that internal communication and external communication are related. In his practice all news releases that are sent to the media are always covered in the *University News* so that employees know what is occurring at Blue University. As an example Charles cites his office’s coverage of the University’s Regents. “We cover extensively the Board of Regents, and when they meet there is a big section of news including listing of all promotions and appointments – that will all be listed in print and online. We think it is all important news for our internal community” said Charles (Line 145).

**Perceptions of How Employees Feel About the Content of Internal Communication**

When asked how employees feel about the content of internal communications Charles thinks content is what it needs to be and overall he believes internal communication efforts are seen as good by employees, “My impression is it is generally positive from all our different measures: click-throughs, comments, response to events that are public, etcetera” he said (Line 157).
Employees as Ambassadors for the Institution

Charles emphatically believes employees are ambassadors for the University. “Blue University is a major employer in this area. There’s hardly a conversation the does not loop back to the University in one way or another so I think our employees have to be ambassadors whether they recognize that all the time. Certainly every one of us represents the University in one-way or another” said Charles (Line 161).

Others in the Institution That Conduct Communication to Employees and a Description of Those Internal Communication Practices

In addition to Human Resources there are approximately 50 educational units on campus as well as schools or colleges within the university who speak directly to employees either in print, face-to-face or via the targeted email system. Athletics also has its own communication personnel targeting employees directly in conjunction with athletic news and sports promotions. Said Charles, “Athletics has nearly 400 employees, is a big operation that is very specialized” (Line 194).

Another area that has its own communication team are the two satellite campuses that are located hours away in other parts of the state from the main campus. Although these locations are included in University News coverage, they conduct their own individual communications to employees as well.

In addition, the large University Health System has a communications team. They are specialists in handling internal and external communication to their 23,000+ employees. Said Charles,

The health system has special needs and a special focus. It's a different atmosphere when you are dealing with a different kind of audience whose
employees are more specialized – healthcare verses patient care assistance and a
much more 24-hour, always open kind of workforce. (Line 187)

Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in Higher Education

Charles indicated his agreement that public relations is a strategic management function. The Vice President of Communication is an executive officer and it is that Vice President who, by the nature of the position, speaks most often with the President of Blue University. “There are so many aspects that we work with and the Vice President of Communications is very much a part of the team working with all of the executive officers of the university and in nearly constant contact with the President” said Charles (Line 208).

Role of Relationship Management

When asked the role of relationship management within public relations Charles replied that, “It is very important to have relationships because that is how you effectively work with people. I think for us at a big, decentralized university, the more we can build personal relationships with the people inside the units we work with, the more effective we can be” (Line 216). He indicated that the more those within the university understand the scope and role of his office the more effective collaborations can be. Said Charles,

Collaboration is key especially at a place like Blue University. There is very little we can do entirely on our own, we have to get the information we need elsewhere. Everything is about relationships and trying to help people understand how we can help them. (Line 225)

He and his team build on individual relationships by creating a network of units and collaborators across disciplines in different offices so that even if individuals leave, relationships should not cease or suffer.
Beliefs and Practices Regarding Symmetrical Communication

With regard to symmetrical communication, Charles and staff value it. He stated that you cannot simply talk ‘at’ employees. You must be willing to listen as well. He cites social media as being a means to facilitate symmetrical communication.

The Office of Public Affairs and Internal Communication has three full time social media persons who work monitor and strategically manage Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets that represent Blue University. “Their primary focus is strategy. We have eliminated dozens and dozens of Twitter feeds that were not getting enough attention and eliminated scores of Facebook pages that were sitting un-updated for weeks” said Charles (Line 246). These employees read and react to what they see on social media as part of an overall communications plan. He said,

As a public university there are lots of people who feel that they need to tell us what is going on – give us feedback beyond our employees. Social media has helped with all that – including with employees and also beyond our physical campuses. (Line 252)

Green University Interview Summary

This large public research university is located in an urban center of approximately 400,000. This urban university has been operational for 100-years. There are approximately 14,000 undergraduate and approximately 4,000 graduate students. This institution has approximately 500 faculty with the majority having a terminal degree as well as employing 1,000 staff/administration. Some employees have representation by various unions.

The senior level public relations practitioner at this university is Glen who is the director of communications and media relations. He has been in his position for approximately 2 years.
Prior to his position at Green University, Glen was a communications director at a foundation as well as serving at a medium sized, suburban private university in research communications and relations capacity, having advanced from positions in communication and marketing and as a news specialist. Glen also has experience working in a variety of capacities on several political campaigns. Glen holds a bachelor’s degree in political science as well as a master’s degree in public policy. He is not APR accredited and is currently not a member of the PRSA.

**Internal Communication Process and Practices**

When asked to describe the internal communication processes and practices at Green University, Glen said he relies on three basic forms of communication to inform internal audiences: the President’s newsletter, social media, and an e-newsletter. The letter from the President is sent out twice per semester during the school year to internal audiences. Social media messaging to employees is conducted as needed. “Obviously there is an internal and external component to social media so our social media specialist does a lot of work communicating to our student and faculty audiences” said Glen (Line 7). But in addition to the President’s letters and social media platforms there is an e-newsletter that is distributed to internal audiences.

“We update that on a regular basis and it provides information research, student features, faculty features, and videos about what’s going on on campus” said Glen (Line 12). This form of communication is released internally every two months to a faculty, staff and student audience. Distribution includes 2,100+ staff and faculty as well as approximately 16,000+ students.

**Obtaining Communication Feedback From Employees**

Glen obtains feedback on his communication to employees in several ways. “We get a lot of feedback through social media and faculty, staff and students will communicate about
newsletters we have sent out” said Glen (Line 20). He indicated that he and his staff also receive feedback on their communication efforts from emails sent directly to him or his team after any internal communication messages have been released. The most scientific form of feedback occurs with the President’s letters. Each time a President’s letter is distributed a specific email address is assigned and placed on the letters in an effort to solicit feedback and comments. Email sent to those specific addresses are sent to Glen’s office first for review and then forwarded on to the President of the university for his response.

**Describing Strategies and Best Practices for Internal Communication**

Asked to describe strategies and best practices for internal communication with employees Glen said, “I think one of the things that is most important for communication internally is to be clear and concise and provide as up-to-date information as possible” (Line 29). Glen explained that one of his current projects is examining email communications on a more strategic level. “We have recently gone from a system where we put out regular communication via an organ called the *Campus Bulletin* that basically was an announcements bulletin board – an electronic board – that contained announcements and parking and event information to a new vehicle that is more events-calendar an event-focused. The new newsletter is electronically distributed each Monday. “Given there are significant announcements and amounts of information that don’t fall under events, we are currently in the process of figuring out what are the best strategies for getting that information out” Glen said (Line 38). He worries however that there will be information overload if his team does not have a plan.

One of the arguments for ending *Campus Bulletin* was that the read rate was very low and there was just too much information contained in it. Glen ponders about what is the best vehicle to replace it,
The events newsletter is focused only on events. We are also looking for email communication, social media communication or other communication organs like our blog or the President’s newsletter as the best methods for letting the campus community know what is going on. We need to be clear, concise and prompt. (Line 45)

The team re-evaluating the internal communication efforts includes the Chief Marketing Officer, the Communication Office staff, and Information Services and Technology. Part of the discussion includes delineating territory. Said Glen,

If it is an email for – and I am making this up – a bake sale…is that something that should go through our office verses a communication from the President? That is something the whole university will be interested in – who is handling those and what is the ultimate button pusher on that kind of stuff? (Line 49)

The team is will set the standards for university wide communications related to university wide policies. These are generally are reviewed by the President on an ‘as needed’ basis and signed off by him. Sometimes, communication is reviewed by a Vice President depending on their division. Ultimately, the internal communications review team will draft the policies regarding whom has jurisdiction over what items and what level of approval is needed. They will also decide by what communications vehicle they will be distributed.

Decisions Regarding What and When to Communicate to Employees

Glen was asked how decisions are made regarding what, and when, to communicate to employees. He said no formal written policy exists. However, in the vast majority of cases the Office of Communication will send out information from other entities on campus that need to communicate to internal audiences. Glen said that Human Resources uses the Office of
Communication as the conduit for their internal communications as they do not have a standalone newsletter. Glen indicated that Human Resources rarely contacts employees without involving the Office of Communications. As a contrast Information Technology does directly communicate with employees and the Department of Athletics has its own communication staff, which is used to communicate directly to internal and external audiences.

Occasionally, the Office of Communication must pass some internal communication materials to the President’s office for review and approval before dissemination. Upon approval the Office of the President and the Office of Communication decide which can be sent via the Office of Communication and which should be disseminated by the office of the President.

**Effectiveness of Best Practices**

Green University is currently conducting a social media audit to obtain a more scientific idea as to what are the preferred and most effective methods of communication among various demographics on campus and best overall social media practices. “We are looking at what are the open rates, engagement rates, what commutation channels are being used by different entities on campus, what are people following and does it make sense to condense some channels?” said Glen (Line 110).

Actual social media vehicles vary by unit at Green University with colleges, departments or programs managing their own social media. Glen thinks in some cases it would be more advantageous for units to use his office’s channels instead of their own for continuity of message and visuals. Said Glen, “Ultimately we will create a social media guide where people have an understanding of what hash tags should be used; what’s the tone that should be used on different things and the visual to go with it. We will create that for all social media users on campus” (Line 109).
Green University also uses Zignal. This a third party social media tracking service that aggregates all social media engagements and provides reports of various usage metrics. You can then compare your ‘score’ with similar universities. Green University is in an urban setting and compares itself to University of Illinois, University of Chicago, Ohio State University, Kent State University and the University of Portland.

Glen and staff monitor engagements daily seeing what resonates with his audiences. He notes that some of the universities with whom he compares to Green University may have more followers on various social media channels but data shows that Green University followers have a deeper level of engagement with regard to use of social media platforms. The one drawback of the research is that unless the user self discloses in their profile if they are faculty, staff, student or just a fan of the university, Glen can’t tell how many staff and faculty are engaging in the sharing and usage of the social media.

He mentions that for the first time ever the President’s in fall 2017 university address was streamed live and then shorter segments were posted on line. It had over 10,000 hits. Glen and staff then tracked which topics trended better than others as well as sharing of any segments of the videos to others via social media. “In the past we would maybe have 550 people at convocation to see the speech. This was very successful” (Line 387). But, the drawback is you can’t tell how many employees viewed and shared this information.

The Relationship Between Internal and External Communication

When asked if there was a relationship between internal and external communication Glen replied that there was a linkage and now that is tied even more tightly together because of social media. “I have been doing communication in higher education for a decade now in two different universities and probably the biggest change in the use of social media” said Glen (Line
146). The amount of content the university produces under social media has had a significant impact on the information our internal audiences are getting while concurrently playing a significant role in what reporters and other outside audiences are seeing about the University.

Said Glen,

It has really changed significantly how we communicate and the emphasis we take on different things. There’s a lot more synergy between what we are doing internally and what we are doing externally because through social media both sets of audiences are seeing the same content now. It is not separate like in the past when you sent one email to campus before putting out a very different conversation in press release. (Line 155)

Social media makes the sharing of information much quicker and easier as well. Said Glen, “It is a lot easier for someone to take the message you have sent and post that somewhere else. It condenses your timeline” (Line 160). Glen notes that a downside to this is that once you have gotten your message out it spreads the word much faster than previous public relations tools. This makes it hard to counteract inaccurate information that may be shared across the world in a nanosecond as well. He cites as an example when employees or students tweet to their friends that the university is closed due to weather. “They are seeing it on Twitter and going back to bed” said Glen (Line 170), adding that and in some cases they are not checking the official university site or looking at their email to make sure that closing is really happening.

Perceptions of How Employees Feel About the Content of Internal Communication

When asked about employee perceptions of the content of internal communication Glen said he believed perceptions are improving. He said, “Since the new President started (less than a year ago) our social media output and the quality of the content that we are presenting across the
board is better. I have gotten a lot of positive feedback on that both from internal and external audiences” (Line 175).

His one area of concern was that the *Campus Bulletin* had been discontinued and that people felt that was the only way to know what was happening on campus. However, as he and his team have worked hard to suggest other options to internal audiences. Early anecdotal evidence suggests they seem pleased with the other options. Glen said, “My argument would be that the static nature of *Campus Bulletin* made that information less effective than it would be if you were using other vehicles. That’s what I have said to folks” (Line 197).

His office also facilitates internal surveying and focus groups. A new online purchasing system was recently implemented. Glen and his staff are internally promoting the new system and encouraging staff to tell them what is, or is not, working and are asking for feedback regarding what other needs the system could be assisting with. Glen encourages employees to complete the purchasing system surveys so that the new system can be evaluated and that information communicated back to the internal audience with news and improvement updates.

When asked if he has conducted any surveys of print materials such as an alumni magazine Glen said his office does not do such items as that falls under the domain of the Advancement entity.

**Employees as Ambassadors for the Institution**

When asked if he perceives employees as ambassadors for Green University, Glen agreed. “I think one of the things with faculty and staff is that we do as much as we can to try and inform them all about the different things go on on campus, different partnerships, different options that available for them to take advantage of and to promote to other folks so that they know what is going on” (Line 235). He also makes sure staff and faculty know general information about Green University such as the value of the University, its overall mission, and
its importance in the community so that staff and faculty can have off campus discussions with their friends and family. He says his office spends a lot of time making sure staff and faculty also have nuts and bolts emails that help them do their jobs better as well as assisting units in updating their websites to make sure the information is accurate.

**Others in the Institution That Conduct Communication to Employees and a Description of Those Internal Communication Practices**

Glen stated that many of the individual colleges communicate directly with internal audiences, as do Advancement, Athletics and the Information Technology Department. In describing the internal communication practices by other entities Glen mentioned that many of the colleges within the University have their own communication vehicles like email blasts or newsletters and those serve both internal and external audiences. The College of Liberal Arts releases a monthly newsletter that is sent electronically to all faculty, staff and students as well as to alumni and donors. That college coordinates this without the assistance of Glen’s team. Three other groups that directly communicate to internal audiences are Advancement, Athletics and Information Services and Technology, all without the assistance of Glen’s team.

Glen said that are currently conversations about the different kinds of communication conducted to different parts of campus and audiences. He is concerned that there may be too many emails being sent to those audiences and are there other ways in which that information can be presented to those target audiences that makes more logical sense. Said Glen.

It is one of the reasons we went to an events calendar as opposed to the *Campus Bulletin*. That events calendar is a tab on our website and people can go there anytime. We are now sending only one event newsletter per week instead of two. If someone wants that information it then it is easily available but they are not
necessarily inundated with emails every week. But that is still a work in progress. (Line 305)

**Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in Higher Education**

When asked if he sees public relations as a strategic management function Glen replied that his office is an important component of providing information to the larger campus community. Said Glen,

> With an organization of this size, with this may moving parts, and with so many different audiences, faculty, staff, students and alumni, and different variations of those it is extraordinarily important for our office to really be able to provide up-to-date accurate and prompt information to folks as quickly as possible. (Line 315)

Depending on the kind of message that must be disseminated, Glen seeks to work with the highest-level officer in that entity. For example Glen will return draft work to the head of the department requesting it for their review of the information before it is sent. If it has a more campus wide audience then it will be cleared by a Dean or Vice President. Said Glen,

> If it is a situation where it is not formal, it’s more dynamic or providing info to campus that is not something they have had before I will go to the Chief Marketing Officer. It is his call whether or not it rises to the level of the President for review and sign off. In most cases when it is university wide dynamic then it will be signed off by the President. (Line 335)

**Role of Relationship Management**

Glen said that relationship management was one of the most important aspects to his position. He said, “Early in my career I worked in politics and it amazes me on a daily basis how
often I use the relationship skills I developed in politics, now in public relations” (Line 344). Glen continually needs to know what is going on at the University, who is doing it, how they are doing it, and what the main message is so that he can communicate it most effectively. He said,

I spend a lot of my time meeting with Deans, department heads, Vice Presidents and individual professors and students trying and get as much info as I can. I have to have those relationships so that if something happens I am their first call. I also do an equal amount of relationship building with reporters and external stakeholders too. (Line 353)

Beliefs and Practices Regarding Symmetrical Communication

When asked his beliefs and practices regarding symmetrical communication, Glen admits that his university does not do all it could to foster that process. He said, “We need to have a better sense of who is looking at what” (Line 374). He and his team do look at blog read numbers and page views but it does not seem evident that they have any formal process for conversations from staff and faculty that allows for feedback to adjust messaging or tactics.

Glen is more focused on quantifying his efforts than qualifying them. He would like to discover a way he and his team can utilize a content marketing perspective to see how content is reaching his audiences, how many are viewing it and how to track activity. Said Glen, “In all honesty we haven’t done as good a job in this area in which we need to ramp up more to see who is reading our stuff, what do they like or not like? (Line 354).

He mentions that for the first time ever the President’s in fall 2017 university address was streamed live and then shorter segments were posted on line. It had over 10,000 hits. Glen and staff then tracked which topics trended better than others as well as sharing of any segments of
the videos to others via social media. “In the past we would maybe have 550 people at convocation to see the speech. This was very successful” (Line 387).

**Silver University Interview Summary**

This large public research university is located in an urban center of approximately 200,000 and has been operational for nearly 150-years. There are approximately 20,000 undergraduate and approximately 4,000 graduate students enrolled here. This university has approximately 800 faculty with the 80-percent having a terminal degree, There are approximately 1,300 staff/administration employed by this institution. Some employees have representation by various unions.

Mike has been with Silver University since 2011 and is the senior level public relations spokesperson at that university serving as associate vice president/chief communications & marketing officer. Prior to his Silver University position Mike was the founder of a public relations firm. Before that Mike served at a president of an independent public relations counseling firm and was the director of communication for a state attorney general as well as holding positions at other public relations firms and working for other state government officials in a public relations capacity. He began his career with news desk positions in television and radio. Mike has a B.A. in sociology and is APR accredited and a current member of the PRSA.

**Internal Communication Processes and Practices**

When asked to describe the internal communication process and practices of his offices, Mike first gave an overview of the department and what it encompasses. In speaking of internal communication specifically Mike said that it is targeted to three different audiences: faculty, staff, and contract professionals. He said, “I tend to think of contract professionals as part of the staff, such as myself, but that could also include groundskeepers, maintenance workers and
administrative people” (Line 12). He also noted that in some cases students could be considered internal audiences as well but for the purposes of this research he “would frame his answers based on communication to faculty, staff, and contract professionals as the main internal audience groups” said Mike (Line 19).

Mike stated “University structure has some interesting challenges for internal communication that perhaps do not exist in other environments” (Line 20). He mentioned that his previous experiences in government, working at a public relations firm, and in corporate communication were very different from the higher education context. He said,

This is my first foray into higher educational and part of the challenge – by location and function – you are part of the administration so you must integrate all that comes from the central perspective of the President and the administration of the university. But, so many communication challenges come from needing to factor into it the college structure within a university like the Deans and what they are communicating and how they are communicating with faculty and staff. (Line 24)

Mike added that communication efforts have to be constructed with the college and academic structure in mind so that there is a respect for the relationships in the structure as well as consideration for the importance of the communication as a whole. Mike says that he is “trying to not tread on territory that others might feel is theirs” (Line 33). He works to ascertain what the Deans are telling their faculty and department staffs. Mike tries to determine how well that coordinates and matches what is being communicated from the administrative level to those same audiences. He speaks of the relationship between top down administrative communication to internal audiences and that the various university Deans are also internal communicators to those same internal stakeholders. Mike said, “I confess that I have been here five years now and
it was not something I had considered or factored in when I first started, but, I am pretty aware of it now” (Line 37).

In his time at Silver University Mike has specifically worked to build relationships with the Deans of the nine colleges. He said, “We try to work with the Deans on the messaging to their colleges and faculty and staff and use a variety of channels of communication both personal from the President and Provost as well as electronic and face-to-face meetings” (Line 50).

The actual communication vehicles that Mike uses to reach to his internal stakeholders include a daily electronic digest that is sent to all faculty, staff and contract professionals. It contains campus events, news and other important issues that the administration wants to communicate to its internal audience. In addition to a daily digest, town hall meetings with the President are utilized. Mike mentions that social media is also used but does not detail specifics.

**Obtaining Communication Feedback from Employees**

In reflecting on how Mike and his team obtain feedback from the people to whom they have communicated, he admitted they don’t do as much as they should. “The honest admission is that we don’t do as much assessment and feedback as we need to…I know we need to but a lot of it is anecdotal” (Line 52). Mike added that some of the information dissemination is habitual and reoccurs at certain times of the year so he believes some internal communication is anticipated by the internal audiences to a certain extent, “because it is disseminated at the same time historically people are used to getting that information” he said (Line 52). But he admits his office does not have any empirical studies to support this.

Occasionally, Mike’s office will hold a forum on a particular topic such as the budget. At these meetings he has solicited exit feedback and it was positive. However, Mike did not indicate if that feedback was formal or not. In so far as using a formal survey with internal audiences to
determine the success of internal communication efforts, Mike said, “We have had a survey or two in my five years here related to the (electronic) digest and getting information that sort of thing, but it is not nearly as well organized or comprehensive as it needs to be” (Line 55).

**Describing Strategies and Best Practices for Internal Communication**

When asked to describe his strategy and best practices for internal communication with employees, Mike said his office emphasizes that employees hear important university-related news from Silver University as their first source. “That is a key challenge that has gotten huge in recent years for two reasons: one is technology and the second is that internal communication becomes external communications very quickly” he said (Line 72). In addressing the technological challenges to internal communications Mike said, “the social media flood makes it more difficult – I don’t know if linear is the right word – but direct communication with the affected audience so that they hear about it from you or the administration first” (Line 73). He added, ‘it may have been put out by you first but it has been tweeted, re-tweeted, shared, liked, whatever, in so many other ways the impression to the recipient is that ‘well, how come my institution did not tell me about his first?’” (Line 77).

The second challenge to internal communications is that internal information becomes external information very quickly. Mike said,

There is such immediate outreach to media of anything that is communicated internally. One of the reporters that I have dealt with over at the main newspaper here – there was something last year we put out to campus first - and within five minutes I was calling him to make sure he had it. He laughed and said ‘you are late, I already have two emails on that’. (Line 85)
“So, we have to recognize from an internal communication standpoint that there is virtually no time between internal and external and that anything we put out internally becomes external in a matter of moments” Mike said (Line 88). Mike added that he knows that media are aided in their quest for information by making sure they are subscribed to Silver University’s daily electronic digest distribution as well as following various university-related social media feeds. He said. “Our status as a public research institution, public higher education institution, everything we produce is public record. Everything is out in the open at some point in time” (Line 92). Adding that the challenge of having open and transparent communication with your internal audience is being cognizant that it is happening virtually in real time with respect to external audiences as well. Mike said,

Literally anything that’s put out goes to the media in nanoseconds. But we do try, so that I and my staff and others can stand up and say ‘we did communicate to you first’. That is a principle, it’s not a written formal policy, it is just the way I was trained and have operated for a long time and it is a shared view within the administration. (Line 102)

Decisions Regarding What to Communicate to Employees

Mike was also asked how he makes decisions regarding what to communicate to employees. He said, “Certainly you take a look at the impact of whatever it is you are talking about on employees and you think about the changes, policies or practices, or the issues confronting the institution” (Line 105). Mike notes that recently a change in labor law had resulted in a reclassification of some employees from exempt to non-exempt with respect to overtime pay. This would result in 250 employees having changes made to their pay. This had to be communicated to all the employees at the university. Not only were electronic
communications drafted by Mike’s office, but, he worked with the Deans of the nine colleges to help organize question and answer meetings as well as create an informational web page, and informational materials for direct supervisors that would help them explain the changes to their employees. Mike said all internal communication materials had to address why the change was occurring and how the university was responding to the new law.

In a second communications example, Mike was able to announce to his internal employee audience that the university was the recipient of a $3 million dollar endowment. Said Mike, “It’s important that our employees know and have context for what happens; be it good, be it challenging, be it change which has been a constant issue for us” (Line 154).

President/Other Entities Indicating When Employees Should Be Informed

When asked if the office of the university President or any other entity indicates when employees must be informed, Mike said that at his university there was a good leadership team and they often shared information so that he “kind of could tell when things need to happen” (Line 158). Again, this is situational and there was no mention of a formal procedure. Mike added that,

The policy level kinds of things or the university focused or university-centric things are relatively well known enough to be able to say ‘ok, we need to give some consideration to what we are going to be doing here’ but, if there are some specific things we need to be doing – people have no problem saying ‘hey, I think we need to [inform]’. (Line 155)
When Employees Need to Be Informed Is Communication Disseminated From University Communications or Elsewhere?

Mike said that when employees need to be informed of an institutional matter how that communication is generated and disseminated via his office or other entities at Silver University. He indicated that his office is removed from departmental or college level day-to-day communications but that if the communication is more substantive his office is consulted.

“The ‘how’ of that gets generated as the content or the substance. We take and construct and edit it and consider the channels that we should use to communicate it” Mike said (Line 171). His office also makes decisions regarding the tone of the message. “We are certainly open when departments or units approach us. But there is no official procedure to this process” Mike said (Line 172). He added that when his office is sought out as a resource it is beneficial because, “When it comes through us you know we are better able to help ensure [the message] than otherwise. But there have certainly been any number of times or circumstances when things happened and we said ‘gee, I wish they would have talked to us for a little different perspective’” (Line 178).

Effectiveness of Best Practices

When asked how as a senior level public relations practitioner Mike judges the effectiveness of his best practices he reiterated that they do not do enough formal evaluation of efforts. He said, “A candid answer is we do not have enough built in of the assessment measurements of effectiveness; although people are not shy about picking up a phone or stopping me across campus as an informal kind of feedback thing” (Line 184). Mike indicated that another reason assessment of communication efforts are not as robust as they should be is due to the lack of resources. Said Mike, “In terms of really measuring and ensuring of what best practices need
to be, it’s an excuse but, you get limited resources, limited time, and assessment unfortunately ends up falling by the wayside. I guess if anyone (in this position) would be honest, they would say the same thing” (Line 189).

**The Relationship Between Internal and External Communication**

Mike also did see a relationship between internal relations/communication and external relations/communication. He said,

> Anything that is internal is external and that is particularly true in a public institution. There is a primacy of the internal audience to your organization and institutional effectiveness as this is well documented. Employees need to know (information) so they can be effective ambassadors in the community even if it’s just to be able to answer questions about what’s going on at your place [of employment]”. (Line 196)

Mike indicated if you do not have good internal communication then your external communication will not align and won’t be as effective due to contrasting messages with your internal audiences. He said,

> I know we break it down, and need to, from internal and external, but, they are the same. They have different motivations, different interests, concerns and priorities, but any communication – and it flips the other way too – if you are thinking about external, you always need to start with the internal audience in mind. (Line 199)

**Perceptions of How Employees Feel About the Content of Internal Communication**

Although Mike said there was paucity of formal data regarding how employees feel about internal communication at Silver University, he did have thoughts on how employees judge the
content of the communication that is provided by his office. He indicated on one level it is
difficult to separate the perception of the messaging coming from the office of university
communications verses those from the office of Silver University’s President and administration.
He indicated that the university had in its recent past some very difficult issues with the former
President who had lost the trust of the university employees. They had voted overwhelmingly
against him in a vote of no confidence.

The President eventually left Silver University and the new President works closely with
Mike helping to rebuild the bond between the administration and the employees. Said Mike, “I
think our particular history of the last couple years has been one of great distrust between the
employees and a lack of trust in the administration for a whole range of reasons” (Line 211).
Mike emphasized that the new President is operating with more transparency and communication
to faculty, staff, and contract employees. Mike said,

Being honest, open and candid, sharing information and having feedback is
what we are trying to do; him on a personal basis and us on an institutional
basis. That trust gap is real and we are trying to address that. It's a real issue for
us here. (Line 218)

Employees as Ambassadors for the Institution

When asked if the university sees employees as ambassadors for itself Mike replied that it
has been hard based on the past couple of years but yes, they would like to see employees as
ambassadors again. A new campaign may help with this. The campaign is a university pride
program and highlights the good stories coming out of Silver University. Employees were
informed of the rollout of the campaign and have seen some of the stories and campaign
materials. For employees viewing these items and learning about positive work at the university
it is hoped they will again be inspired to talk about the university with pride. Mike said,

It is ways for them to show their pride and be ambassadors and we are going
to hopefully be moving into the next phase of the campaign soon to do that –
to help people know that they can feel good about the university again after
some challenging times. (Line 233)

Others in the Institution That Conduct Communication to Employees and a
Description of Those Internal Communication Practices

Within Silver University there are other entities that also conduct communication directly
to faculty, staff, and contract employees. Said Mike, “You have the college level sorts of things
that happen within the various units from an administration function side they end up doing their
own communication about (unit) issues that crop up and his office tends not to be involved in
those kind of day-to-day operations. My office does not get down into the weeds like that unless
a unit seeks us out” (Line 252).

When describing the internal communication practices by other entities at the university
Mike does point out that he would like to work more with the units from a communication
support and training standpoint. Said Mike,

We do it more on the marketing side then we do on the communication side
but there is improvement that could be had as by nature as they are not
trained as communicators, some are more adept and open to that than others.
I think that is an area that would be helpful so that if they are presenting
things they are sparking communication better internally. That would be
good. (Line 256)
**Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in Higher Education**

When Mike was asked what his beliefs and practices were regarding public relations as a strategic management function in a higher education context he asked that the recording device be turned off and no notes taken. Although he did express an opinion on this question as it was ‘off the record’ no data exists to be cited here.

**The Role of Relationship Management**

With regards to the concept of relationship management within the public relations function in a higher education setting, Mike asked the interviewer to define the concept of relationship management. It was stated by the interviewer that “public relations is not just about disseminating; a lot of theory tells us, and research tells us, that public relations is about building relationships with various constituencies and publics. Is that taken into account?” (Line 287).

Mike responded,

Yes, another word I might use for that is trust because it is within a relationship. There is a kind of personal and institutional relationship that comes into play and I believe it needs to be built on a foundation of trust and that means openness and honest, continuing communication. It is not transactional. It needs to be relationship-focused. (Line 293)

He added specifically employee relationships are important and you need to be focused on them because you want employees hearing things from you first. “That is respecting their status, their relationship with the institution. So, if you think of it in the human terms of building that relationship that is what you try to do” said Mike (Line 294).
Beliefs and Practices Regarding Symmetrical Communication

Finally, Mike was asked what his beliefs were regarding symmetrical communication used for cultivating relationships and maintaining feedback. He replied that,

Meeting and taking questions and just having dialogue with colleges and work units is helpful. Talking to those on the night shift who otherwise may not be here during the day is good. Being open and approachable that is a personal level of communication that is vital particularly in our circumstances, but in general too. (Line 307)

Mike mentioned the work of the university’s president who is holding town hall meetings with a broad range of internal groups as evidence of symmetrical communication at Silver University. “It is personal and you get feedback immediately” he said (Line 309).

Chapter 4 Summary

The interviews conducted with the participants in this research offer insights into how they conduct and perceive their roles and responsibility with respect to internal communication to employees. All were very candid and forthcoming with their processes and in mentioning what they consider to be positive practices as well as listing some of their shortcomings or less successful processes. We next look at an analysis of the data and see the emergent themes in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The overarching question that guides this study is: how do higher education senior level public relations practitioners develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees? To inform this question this qualitative interview study profiles senior level public relations practitioners in higher education regarding their processes and practices for internal communications with particular emphasis on the processes and strategies for communication with employees. The research questions sought understanding regarding the practitioners beliefs and practices regarding: (RQ 1) public relations as a strategic management function; (RQ 2) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (RQ 3) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment (Grunig, 2006). In addition, some demographic data was gathered regarding the career paths and education of the practitioners who are senior level public relations practitioners at universities in Michigan and Ohio.

In addition, The Excellence Study of public relations as a strategic management function contains within it the following 12 attributes: a) human resources; b) organic structure; c) internal entrepreneurship; d) symmetrical communications systems; e) leadership; f) strong and participative cultures; g) strategic planning; h) social responsibility; i) support for women and minorities; j) quality as a priority; k) effective operational systems; and l) collaborative societal
culture. It was hoped that these attributes would organically occur in some of the discussions with the participants.

What follows are the findings of the three research questions, the participants’ answers to the interview questions and a review of which *Excellence Study* attributes occurred in this research. We begin by addressing the research questions.

**Examination of Three Public Relations Theories From the *Excellence Study***

Regarding public relations theories in actual practice in higher education I examined: (a) public relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment, the research in this specific context revealed the following.

**RQ 1: Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function**

Universally participants felt their role was seen as a strategic function with direct and 24/7 access to the president. In addition, participants indicated they were permitted access to any entity and all personnel at their respective universities. All but one of the participants is a senior level public relations practitioner who *directly reports* to the university’s president and attended top-level meetings. The other participant did have access to the president whenever communication was needed, but due to the size of the university his function reports to a vice president who is a direct report to the president. He emphasized that this in no way ‘filtered’ his access to the president.

One participant, who at a previous university position did not have direct access to the president, detailed how difficult and ineffective that made her position. Several participants specifically expressed concern that public relations is not a strategic management function it
cannot do its best. The examples they gave are when the position is subjugated to another very narrowly confined communications function such as admissions or advancement in a higher education environment.

**RQ 2: The Role of Relationship Management in Public Relations**

All participants stressed that relationship building and maintenance is key to the success of their positions. Relationships help them to gain knowledge of what is occurring in their environment as well as to help facilitate what their function does and how it can help other entities at the university to obtain their communication goals. Relationship management allows them to gain anecdotal feedback on how well, or poorly, their messages are being communicated. Several mentioned that good relationship building today helps to mitigate problems in times of crisis. They believe relationship management helps to build credibility and trust for their work.

**RQ 3: Symmetrical Communication in the Practice of Public Relations**

Participants said that symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment, however practice is not following theory. Many are using asymmetrical communication and thinking it is symmetrical. Of the practitioners who are not collecting data on this practice, most said they were doing a good job of it but they could not provide solid evidence of such. They have examples of adjusting communication practices based on feedback. Most used informal means to evaluate this.

Two practitioners collect more formal data on their communication efforts and do make adjustments to both the actual communication and/or method as well as identifying relationships
that need improvement or greater cultivation. However, even if performing strategic data
collection most participants indicated they are not doing enough work in this area.

With respect to individual interview questions, those can be grouped in the following
findings as they cluster around common variables or practices. These clusters in turn form
themes that will also be discussed.

**Interview Questions 1, 3, and 9 Asked Participants to Describe Their Internal
Communication Processes, Practices, and Strategies**

**In Describing Their Internal Communication Processes and Practices None of the
Participants Had Any Documented Processes or Practices**

The majority of participants expressed that they know they *should* have written policies.
Some indicated that they had staff working on such internal communication process descriptions
but no deadline was set for that to be completed and it did not emerge as a priority in their
planning for their departments. “It is probably a little too undefined for my tastes but we are
working at it” said Ann of Purple University (Line 141). Said Beth of Gold University, “Process
wise it just depends on the situation….there are no written policies but it is a case-by-case basis”
(Lines 4 & 80). David at Red University said that they did not have “anything formal I would
associate with internal communication” (Line 4). Charles of Blue University said that they do not
have a written formal policy as they are “just too big and decentralized” (Line 109).

**Standard Practices of Communication: Clear and Concise, Internal First and
Intentionality**

Participants believed a goal of internal communication practices was and provide as up-
to-date information as possible that it be delivered quickly and in an understandable and succinct
manner. “I think one of the things most import for communication internally is to be clear and
concise and provide as up-to-date information as possible” said Glen at Green University. In
addition those practices participants said they felt very strongly that information coming from their offices needed to be targeted to internal audiences before it was sent externally. “We strive to make sure employees hear important news from the university first, that is a key, huge challenge” said Mike of Silver University (Line 76).

Said Ann at Purple University,

We have gotten much better at making sure what when there are major announcements that are going to occur through the media, that those announcements go internally to campus constituencies first.... We don’t feel our faculty and staff should be hearing about it in the local newspaper (Line 48).

Charles at Blue University said,

We are a public university and we take that seriously, wanting to be open and transparent with our employees. We are always talking particularly information that might be available to the public and if likely to be covered by the local news media, we want them (employees) to hear it from us as well. We don’t want the only voice being an outside perspective. (Line 112)

David at Red University said his system is to always have an intentional internal communication plan. He and his staff meet weekly to specifically discuss internal communication asking themselves what news needs to be shared with campus that week and by what communication vehicles will it be communicated. “It’s intentional. It’s the easiest thing to let go because you are worried about a press release or a video you are doing or a publication. You need to think about internal communication” (Line 83). Speaking of intentionally communicating with employees, Charles and Blue University said, “We want them to be informed. We care about them” (Line 85) adding “we fight hard to inform employees first” (Line 89).
114). Mike of Silver University said, “It is hard to have that understanding that internal is critically important to audiences and that all efforts have been made to insure that the communication occurs” (Line 86).

**All Reported That They Communicate With Employees Via Multiple Channels**

In mentioning that his university is large and decentralized, Charles said that they emphasize that multiple communication channels be used (Line 11). “There’s no one or two (communication) vehicles used by everyone. We have 19 different schools and colleges...The general philosophy throughout the university is to use multiple channels with communication with our employees” (Line 8). “We use a number of different avenues to communicate with internal audiences” said Glen of Green University. His vehicles include an e-newsletter, email, social media, and a presidential newsletter. Beth at Gold University said, “We will cross promote. We will send things out on email and we will put it out on our Twitter account, Facebook, and Instagram” (Line 69). She also will send out information in the quarterly (printed) newsletter. Red University also cross promotes with the use of meetings, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and email. Mike at Silver University uses as his principle forms and channels of internal communication personal meetings by the president, e-newsletter, email and town hall meetings.

**Participants Rely Heavily on Use of Email and E-Newsletters**

Every participant cited the use of email or e-newsletters as a communication vehicle for internal audiences. This could take the form of e-newsletters sent via email or simply short, frequent emails that contain important news or event information. Emails may also link to stories that are posted to intranet sites or reference back as hotlinks to employee or marketing newsletters. In speaking of this kind of communication vehicle Mike at Silver University said,
“the daily [e-mail brief] goes to faculty, staff, and contact professionals on a daily basis and it contains what’s happening on campus, important issues, and what the administration wants to communicate” (Line 42).

Some participants did admit that they might be overusing email and were worried that it might not be as impactful as they desired. Ann at Purple University conducted a study and found that “it seems that email is the preferred method of communication on campus although a lot of that is that they have the flexibility in deciding what they pay attention and what they don’t pay attention to” (Line 15). Sometimes communicators opted out of using email for another communication vehicle due to concerns that internal audiences are inundated with emails. “Sometimes we will just regulate it [message] only to social media and not send out an email because faculty and staff get just flooded with emails” said Beth at Gold University (Line 70).

David at Red University is skeptical that emails are even being read, “Even at an institute of higher learning they don’t read email. Even when you tell them it is your job to read email; they don’t read email” (Line 29). Occasionally, rogue emails from other campus entities can cause problems for senior level public relations practitioners.

Yesterday, someone from the physical plant wrote an email to campus about all the roads on campus that will be closed because of the [construction] project we are getting ready to break ground on. Well, we had not really talked about when that was going to happen. I had to call that person and say ‘you know I’ll do this for you, you know that all you have to do is tell me I want to communicate it and I can fit it into our larger communication plan about the park. What you have done is confuse the heck out of everyone who now are wondering what are you talking about, said David of Red University. (Line 186)
Ann of Purple University sees similar rogue email situations occurring on a cyclic basis. Lots people on campus have the ability to send campus-wide emails and so as much as you try to be consistent you know, reign it in, what inevitably happens here is it is like a cycle we will tighten it up – that is the process we are in right now – then steadily over the course of the years it will creep back out like this and then it’s like ‘ok, it’s time to bring it back up again. (Line 61)

Only one participant mentioned that they have a printed newspaper that is distributed each Monday to all their campuses statewide. That newspaper’s website is also continually updated and as such employees are sent an email each day functioning as a mini e-bulletin containing links back to the newspaper’s website. Said Charles at Blue University, We have a print edition, we have a website updated constantly as news warrants, and then Monday through Friday we also send an email to all employees with links to the latest news on the [newspaper’s] website. So, there’s three ways that people can get news that is in the [newspaper] in the print edition, through the website, and then the stories we highlight each day in the email. (Line 20)

All participants stated they used e-newsletters with internal audiences. E-newsletter frequency ranged from daily distribution to once-per-week or several times each semester depending on the institution. These communication vehicles included a combination of news and general information, as well as event and marketing updates. Beth at Gold University said, “We also have an e-newsletter that goes out quarterly also internally and externally so all of our news is sort of gathered and saved for quarterly newsletters” (Line 73). Glen at Green University said his office provides an e-newsletter “that we update on a regular bases that provides information
on research, student features, faculty features, videos etcetera related to what’s going on on-campus” (Line 14). They also distribute a presidential e-newsletter twice per year.

Practitioners Are Generally Not Targeting Social Media to Employees

Some participants mentioned the use of social media but it was always in the context that internal audiences could see what is posted for external audiences, not that any social media is being particularly targeted to internal audiences. Only one university mentioned specifically using social media with respect to internal audiences. Beth at Gold University said, “We will send things out on email and we will put it out on our Twitter account, Facebook and Instagram. But, sometimes we only put info out on social media and not send an email because faculty and staff just get flooded with emails” (Line 66). Beth also posts some announcements to the university’s web page and tweets them out too knowing some employees may see them.

Green University uses Zignal to track social media use. This media intelligence software service aggregates the university’s social media engagements. Zignal provides a score so their clients can compare their university with similar universities. For example, Green University knows that some of the local universities it compares itself to may have more Twitter followers but that Green University’s followers have a higher level of engagement. “Our Twitter engagement is higher than those two universities. Even though they have more followers, our followers are doing more with our content” (Line 151). However, Glen admits they can’t tell if users are students or employees. “That depends on what that person puts on their Twitter profile” said Glen, (Line 159). If employees chose to follow, but not identify as employees of Green University, Glen has no way of knowing how many of Green University’s Twitter followers are actually employed by the university. It appears that although social media is not generally targeted towards internal audiences, senior level public relations practitioners in this study
recognize that internal audiences may be looking at the social media accounts of the university but they have no way to know in what numbers this is occurring.

**Face-to-Face Meetings Still Have Value in a Digital Age**

Participants also mentioned that they still use meetings such as presidential ‘town halls’ or open office hours targeted to employee audiences as a face-to-face form of communication. In reflecting about presidential office hours, Red University’s David said, “In the beginning it was pretty spotty, no one came but over time people got comfortable with it and we usually have people waiting in the hallway to meet with him” (Line 24). Red University also hosts presidential/vice presidential community forums for employees twice a semester. Likewise, Gold University’s president addresses employees after each board meeting that occurs several times per year. It is not required that anyone attend but turnout for the meetings is always good. “He doesn’t hide anything, bad news or good. He just puts it all out there and we have open discussion” said Beth. Silver University’s president has town hall meetings with the various colleges within his university. Some practitioners facilitate having vice presidents sit in on other vice president’s staff meetings as a way of cross communicating in a face-to-face environment. “I’ll go to each of the other vice presidents’ staff meetings and they will each go to mine. The idea is cross communication. People might be more comfortable if they are in their offices and they are able to ask another vice president questions” said David (Line 17).

**Interview Questions 3 and 10 Asked Participants How They Decide What Can Be Communicated to Employees and Which Entities at Their Institution Can Communicate Directly to Employees**

Senior level public relations practitioners generally had autonomy to decide what to communicate and how to script it. They also have the ability to determine the vehicles used to
disseminate the message to internal audiences. Most indicated that their office becomes involved in message dissemination when an issue will affect employees across the institution.

**Practitioners Generally Decide What Gets Communicated to Employees**

At Silver University they look at the impact that the message will have as a determining factor. “Whatever it is you are talking about on [sic] employees and you think about the either changes, policies, or practices of the issues that are confronting the institution or the day-to-day stuff that is communicated” said Mike (Line 114). His office generally gets involved in “matters of particular substance” (Line 116). Other participants said similar things. “We get involved when we feel everyone needs to know – needs to be conveyed with one message, once voice. If you have several groups working on something we’ll kind of funnel it through our office so it is coming through us” said Beth of Gold University.

At Green University internal communications related to university wide policies generally go to the president’s office for review prior to release. However, releases of less universal issues are sometimes reviewed by senior vice presidents. “They will review it if it in their division, depending upon what the communication is but anything from a university-wide perspective with a large impact will be reviewed by the president and signed off on before it is sent” said Glen (Line 86).

David meets weekly with his president to discuss what internal communications are pending. “Sometimes that is a two second conversation and sometimes it is an hour. It just depends on what is going on” he said (Line 173). Beth meets with her president on a monthly basis (Line 224). Other participants did not have standing meeting with their presidents, but indicated they do meet with them on an as-needed basis. Size of the university may also impact communication to internal audiences.
The University’s Structure Impacts the Communication Process as Well as Who Communicates to Internal Audiences

The largest public university in the study has its internal communication driven by its decentralized structure. “We have 19 different schools and colleges and in some way those units communicate to their employees directly, not necessarily everything flowing directly through central communications which I am a part of” said Charles (Line 9). Also at Blue University nearly as many employees work for the health care network as do the university. Although Charles is responsible for all employee communication including the healthcare employees there is a senior level communicator within that entity that also communicates to those employees directly. However, Charles added that as a large public university they have a special responsibility to be open and transparent with their employees (Line 112) and that often informs what his office releases. Aside from the president, other departments or units on campus can, and do, use the services of the public relations practitioners and their teams.

The Public Relations Function Is Seen as a Resource for Campus Entities to Use When They Need to Communicate Internally

Participants also expressed that many of their colleges or units would seek their team’s assistance when those entities needed to communicate internally. Said Glen of Red University, “We’ve gotten pretty good in communicating that it needs to come through us” (Line 184). He added that other entities on campus use his office for university wide communication and that “I think they see us as a tool, not as another hurdle for them” (Line 317). At Green University they have proactively tried to meet with various entities on campus to inform them of their communication support. Noting that campuses can be siloed and compartmentalized Glen and his team explain to others how their department can support other departments. “As a university it is sometimes not necessarily knowable to everyone on campus what the options are. If you are
pushing a new book...hosting an event on campus and want to get people there…we provide assistance and a service to people” said Glen (Lines 126, 139, & 132). David at Red University also sees his department as a service-orientated one and refers to those who use his department’s services as ‘clients,’ (Line 307) and Mike at Silver University does this as well, (Line 202). However this is not to say that these public relations and communication departments are the only entities that release internal communication to employees. Other entities on campus also release information directly to internal audiences.

**Practitioners Recognize That Other Entities Can Communicate Directly to Employees and Are Not Threatened by This**

In addition to the university’s president who can directly communicate with internal audiences, all participants also named Human Resources as an entity that communicates directly to employees. Depending upon what the topic of communication was Human Relations often uses the services of the public relations practitioners in crafting or disseminating communications. Routine items such as reminders to sign up for yearly benefit renewal may be directly communicated whereas larger items may need public relations assistance.

At Silver University a major change was taking place with regards to changes in a fair labor standard. This would reclassify some employees from those who were eligible to receive overtime pay to those that could not be. Mike and his team worked with Human Resources to develop communications to the approximately 2,600 affected employees. Materials were created for supervisors. In addition a website with frequently asked questions and links was launched and other communication tools were drafted to help employees understand the changes in the law as well as who is affected and how this process would unfold and what impact it would have on paychecks moving forward.
Four of the six participants mentioned significant internal communication by athletics making that entity the next most frequently named department that communicates directly with employees. “Athletics, for example, speaks directly when they offer discounted tickets to employees for example to a Blue University volley ball game” said Charles (Line 172). Athletic communication includes reminders of games, special employee offers and other sports related news or event information.

Other entities that can communicate internally and were briefly mentioned by participants were the Office of Advancement, Information Technology, Academic Affairs, Campus Ministry and the Campus Police Department. Marketing is not listed here as each of the participants is seated within the marketing communications function. In general, one participant desired more contact with other deans and departments as those entities plan their own internal communication messages. Mike of Silver University wants to increase interaction and coordination from his department with other units. “It would help if there were some greater interaction with the department and the deans or colleges on some of their communication efforts” (Line 261).

Not All Internal Audiences Have the Same Access to Communication

In addition to whom participants can communicate with and which other entities on campus can directly communicate to internal audiences, there is the consideration that some internal audiences have unique communication needs. Participants recognized that in communicating information to internal audiences they had to be cognizant that not all audiences access information in the same way. For example, at Blue University the employees who work for the health care network may not have regular access to electronic communication the way that higher education administration and educators do. Therefore at Blue University they have
recognized the need to provide printed materials to the health care staff as well as electronic messaging. Said Charles,

We deliver several large bundles of the print edition (of the weekly newsletter) to the hospital and they break it down and distribute it internally through their system so it actually gets to the break rooms where the nurses and the doctors when they have 10 minutes to put their feet up, they have got something there to read. (Line 77)

Similarly, Ann at Purple University made a key discovery from an internal communications focus group regarding communication needs. Her data informed her that not all of her university’s internal audiences accessed information in the same way.

We needed a specialized internal communications strategy for our physical plant and our security staff. Because they are out on campus all day long and they don’t sit at a desk and look at their email. Many of them do not even check their university email accounts regularly. So relying on email to get information to them is a big misstep. That was an epiphany moment. (Line 248)

**Some Internal Communication Is for Marketing Purposes**

The majority of the participants recognized that a portion of their communication is not just to provide information, but also to provide information with a marketing purpose even targeted to internal audiences. Recalling the titles of the participants reaffirms that all work within the marketing function of their respective universities. Participants titles are: Chief of Staff/Vice President of Communication and Marketing, Vice President of Marketing, Director of University Relations (who reports to the Vice President of Marketing), Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer, Director of Communications and Media Relations (who reports to the Chief
Marketing Officer), and the Director of Public Affairs and Internal Communication (who reports to the Vice President for Global Communication and Strategic Initiatives).

Said Beth at Gold University, “My office is a part of the Office of Marketing. So a lot of the time the news I am generating is with a marketing slant” (Line 5). Glen of Green University said that one of the things that was very important when he began at that university was to meet with as many people on campus as possible, “to let them know about the marketing office, what our vehicles are that we use, how we can help them, get information to them about what our options are” (Line 213). This was because he felt that whenever you have a large organization that may have units that operate in a ‘silo’ and are very segmented. Glen believes it is necessary for those units to understand the scope of what the chief university communications function does. As such he works with a variety of university staff to help them understand how his department can help inform as well as market to internal (and external) audiences. For example, if a professor is having a book published or a college is hosting a speaker, Glen and his team will not only provide that information to external audiences but will promote it internally as well.

David of Red University said that marketing should fall under the domain of the chief communicators for a university at the highest levels because communication lays groundwork for the university as a whole. “I think most schools are understanding that marketing is not something you put under the advancement person or the admissions person. It is something [sic] – someone – that needs to have a seat at the management table” (Line 353). Ann believes that her all her internal and external communication helps her institution as a whole in several ways.

To me we are laying the groundwork our job is to grow visibility and our job is to improve reputation and to lay the foundation for enrollment management to recruit students and for advancement to be out there to raise funds. I think that
we are not always considered a revenue generator but we are getting to the point where people recognize we are somewhat invaluable to the revenue generators. Certainly either one of those operations could do their jobs without us but it would be that much more difficult to accomplish goals without having some kind of general awareness. (Line 348)

**Interview Questions 2, 4, and 6 Asked Participants How They Obtain Feedback From Employees and Judge the Effectiveness of Internal Communication Efforts**

Some participants use formal and strategic data collection on their internal communication efforts. Most participants in this research indicated they are using informal methods. These ad hoc methods are not strategically planned and do not seem to be top of mind by practitioners

**Formal Data Collection Occurs Rarely**

Although several participants expressed that they had some level of formal data collection regarding internal communication, by far Purple University had conducted the most formal research in this area. Every three years they undergo significant research. The last research was conducted in 2016 and the next will take place in 2019. The 2016 data they have been analyzed informs Ann’s 5-year strategic communications plan. Several kinds of research were conducted including surveys and focus groups. The first survey included specific communications questions regarding internal communications to employees. “We used that quantitative data to really help us identify areas in which we needed to dig a little deeper for the qualitative research so the two played significant roles” (Line 94).

Next, her department conducted focus groups with nearly 70 employees. The purpose of the study was to have conversations centered on perceptions of, and potential improvements to,
internal communication. Participants discussed ways in which there can be more efficient use of email messaging that will increase the possibility that internal audiences will pay attention to the communication. Resultantly Ann and her team will be decreasing the size of messages and writing them more concisely with greater use of bullet points. “Very short and sweet and focusing simply on those nuts and bolts that people need to be able to do their jobs” (Line 24). In addition, marketing focused communications will be placed in separate emails or newsletters than the ‘nuts and bolts’ informational communication items (Line 27).

A third form of research conducted was the Quality Culture Explorer. This third party survey focuses on the kind of culture at an organization with respect to behavior, values and attitudes. It also includes questions about how information is available and communication processes within the organization and levels of trust in that information and communication processes. Results from this instrument indicated there were some concerns with internal communication as well as data showing that for Purple University’s employees they did not prefer use of social media or texting in order to do their jobs. “Social media is not the place where they want people pushing day-to-day information. It is there way to interact with their peer group. Texting can be seen as intrusive” said Ann (Line 131). Consistently across all forms of research it was found that employees prefer email as their primary form of communication. Ann and team are now tracking open rates and click through rates as a result of this research. Of her data collection she said, “I think looking at those results and identifying where improvements have been noted and where areas of concern might still lie is one of the key ways we can evaluate effectiveness” said Ann (Line 244).

Red University has also conducted some formal internal communication research. They directed both an annual survey specially asking about internal communication and conduct focus
groups. Said David, “We ask them a series of formal questions about what we have attempted; and if it suits them and (then we) ask for directives” (Line 42). All survey results are directed to a faculty chair that then compiles the results. This is done as a safety measure just in case staff are [sic] afraid to give us frank feedback (Line 45). From the data David has concluded that internal audiences have a favorable perception of what his staff is trying to do (Line 231). “I think people know there is an effort being put forth every year and that we are trying to work hard at internal communication. You have to keep naming it. You have to keep telling people” he says (Line 47). In speaking of the focus groups David stressed that the best thing one can do is actively listen to what participants are sharing when his team is asking what they can do better (Line 211). Focus groups are held twice per year.

At Green University plans are underway for a social media and content marketing audit to see what kind of social media usage is conducted on campus by entities outside of the communication office as well as examining what communication vehicles are effective as well as looking at engagement rates. As part of this effort Zignal, an outside social media tracking service, has been contracted to gather data. Early data results indicate that the social media followers of Green University are not as numerous as those of the university’s to which Green University compares itself, but they have a greater quality of engagement and activity. A drawback to this data though is that unless social media users self-identify as Green University employees, David cannot tell which university employees are following Green University on social media.

Another form of more formal internal communication data collection is used at Green University. David’s staff sends out a twice-per-semester presidential newsletter. When released
this includes a specific email address so that readers to reply and comment back to the president. “That goes to our office and we forward it to him at his office to respond” (Line 28).

Gold University does not have any formal data collection in place as far as surveys or focus groups. They do gauge internal communication success by attendance numbers. “If we have an event we can judge by attendance and who is there” said Beth (Line 109). However, depending on the event, this is unreliable. If an event is open to the public it may have both internal and external audiences attending and there is no process in place to differentiate the groups. If an event is for staff only, such as the town hall meetings with the president, attendance may be skewed. This can occur if departments require their staff to attend even though the event is said to be voluntary.

Blue University formally gathers data on its internal communication in their multiple channels electronically. “We check the open rate of the emails. Click through rates on the website and we allow commenting on our stories” said Charles (Line 46). For their electronic news site they also can see what is trending. “We have a widget on our website that says what the most popular stories of the day are” he said (Line 126). In addition, Charles generally has a positive impression from his internal audience with respect to his communication to them. “My impression is it is generally positive from all those different (formal) measures: click throughs, comments, response to events, etcetera, etcetera” he said (Line 157).

Another form of success tracking at Blue University comes from the sale of advertising in their publications, both in print or electronic. Charles uses this as another form of data collection. “Lots of units use the advertising to promote events, lectures, visiting scholars….they give us feedback by advertising ad renewing their contract for the next year as a vote of confidence” he
Silver University admits that ‘The honest admission is that we don’t do as much assessment and feedback as we need to” said Mike adding “it’s not nearly as well organized or comprehensive as it needs to, should [sic] be (Lines 65 & 71). He notes that they have not been proactive in building in measures of effectiveness in the various internal communication vehicles (Line 193). He notes that in the past there may have been ‘a survey or two’ (Line 69) but that it was only in relation to a single communication newsletter. He did not comment on what data that yielded. In explaining why there is a lack of formal data with regards to the success or failure of internal communication efforts Mike said, “In terms of measuring and ensuring of what best practices need to be; it’s an excuse but you get limited resources, limited time and unfortunately [sic] ends up falling by the wayside” (Line 199).

**Informal Methods of Data Collection Occur With Most Participants**

The majority of participants relied on anecdotal feedback that happened to be shared with them – meaning they did not seek it out. Gold University is very reliant on informal feedback. Said Beth, “We are a small organization so it is easy to get feedback from just talking” (Line 27). She speaks to school chairs and deans in order to obtain feedback regarding what kind of information they would like to see communicated. Beth believes strongly in word-of-mouth feedback (Line 107). Stating she has an open door policy, she believes people do contact her if they have an issue with her communication. “As a formal process we have not put one in place – of feedback – they know where to find us…they will let us know” (Line 36). Blue University also sees merit in non-formal data collection. “We find our employees are not bashful about
telling us what they think about our communication and whether they [sic] are effective or not, whether they know about something or not” said Charles (Line 44).

Mike at Silver University said, “The honest admission is we don’t do as much assessment and feedback as we need to, as we should, as I know we need to do. A lot of it is anecdotal and some of it is historical as people are used to getting that information” (Line 65). However he adds people are not shy about picking up the phone and contacting him or stopping him around campus to discuss items from his office as a way of informal feedback.

Mike did note that in the case of his university he is under a new president. The former president resigned after a vote of non-confidence by faculty senate. This lead to some unique internal communication challenges for Mike and his team. “I think our particular history and particularly the history of the last couple of years has been one of great distrust between the employees … and a lack of trust in the administration” he said (Line 220). He mentions that this is a complicated topic but that under the new president there is an emphasis on ‘transparency’ (Line 226). He adds that in all they do they are “being honest and open ad candid and sharing information and having communication [sic] and feedback is what he and we are trying to do” (Line 227). He adds that right now “the trust gap is real and we are trying to address that…it's a real issue here” (Line 230). At Red University they also gather anecdotal feedback to supplement formal data collection. “A lot of it is sitting and listening and saying talk to us from your seat – what do you think we can do better in terms of communicating” (Line 211).

**Interview Question 5 Asked Participants How Do They Perceive the Relationship Between Internal Communication and External Communication**

Ann of Purple University said there is a relationship between internal relations and external relations and her university is trying to harness this. “I think we have started to take an
approach that values a combination of both paid outreach and grassroots outreach” (Line 269). This is due to her knowledge of the connection between internal and external communication.

First and foremost I think that internal communications increases satisfaction with your job and if people are satisfied with their jobs on campus then they are more likely to say positive things about the place they work for and talk to others about [the university]. (Line 267)

At her small private institution Ann will never have large marketing and communications budget. However, she is expected to compete with the larger state universities that are geographically near her campus and compete with her for employees and students (Line 271). “We have to find more creative ways to expand visibility and having your people talk about the institution in positive ways I think is really important” she says (Line 274).

All Participants Agreed There Is a Relationship Between Internal and External Communication as Both Have Impacts on the Other

At Red University David says he absolutely sees a relationship between internal and external communications. “They are absolutely part of the same; two sides of the same coin. We work very intentionally internally but at the same time our messaging has to match up with what we are talking about to external constituent groups” (Line 219). Beth at Gold University concurs saying there is a relationship and they “support each other because a lot of the time we use our internal people to communicate externally if that makes sense” (Line 131). Mike at Silver University posits that “anything that is internal is external at a public university” (Line 204) and he adds, “The primacy of the internal audience to your organizational and institutional effectiveness is well documented” he said (Line 206).
Glen at Green University notes that the increased reliance of social media usage in the last decade has really accelerated and blurred the relationship between internal and external communication (Line 177).

There is a lot more synergy now between what we are doing internally and what we are doing externally. Because through social media both sets of audiences are seeing the same content, so it is not separate like it may have been when you were sending one email to campus about what you are doing and that may be very different than the conversation or the message you may be having in the press release. (Line 172)

He posits also that social media has greatly condensed communication response time and “You have to get out in front of things much differently than you did before” (Line 183). According to Glen this is due to the fact that on social media it is so much easier, as well as quicker, to take a message someone has sent you and repost it or transmit it to other places or persons (Line 179).

**Interview Question 7 Asked if Participants Regarded Employees as Ambassadors for Their Institution**

Glen at Green University does regard employees as ambassadors for his institution (Line 221). As such he feels part of his job is to make sure they have all the information they need in order to communicate good things about the university. “Faculty members really enjoy being (here), enjoy the mission and are really strong ambassadors because of their love of the university” he said (Line 252). He adds that one of his goals with respect to internal communication is to assist faculty and staff in knowing the overall value of Green University, its mission, and the overall importance of the work done there. He says this results in making
“everybody feel better about the work you are all doing on a daily basis” (Line 264) and that impacts what is said about the university.

**All Participants Acknowledged the Role of Employees as Ambassadors**

In a similar sense Silver University sees its employees as ambassadors who have informational needs regarding people, policies, and events occurring on campus. “There’s a lot of great stuff happening at the university and we want to communicate that information” said Mike (Line 23). He and his team have created a pride campaign that uses advertising, public relations and social media to spotlight good works and victories on campus. Directed specifically at internal audiences the campaign talks about the good work of the faculty and students, experiential learning and working with local businesses. It points out the connections between the university and the community in a wide range of areas (Line 244). This was done pointedly for employees he said adding “Its way for them to show their pride and to be ambassadors” he said (Line 248).

By virtue of its main campus size, that it has two other large satellite campuses, and runs a healthcare system, Blue University is a major employer as well as a large public university. This impacts how Charles sees the use of its ambassadors.

There is hardly a conversation that (in the city of the main location) that does somehow loop back to the university in one-way or another. So, I think our employees have to be ambassadors whether they recognize that or not.

Certainly every one of us represents the university in one way or another, some more publically than others. (Line 162)

Beth at Gold University also sees a relationship between internal and external communication. “They support each other because a lot of the time we use our internal people to
communicate externally” (Line 130). Purple University also acknowledges that employees are ambassadors for the institution. We do not have the power or the budget or the resources to grow visibility on our own so anytime we can use audience as extension of our reach it is really critical; and faculty and staff are part of that” (Line 300).

**Some Participants Had Formal Methods of Employee Ambassadorship**

David at Red University also sees employees as ambassadors and spends time “Trying to get them to see themselves that way” (Line 280). He has worked with the Admissions Department and they have a more formal ambassador program in place. The Partners Program allows any employee to have a more formal ambassador role with the end goal of recruiting students. If a staff person is interested they will receive formal training. One example of how a staff recruit can formally be an ambassador is to write a hand written letter delivered by the post office to a prospective student who has been accepted but has not yet enrolled. David notes that prospective students are used to getting letters from Admissions, Financial Aid or Athletic coaches but not from anyone else. He had a librarian come to him who wanted to be an ambassador in the program. He was delighted to help train her.

Imagine the letter from the librarian who says ‘I have been here for 25-years and I love it. I would love to see you and don’t worry, when you walk though the doors of the library you’ll have my personal attention’. That’s meaningful. That’s powerful. (Line 296)

**Interview Question 11 Asked Participants What Were Their Beliefs and Practices Regarding Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function in a Higher Education Context**

Charles of Blue University agrees that public relations must operate in a strategic capacity with upper management. “I agree and we are. The Vice President of Communication is
an executive officer” (Line 206). He adds that that position by its very nature talks more to the University President than any other executive position and is in almost constant contact with all the other executive officers as well (Line 210). Glen at Green University works with the highest level of officers at his university (Line 364). He perceives his function as an important component of providing information to the larger Green University community.

With an organization of this size, with this many moving parts, with so many different audiences, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and different variations of those it is extraordinarily important for our office to be able to provide up-to-date, accurate and prompt information to folks as quickly as possible. (Line 344)

**Unanimously Participants Stated That the Public Relations Function Must Be Part of the Upper Level Management Function**

David at Red University emphasized that communication function that “needs to have a seat at the management table – at least if they are not there all the time they are brought in on a regular basis so they are seen” (Line 355). That way planning for communication is “absolutely part of everything everyone does” (Line 364). He notes that communication is a specialized discipline that offers assistance to all parts of the institution and should be recognized as such. “We have a CFO here who doesn’t try to be a communicator because her strength is numbers and reading spreadsheets. But she understands the value of communicating and partnering with us” (Line 365). Beth at Gold University agreed that it is “extremely important” her position does work in a strategic capacity with the President and other university officers in the way she currently operates (Line 212). “I get dismayed when I hear of universities cutting marketing or public relations staff because that is really your army out there. The one that is giving out your
message” (Line 221). She adds that while all the other entities on campus are “busy doing their own thing” her office exists to “funnel all that news out” (Line 223).

Some Participants Are Concerned That Public Relations Could Be Subjugated to Another Discipline

David is concerned however about the subjugation of the communications function to Admissions or Advancement departments that occurs at some universities.

I think there are two 800-pound gorillas at the institution these days. One is the Vice President for Admissions and Vice President for Advancement. If you work for one of them you naturally will spend the bulk of your time with that as your focus and they are really differed audiences. And so I think the communications structure should report to the president and those who need your services. It is the right thing to do and I think consistent to where most places are going. (Line 369)

Ann at Purple University says her function is part of upper management for strategic reasons. She works very closely with the President and executive team during all strategic planning and aligns her department’s strategic goals and mission to that of the overall university’s strategic plan and continually will reaffirm and revise messaging strategies based on the university-wide plan if it evolves (Line 371).

Ann is also concerned, like David, about universities who place communication under Admissions or Advancement. She often must explain how what her office does is different from the mission of Admissions or Advancement. She posits that either one of those operations could do their jobs without her department but it would be much more difficult to accomplish their goals without her team providing general awareness of the university and its good works and mission (Line 356).
To me we lay the groundwork. Our job is to grow visibility and our job is to improve reputation and lay the foundation for enrollment management to recruit students and for advancement to be out there to raise funds…we are not always considered a revenue generator but we are getting to the point where people recognize we are somewhat invaluable to the revenue generators. (Line 351)

Ann sees her office as the keepers of the identity. She feels it is her job to make sure that communications to all audiences are authentic and truthful. “It does us no good to misrepresent ourselves because what we are going to end up with may not be an enrollment problem on the front end but it will be a retention problem down the road” (Line 362).

Beth had some unusual insight into how her role could be diminished and not fully function if subjugated and removed from the management table. In a prior position Beth worked at a university that did not support her function to operate in a strategic manner and at the same level as other chief officers. Her experience offers interesting insight into a communications function barred from direct contract with the upper management of the university.

“It was working in a vacuum. It was extremely hard to know what was important to that leader and institution – it was difficult” (Line 236). In her year at that university Beth never even met the president of the institution. If Beth had anything she wanted presidential input on she was required to show it to the Vice President of Advancement and then he would present it to the President on her behalf. “I had the exact same level of position there as I do here. Exactly. I did not have that pipeline and was getting all my information fed through the Advancement office. I was in a vacuum” (Line 239). “I pushed to have meetings (with the president) and was told no
this is not the way she operates. So, there are some (people) out there who just see public relations as this little function over here – or scary” (Line 251).

Ann found out quickly her position was not a strategic communications one but was seen as a non-strategic position subjugated to the university’s fundraising department. “So they saw me as alumni and reaching out for the purpose of securing donations, but it was not seen as a marketing arm. Admissions had their own marketing person. So, we weren’t even involved in Admissions” (Line 242).

This presented an additional challenge to Beth as often she found there were contrasting messages coming from different parts of the university to their various publics. “It was really interesting they would be promoting one message and we had a different message” (Line 248). She found herself particularly frustrated because there would be things occurring on campus “and I had no idea that they were taking place so I could not communicate about them or promote them” (Line 249).

**Interview Question 12 Asked Practitioners What Are Your Beliefs and Practices Regarding the Role of Relationship Management Within the Public Relations Function in a Higher Education Context**

Beth at Gold University says that the most important part of her job is relationships (Line 120). Within her university she has cultivated relationships with faculty, deans and works closely with persons in Human Resources, Student Affairs, Advancement and Alumni Relations. Keeping the line of communication open is a key part of her relationship strategy (Line 121). “Internally it is all about relationships; getting feedback from different faculty members or deans or the provost or president about how we are communicating and if we are doing an effective job” (Line 115).
All of the Participants Envision Their Roles as Boundary Spanning

In order to accomplish that across disciplines they all said how hard they work to establish, cultivate and maintain good relationships with internal constituencies. Most acknowledged that this is an ongoing process that eventually reaps rewards for them. “I think we are learning that we need to do a better job of building internal relationships on campus and to foster understanding about what we are doing and what it is resulting in” said Ann of Purple University adding that it is a real challenge to do that (Line 381).

Relationship management to David at Red University is “It's everything, absolutely everything” (Line 379). To him, the core nature of his position is being credible with people who rely on you as well as making sure you have good relationships with gatekeepers who have access to either knowledge or the people who have the knowledge a practitioner needs to do their job (Line 384). David is also quick to recognize if a relationship is not working and he and his staff then analyze it and work to improve it. “We are going to spend time with these groups we don’t have a strong relationship with because we know we need them and they need us” (Line 391). He adds that you can’t ignore it or just assume it will just get better either (Line 397). He emphasized that “Relationships are at the core of what we do” (Line 399).

Ann also states that she has had corporate public relations positions in the past but that “higher ed is a whole different animal” with regard to how it perceives the public relations function (Line 386). She works hard to build relationships particularly with academics that, in her opinion, have a tendency to question things more than corporate employees. She says that kind of questioning is specifically challenging because “I think it’s taken very personally and you feel like your expertise is being questioned” (Line 390). It even makes her “wonder why you are even here when somebody else thinks they can do their job better than you” (Line 391). This
situation frustrates her. However, Ann has adapted her communication style so to provide ‘evidence’ or data of practice to academics. That way she demonstrates why her office does what it does and this helps her build relationships with the academics. She modified her relationship with faculty by learning to communicate with them in ways that makes it easier for them to ‘digest’ what she is saying. In summarizing her epiphany moment regarding how to talk to faculty she says “It just means that there is another part of internal communications that isn’t the institution communicating to the employee but the employees communicating with one another and that is really, really critical” (Line 399).

Charles at Blue University recognizes in the environment of his larger, decentralized university he and his staff must work hard and develop relationships in order to work effectively. “The more that we can build personal relationships with the people inside the units we work with the more effective we can be…collaboration is key” (Line 218). He also said that by working so diligently to cultivate relationships he and his team not only help others to understand his department’s role at the university but also how his team can collaborate to assist other entities there as well. “Everything is about relationships and trying to help people understand how we can help them” (Line 225).

**Building Internal Relationships Can Result in Better External Relationships**

Ann also understands the value of building relationships across campus both internally and externally. She discusses that her office has good community relations with the city’s government in which they are located and relationships within the community in general are very positive. As she previously stated her belief in linkage of internal and external communications Ann knows that “everything that is done here is inevitably going to impact something else” and
that sometimes that impact is on campus and often is reaches public audiences but that relationship management is both “extremely important and extremely challenging” (Line 378).

Glen at Green University also believes in the importance of relationship management and also says it is “the most important part of what we do” (Line 373). In his prior career Glen worked in a public relations capacity for several politicians. On a daily basis he finds he uses those skills in his current job. “A lot of the relationship skills I developed in politics, I really use I public relations…developing conversations with voters, working with candidates, going door-to-door…” (Line 375). Glen spends a lot of time meeting with deans, department heads, senior vice presidents as well as professors and students in order to be aware of what is occurring on campus (Line 381). He wants to have top of mind presence to all those groups. “To have those relationships so that if something happens I am their first call; then doing an equal amount of relationship building with reporters and external stakeholders to make sure we have a good relationship” (Line 383). He adds, “I have to know what’s going on, who is doing it, how they’re doing it. And what the message is a quickly as possible” (Line 378).

**Trust Is Another Important Aspect of Relationships**

Mike at Silver University said, “Another word I might use for that is trust. I believe it needs to be built upon a foundation of trust and openness and honestly continuing communication” (Line 303). He added what is key to the functioning of his discipline is that it is relationship based. “It is not transactional. It needs to be relationship focused” (Line 305).

Also relating to trust, Ann at Purple University said, “I have been sharing this (topic) a lot with my staff, in terms of relationship building, when you build good solid relationships with people small things don’t turn into crises” (Line 426). She added that if you have good relationships then if things don’t work out as expected, or there is an issue, persons with whom
you have a relationship are much more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt. Rather than being accusatory or combative “They are much more likely to come to you in a much more congenial way and talk through the issue” (Line 429).

**Finally, Interview Question 13 Asked Participants What Were Their Beliefs and Practices Regarding Symmetrical Communication**

“We work really, really hard at that [symmetrical communication]” said David at Red University (Line 409). “The field has to be such that you communicate and when you communicate with people you are getting information back. He is continually seeking formal data via surveys and focus groups as well as interviewing members of the president’s advisory council each year to collect their feedback on his communication efforts. David said, “You have to be willing to ask people are they hearing you? What are they hearing? Where is it falling short and then respond” (Line 417).

**Listening Is Important**

Beth at Gold University said “I think it is really important to be listening to the audiences that we are trying to communicate to because if they are not hearing what (information) they think they should be hearing, then they are going to tune you out” (Line 267). She adds that having two-way communication is important (Line 274). David also mentioned the importance of listening to your audience. “The field has to be that you are such that you communicate and when you communicate with people you are getting information back and you and not just telling people” he said (Line 419). Charles at Blue University also mentioned listening as a key part of symmetrical communication. “I think it is crucial too. You can’t be talking ‘at’ employees and not listening to our employees” (Line 235). He also mentions the use of tools that data
regarding that is reading or seeing what electronic and social media communications and commenting on them and sharing them as part of his symmetrical communication (Line 245).

**All Participants Said They Use Symmetrical Communication but There Is Little Evidence of This**

Many are using *asymmetrical* communication as there were few examples from participants of true symmetrical communication that impacts the way, or the content, communicated by the public relations entity. Ann and David, who had the most formal internal communication data collection methods did have evidence of symmetrical communication in practice. Ann at Purple University uses yearly formal or planned symmetrical communication channels that permit the formal collection data to adjust her team’s communication efforts. But she may also be in the minority. Ann emphasizes the need formal mechanisms to ensure that you are “capturing the big picture” (Line 424).

David, on an annual basis, seeks formal additional data to improve internal communication efforts. He says, “You have to be willing to ask people are they hearing you? What are they hearing? Where is it falling short and then respond. It has nothing to do with me; it has to do with the field. The field has to be such that you communicate and when you communicate with people you are getting information back and you are not just telling people things,” he said (Line 418). He has provided examples of different kinds of communication vehicles, such as town hall meetings, that were not embraced by employees and as a result of this data collection those kinds of meetings were discontinued and he is now trying other communication means to disseminate the information that would have been promoted in the town hall meetings to his university’s employees.
Glen at Green University responded to this question by stating he does not feel his university uses formal mechanisms to permit two-way communication and data collection enough. His university is struggling just to know what their audience is seeing in terms of the communication coming from his office. “One of the things we are looking to do is try to come up with a better sense of who is looking at what” (Line 406). He would like to implement formal programs from a content marketing perspective. “We need to ramp up more to see who is reading our stuff and who’s reading what stuff” (Line 417). Glen is examining all his office’s forms of communication and asking “how is the content and how does it get to his audiences? What are the actual engagement and pass along metrics on each kind of communication his office sends out or publishes? How are people viewing the content and do they like what they see?” (Line 414). Similarly, Beth and Charles did not reveal examples of true symmetrical communication that results in message or program adjustment.

Mike at Silver University said that he is very focused on two-way communication, but his examples are not of symmetrical communication.

Meeting and talking with, and taking questions and just having dialogue with colleges, with work units – doing a night shift to be able to talk to folks what would not be able to be here during the day – having email exchanges with students and employees in the wee hours of the night or morning. Being open and approachable. That is a personal level of communication that is vital. (Line 317).

All the findings from the interview questions are categorized as emergent themes. Discussion of the themes follows.
Important Themes

How higher education senior level public relations practitioners develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees was the overarching question in this study. The following are the emergent themes found in this research.

None of the Participants Have Any Documented Internal Communication Processes

The most impactful theme overall was that although all participants said they needed their internal communication processes documented, *not a single participant had written procedures* regarding internal communication to employees. Yet many had written processes for things like social media communication. Interestingly, communication participants had similar practices and beliefs in four key communication areas.

Be Clear, Concise, Internal First, and Strategic in Your Communications

All stated that their standard practices with regard to communication to employees included four tenants. One, communication must be clear so that it is easily understandable. Two, communication must be concise. Employees are busy and in order for communication to be ‘digested’ and not skipped over, messaging needs to be short. Three, communication must be released internally first so that employees are not first hearing things about the university from other unofficial, non-university sources. Four, communication from the university to its employee publics must be done with intentionality and strategy, not haphazardly and ‘from the hip’.

Use Multiple Channels and Do Not Exclusively Rely on Electric Communication

Another interesting theme noted by several participants, and even called an epiphany moment by one, was that different employee groups don’t access communication the same way.
This resulted in a practice that communications messages may need to be released to different employee subgroups by different vehicles, such as print verses e-mail.

With regard to internal communication processes participants also emphasized the use of multiple channels to deliver messages. Email was the most popular way to reach university employees. Other strategic methods included e-newsletters or printed newsletters or newspapers, social media, face-to-face meetings. The least mentioned communication vehicles were electronic bulletin boards on campus and Internet portals. Participants noted that not all employee groups have regular access to computers and therefore print materials or face-to-face meetings are more valuable tools with those groups.

**Formal Processes of Obtaining Feedback and Judging Effectiveness of Practices Are Needed**

Interestingly, although all participants agreed that they needed to monitor the reach and effectiveness of their internal communication efforts; most were collecting it in an informal, anecdotal ways. With the exception of one participant who had a long-term strategic plan to continually collect data, most formal data collection was sporadically occurring in the forms of: focus groups, surveys, social media tracking, click through rates on various email links as well as open rates for emails and trending story rates on university sites.

Informal effectiveness feedback was gathered in a random basis when the practitioners were approached by members of the university via email, phone call or face-to-face encounters. It is important to note that the informal data collection is *never* planned and participants indicated it occurs sporadically when campus employees seek them out in response to some communication released by the public relations office.
Regardless of method of data collection, all participants stated they needed to more formally and on a planned schedule conduct research to truly ascertain how effective or ineffective their efforts are to internally communicate.

Relationships Are Generally Good With Other Entities Who Also Communicate Internally

Another theme was that practitioners know that there are other entities on campus that directly communicate with employees, but this does not pose a threat to the participants. All participants stated that when communication to employees was of a universal nature requiring all employees need to know something, then the public relations function generally releases the information. Although sometimes they write it and it is released from the office of the president. Practitioners referred to this as ‘university wide’ information or as messaging that impacts university employees as a whole.

Occasionally, there are other entities on campus that need to directly communicate internally with employee groups. Participants expressed that these entities are not necessarily in conflict with, or encroaching on, the domain of the public relations function. Senior level public relations practitioners had a comfort level with those other entities with regard to them communicating directly to employees. Participants were not concerned that there was a conflict of messages sent from those entities verses the messages sent to employees from the public relations function.

No Fear of Encroachment From Other Entities

Participants did not express a fear of encroachment on their own job function or department from others at the university and some stressed how well they work with other internally-communicating entities on campus. For example, Human Resources often sought the assistance of the public relations function when they had very important items they needed to
present to the employee audience. All participants indicated they had good working relationships with other university entities. Practitioners also believe other departments regarded the public relations department as a resource and sought their public relations expertise on certain projects.

Larger public universities reported that the size of their university impacted how often other entities would communicate directly to employee groups. This was due to the fact that some entities on campus were large enough to employ their own trained communicators. For example, although Blue University can, and does, communicate to their health care/hospital division of 20,000+ employees, that division has its own communication staff that directly communicates with its division’s employees. These health care communicators generally do not involve the university’s senior level public relations practitioner when targeting their division’s employees. The same applies to the self-contained satellite campuses at Blue University that are 1-2 hours away from the main campus. Interestingly, this same ‘independence’ is seen in the athletic divisions of all the participating universities. However, it should be noted that communication from Athletics is almost exclusively externally focused. Smaller universities reported fewer occurrences from other campus entities sending out their own internal messages to large employee groups. Practitioners at smaller universities described more incidences where other entities would reach out to the public relations function first for help to plan, craft, and communicate the other entity’s message. Interestingly, the only ‘fear’ that was mentioned by about half the participants was for their position to not be encroached upon, but subjugated to another area such as admissions or advancement.

**The Relationship Between Internal and External Communication Is Acknowledged**

All participants expressed that internal and external communication are related to each other to some extent and that both have value. Two participants commented that they know that
specifically internal communication has a relationship with job satisfaction. All said that internal and external communication messages that contain the same subject matter must be consistent so that the internal audience and external audience information does not vary or contradict.

Practitioners cited that in times when both the internal audience and external audience would be receiving communication regarding the same topic, the internal messages were released first. Practitioners emphasized that in cases like that they counted on the employees to be ambassadors for the university and that is again why it is important that employees hear external news first before it is released to the general public.

Practitioners said with the increase of the social media use it is making it more difficult to release internal news first, have it be read by that audience and then later release the same news to the general public. Practitioners acknowledged that news released internally is often very quickly forwarded electronically to social media and becomes viral. Timelines are now very condensed and this blurs the line between internal and external communication.

**Employees Function as Ambassadors**

Universally the practitioners stated they know employees can function as ambassadors for their universities. Practitioners are mindful of the employee ambassador role as they decide what, and how, to communicate to employees. One university actually has a formal employee ambassador program that includes training for those who wish to be formal ambassadors for the university. Having just reviewed the study’s data in this chapter, we move on to Chapter 6 where conclusions and recommendations will be discussed.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how higher education senior level public relations practitioners develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees. This specific topic within this special context and population had not been studied before. The data suggests to us several things regarding actual communication processes, what is communicated to employees and reveals other entities on campus that communicate directly with the employee (target) population. The study offers insight on how practitioners obtain feedback and judge effectiveness on their efforts. The research questions that guided this study are:

RQ 1. What are the internal communication processes/practices of the public relations function in higher education as described by the senior level practitioner?

RQ 2. What are the practitioner’s processes/practices regarding

(a). public relations as a strategic management function, per the Excellence Study findings, in a higher education context;

(b). the role of relationship management within public relations per the Excellence Study findings, in a higher education context;

(c). if symmetrical communication per the Excellence Study findings, is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment in a higher education context; and
(d). To what extent, if any, does the environment include the 12 attributes of excellent management per the *Excellence Study* findings?

RQ 3. How do senior level public relations practitioners in higher education describe the internal communication practices by other entities in the organization such as the human relations function?

In addition, this study examined practitioners’ beliefs and practices with respect to The *Excellence Study*’s 12 attributes for excellent public relations: a) human resources; b) organic structure; c) internal entrepreneurship; d) symmetrical communications systems; e) leadership; f) strong and participative cultures; g) strategic planning; h) social responsibility; i) support for women and minorities; j) quality as a priority; k) effective operational systems; and l) collaborative societal culture.

Finally, demographic details regarding participants’ educational backgrounds were reviewed. This chapter will review the research themes and findings as well as suggest what this specific research adds to the body of knowledge of this topic in this specific context. Possible policy recommendations will be made and the chapter will conclude with limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

**Findings and Connections to Previous Research**

Regarding public relations theories in actual practice in higher education my research questions examined: (a) public relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within public relations; and (c) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment, the research in this specific context revealed the following.
RQ 1: Describing the Internal Communication Processes/Practices of the Public Relations Function in Higher Education

**Actual processes are not documented.** None of the participants had written internal communication processes *although all said they needed to have such.* Most stated they were uncomfortable about this. Some were currently examining processes in order to document them. Having worked in both the private and government sectors as well as for large and small organizations and in both for-profit and non-profit educational entities in a public relations capacity, I have experienced that public relations processes were documented in writing as a matter of best practice. As a result of my schema, the universal prevalence of *not* documenting any public relations processes by *any* participants in this study was the most surprising theme. This certainly indicates an area of risk that could permit legal action taken against institutions of higher education in some circumstances and makes one wonder if we are (emphasis mine) hiring the right persons for these positions or if they are a liability to the organizations they serve?

Written processes in an organization are very important and critical for a number of reasons.

**Importance of written processes.** Written processes help organizations function effectively and efficiently, and have a direct impact on the bottom line economics of an organization. “Processes exist to the extent that organizations (i.e., campuses, colleges, schools, and departments) invest in them” (Rouse, 2016, p. 2). Rouse (2016) explains that this is done in order to achieve a competitive position and gain economic returns. Teece says that a good management of process is very much dependent on how well it is understood and what is key to understanding a process is that it is documented (1998). As well as aiding understanding, organizations document processes for the purposes of eliminating ambiguity, standardization of operations and quality improvement (Ungan, 2006).
Primary benefits of documented processes. In addition to the direct economic impact resulting from having articulated and recorded processes, three other primary benefits occur: no ambiguity in operations, creation of training material, and items for possible marketing use (Juneja, n.d.). Process documentation eliminates operational ambiguity as all participants in the process understand what the best practices are and what roles are undertaken with respect to them (i.e. who does what and when). This can also reduce the risk of ‘shooting from the hip’ and simply reacting to situations in an ad-hoc and non-strategic manner. Written processes provide benefits as they set forth the guidelines that standardize processes and this results in administrative advantages in that it reduces potential conflict among employees and assists in training new hires with respect to how specifically a job should be performed and by whom (Ungan, 2006).

Archiving processes (standardization of operations) provides training materials for employees by capturing institutional knowledge that can be recalled in a consistent way. Finally, documentation can often provide information for other units in the organization (ex. marketing or the office of the university’s president) to understand the capabilities of the organization/function (Junja, n.d.) and this can aid quality improvement.

Processes provide organization and consistency. An additional problem that may occur as a result of a lack of process documentation is no formalized method or system that aids practitioners to assure their work is organized and consistent. Documentation of process provides standardization. Standardization is defined as the degree to which work rules, policies, and operational procedures are formalized and followed (Jang & Lee, 1998). Documentation resulting from standardization of processes provides consistent operational procedures. Consistency is valued in an organization as it increases efficiency while minimizing uncertainty
and variability (Ungan, 2006). Overall, processes ensure that people are working together to meet the organization’s goals (Garvin, 1995)

A lack of process documentation can directly lead to occurrences and consequences that are surprising and unexpected. It adds an element of chaos to the practice that would not be beneficial to it. In turn, this creates a confusing lack of consistency by the communicators that reflects poorly on the organization as a whole. This situation could result in a lack of confidence by those very internal publics with whom the public relations practitioner seeks to communicate.

Processes provide ways to gauge effectiveness. Another problem with a lack of documented processes is that practitioners will not be able to gauge effectiveness of efforts and what resources are needed in order to conduct the public relations aspects of the position. You cannot measure what you have not defined and explained. Grunig has said that public relations cannot have a role in the strategic management function unless its practitioners have a way to measure effectiveness (Grunig, 2013).

Within the scholarly and trade public journals, there are many articles emphasizing how public relations needs to, and should, measure its effectiveness in order to prove its worth and its professionalism (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Grunig, 2013; Michaelson & Stacks, 2011; Stacks, 2002). Noting this the profession has created organizations to set standards for process documentation and measurement. The Institute for Public Relations has maintained a documentation and measurement commission since 1956 and the International Association of Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (IAMEC) was founded in 1966 (Watson, 2012). Joining those organizations was the Association of Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) in 1997 (Watson, 2012). The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) offers a certification in this area.
Periodicals and textbooks also emphasize the need for process documentation and measurement. *Public Relations Review* has dedicated several issues to the topic of using research to plan and evaluate public relations (Watson, 2012) and Dozier’s *Research Methods in Public Relations* has also been a seminal textbook on the subject (1990) with most subsequent public relations textbooks containing chapters dedicated to this aspect of the practice. While measurement is important, it is also critical to understand *how* your audience wishes to receive communication messaging. Research participants showed understanding of this.

**Practitioners recognize the need for different communication vehicles for different internal subgroups.** Practitioners understood that employee groups are not homogenous. A positive theme was that participants understood that their employee audience was not homogenous and that different groups accessed information in different ways. Literature supports the idea that internal stakeholders are interrelated but not a homogenous mass (Jones, 1995; L’Etang, 2005; Welsh & Jackson, 2007). Most participants in this study indicated that they communicate with employee audiences via multiple channels and take into consideration the audience’s needs when deciding what communications vehicle to use. Although the vast amount of employee communication is sent electronically, specialized audiences who do not have access to electronic means of communication are recognized for their special needs as each communicator tries to reach them by print or face-to-face means. This is the case with audiences like physical plant employees, campus police, or medical professionals (in university hospital settings) who don’t have the time or a place when on duty to access electronic communications.

**What is communicated to internal audiences.** Generally items communicated to employees are university-wide in scope and interest. News items such as construction updates, personnel changes, creation of new programs or merging or elimination of others, or large
awards or grants may be sent internally. Items of interest to specific units and departments only are sent by those entities directly to their employees. However, if departmental (or unit) communication needs are advanced, research participants said they felt those entities do seek guidance or assistance from their office. This results in the public relations staff helping to craft, and sometimes disseminate, departmental (or unit) messages for specific employee subgroups.

**Some internal communication is marketing or branding related.** What is communicated to employee audiences from the participants in this study is generated from two perspectives: informational or marketing. Most of the information or fact-driven communication is designed to help employees with day-to-day operations such as providing facts or directives concerning construction information, benefit information, or personnel changes. However, some information is also provided to this same audience that would be from a marketing and branding perspective. This would include items that would also be externally released like awards, grants, faculty or student success (feel good) stories, or other facts and figures related to student enrollment and recruitment. This is reflected in the literature as a specific kind of communication competency that is critical to an organization. This is because communication to key audiences such as employees reflects upon an organization’s brand and reputation (Malmelin, 2007). The participants in this study were very aware of this fact.

In addition, this recognition by participants of deliberate dissemination of two different kinds of communications messaging may be due to the fact that all who were interviewed have some marketing responsibilities assigned to their positions. Some even have marketing as part of their titles. It was interesting to hear that they differentiated between general information communications to internal audiences and communication to those same persons with a deliberate marketing or brand focus. Clearly all participants in this study were cognizant of this
idea and that informing their employee audience of marketing or branding information helps those employees function as ambassadors for the university. This is also supported in the literature by Ahmed & Rafiq, (2003); Crescendo, (2005); Gruing, (1999); and Rhee, (2004).

Glen mentioned providing marketing information to employees in the context of providing them what they need in order to be better ambassadors for the university (Line 111). Beth also mentioned this in the context of making sure employee ambassadors understand her university’s brand (Line 170). She added that a lot of the news she releases to employees is “written with a marketing slant” (Line 6) and with a purpose of furthering her university’s brand (Line 7). Ann said that her office separates information that employees need to do their day-to-day work verses marketing orientated information as well but that both kinds of communication are sent to that internal audience (Line 7 & 30). Sadly though, few participants were measuring the impact of their efforts to communicate with internal audiences.

**Few practitioners obtain formal feedback to adjust communication or measure success of their efforts.** Few results are formally documented. Very few of the participants have formal processes in place to document results although all admitted they needed to do this. Most use anecdotal means to determine success of efforts, but this is haphazard. Those using anecdotal means did not pointedly seek to evaluate their communication efforts. They only learned of employee impressions of their work if an employee sought them out and took the time to discuss messaging with them.

A minority of participants in this study engaged in the formal collection of data via surveys or focus groups administered by third parties or via the use of electronic tracking of story sharing, tagging, open rates or click-throughs. Those with more formal means of data collection were more confident in their ability to point out areas where communication practices or
messaging was lacking or successful. Those are the same participants who are also formally trying to improve their communication based on the data they examined. This research also looked at what other entities on campus communicate directly to internal audiences.

**RQ 2: Practitioner’s Processes/Practices Regarding Public Relations as a Strategic Management Function, the Role of Relationship Management Within Public Relations, and if Symmetrical Communication Is Used**

Public relations as a strategic management function occurs with all participants. Every participant expressed that their role is conducted as a strategic function with access to the president. Participants indicated they were permitted access to any entity and personnel at their respective universities. All but one of the participants is a senior level public relations practitioner who *directly reports* to the university’s president and attended top-level meetings. The one who only meets with the president on a monthly basis did stress that she can see him as needed as well.

One participant, who at a previous university position did not have direct access to the president, did detail how difficult and ineffective that made her position. Several participants when mentioning the importance of being part of the dominant coalition specifically expressed concern that public relations cannot do its best when it is subjugated to another very narrowly confined communications function such as admissions or advancement in a higher education environment.

All participants acknowledged the role of relationship management in public relations. All senior level practitioners stressed that relationship building and maintenance is key to the success of their positions. Relationships help them to gain knowledge of what is occurring in their environment as well as to help facilitate what their function does and how it can help other entities at the university to obtain their communication goals. It also allows them to gain
anecdotal feedback on how well or poorly their messages are being communicated. Several mentioned that good relationship building today helps to mitigate problems in times of crisis. They believe relationship management helps to build credibility and trust for their work.

Not all participants are using symmetrical communication in their practice of public relations. Participants acknowledged that symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment. Most used informal means to judge this. Some do collect more formal data on their communication efforts and make adjustments to both the actual communication and/or method as well as identifying relationships that need improvement or greater cultivation. It is a concern that practice does not follow theory here as many seemed to be demonstrating asymmetrical communication where feedback may have been heard (not necessarily sought out) and then not acted upon. Most participants indicated they are not doing enough work in this area.

RQ 3: Practitioners in Higher Education Describe the Internal Communication Practices by Other Entities in the Organization Such as the Human Relations Function

Participants acknowledged that many other entities communicate directly to employees. This was a universal theme regardless of the size of the university. Specifically mentioned by participants as having the ability to directly address employees were: the president of the university, deans and provosts, any department or unit, Human Resources, Information Technology, Advancement, Student Affairs, Alumni Affairs, Security, Physical Plant, and Athletics as well as a health system run by a large public university.

Interestingly, not a single participant said they felt that their position was being encroached upon. This challenges the literature in this area that warns of the occurrence of
encroachment into the public relation’s communication ‘territory’ by other units or persons outside of the public relations department (Buffington, 2004; Cutlip, 1992; Laborde & Pompper, 2016; Lauzen, 1991; Lauzen 1992; Lee, Jares, & Heath, 1999; Hutton, 1999; Swanger & Redgers, 2013; Wilson, Callister, & Seipel, 2018). While not afraid of encroachment, several practitioners did mention that they ‘feared’ being subjugated to another function such as admission or advancement.

How This Research Reflects Key Excellence Study Attributes

Another area of interest in this research are the 12 attributes found in the Excellence Study. These can be categorized into three specific classifications: (a) that public relations is perceived as a strategic management function; (b) the importance of relationship management, and (c) use of (or nonuse of) symmetrical communication and feedback mechanisms. It was hoped that these attributes would organically occur in some of the discussions with the participants.

Table 1 reflects these classifications. For the attributes a scale was created indicating the amount of participants engaging in each attribute. Scores range from 1 (occurs with zero participants) to 6 (occurs with each participant) or, in some cases, the attribute is listed as ‘unknown/unable to determine. Scores were assigned by the researcher based on data gathered in the interview process. Table 1 shows a brief summary of those topics.
### Table 1

**Twelve Key Attributes of the Excellence Study as They Relate to This Study of Internal Communication in a Higher Education Context**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall category in this study</th>
<th>Specific Excellence Study Attribute</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>How Much of This Attribute Participants Demonstrated</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Who Demonstrates this?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Talk to all levels of personnel; share strategic vision; build relationships; create inspiring vision</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Strategically works with top management - is not just a technician</td>
<td>All participants except Gold University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Organization has tolerance for risk taking</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6 (UNKNOWN)</td>
<td>Unable to determine from this research study</td>
<td>Unable to determine from this research study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong, Participative Cultures</td>
<td>Support organization’s values and strategic plans Enables co-creation Better employee satisfaction</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Part of the top leadership collaboration and direct access to university president</td>
<td>All participants except Gold University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Planning</td>
<td>Helps to contribute to and implement major organizational goals</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Directly involved with top level strategic planning</td>
<td>All participants except Gold University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Women and Minorities</td>
<td>Inclusion of women and persons of diverse backgrounds</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6 (UNKNOWN)</td>
<td>Unable to determine</td>
<td>Two participants were women but all participants were White. No general data collected regarding inclusion of women or minorities as employees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Responsibility</td>
<td>Organization’s concern for the welfare of society</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6 (UNKNOWN)</td>
<td>Unable to determine</td>
<td>No questions asked regarding this specifically and the topic did not organically occur</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality as a Priority</td>
<td>Continuous improvement</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6 (UNKNOWN)</td>
<td>Unable to determine</td>
<td>Nearly all mentioned accuracy or transparency as a priority, only two specially mentioned quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Operational Systems</td>
<td>Well-functioning processes</td>
<td>Zero 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>All were examining their processes but only two had formal evaluation in place</td>
<td>Only Purple and Red universities were doing a planned and strategic evaluation of their internal communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 1—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall category in this study</th>
<th>Specific Excellence Study Attribute</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>How Much of This Attribute Participants Demonstrated</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Who Demonstrates this?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human Relations I</strong></td>
<td>I. Use of humans as resources for public relations</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>All 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>I. Purposely communicates with employees of all levels for information gathering and to gain feedback on communication efforts</td>
<td>I. All participants do although some more formally than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human Relations II</strong></td>
<td>II. use of the human relations office</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>All 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>II. All mention collaboration with HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organic Structure</strong></td>
<td>Autonomy – PR functions best in non-bureaucratic environment</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>All 1 2 3 4 5 6 (UNKNOWN)</td>
<td>Unable to determine</td>
<td>Unable to determine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative Culture</strong></td>
<td>Collaborating with persons outside of immediate discipline</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>All 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Purposely seeks collaboration with persons outside of immediate discipline</td>
<td>All participants demonstrate this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Human Relations” III</strong></td>
<td>Use of humans as feedback mechanisms</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>All 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Purposely communicates with employees of all levels for information gathering as well as to gain feedback on communication efforts</td>
<td>All participants gather info to do job, not all seek it to adjust what they are doing for that audience (symmetrical communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symmetrical Communication</strong></td>
<td>Allows for two way communication and cyclic process of examination of PR progress and adjustment</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>All 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Seeks feedback from employees formally or informally</td>
<td>Half of participants (formal), all participants (informal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategic Management Function Attributes

The *Excellence Study* indicated that public relations as a strategic management function contains within it the following attributes: (a) leadership; (b) internal entrepreneurship; (c) strong and participative cultures; (d) strategic planning; (e) support for women and minorities; (f) social responsibility; (g) quality as a priority; (h) effective operational systems.

**Leadership practice by practitioners.** Regarding the leadership attribute, all of the participants indicated that they had direct access to the top leadership in their universities. In terms of the participants demonstrating leadership qualities, each works to demonstrate strategic vision, interacts with personnel from all levels of the organization as well as helping create the vision of their respective universities. Each participant worked very strategically with the president of the university and other members of the dominant collation. This would support the recommendations in this area from the *Excellence Study* of showing leadership in public relations and being a part of the top management group who crafts the strategic direction of the organization.

This leadership position was further reinforced by participants demonstrating that they fulfill the manager role of the public relations practitioners in the vast majority of their practice and spent a minimal amount of time as a public relations technician. The only person in this study who may be working more as a technician than a manager was Beth of Gold University, who indicated that she is usually told what to communicate to employees (Line 51 & 89) but is a direct report to the president. Overall, this researcher believes that leadership is demonstrated by the public relations function for nearly all of the participants in the vast majority of the time. Score 5 out of 6.
Internal entrepreneurship on campus. This attribute is the second listed under public relations as a strategic management function. It is demonstrated when an organization has a tolerance for risk taking. This study was unable to determine how internally entrepreneurial the organizations were based on the data gathered. That particular element of the Excellence Study was beyond the scope of the research here.

Presence of a strong, participative culture. A third attribute is a strong, participative culture. Many of the participants indicated that they were part of the top leadership collation and also interacted across boundaries with persons from all levels and areas of the university. This demonstrates that co-creation is occurring, which is a strong indicator of a participative culture. Score for this variable is 5 out of 6.

Participation in strategic planning. The last attribute in the strategic management category is participation in strategic planning. All participants indicated they were engaged in their respective university’s strategic planning process. In most cases the strategic vision and plans were then reinforced via their own department’s goals and objectives. Also, some of the data collected are used in informing strategic planning as well. Score for this variable is 5 out of 6.

Support for women and persons of diversity. Although two of the four participants were White females, the rest of those interviewed were White males. There were not specific interview questions that attempted to tease out the extent to which this attribute occurred. That particular element of the Excellence Study was beyond the scope of the research conducted.

Corporate culture that promotes social responsibility. This variable also was not directly addressed and therefore conclusions regarding it are beyond the scope of the research here.
Continual quality improvement as a priority. In light of the fact that quality must be measured and that few of the participants had rigorous and strategic process examinations in place it appears that this attribute is not practiced vigorously. Specifically, continual quality improvement was not mentioned by participants and only two actually mentioned ‘quality’ at all. Therefore, this researcher is not convinced there is enough evidence in this study to draw a conclusion about this attribute.

Existence of effective operational systems. In order for operational systems to be deemed effective some kind of evaluation of the system must take place. As only two participants had formal, strategic evaluations in place and all others take ad hoc and haphazard feedback that happens to occasionally be directed to them this area earned a score of 2 out of 6.

Relationship Management Function Attributes

A second overall category examined from the Excellence Study is that of relationship management. There are three attributes in this area: ‘human relations’ organic structure, and collaborative culture. Human relations has two facets to it.

Human relations I refers to the use of humans as a resource for the practice of public relations. In this area all participants demonstrated that they see others on campus as resources and they have obtained feedback, either formally or informally from them and that results in a score of 6 out of 6.

Human relations II addresses the actual human relations function/office at the respective university as a resource for the public relations function. The public relations personnel working with the human resources personnel and purposefully communicating to all levels of employees demonstrates this. All participants indicated that they work closely with the
human resources office on their respective campuses as needed. In both areas of ‘human relations’ the score here is 6 out of 6.

**Existence of an organic structure.** Organic structure indicates the level to which public relations is autonomous and functions in non-bureaucratic environments. Most participants indicated they felt they had substantial autonomy over their work and work-related decisions. However, this researcher did not specifically ask about bureaucracy in the university settings. Although participants never indicated that bureaucracy was something that hindered their work, this variable must be listed as undetermined.

**Existence of a collaborative culture.** This attribute describes the ability of persons within an organization to collaborate with others outside of their immediate discipline. All of the study participants engage in this behavior regularly. Score here is 6 out of 6.

**Symmetrical Communication**

The third overall category examined from the *Excellence Study* is symmetrical communication. Within this category are the attributes of human relations III and symmetrical communication.

**Evidence of human relations III – the use of humans as feedback mechanisms and the actual practice of symmetrical communication.** Not all participants stated that there was a *purposeful and formal* use of humans as feedback mechanisms (human relations III) to determine the success of efforts. Resultantly, the score here is 2 out of 6.

**Use of symmetrical communication.** Although not all participants had formal feedback mechanisms in place for the promotion of this specific kind of recurrent communication, all did acknowledge that they do obtain feedback even if on an unplanned and informal basis. Many seemed to be demonstrating asymmetrical communication where feedback may have been heard
(not necessarily sought out) and then not acted upon. Overall, only about half of the participants had formal data gathering in place for adjustment of programs and shared examples with the researcher of their adjustment to process or message based on employee feedback. Score in this area is 3 out of 6. One other area where data was captured was that of participant’s educational background.

**Miscellaneous Findings**

During the course of this research some themes were uncovered that were interesting although they did not directly address the major research questions. They are the topics of: (a) educational background of the participants; (b) awareness of communication and organizational commitment and (c) the impact of various environmental variables.

**Possible Influence of Educational Background on Participants’ Practice and Beliefs**

Participants in this study had varied educational backgrounds that may have impacted their understanding and practice of public relations and internal communication. Table 2 contains educational level obtained and field of study as well as whether the practitioners are members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) or have earned their PRSA accreditation in public relations (APR).
### Educational Background of Participants in This Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>PRSA member</th>
<th>APR Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>B.A. Mass Media &amp; Communication, M.A. Journalism</td>
<td>Purple University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>B.A. Communication</td>
<td>Red University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>B.A. Communication Management</td>
<td>Gold University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>B.A. Journalism &amp; English, M.S. Administration</td>
<td>Blue University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen</td>
<td>B.S. Political Science, M.S. Public Policy</td>
<td>Green University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>B.A. Sociology</td>
<td>Silver University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ann has a B.A. in Mass Media and Communication and has a graduate degree in Journalism. David and Beth each have a B.A. in Communication fields. Charles, Glen and Mike do not have degrees in Communication. They respectively hold undergraduate degrees in Journalism and English, Political Science, and Sociology. Two from this subgroup also hold advanced degrees in Administration and Public Policy. In the course of the interviews I had to explain certain public relations concepts to Charles, Glen and Mike; they specifically indicated they were not familiar with those concepts. These were the core public relations concepts of public relations as a strategic management function (Mike, Charles), relationship management (Mike, Charles) and asymmetrical verses symmetrical communication (Mike, Charles, Glen).
Their lack of formal exposure to these concepts may explain why those behaviors are not overtly part of their internal communication beliefs or practices.

Conversely, Ann, David and Beth all have degrees in Communication and this subgroup did not seek definition or clarification of those same concepts. It was evident in the context of the interviews that all were aware of the concepts. I surmised that due to their educational background they would have been exposed to public relations theories as part of their coursework. Interestingly, Ann and David also had the most formal and comprehensive data collection plans in place to continually review their team’s internal communication efforts. They also modeled the best overt practices in data collection, symmetrical communication, and relationship management. Again, this may be attributable to their educational backgrounds.

One outlier in this supposition is Mike. Although he has a degree in Sociology and not in communication, Mike does belong to the PRSA and earned his APR accreditation. In obtaining his APR, he should have been exposed to the key public relations concepts of strategic management function, relationship management, and symmetrical communication. But, I have no access to the exact questions on the APR test the year Mike took the exam, or access to his preparatory coursework, and cannot definitively state that he was, or was not, exposed to those seminal public relations theories in his preparation to take the accreditation examination. There is just not enough data here to draw a conclusion as to the impact of an APR accreditation on the understanding of internal communication theory and practices by persons who do not hold a degree in the communications field.

**Hiring Persons Educated in Public Relations: Universities Versus Business**

In competitive environments, organizations seek to hire exceptional employees who have specialized training that will provide that organization with an advantage in their area of
expertise. It is expected that these employees are resources upon which the company may draw in order to give itself a competitive advantage. An organization becomes successful when it grows and increases market share. Organizations are then able to raise profits (in a for profit model) or gain increased outside funding (non-profit model) that can be used to reinvest in the organization or be distributed as a reward to the very employees who helped the organization. Following this logic, it would make sense for institutions of higher education to employ persons who specialize in public relations to manage the institution’s public relations efforts, since this is a recognized degree and specialty.

According to DataUSA, the most common bachelor’s degree held by graduates who are in the public relations workforce are communication (38.4%), social science (13.5%), and business (12.8%). Other majors who list themselves with the census bureau as public relations practitioners majored in the following: English (8.2), visual and performing arts (4.2), psychology (2.5) education (2.1), and history (2.1). The other 16.2-percent are made up of many other majors in minuscule amounts (DataUSA, 2016).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2011-2012 undergraduates obtaining a degree in Public Relations numbered 4,121. Only 508 obtained master’s degrees in public relations during that same time. There were no persons who obtained a doctorate in Public Relations for 2011-2012. Further research found that only combined doctorates in communication and public relations are available and that there are no ‘pure’ Ph.D. programs focusing only on public relations. During that same time period, 6,715 persons obtained bachelor’s in communication, 490 earned master’s degrees and 70 earned doctorates in communication (NCES, 2012). In comparison, there were 42,088 bachelor’s degrees in English
with 9,201 master’s degrees and 1,332 doctorates. The social sciences graduated 9,507 students with bachelor’s degrees, 1,097 with master’s degrees and 28 with doctorates (NCES, 2012).

These data do not specify the sectors in which these public relations practitioners are working. So, at this time it is indeterminate if more or fewer persons working in public relations positions in higher education have public relations degrees than those persons who are public relations practitioners in the business sector but certainly this is an area in which future studies should be conducted as there is a paucity of information in this area. Another area of information that was teased out was the understanding that improved communication aids in increased organizational commitment.

**Awareness of Communication and Its Relationship to Organizational Commitment**

A portion of the literature review for this research project examined previous studies of how communication climate contributes to an employee’s feelings of organizational commitment (Eisinga, Teelken, & Doorewaard, 2010; Mathiew & Zajac, 1990; Mottaz. 1988; Porter, Steers, & Mowday, 1974) and why organizational commitment is important to the success of an organization (Angle & Perry, 1981; Mathiew & Zajac, 1990). As the previous studies demonstrated successful organizations have a communication climate that results in a positive correlation with an employee’s level of organizational commitment.

Few participants directly addressed the topics of communication climate or organizational commitment, and to be fair, no interview questions directly addressed this. However, most participants talked more about process as a technical function rather than their process being overtly targeted to employees in order to contribute to an employee’s level of commitment. Only two participants overtly mentioned their awareness of these
communication/organizational commitment theories with respect to employees of their organization: Ann and David.

Ann at Purple University stated that “internal communication increases satisfaction with your job” and she went on to point out that if employees are satisfied with their jobs they are more likely to say positive things about the university to others (Line 267). One other participant, David at Red University, also stated that he and his team “need to think about internal communication as it is a huge morale issue” (Line 84). Ann was also the participant with the most formal program of data collection in place to track how well her processes worked. She holds an undergraduate degree in mass media and communication and has a graduate degree in journalism. Ann may have been exposed to more communication theory through her education than the rest of her participant peer group. David also had one of the more robust programs in place to track the success of his team’s efforts with employee communication and he too has an undergraduate degree in communication. However, Beth of Gold University, who also has a B.A. in Communication, did not make any comments regarding communication climate or organizational commitment. As previously mentioned, the three other participants who did not comment on this topic may be unaware of the theory in this field, as they do not have degrees in Communication or public relations.

Research data as reviewed in Chapter 2 indicated that the kind of communication to employees matters; quality, accuracy and reliability are the hallmarks of good communication within an organization (O’Connell 1979; Welsch & LaVan, 1981). This study’s participants did mention some of these functions when they stated that they ensured internal communication be disseminated quickly and accurately to the employees of the various universities they represented.
Glen emphasized “clear, concise, and up-to-date” communication (Line 34). Charles (Line 114) and Ann (Line 49 & 150) pointed out the importance of informing employees first before outside audiences. Wayne (Line 211) and Mike (Line 100 & 210) stressed being honest, open, and candid as well as specifically mentioning the importance of open and transparent communication. David (Line 239) emphasized the importance of demonstrating that you and your communication pieces are credible.

The Impact of Various Environmental Variables on the Public Relations Practice

In this study the variables of private or public, secular or religious, union or non-union, urban or suburban, or the size of the institution had no discernible impact on internal communication. There was no mentioned impact due to variables of large verses small universities, or private verses public, or religious verses secular institutions. Likewise, the variable of geographic location a university did not seem to have any impact on internal communication practices. Some of the larger public universities also had some union employees but this variable was never mentioned by any participants and seems to have no impact on their communication efforts either.

Study Limitations

Humans are fallible and personal opinions/biases potentially can influence research. In an effort to be as neutral and non-self influential to my research study, I built in some safeguards. One way to mitigate any biases is to write an epoch and to bracket my experiences, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Creswell, 2007). This was done prior to any actual interviewing. My epoch included that I must be mindful not to let any of my strong belief in theory over shadow my findings. Although I am in agreement with most of the recommendations of the Excellence Study, I must strive to be open-minded to any data that may be in conflict with its precepts. I
must also write of facts and be cognizant to exclude any emotionally charged words from my dissertation.

A second way to control for bias was to permit interviewees to review the reflective writings of the interview sessions for accuracy of themes and meaning. All participants were sent transcripts of their sessions and asked if they wished for any changes in the notes. None requested any changes or additional commentary revisions to the original transcripts.

A third control was closely with Dr. Andrea Beach as my ‘critical friend’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). She reviewed my work and provided feedback in this area. I am also confident my colleague and third committee person, Dr. Tim Penning, was helpful with his review of my public relations theories as this is his area of expertise. All of these strategies are used in an effort to acknowledge, and reduce, my personal biases within the research project.

Other limitations to this work include: (a) the actual interview questions; (b) interview time constraints; and (c) a participant who kept wandering off the topic of employees as the internal audience. The actual interview questions limited the scope of the data gathering and some questions were redundant. I would have eliminated redundant questions and asked more probing follow up questions to those interview questions that were the most fruitful. Although questions were sent one week in advance of the interview to every participant, it was clear that not all participants had read them in advance. This was apparent as some admitted that they had not reviewed the questions and I had to explain several key public relations concepts to several of the participants.

There were some time constraints in that most participants were only willing to talk for an hour and yet I could have had added more probes or teased out more detail if I had a longer time slot with them. Although my participants were very kind to agree to be a part of this
research and all said to contact them again if I had more questions, they made it very apparent they were very busy and preferred any follow-up to be conducted via email.

Another limitation was that I had one participant who kept talking about students as his internal audience. It was clearly stated in all materials and in all my contacts to my participants that employees were the target audience for this study. This concept was also restated at the start of every interview. However, one participant had to be continually steered back to talking about employees as the internal audience as he kept discussing students as the audience. He stated students as part of his internal audience 31 times. No other research participants mentioned students with such great frequency, and if they did it was not in the context of an internal audience. Students were mentioned by others, as an example, as part of the kinds of news (student success stories) that is often shared with employee audiences. As a result, I don’t feel that this person’s interview contributed to the data as much as the other interviews did.

**Study Delimitations**

There are intentional delimitations to this research. This research proposal is narrowly focused. It examines public relations functioning only within the context of higher education in a small sample of public and private universities in two states. It examined a purposeful sample and may not be generalizable to other contexts or types of higher education.

This study also only looked at the *Excellence Study* as the theoretical framework for internal communication. Certainly there are other public relations theories that may be used that do not parse themselves in the same way as the *Excellence Study*, may disagree with it, or may posit other attributes or variables more important in the practice of internal communications.
Policy Recommendations

There are three general policy recommendations resulting from this research: (a) documented processes, (b) formal evaluation methods, and (c) use symmetrical communication to seek feedback.

Document Internal Communication Processes

Foremost and most vigorously recommended is that practitioners need to create and use documented internal communication processes. No participants in this study had them in place, yet each person interviewed admitted they knew they needed to create and implement them. Lack of processes may be having a direct negative economic impact on the organization as this lack of documented processes directly impacts day-to-day tasking and eliminates ambiguity or duplication of efforts in operations. Undocumented processes potentially impact the training and efficiency of employees in these public relations offices as well and may result in wasted resources when employees react to situations in ad-hoc and nonstrategic ways. Use of documented processes supports public relations as a strategic management function per the Excellence Study.

Formally Review and Evaluate Communication Efforts

A second policy recommendation is the need to have formal methods in place for examining success or failure rates of a public relations practitioner’s efforts as they communicate to their employee audiences. Lack of documented process is problematic as the public relations practitioners cannot demonstrate what methods or messages are successful and they cannot prove their value to the organization. Although it is fairly simple to track the dissemination of communication with the quantitative analysis of counting the open rates of email, forwards or messages passed along in social media or email as well as determining where (and how long) a
reader remains on an electronic communication that is only part of the data picture public relations practitioners need to gather. The numbers tell the ‘what’ as in ‘what are they seeing?’ However, excellent public relations practitioners need to know how employee audiences feel about that they have just seen. That is the qualitative part of the evaluation efforts and it can be obtained by symmetrical feedback.

**Obtain Feedback Via Symmetrical Communication and Use This to Help Build Relationships and Drive Communication Practices**

A third recommendation would be that practitioners not wait for random feedback on their efforts. They must strategically and proactively seek out and build better relationships and inform practice. Most participants acknowledged knowing the public relations theory that that symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment. But few were regularly and strategically practicing this.

Good communication analysis and solid relationships do not just ‘happen’. Both need to be strategically conceived and built into the overall communication plans of the organization. Practitioners must continuously and actively seek feedback from their internal publics, as well as all other publics, so that they can be adjusting programs and messaging in accordance with the symmetrical communication processes concluded as a best practice in the *Excellence Study*. Excellent public relations practitioners regularly, and purposively, seek out samples from the employee audience to hear how they feel about not only what is being communicated but do they favor the actual communications efforts overall? Are those employees getting the kinds of information they desire in a timely manner and in the form that best meets their needs?
Future Research Recommendations

This project provides a needed platform for deeper future research into the public relations function in higher education outside of the much examined areas of crisis communication and media relations. Perhaps this work will inspire the creation of additional ‘branches’ of inquiry in this area of internal communication processes or in looking at other facets of public relations in a higher education context not currently found in the literature. Specifically, areas for future research include:

**Written Policy and Processes**

How does the lack of any written policies or practices with respect to internal communication that was revealed in this study compare with a possible study of greater numbers higher educational institutions? If comparable results are found, how would this compare to K-12 education or even corporate internal communication practices? Why don’t practitioners in higher education have processes documented? Does this open up an area of risk for universities?

**Formal Data Collection**

All participants said they did not have the time or resources for formal data collection. Perhaps there are other higher educational entities that do this very well. What are their processes and how are they able to secure resources for such data collection? Are they able to utilize other campus units to help with data collection in light of not having time or funding?

**Marketing Encroachment**

Every participant in this study remarked that they had not only responsibility for public relations for their university, but also had marketing responsibilities assigned to them as well. Interestingly, this group did *not* demonstrate concern of encroachment by the marketing function into the public relations domain. No participants seemed concerned that marketing
responsibilities could be disproportionally monopolizing their time and energy, resulting in neglecting important public relations stakeholders in favor of donors, alumni or potential new students to the university. This is an area of further inquiry not only with respect to marketing in higher education but also to advancement, alumni relations and fundraising as those are functions also served by most of the research participants.

**Educational Background**

The results of this study suggest that educational background and field of study might impact the schema from which a public relations practitioner operates. This would make an interesting further study and could examine the degrees that public relations practitioners and leaders in higher education hold. It could also include questions about the professional societies and certifications practitioners identify. Would we see more or fewer persons with public relations education having the certification? This would open up other lines of inquiry as to the value of such and might add to the ongoing debate concerning if public relations practitioners should be licensed.

**Miscellaneous Variables**

Although mentioned in passing this study, the variables of private or public, secular or religious, union or non-union, urban or suburban/small town and university size were not examined with any depth with this specific study. These themes were more noticeable by the researcher for the paucity of mentions within the interviews. Perhaps these variables could be studied more purposively with respect to internal communication in a future study.

**Conclusion**

In so far as there has been a decline in good will toward institutions of higher education in the past three decades and that both public, media and politicians have called for a greater
transparency, it would be beneficial for institutions of higher education to utilize strategic means
to communicate its stories, successes and brand directly to various publics. One of these
important publics, albeit often an overlooked, is the university’s employees. Not only do
employees need to know news about their organization to function well at their positions, they
need to also understand the strategic direction of the organization. This communication can be
accomplished with them via internal communication that falls under the domain of the public
relations office.

This study sought to examine how senior level public relations practitioners in higher
education develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees.
Understanding was sought regarding the practitioners’ beliefs and practices regarding: (a) public
relations as a strategic management function; (b) the role of relationship management within
public relations; and (c) if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while
maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and
environment.

This study also looked at common and unique elements of practice, how higher education
public relations practitioners define best practices, and if they coordinate internal communication
with other entities within their college or university and analyzed some demographic data
regarding the career paths and education of the practitioners. It concluded that while the
participants in the study were operating with direct reporting to the president of their respective
university’s and that all demonstrated working in a strategic capacity in a strong participate
culture, none had documented communication processes with respect to internal audiences and
few had formal methods in place to evaluate the success of their efforts. In addition none had
well-formulated and strategic processes in place with respect to if symmetrical communication is
used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment.
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Appendix A

Letter Requesting Participation
Dear (insert name of senior level public relations practitioner here),

My name is Kelly A. Campbell and I am a doctoral student at Western Michigan University working on my dissertation research for my doctoral degree in Educational Leadership-Higher Education.

I am writing to ask if you are interested in learning more about participating in study research regarding internal public relations as practiced at state universities in Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. **The purpose of this study is to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education and their processes and practices for internal communications** with particular emphasis on the process and practices for communicating with, and to, employees. This study will also look at common and unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best practice and how they judge the effectiveness of their internal communications with employees.

Participating in this study will include an interview conversation that should last approximately 90 minutes and that will be conducted either in person, or via telephone, at a time convenient for you Prior to this conversation, I will submit the interview questions to you.

If you are interested in learning more about participating, please contact me by replying by email to k.a.campbell@wmich.edu or you may feel free to contact me by cell phone at (616) 889-1758.

I will be following up with you regarding this project appreciate your consideration of this project and look forward to speaking to you.

Sincerely,

Kelly A. Campbell
Appendix B

Consent Document
You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “Looking Inward: Higher Education Public Relations and Internal Communication.” This project will serve as Kelly A. Campbell’s dissertation, in partial fulfillment of requirements for a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University. This document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over the time commitments, procedures used in the study, and risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this document carefully and completely and ask questions if you need more clarification.

**What are we trying to find out in this study?**
The purpose of this study is to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education regarding their processes and practices for internal communications with particular emphasis on the processes and strategies for communication with employees. This study will also look at common and unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best practices, and if they coordinate internal communication with other entities within their college or university.

**Who can participate in this study?**
Participants for this study are individuals who are senior level public relations practitioners with a minimum of two-year’s experience in their current positions at public or private universities in Ohio and Michigan. These individuals have key perspectives regarding the planning and practice of public relations within their institutions.

**Where will this study take place?**
The settings will vary, as each interviewee will be interviewed in their own respective offices or location of their choice. Interviews will take place at a predetermined time that was agreed upon by both parties. If face-to-face interviews cannot take place then interviews will be conducted via Skype.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**
This study will require the participant to take part in a 90-minute interview, which includes the overall time of completion from the obtaining of informed consent to the subject’s completion of the study.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**
Participants will be asked to share their experiences and perspectives regarding the public relations process of internal communication at their respective universities.
What information is being measured during the study?
This study will investigate the process of internal communication by the public relations function at mid-size state public universities.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
To the investigator’s knowledge there are no potential risks to the subjects. You will be forfeiting 90 minutes of your time for the study. Your name will not be used in the dissemination and your institution will be masked, so there is little chance for disclosure of sensitive or confidential information.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
The results from the study will provide public relations practitioners in higher education knowledge regarding commonalities or uniqueness in process and will provide public relations practitioners in higher education a deeper understanding of such processes.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
The principal investigator: Dr. Andrea Beach
Associate Professor, Higher Education Leadership
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology
Western Michigan University

The student investigator: Kelly A. Campbell
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, & Technology
Western Michigan University

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Andrea Beach at 269-387-1725 or andrea.beach@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This study was determined by WMU’s HSIRB to not constitute research on human subjects, because the focus is organizational and process oriented, and participants serve as key informants. However, the researchers are committed to following the ethical standards for research represented in the Belmont Report, and offer this consent form to participants as part of that commitment.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.
Please Print Your Name

______________________________
Participant’s signature

______________________________
Date
Appendix C

Confirming Interview Place/Time via E-mail
Hello ______________

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study of internal communication at your institution of higher education. I want to confirm with you that the in person interview/phone interview or Skype will take place at ________________ and be held at this date and time ______________.

Thank you again for consenting to participate in this study. As a reminder, I will be digitally recording the interview so the study can be as accurate as possible. However, you may request that the digital recorder be turned off at any point of the interview.

The purpose of this study is to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education and their processes and practices for internal communications with particular emphasis on the process and practices for communicating with and to employees. This study will also look at common and unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best practice and how they judge the effectiveness of their internal communications with employees.

The overarching question that guides this study is: how do higher education senior level public relations practitioners develop and carry out their internal communication responsibilities to employees? To achieve an in-depth understanding, this study will be guided by the following questions:

RQ 1. What are the internal communication processes/practices of the public relations function in higher education as described by the senior level practitioner?

RQ 2. What are the practitioner’s processes/practices regarding
   a. public relations as a strategic management function, per the *Excellence Study* findings, in a higher education context?
b. the role of relationship management within public relations per the *Excellence Study* findings, in a higher education context?

c. if symmetrical communication per the *Excellence Study* findings, is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment in a higher education context?

d. To what extent, if any, does the environment include the 12 attributes of excellent management per the *Excellence Study* findings?

RQ 3. How do senior level public relations practitioners in higher education describe the internal communication practices by other entities in the organization such as the human relations function?

**Study Methods**

This study will use a qualitative interview approach to investigate the public relations function within a higher education context. The target number of senior level public relations practitioners to be studied will be six to eight. These will be drawn from state universities in Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania that have enrollment of more than 12,000 students.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Kelly A. Campbell, the student investigator at k.a.campbell@wmich.edu or on her cellphone at (616) 889-1758 (cell). You may also contact the Chair, The Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269) 387-8293 or via email at hsirb@wmich.edu, or the Vice President for Research (269) 387-8298 if any questions or issues arise during the course of the study.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol
Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. I would like to record the interview so the study can be as accurate as possible. You may request that the digital recorder be turned off at any point of the interview.

The purpose of this study is to profile senior level public relations practitioners in higher education and their processes and practices for internal communications with particular emphasis on the process and practices for communicating with and to employees. This study will also look at common and unique elements of practice, how higher education public relations practitioners define best practice and how they judge the effectiveness of their internal communications with employees.

We will begin with some general questions regarding demographics and then move on to questions regarding your communications and public relations practices at this state universities.

[Gender]
1. Interviewee is:
   - Male
   - Female

[Education]
2. Do you have a 4-year degree in:
   - Public Relations
   - Business
   - Marketing
   - Journalism
   - Communication
   - Political Science
   - Other __________

3. Are you accredited in public relations (APR)?
   - No
   - Yes

4. Are you a member of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)?
   - No
   - Yes

1. The Excellence Study was a longitudinal study that provided the theory that public relations contributes value to organizations, publics and society. Three important concepts that are taught to public relations students are (a) public relations is a strategic
management function; (b) relationship management within public relations is critical; and (c) symmetrical, two-way communication is a best practice in public relations for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment (Grunig, 2006). In considering this— I have the following questions:

a. Can you describe to me how public relations as practiced here are a strategic management function?  
(If they are not, can you describe to me what functions in the university do operate as a strategic management function and how does that entity interact with the public relations function?)

b. Theoretically relationship management is a key tenant in the practice of public relations. Describe your public relations practices with respect to relationship management.

c. Two-way symmetrical communication that allows for continual feedback and adjustment between communicating publics is also a key theory in the practice of public relations. Please describe for me your processes of communication, feedback and adjustment.

2. The *Excellence Study* also found 12 attributes of excellent management. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support these attributes?

a. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support good use of humans as ‘resources’?

b. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support a structure that allows for employees to participate in the management structure of the organization?
c. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support internal entrepreneurship – i.e. allowing employees to be internal entrepreneurs to take risks and voice new ideas?

d. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support symmetrical communication – i.e. back and forth flow of information from those doing the communicating and those receiving the communication?

e. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support the public relations function to lead itself? (versus subservience of the function to the leadership)

f. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support a strong, participative culture for all employees?

g. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support public relations with respect to its participation in strategic planning?

h. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support corporate social responsibility – being a good corporate citizen with the community?

i. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support for diversity?

j. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university are quality focused?

k. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university have created an environment that embraces effective operational systems? (i.e. good processes are in place and systems are functional on a day-to-day basis)

l. To what extent do you feel those who lead the university support a collaborative social culture that includes trust, cooperation, and mutual responsibility?

3. Describe for me the internal communication processes/practices of the higher education office of public relations?
4. How do you as a senior level public relations practitioner in higher education describe your strategy and best practices for internal communications with employees?
   • How do you make decisions regarding what to communicate with employees
     (Probe) is there a written or formal policy in the office?
     (Probe) Does the office of the President or another entity at your university indicate when employees should be informed?
   • When decisions are made that employees need to be informed of an institutional matter, is that communication generated and disseminated from your office or are there other institutional persons/units that communicate directly with employees?

5. How do you as a senior level public relations practitioner in higher education make judgments regarding the effectiveness of your ‘best practices’?

6. Is there a relationship between the internal relations/communications and their external relations/communications?

7. What is your perception of how employees feel about the content of the communication they receive from the office of public relations at this state university?

8. Does this institution regard employees as ‘ambassadors’ for itself?
   • Please explain why or why not.

9. Are there other entities in your organization that also conduct communication to employees?
   • Please list them and describe the kinds of internal communication for which they are responsible.
   • Do you work with them on those kinds of communication – why or why not?
     Please explain.
10. How do you in higher education describe the internal communication practices by other entities in the organization such as the human relations function?

11. What are your beliefs and practices regarding public relations as a strategic management function in a higher education context?

12. What are your beliefs and practices regarding the role of relationship management within public relations in a higher education context?

13. What are your beliefs and practices regarding if symmetrical communication is used for cultivating relationships while maintaining a feedback mechanism to adjust public relations strategies based on publics and environment in a higher education context?

14. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else you’d like to share?
Appendix E

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Exemption Letter
Date: March 2, 2016

To: Andrea Beach, Principal Investigator
    Kelly Campbell, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: Approval not needed for HSIRB Project Number 16-03-10

This letter will serve as confirmation that your project titled “Looking Inward: Higher Education Public Relations and Internal Communication” has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Based on that review, the HSIRB has determined that approval is not required for you to conduct this project because you are not collecting personal identifiable (private) information about individual and your scope of work does not meet the Federal definition of human subject.

45 CFR 46.102 (f) Human Subject

(f) Human subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains

(1) Data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or
(2) Identifiable private information.

Intervention includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (for example, venipuncture) and manipulations of the subject or the subject's environment that are performed for research purposes. Interaction includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject. Private information includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may readily be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects.

Thank you for your concerns about protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects.

A copy of your protocol and a copy of this letter will be maintained in the HSIRB files.