The Role of Search Consultants in Interpreting and Communicating Organizational Identity during Presidential Searches at Small, Private Colleges

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THE ROLE OF SEARCH CONSULTANTS IN INTERPRETING AND COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY DURING PRESIDENTIAL SEARCHES AT SMALL, PRIVATE COLLEGES

by

Dawn M. Markell

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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THE ROLE OF SEARCH CONSULTANTS IN INTERPRETING AND COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY DURING PRESIDENTIAL SEARCHES AT SMALL, PRIVATE COLLEGES

Dawn M. Markell, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2020

Search consultants’ perceived expertise in reaching a target audience and generating a pool of qualified candidates has led to their widespread use across higher education, including small, private colleges (Atwell, 2009; CIC, 2018; Johnson & Ferrare, 2013). As small, private colleges confront an unprecedented level of existential stress, they are faced with competing pressures to differentiate themselves through their historical organizational identity while still pursuing change (Baker & Baldwin, 2015; Jaquette, 2013; Stensaker, 2015; Weerts, Freed, & Morphew, 2014). Matters of identity become especially significant during times of leadership transition (MacDonald, 2013). Despite the convergence of these factors, there is a lack of research regarding how organizational identity is communicated during presidential searches for small, private colleges.

This basic interpretive study was conducted to learn how search consultants understand and communicate organizational identity while facilitating presidential searches for small, private colleges. The focus of the research was consultants’ reflections on their interactions with governing boards, search committees, prospective presidential candidates, and other campus stakeholders. An integrated view of organizational identity, comprised of the social actor, social constructionist, and institutional perspectives, was used as a theoretical lens through which to
explore the topic (Pratt, Schultz, Ashforth, & Ravasi, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were held with 10 consultants who had facilitated a minimum of three presidential searches for small, private colleges within the past five years.

Three themes emerged as salient to search consultants’ interpretive process: (a) building a composite view of the college, (b) using the search profile as an interpretive tool, and (c) remaining mindful of professional responsibility. Results suggest that search consultants view themselves as actively contributing to the viability of the small-college sector by facilitating a strong match between a college and presidential candidates. They work toward this outcome by systematically building a composite view of the college, comprised of a holistic perspective of the college’s identity, its expressed leadership needs, and existential stressors. Through a recursive and iterative process, search consultants use development of a written search profile as an interpretive tool to refine their understanding. While performing this function, they identify discrepancies between the college’s identity, culture, and strategic vision that could prove problematic during the search process. Results of this study suggest search consultants are guided by a sense of professional responsibility toward both the client college and prospective candidates.

Through qualitative inquiry, this study has addressed the gap in empirical research regarding organizational identity and the facilitated presidential search process in small, private colleges. Furthermore, by illuminating the importance of process to search consultants’ interpretative role, this research has practical implications for individuals and groups involved in a presidential search, primarily: (a) search consultants, (b) search committees, (c) governing boards, and (d) prospective presidential candidates.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Small, private colleges are arguably the most financially stressed segment of the higher education sector, with potentially crippling financial pressures especially acute for colleges with enrollments under 2,500 (Brown, 2012; Chabotar, 2010; Hilbun & Maniseishvili, 2016; Wootton, 2016). Every year, several small colleges succumb to the death spiral of financial insolvency created by unsustainably low enrollment, a trend which shows no sign of slowing (Nichols, 2017; Thomason, 2017; Wylie, 2018). Difficult times call for strong leadership. Unfortunately, for a struggling small, private college there is little margin for error if it finds itself searching for a new president. If the wrong person is chosen to take the helm, that decision exacts a heavy toll in terms of finances, organizational morale, and institutional reputation (Trachtenberg, Kauvar, & Bogue, 2013; Wilde & Finkelstein, 2016). Therefore, the stakes are high for governing boards to make the right choice.

The majority of governing boards now contract with executive search firms, relying on them to recruit qualified candidates and assist throughout the search process (American Council on Education [ACE], 2017; Curris, 2014; Johnston & Ferrare, 2013; Lingenfelter, 2004; Selingo, Chheng, & Clark, 2017; Song & Hartley, 2012). Boards, typically not well-versed in the complexities of executive recruitment, seek to optimize their chances of finding the right person for the job, and are willing to pay for the presumed expertise (Atwell, 2009). It is customary for a search firm to charge $75,000-$100,000 or more per contract (Johnston & Ferrare, 2013; Wilde & Finkelstein, 2016). Despite this sizable cost, one which often reflects an unbudgeted expense, even small colleges often commit to the investment (Klein & Salk, 2013).
The role of college president has perhaps never been more difficult, with the demands of the job steadily intensifying over the past two decades (Cook & Kim, 2012; Hartley & Godin, 2009; Neuman & Neuman, 1999; Song & Hartley, 2012). Not surprisingly, the root causes underlying troubled presidencies vary, and usually stem from a convergence of complex issues (Trachtenberg et al., 2013). However, some failed presidencies and the accompanying institutional stress can be partially attributed to misalignments between a college’s organizational identity and its president (Aspen Institute, 2017; Selingo et al., 2017; Selzer, 2018b).

As originally described by Albert and Whetten (1985), the term organizational identity denotes those aspects that are “central, distinctive, and enduring” to the institution (p. 265). Organizational identity theory had its genesis in the mid 1980’s. A body of research has been produced since then, centered on how organizations define themselves, how they are defined by others, and how organizational identity is communicated (Pratt, Schultz, Ashforth, & Ravasi, 2016). Paralleling that trend within the general organizational literature, the higher education subset has explored various facets of internal identity, externally marketed image, and institutional reputation (Dumay, Draelants, & Dahan, 2015; MacDonald, 2013; Weerts, Freed, & Morphew, 2014).

As an indication of organizational identity’s operational importance, new presidents, particularly those of small institutions, seek to acquire an understanding of the college’s core identity as they transition into the role of president (Lohse, 2008; Smerek, 2013). Given their prevalence and involvement in the process, search consultants occupy a critical position in a college’s hunt for new leadership (Beardsley, 2015; Turpin, 2013). However, a surprisingly limited body of research exists regarding the use of search consultants. Furthermore, no previous empirical studies have focused on the role of search consultants in interpreting and
communicating organizational identity during presidential searches for small, private colleges. When considering the implications for a small, private college, that absence signaled the need for this study.

The remainder of Chapter 1 consists of the following: (a) background information germane to the study; (b) the problem statement and research questions that guided the research; (c) the study’s initial conceptual framework; (d) an overview of the methodology used to conduct the research; and (e) the practical significance of the study.

**Background of the Study**

Literature pertaining to the topical areas underpinning this study will be expanded upon in Chapter 2. The following overview provides foundational information which informed development of the study’s conceptual framework.

**Organizational Identity**

The field of organizational identity research encompasses several related perspectives of the construct (Pratt et al., 2016). The classic definition of organizational identity is: “The central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations” (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). A proliferation of research has been produced since the field of organizational identity was conceived in the 1980s, most of which has addressed the question, “How does a collective define itself?” (Pratt et al., 2016, p.3). The scholarly literature can be subdivided into the following three main epistemological categories: the social actor perspective, the social constructionist perspective, and the institutional perspective (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013). Of particular significance to my study, the simultaneous presence of all three perspectives has also been noted (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010).
The *social actor perspective* within organizational identity theory essentially views the organization as the personification of a collective individual (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). People external to the organization learn about it through its actions, commitments, and self-referencing claims from those who speak and act on the organization’s behalf. This perspective is rooted in the image, impression, and reputation held about the organization by those external to it, each of whom have their own set of information filters (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten, 2006).

The *social constructionist perspective*, in contrast, focuses on how members of the organization itself define and view it. That self-referential process is viewed as a process of negotiation, which on the surface might seem at odds with the *enduring* component of Albert and Whetten’s (1985/2006) definition. However, the two views are recursive and ultimately complementary, provided that areas of ambiguity are successfully navigated by stakeholders (Gioia et al., 2010; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), with simultaneous acknowledgement of the impact of organizational culture (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). The presence and role of *identity custodians* are key to potentially reducing this ambiguity, ideally serving to clarify and signal to others what the core identity of the organization is. Identity custodians are typically organizational members who occupy leadership or similarly influential positions within the institution, and whose perceived authority allows them to function as a conduit in communicating organizational identity claims (Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013; Schinoff, Rogers, & Corley, 2016).

The *institutional perspective* of organizational identity considers both the internal and external views of the organization, but focuses on the effect that outside forces have on it. The organization is viewed through the lens of its perceived status within the broader institutional
context in which it resides, and upon which it bases its sense of legitimacy. This perspective recognizes the inherent tension in balancing isomorphic pressures to conform to institutional norms, while still maintaining a desired level of distinctiveness (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007; Purdy & Gray, 2009).

Within that institutional perspective, two-stage valuation theory provides a sharper lens through which an organization can balance those competing pressures of conformity and distinctiveness (Zuckerman, 2016). The first of the two stages requires an organization to demonstrate membership in whatever category a constituency deems important. That stage conveys legitimacy within the given field -- whether the entity is a dry cleaner, restaurant, bank, or any other organization that belongs to a recognized industry. Rather than view isomorphic pressures and distinctiveness as diametrically opposed, though, Zuckerman reconciles the two by stating that both have value within the marketplace. The implication is that an organization must first be viewed as a legitimate member of the broader field in which it resides. Only after this legitimacy has been established will customers and other stakeholders be receptive to the organization’s attempts to distinguish itself from the competition (Phillips, Tracey, & Kraatz, 2016; Zuckerman, 2016). Within this viewpoint, a college would thus desire to be seen as a legitimate member of the higher education industry, but also attractive to students due to its unique attributes.

**Pressures on Small, Private Colleges and Presidents**

Given their tuition dependency, small colleges must continually strike a delicate balance between funding operations solely through enrollment-generated revenue and variable levels of philanthropic support (Zdziarski, 2010; Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, & Finney, 2012). Attempting to spark enrollment through leveraging historical strengths, innovation, and financial
incentives is a recurring pattern within the small-college sector (Biemiller, 2018; Bonvillian & Murphy, 2014; Ma, Baum, Pender, & Welch, 2016). This is the environment facing the presidents of these institutions.

Compounding the above challenges, the ranks of chief executives within higher education are aging. According to the most recent survey data, presidents of private colleges that award primarily bachelor degrees now average almost 61 years of age; many chief executives, as in other sectors of higher education, are either planning to retire within the next several years or leave office for other opportunities (ACE, 2017; CIC, 2018). The length of service for presidents of private colleges has declined during the last several years, with 6.6 years the average for this sector as of 2016 (ACE, 2017; CIC, 2018). A coexisting reality is that higher education, unlike many other industries, does a poor job of presidential succession planning (Aspen Institute, 2017; Calareso, 2013; Long, Johnson, Faught, & Street, 2013). The implication is that presidential vacancies are accelerating, as is a reliance on external candidates to fill those vacancies.

A diverse skill set is now viewed as necessary to succeed as a college president (Hammond, 2013; Pierce, 2014; Trachtenberg, Kauvar, & Bogue, 2013). The previously noted financial pressures at many U.S. colleges and universities, exacerbated by resource-straining legal and regulatory mandates, have placed budgeting and fundraising skills high on the list of desired presidential attributes. In particular, well-developed fundraising acumen is now viewed as mandatory, rather than a merely a tangential skill (Bourgeois, 2016; Carey, 2014; Selingo, Chheng, & Clark, 2017).

Historically constant routes leading to the presidency have also been shifting, with academics no longer having the clear advantage. A pattern of search committees selecting
presidents from nonacademic corporate backgrounds has emerged during the past decade (ACE, 2017; Hartley & Godin, 2009; Song & Hartley, 2012). This correlates with the growing emphasis on fundraising and aggressive innovation, along with the expectation that a president be a good steward of the college’s economic and social impact on the surrounding community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the declining interest among provosts in ascending to the presidency is largely attributed to this ever-expanding and nonacademic role of the office (Bourgeois, 2016; Carey, 2014; Hartley & Godin, 2010; Selingo et al., 2017; Weill, 2009). This lends additional credence to the view that the already limited succession planning within higher education is unlikely to improve anytime soon, and thus recruitment of external candidates will continue to dominate.

The combination of tuition dependency, enrollment challenges, intensified expectations, and a diminishing pool of internal candidates is formidable. If a governing board uses a presidential vacancy as an opportunity to spark innovation and change, the existing pressures on the college can create a paradoxical situation: Boards search for and hire ‘change agent’ presidents, but then fail to assist those presidents in creating a shared vision and culture through which innovation can occur (Byron, 2015; Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013; Pierce, 2014; Trachtenberg et al., 2013). Although often attributed to other reasons, the root cause of troubled presidencies often is the failure of aligning what the governing board says it wants in a president with what it is willing to support (Mitchell, 2013; Stowe & Komasara, 2016). Clearly, there is a heightened risk of disconnect between expectations and results stemming from a presidential search.
Rationale for the Study

As small, private colleges confront an unprecedented level of existential stress, they are faced with competing pressures to differentiate themselves through their historical organizational identity while still pursuing change (Baker & Baldwin, 2015; Jaquette, 2013; Stensaker, 2015; Weerts et al., 2014). Research also suggests that organizational identity is being increasingly leveraged by some higher education institutions, and can help explain how and why colleges make key operational decisions (Dumay et al., 2015; MacDonald, 2013; Pierce, 2014; Steiner, Sundstrom, & Sammalisto, 2013; Stensaker, 2015). Furthermore, matters of identity become especially significant during times of leadership transition (MacDonald, 2013).

Simultaneously, search consultants’ perceived expertise in reaching a target audience and generating a pool of qualified candidates has led to their widespread use across higher education (Atwell, 2009; Johnson & Ferrare, 2013). The majority of college governing boards now contract with search firms to assist in presidential searches (ACE, 2017; CIC, 2018). Search consultants function as conduits of institutional information, and also occupy an influential position in assessing candidate-to-college fit (Turpin, 2013).

Misalignments in fit, some of which have been linked to organizational identity, can contribute to failed presidencies and additional institutional stress (Aspen Institute, 2017; Selingo, Chheng, & Clark, 2017; Selzer, 2018b). Therefore, a logical inference is that organizational identity should be actively considered during the presidential search process. However, despite their ubiquitous use, the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity, particularly within the context of a small, private college’s presidential search, has not been empirically studied. Given the topic’s operational
implications for small colleges and their presidents, this is a research gap that needed to be addressed.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to understand the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity while facilitating presidential searches for small, private colleges. The focus of the research was on consultants’ reflections on their interactions with governing boards, search committees, prospective candidates, and other stakeholders during the search process.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do search consultants acquire an understanding of a small college’s organizational identity?
2. How do search consultants communicate the college’s organizational identity to prospective presidential candidates?

**Interim Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework serves as the “superstructure for the work” of a research study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016, p. 9). Accordingly, Figure 1 represents the framework for my study, as informed by research presented earlier in this chapter and further detailed in Chapter 2. The following description reflects my thought process that guided the framework’s development.

I viewed the role of executive search consultants as interpretive moderators between the inputs (organizational identity, existential threats, and desired presidential attributes) and a successful outcome, which is the recruitment of a pool of suitable presidential candidates. My framework presents organizational identity as the point at which the constructs of the social actor, social constructionist, and institutional views intersect, with two-step valuation theory a
contributing theoretical strand to the institutional view. The intersection of these theoretical perspectives represents an integrated view of organizational identity, a holistic construct previously explicated in the literature (Gioia et al., 2010). Although not testing theory, I used this integrated perspective of organizational identity as a lens through which to explore search consultants’ interpretive role.

I envisioned search consultants working to understand a college’s identity, while also learning of existential threats facing the college and what attributes it seeks in a new president. I further envisioned search consultants attempting to harmonize and communicate these identity factors as they carry out their work for the client institution. Finally, I viewed the outcome of the process as a pool of viable presidential candidates for the governing board’s further consideration.

Figure 1. Interim Conceptual Framework
This framework served as a solid foundation as I conducted the study. However, I was also mindful that although a conceptual framework pulls together components from elsewhere, the structure and coherence are the researcher’s mental creation (Maxwell, 2005). I developed this schematic to conceptually represent the constructs and dynamics related to the topic. I also realized that my initial framework, as presented in Figure 1, was inherently vague. Search consultants’ interpretive process was the phenomenon being explored, and was the segment of the diagram specifically targeted for refinement. Therefore, it was incumbent upon me to critically examine the study’s findings as they emerged, and determine how to best represent them within a revised schematic. I also remained open to the possibility that the study’s results might conflict with the initial framework, which would then mandate a more extensive revision. In Chapter 5, I present my finalized version of the conceptual framework and discuss how it was derived from the study’s findings.

**Overview of the Methodology**

Organizational identity has historically been explored using quantitative and qualitative methods (Dumay et al., 2015). However, to gain a deeper understanding of organizational identity’s relationship to institutional dynamics, researchers are increasingly focusing on qualitative methods to reveal identity’s operational implications (Foreman & Whetten, 2016). A qualitative approach to inquiry addresses research questions at an interpretive level beyond the intended scope of quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Because I sought an in-depth understanding of search consultants’ role in interpreting organizational identity during presidential searches, I decided that a qualitative approach would be the most responsive to my research questions.
The methodological shift of the organizational identity literature also aligned well with my philosophical stance. My ontological and epistemological perspective falls into the category of social constructivism, whereby knowledge is acquired through interpreting the meaning people give to their experiences, but with the acknowledgement that multiple realities exist as constructed through one’s lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The contributing strands of organizational identity theory stem from the multiple vantage points through which identity is experienced, expressed, and interpreted (Goia et al., 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; King et al., 2010; Pratt et al., 2016). This provided additional rationale for selecting qualitative inquiry through which to explore the topic. The following summary provides an overview of the approach and methods I used.

I conducted what is considered a basic interpretive study. A basic interpretive study seeks to uncover how people interpret what they have experienced. It is the design of choice when features of other qualitative methods do not align well with the research questions (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). Chapter 3 explicates my decision-making process for having excluded other qualitative approaches.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to identify and select 10 executive search consultants as the study’s participants, including three consultants who took part in a pilot test of the research design. All participants met the inclusionary criteria of having facilitated at least three presidential searches for small, private colleges within the past five years. Empirical research conducted by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) indicates that, for most qualitative studies, saturation is generally achieved within the range of 6-12 relatively homogenous participants. One-on-one semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data
collection. In order to not limit the geographic range for participant recruitment, I conducted all interviews via videoconferencing or phone, both of which are acceptable modalities for data collection (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After transcribing each interview, I forwarded a copy of the resulting transcript to the respective search consultant. I asked them to provide me with feedback on the transcript’s accuracy and to offer any clarifying comments. In addition to reflecting professional consideration toward the participants, this member-checking procedure also demonstrated trustworthiness of the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Richards, 2015).

I used the constant comparative method to analyze the interview data. The constant comparative method focuses the researcher on engaging with the data in a purposefully iterative fashion (Glaser, 1965). The process is comprised of assigning code labels to data segments, while simultaneously comparing segments with those previously coded to the same category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1965; Saldana, 2016). Throughout this process of cyclic constant comparison, I made extensive use of memos to capture my reflections, evolving insights, and questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moving through successive iterations of coding, categorizing, reflecting, and memoing allowed me to identify themes salient to the research questions (Richards, 2015). The resulting themes and the findings which generated them will be presented in Chapter 4.

**Significance of the Study**

Operating under the premise that selecting the right president is a key decision for a college (Bourgeois, 2016; Trachtenberg et al., 2013), and that the college’s organizational identity factors into that decision (Pratt et al., 2016; Selingo et al., 2017), this study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding organizational identity and the use of search consultants in
higher education. It addressed the research gap on how salient aspects of organizational identity are communicated to executive search consultants, focusing on small, private colleges. In doing so, this research has illuminated how the constructs of organizational identity theory translate to actual practice. I foresee this study as beneficial to college governing boards, search committees, potential presidential applicants, and search consultants new to the small-college segment of higher education.

Governing boards can use this research to better understand how consultants interpret and communicate organizational identity when attracting a pool of applicants. Since selection of a president is one of the most important duties a governing board carries out (Trachtenberg et al., 2013) board members and their designees on the college’s search committee can use the outcome of this research when interviewing potential search consultants. This can help ensure the consultant and governing board are in agreement on identity, search criteria, and applicant recruitment parameters before a consultant’s contract is finalized (Johnston & Ferrare, 2013). Agreement in these areas can minimize the risk of a failed search that is due to poor alignment between the new president and the college’s organizational identity (Aspen Institute, 2017).

Individuals aspiring to be college presidents can use this study to prepare for their interactions with search consultants and search committees. This can assist them in asking and responding to questions that have a bearing on institutional fit while still early in the process (Turpin, 2013). It can also help them discern when consultants are sufficiently attentive to issues of organizational identity prior to entering into a working relationship with them. This is significant, since small-college presidents typically spend much of their inaugural time learning about how the institution views itself and how others view it (McDade, Dowdall, Polonio, & Hamos, 2017; Smerek, 2013).
Finally, this research can be of benefit to consultants and the executive search firms that employ them, since sensemaking is important within the realm of managerial consultancy (Johnston & Ferrare, 2013). There is a business case for search firms to establish a strong record of success. Understanding the role organizational identity plays in the executive search process can increase the likelihood of a stronger match between a college and its eventual president.

**Chapter Summary**

In Chapter 1, I presented an overview of the converging factors in higher education that led me to conduct this study. I offered a summarization of literature indicating that small, private colleges are experiencing an unprecedented level of existential stress, largely stemming from financial pressures caused by enrollment challenges (Hilbun & Maniseishvili, 2016; Thomason, 2017; Wootton, 2016; Wylie, 2018). In their quest for survival, small colleges are faced with competing pressure to maintain their historic identity while still pursuing change (Stensaker, 2015; Weerts et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is during periods of leadership transition that organizational identity becomes especially important (MacDonald, 2013). The widespread use of search consultants in facilitating presidential searches, seen also across the small, private college sector, positions search consultants to be interpreters and communicators of organizational identity. However, I did not find prior empirical research regarding how search consultants learn about and communicate their client college’s identity to prospective presidential candidates, which emerged as the focus of my study.

After introducing the issues, I provided relevant background information to further delineate the researchable problem and its operational implications for small, private colleges. In doing so, I also situated my study within the theoretical conversation surrounding organizational identity, concentrating on an integration of the social constructionist, social actor, and
institutional perspectives of identity. Following an overview of how I carried out the research, I then presented and described my initial conceptual framework, which served as an interim schematic representation of the research topic pending the study’s conclusion. I concluded Chapter 1 by offering a summary of the study’s practical significance for college stakeholders, search consultants, and potential presidential candidates.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity while facilitating presidential searches for small, private colleges. The focus of the research was on consultants’ reflections on their interactions with governing boards, search committees, potential applicants, and other stakeholders during the search process. I provide evidence in Chapter 2 that organizational identity is important to small, private, nonprofit colleges, and that not enough is known about the role it plays in the presidential search process at these institutions. This review includes literature from the following subtopical areas, the intersection of which drove the justification for my study: (a) organizational identity; (b) challenges facing small, private, nonprofit colleges; (c) pressures of the college presidency; and (d) facilitated presidential searches. Each section begins with an overview to provide a baseline understanding of the subtopic, followed by a focused presentation of literature that supports my study’s purpose.

This chapter includes primarily empirical, theoretical, and meta-analytical literature. Nonscholarly published work appearing in higher education professional publications, such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, are also included to supplement or lend additional context. Because organizational identity occupies a central place within my study, I begin with a discussion of what it is and what major conversations are currently taking place in the field.

**Facets of Organizational Identity**

Much of the foundational research on organizational identity consists of meta-analyses and conceptual/theoretical work. *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Identity* is an
anthological body of work that encapsulates the historical and current status of organizational identity as a field of research (Pratt et al., 2016). This section of Chapter 2 draws heavily from that collective resource to frame the theoretical base. A broad view is necessary before moving on to examine research that deals specifically with organizational identity in higher education.

**Origins, Ontology, and Utility**

The term *organizational identity* and its definition was conceived by Albert and Whetten in 1985, and reinforced by Whetten (2006) two decades later. The classic definition of organizational identity, as distilled from earlier scholarly work in the field of sociology and psychology, is: “The central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations” (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). As originally described by Albert and Whetten (1985), it highlights those aspects that are “central, distinctive, and enduring” to the organization (p. 265). Most subsequent research has centered on the question, “How does a collective define itself?” (Pratt et al., 2016, p. 3).

Over the past several decades, however, there has been a trending away from conceptualizing organizational identity as a static set of institutional characteristics to instead viewing it as a process (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Whichever ontological view is taken, the value of organizational identity as a body of knowledge resides in its usefulness as an analytical resource for understanding organizational dynamics (Watson, 2016) and in dealing with existential challenges and threats (Anthony & Tripsas, 2016). Strategically tying identity narratives to the organization’s history can align stakeholders with the organization, and can also serve as a point of leverage to distinguish it from competitors (Suddaby, Foster, & Quinn Trank, 2016). As discussed later in this chapter, small-college presidents are often called to confront
existential threats by managing change within an unstable environment. This signals the direct relevance of organizational identity to the role of a small-college president.

Extending that thought, Schultz (2016) maintains that leaders can use this flexible view of historical identity as a stabilizer while simultaneously orchestrating change. Whetten (2006) noted that organizational members are most likely to directly reference historical identity when confronted with major decision points or crises, holding that “at such times identity claims are likely to be presented as categorical imperatives – what the organization must do in order to avoid acting out of character” (p. 221). Similarly, Van Knippenberg (2016) found that organizational members’ sensemaking of the enterprise’s identity is intimately tied to a leader’s sensegiving ability. That sensegiving ability is, in turn, contingent upon the leader acting in a way that consistently reflects the identity. This influence was highlighted by Anthony and Tripsas (2016), who noted that leaders often set the stage for incremental or dramatic change in the organization’s identity, even if inadvertently. This clearly has implications for a new college president, particularly one who moves in to lead an institution under stress.

A logical question is: Who establishes an organization’s identity? Ashforth (2016) notes that founding leaders almost always set the baseline identity, and for a period that foundation serves as a constraint on change and an enabler of stability. However, over time, statements of what an organization’s ‘true’ identity is can become problematic, since those statements imply unity in all members’ understanding of the enterprise. Even more troubling is that publicized statements of how an organization views itself often mask issues of power and intra-organizational conflict (Watson, 2016). Kenny, Whittle, and Willmott (2016) concur, stating that the appearance of unity about an organization’s core identity is more a reflection of power dynamics and corporate politics than stakeholder consensus. Extending that thought, Schinoff et
al. (2016) developed a four-frame typology, expressed in first-person plural voice, to depict how organizations might view and communicate their identity:

1. “We don’t know who we are” (p. 227).
2. “We don’t need to communicate who we are” (p. 228).
3. “We don’t know who we are, but will communicate who we might be” (p. 229).
4. “This is who we are” (p. 230).

Schinoff et al. (2016) further contend that identity is typically communicated by those “who are seen as capable and legitimate communicators of the organization’s deepest held meanings and beliefs” (p. 231). However, Kenny et al. (2016) again assert that an organizational claim of a clear identity merely echoes the opinion of the most powerful person or group within the institution. These perspectives have contributed to the view that most organizations actually have multiple identities vying for expression (Pratt, 2016). Also, reactions to situations that threaten how stakeholders view an organization’s identity are highly individual, whether or not those threats come from within or outside of the institution (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016).

Petriglieri and Devine called for additional research to illuminate how organizations respond to identity threats, specifically member responses that serve to preserve identity versus those that alter it. These views highlight a connection with my study. Although research exists on a broad, conceptual level, I did not locate studies that explored which voices are heard when articulating a small college’s identity during a presidential search.

**Four Epistemological Perspectives**

Probing more deeply into the theoretical base of organizational identity, scholarly work examining how it can best be understood falls into the following three main epistemological strands: the social actor perspective, the social constructionist perspective, and the institutional
perspective (Gioia et al., 2013). The social constructionist perspective focuses on how members of the organization define and articulate their collective identity. This perspective is viewed as a continuous negotiation among stakeholders regarding what the organization’s identity is and how it should be best expressed. It aligns with the ontological view of organizational identity as a process (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Far from a simple process, though, arriving at any level of mutual agreement is subject to stakeholders successfully navigating ambiguity (Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). This is relevant to my study’s purpose. As will be discussed in a later section of this chapter, small colleges exist in an environment ripe with uncertainty and punctuated by questions of identity.

The social actor perspective within organizational identity theory views the organization as the personification of a collective individual (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). It focuses heavily on image. An organization decides how it wants society to view it, and then takes actions to shape its reputation (King et al., 2010). People external to the organization learn about it through its actions and the commitments of those who claim to speak and act on its behalf. Coined identity custodians by Schinoff et al. (2016) the role of these individuals is to signal to others what that core identity of the organization is. Identity custodians are organizational members who occupy leadership or similarly influential positions within the institution, and whose perceived authority thus allows them to function as a conduit in communicating identity claims to others (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). The identity communicated by leaders, however, must be in harmony with that of the organization to avoid potentially harmful disconnects (Van Knippenberg, 2016). Learning who communicates “who” the college is during the presidential search process is where this particular conversation in the field intersects with my study.
The *institutional perspective* of organizational identity considers both internal and external images of the organization, but focuses most on the effect that outside forces have on it. The organization is assessed by its status within the broader institutional context in which it resides, and upon which it bases its sense of legitimacy (Glynn & Abzug, 2002). An example within the higher education field is the perceived importance of the annual U.S. News and World Report educational rankings (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010).

A view recently advanced by Zuckerman (2016), termed *two-stage valuation theory* factors into the conversation by seeking to reconcile two related constructs within the institutional perspective of organizational identity – optimal-distinctiveness theory and different-audience theory. Optimal-distinctiveness theory states that organizational members look for a balance between their organization’s similarity to others in the industry and how their organization is distinctive. Different-audience theory views organizational members as having to contend with pressures that exist within the industry to be similar to other institutions. Zuckerman’s theory overlays the optimal-distinctiveness and different-audience constructs upon each other. He argues that customers first judge whether an organization has the features that prove it is a legitimate part of the industry to which it claims to belong. Only then will they compare distinguishing features between organizations and make a selection. Phillips et al. (2016) concur, stating that organizational identities often are derived from fundamental identities shared across an institutional sector. As will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, colleges strive to differentiate themselves from the competition while still being viewed as legitimate and desirable members of the higher education industry (Weerts, Freed, & Morphew, 2014). Incoming presidents must be aware of this distinction in order to be successful.
Given the wide-ranging conceptual base within the field of organizational identity research, scholarly work has recently moved into the area of how to reconcile and integrate these views that initially appear irreconcilable (Pratt et al., 2016). Gioia et al. (2010) determined that both the social actor and social constructionist perspectives of organizational identity are present as identity is formed. Additionally, Gioia et al. (2010) indicated that all three views are necessary to forge a sense among stakeholders of an enterprise’s core values and defining characteristics. This juxtaposition of the social actor, social constructionist, and institutional perspectives of organizational identity were integral components of my study’s conceptual framework. I anticipated that one or a combination of these three epistemological views and their underlying ontological foundations would surface during my research. Having explored relevant literature from the broader research field of organizational identity, I turn next to identity research specific to the higher education field.

Organizational Identity within Higher Education

Gioia and Thomas (1996) suggested that executive leaders’ views of a desired future image during a period of changing conditions are key to how stakeholders perceive issues facing a college. Literature generated over a 40-year timespan indicates a pattern of higher education institutions seeking to utilize historical narrative for their sustainability and growth (Dumay et al., 2015). I find it significant that Dumay et al.’s analysis is consistent with that of the general organizational literature regarding change: Organizational identity serves the paradoxical dual purpose of both limiting and guiding it. They noted a pattern that indicates a recursive relationship exists between internal identity claims, branding and marketing efforts, and assessment of external image/reputation. This mirrors the social actor, social constructionist, and institutional perspectives highlighted in the theoretical literature.
Tracing the conceptual and empirical perspectives of organizational identity within higher education, Weerts et al. (2014) constructed a four-era historical segmentation with descriptive labels: (a) storytelling - focused on campus-specific traditions and events that served to signal a unique campus life; (b) saga – emphasizing the deeply held values and commitments of the college that have endured throughout its history; (c) strategy – marked by a new concern with reputation and quality rankings; and (d) market responsiveness – characterized by heightened competition for students and resources. Weerts et al. (2014) identified a trending away from viewing identity as a set of static attributes. Instead, researchers are now more likely to consider organizational identity as a set of characteristics subject to continual re-evaluation, negotiation, and reshaping based on stakeholder and societal feedback. This supports a blending of the ontological views of Albert and Whetten (1985) and Hatch and Schultz (2002).

Unlike other disciplines in which the pattern of research is to transition from primarily qualitative approaches to quantitative, studies pertaining to organizational identity have been trending in the opposite direction. Researchers are now turning to qualitative methods to probe more deeply (Foreman & Whetten, 2016). The design of my study was qualitative, which was consistent with that emphasis on seeking a deeper understanding. One of Weerts et al.’s (2014) findings aligned well with my study’s purpose: “As the unique niche for small distinctive colleges shrinks, intriguing questions emerge about the relationship between organizational identity and survival of these institutions” (p. 266). That quote serves as an apt segue to an examination of literature specific to small, private colleges, which is the segment of higher education relevant to my study.
Challenges Facing Small, Private Colleges

This section begins with a discussion of characteristics that define the small, private college sector of higher education. That is followed by a discussion of the historical and current state of the sector. The remainder of the section is devoted to a presentation of literature that speaks to existential threats facing these colleges. For purposes of brevity, and unless otherwise needed for attribution or clarity, these institutions are collectively referred to as “small colleges” throughout the remainder of Chapter 2. As I review and discuss how this research supports the need for my study, I draw connections to the organizational identity literature discussed in the previous section.

Institutional Characteristics

As of Fall 2016, the most recent time period for which national data are available, small, private colleges comprise 20% (872) of the total number of postsecondary institutions in the U.S. (4,358). That subset does not include special-focus institutions that award degrees in a single field of study (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016). Of the 872 private, nonprofit institutions in the data subset, two-thirds have an enrollment of less than 2,500 students. That is the segment of the private higher education sector in which my study was situated.

A distinct difference between public and private, nonprofit institutions is the degree of reliance on tuition as a source of revenue. The foundation of a private college’s budget is tuition dollars, and the ability to support operations through a carefully determined combination of endowment funds and tuition revenue is critical (Zdziarski, 2010). Furthermore, Zumeta et al. (2012) indicated that the wealth and selectivity of private institutions are highly correlated. The combination of those two factors is inversely related to how tuition-dependent a college is for its
revenue stream. The less wealthy the college, the more dependent it is on tuition to sustain its operations – and tuition is directly related to enrollment. Zumeta et al. (2012) stated that it is not uncommon for a private college to discount its listed tuition rate up to 45%, depending on how far it finds itself above or below enrollment targets for the year. The discount rate continues its steady escalation, with the 2018-2019 average undergraduate discount rate at private colleges inching up to 46% overall, and 52% for first-time freshmen (Johnson, 2019). Tuition increase are, in fact, being outpaced by increases in discounts that supplement other grants and tax-based incentives (Ma et al., 2016). The financial implications of recruitment and retention are clearly of vital importance to this sector.

Because of this reliance on enrollment-dependent tuition, it is not surprising that, on average, private nonprofit colleges are no more selective in their admission policies than public institution (Chingos, 2017). Competitive differentiation based on selectivity is thus not an option for the typical private college. However, the characteristic low faculty-to-student ratio, focus on relationships, and tendency toward personal attention appeal to many students, including students often considered at high risk (Gross, 2008). Gross noted these characteristics are points of pride for small colleges, and are inherent aspects of their self-image.

Due to this tuition-dependent status, private colleges rely on philanthropy as a strong secondary source of funding (Byron, 2015). This connects to literature which discusses governing board composition. The governing boards of private colleges differ from public institutions in several respects. Rather than being appointed by governmental action or publicly elected, incoming board members at private, nonprofit institutions are selected by current members. There is a strong preference for individuals with considerable wealthy and community standing (Trachtenberg et al., 2013). The intention is to fill the board with strong donors who
will also secure philanthropic support from others (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Mitchell, 2013). This concentration of wealth and community influence within a governing board can be viewed as a power differential. As previously noted, those who hold power are often the ones with access to communicate their view of the institution’s identity (Kenny et al., 2016; Watson, 2016). Exploring how this differential manifests itself during the presidential search process ties directly into my study.

Having presented literature pertaining to the operational environment of small, private colleges, I next examine what is known about how that sector is currently faring. This is to provide supporting evidence that issues of organizational identity are salient to a small college during periods of stress and transition, such as seeking new leadership.

**Existential Threats and Closures**

Although the mounting pressures described thus far pose a threat, research indicates the small-college sector has been surprisingly durable over time. In a study based on Astin and Lee’s seminal 1972 research on nonselective small colleges, Tarrant, Bray, and Katsinas (2018) found that 411 of the 491 previously studied institutions remain open. Furthermore, 354 of those colleges are still considered distinct private, nonprofit institutions. The rest, although still open, have merged or otherwise changed in structure. Tarrant et al. (2018) noted that, “Even in the face of adapting and evolving, these institutions remained consistent in mission and type” (p. 359).

As further indication of the sector’s overall durability, an analysis of closures and mergers occurring between 1960 and 1994 revealed that private, nonprofit colleges failed at a much lower rate than businesses in general (Bates & Santerre, 2000). Despite the overall resilience of the sector, however, there are warning signs that small institutions are under more
stress now than ever before. In a cross-sectional study of institutional diversity across American higher education, Morphew (2009) noted colleges with 500-2,500 students were well represented in 1972, but had become significantly less so by 2002, as gauged by their respective proportion within the sector. Since then, the annual closure rate of private colleges has averaged less than 1%, but there are concerns that the closure rate will soon begin to escalate. This concern stems from the disproportionate amount of operational stress that small colleges experience from issues confronting all of higher education (Wootton, 2016). Selzer (2018a) estimates that approximately 20% of small colleges are experiencing significant financial pressure. Financial rating agencies have also repeatedly noted that small colleges remain the most unstable segment of American higher education (Wylie, 2018). Selzer (2018a) stated that although the predicted tripling of the small-college closure rate by 2017 did not take place, it has continued to inch steadily upward.

Adding to the pressure, it is not uncommon for alumni with nostalgic images of their small-college experiences to be shocked by the present state of their alma mater (Nichols, 2017). Large debt loads and stagnant enrollment too often result in poorly maintained infrastructure and other manifestations of financial stress. In an effort to contain costs, it is typical for a struggling small college to postpone repairs and upgrades to its physical facilities and grounds (Biemiller, 2015). This can contribute to the formation of a self-perpetuating cycle, since potential students often judge a college partially on the appearance of its campus. Compounding the issue, small colleges’ combination of comparatively weak financial resources and purchase volume put them at a disadvantage when negotiating supply purchases and service contracts (Brown, 2012). One suggestion to improve the financial standing of small resource-constrained colleges is to consider entering into joint ventures with others in a similar situation, although Blumenstyk (2012) reports
that many do not entertain that notion until they are in truly desperate straits. A legitimate question is whether this hesitation stems from identity-related concerns.

When college closures occur, they are almost invariably the culmination of multiple consecutive years of declining enrollment (Thomason, 2017). Chabotar (2010) referred to a form of “crisis fatigue” (p. 10) that can occur among the staff and faculty of small colleges who live through year after year of enrollment and financial instability. Ekman (2014) echoed that view, stating that challenges in attracting and retaining students are virtually endemic, and especially so for small private colleges. Ekman considered the density of small institutions in the Midwest and Northeast sections of the country as presenting a particularly difficult environment. Interestingly, Stowe and Komasara (2016) determined that geographic location is not actually associated with an increased risk of closure.

Ekman (2014) directly attributed the difference in some small colleges surviving while others do not to the quality of institutional leadership. In a study of closed colleges, Brown (2009) reported that one president recognized early in his tenure that the mission and identity of his institution no longer served the needs of the students or region. Unfortunately, the governing board and other influential stakeholders did not reach that conclusion before the institution became unsustainable. Biemiller (2018) also noted that many small colleges do not try innovative approaches until their financial situation is dire, at which point resources are not adequate to support implementation of a new program. Burrell (2008) earlier arrived at a similar conclusion, finding that many small colleges are so tightly bound to their institutional history and original mission that they often hesitate to consider innovative approaches. This connection between organizational identity and leadership ties directly to my study.
In summary, the research presented in this section served to frame the multiple challenges confronting small colleges. These institutions operate in a highly competitive environment in which their largely tuition-dependent status and poor economies of scale place them in a precarious situation. Viability depends on successfully balancing tuition discounting, innovation, philanthropic support, and enrollment efforts over multiple years. Indications of identity crises dot the literature. It is within this challenging environment that the small-college president must lead, and whose role is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

**Pressures of the College Presidency**

This section begins with an overview of literature on the American college presidency to set the overall context. The emphasis is on the escalating stressors of the position. The historical and current pathways to the office will then be presented, followed by literature pertaining to how college presidents leverage organizational identity for survival. The section concludes with a review of the risks and consequences of presidential failure. I present the topics in this manner to frame the issues relevant to my study.

**Role and Scope of the Office**

Tracing the American higher education presidency from the 1800s to the present, the role of a college and university chief executive has moved along a continuum from faculty member, manager, physical and social architect, accountant, and, most recently, to multidimensional leader (Selingo, Chenng, & Clark, 2017). As Bourgeois (2016) wryly noted in reference to reference to the multi-faceted role of the modern college president:

To bring these sometimes combustible elements together and manage them to the desired effect, the institution must have that rare superhuman leader who has a brilliant, compelling vision and who can: attract seven-figure gifts on a regular basis; enlist
passionate, generous board members; recruit, motivate, and retain faculty and staff; enroll gifted students; provide insightful editorials on current local, national and international events; and, in his or her spare time, ameliorate neighborhood issues. (p. 11)

The 21st century college president must deal with a constant flow of crises and industry volatility not seen in previous eras (MacTaggart, 2017). Survey results of the American College on Education’s (ACE’s) most recent study indicate that the nation’s higher education environment has become increasingly unstable and subject to public scrutiny (ACE, 2017).

Within this generally unsettled atmosphere, disruptive changes in technology, shifting student demographics, and governmental regulation are realities that have made the role of president more difficult than in decades past (ACE, 2017; Hammond, 2013). The Aspen Institute (2017) conducted a cross-sector review of presidential leadership requirements. Aspen held individual and focus group interviews with presidents, later supplemented with discussions among other key stakeholder groups – governing board members, student leaders, faculty, provosts/deans, and search consultants. Results clearly indicate that the modern college presidency requires a set of skills that is multi-focal and adaptable. In particular, exercising finesse when dealing with various faculty concerns, programmatic challenges, fiscal pressures, and evolving public and social concerns is essential. A distinct difference from previous decades is that issues are increasingly volatile. This largely due to the immediacy with which they are publicized through both traditional and social media (Aspen Institute, 2017). More than ever before, presidents in today’s environment must be willing to confront challenges and transform those into new ways of generating business for the institution (MacTaggart, 2017). Additionally, Weill (2009) noted that colleges are expected to contribute to the economic and cultural health of
the surrounding community, and the college president is viewed as both architect and emissary in forging that relationship.

Assertiveness and risk-taking are considered beneficial qualities in a college president, even when viewed from a historical vantage point. In a time series study of the strategic leadership style of more than 150 liberal arts college presidents, Neumann and Neumann (1999) determined that, even in the 1980s and 1990s, college presidents with a strategic leadership preference for maintaining the status quo were associated with institutions that were in decline. The extent of decline was gauged by enrollment stagnation, resource availability, and quality improvement issues. Presidents with a more innovative and visionary leadership style were associated with colleges that experienced improvements in all three areas. These findings are consistent with those from the preceding section. The literature sends a consistent message: Innovation and differentiation are essential for a small college.

An emergent trend is that presidents across all sectors view fundraising, budgeting, and other aspects of financial management to be their most time-consuming responsibilities. Analysis conducted by the Council on Independent Colleges [CIC], comprised of private, nonprofit liberal arts institutions, indicated that fundraising takes on even greater importance to presidents of their member institutions. Eighty percent of the responding presidents stated that fundraising is the task that occupies the majority of their time. This was several percentage points higher than presidents of other higher education sectors (CIC, 2018). Previous work by Cook and Kim (2012), as well as Hartley and Godin (2009) demonstrated that budgeting and fundraising skills have been steadily rising in importance for well over a decade. A study of primarily private, nonprofit college presidents revealed that many do not consider themselves adequately skilled in fundraising, even though it now assumes a more critical role in their
success or failure (Selingo et al., 2017). Emphasizing this point, Selingo et al. (2017) noted that “Fundraising, in particular, is essential from a president’s first day in office, and only grows in importance over time in the position” (p. 3).

The importance of communication skills is a recurring theme in the literature. Of note is that it, too, is intimately tied to fundraising. A tie-in with organizational identity, and thus with my study, is that a modern president must be able to merge the salient points of the college’s narrative story with donors’ overlapping areas of interest (Nichols, 2017). Byron (2015) came to the same conclusion, finding that a new president must be versatile in the high-level management of a multi-faceted organization, and with the associated role of chief fundraiser especially important. As a partial nod to shared governance, Byron noted that the skill of communication is also important when working with faculty, especially in a tenure system that insulates faculty from the consequences of disagreeing with the new president’s direction. There is a message resonating from the studies highlighted in this section. More than ever before, presidents are expected to possess and deploy a wide range of skills that respond to the needs of many. And, as Van Knippenberg (2016) concluded, a leader must conduct him/herself in a manner viewed as consistent with the organization’s identity.

Trachtenberg et al. (2013) suggested that the challenge of deftly handling the diverse expectations of stakeholders is especially acute for presidents of private, nonprofit colleges. Mrig and Sanaghan (2015) found that presidents of these institutions often speak to the stress of balancing their efforts between fundraising and enrollment-management related tasks:

Which objectives—fundraising or student enrollment—should get most of their attention? Presidents at private institutions are often in the most precarious position when balancing the demands of their time as there is seemingly no end to their external duties,
and yet they also play a more operational role in helping to shape and execute the vision for the institution. (p. 4)

Not surprisingly, presidents of small colleges are alarmed by successive low-enrolled freshman classes more than any other stressor (Docking & Curton, 2015). Docking and Curton’s findings suggest that resource-dependent issues facing a president can be addressed with a sufficiently robust pipeline of students. The Council of Independent Colleges (2018) also revealed that presidents within their membership spend a higher percentage of time on enrollment management than do presidents of other institutional types. This again is attributed to the tuition-dependent nature of private, nonprofit colleges, the critical importance of which draws the operational attention of these presidents (CIC, 2018). Kolomitz (2016) found that these leaders are well aware of their institutions’ fragile state, yet are energized by the prospect of helping to reverse the decline.

Given the demands of the position, the importance of proactively planning for a presidential transition appear inarguable. However, as will be explored in the next two sections, significant deficiencies exist in the area of succession planning. The issue has a direct connection to the presidential search process. In light of their resource-constrained environment, this places small colleges in an especially vulnerable position.

**Presidential Turnover and Succession**

The average age of a college or university president has been steadily rising. The three-decade span ending in 2016 saw the percentage of presidents age 50 or younger drop from 42% to 10%; those age 71 or older rose from 5% to 11%, and those 61 years or older remained constant at 58%. Thus, almost 60% of sitting presidents are at least 61 years old, with a significant shifting toward the upper tier of the age range (ACE, 2017). This suggests that
presidential vacancies will accelerate due to natural attrition through retirement, even if other factors remain constant.

Taking a narrower view, a demographic snapshot taken in 2016 reveals that the typical private, nonprofit college president is a 61-year-old married White male with an earned doctorate (CIC, 2018). This reflects an almost nine-year increase in the average president’s age since 1986. The average president has served in the role for 6.6 years, which represents a steady decline in average length of service since the high point (8.5 years) measured in 2006.

Hammond (2013), in reporting the perspective of higher education association insiders, concluded that presidential vacancies are being driven not only by an accelerating rate of retirements due to age, but also to the steadily increasing intensity and demands of the role. The Council of Independent Colleges conveyed that, in 2016, almost half of their member institutions’ presidents (49%) stated an intention to leave their role within the next five years. (CIC, 2018). As to their reported destinations, 39% indicated they would fully retire, 27% planned to seek the presidency at another institution, and the remainder indicated they would pursue other opportunities either inside or outside of higher education (CIC, 2018).

Although data clearly and consistently have signaled an upcoming widespread executive leadership void, the higher education industry as a whole has been surprisingly nonresponsive to the widespread lack of succession planning (Bennett, 2015). Long et al. (2013) noted the irony of students being taught the importance of leadership continuity while sitting in the classrooms of institutions that do not practice it. Klein and Salk (2013) found that not only have there historically been poor levels of succession planning, many governing boards still do not view the issue with a sense of urgency. This deficiency is especially problematic when a college loses its president quickly, such in the case of resignation, termination, or illness/death, rather than
through retirement. A logical question, then, is what explains the widespread lack of succession planning? Calareso (2013) noted that resource constraints, especially acute at small colleges, contribute to the lack of internal leadership development programs. Committing scarce financial and/or programmatic resources to develop a formal leadership training structure can be particularly difficult for those small institutions (Aspen Institute, 2017). The widespread lack of succession planning, then, is partially attributable to the very stressors which leadership is needed to address.

Another point of irony is that the aspirations some individuals have for higher office can actually work against a college’s need for a successful presidency. Research findings by Selingo et al. (2017) suggest the importance of a complementary linkage between a president and his/her college’s organizational identity, a point of relevance to my study:

One attribute of effective presidents is that they are in sync with the DNA of their institutions. But the career climbers among academic administrators too often apply for presidencies at a range of disparate institutions with varying missions and needs because they simply want to be a president somewhere. (p. 17)

The implication is that applicants with otherwise strong qualifications might not be well-aligned with the unique identity of a small college.

Even in light of those deficiencies, the fact remains that when a presidential vacancy arises, a successor is eventually chosen. However, as the literature presented in the next section reveals, the paths individuals take to the presidency are changing. This too has implications for the presidential search process.
Routes to the Presidency

Scholarly research on trajectories to the presidency is limited, but longtime patterns appear to be shifting. In particular, presidents of private, nonprofit colleges now arrive at the office through a variety of routes, rather than directly from the historically typical position of chief academic officer/provost. CIC (2018) subanalysis of the American Council on Education’s 2017 presidential study revealed the following: 26% ascend directly from having served as that college’s chief academic officer/provost, 22% served as a nonacademic vice president; 19% were presidents at other colleges; 17% transitioned from roles outside of higher education, and 14% ascended from academic offices other than the provost. Presidents of private, nonprofit colleges are slightly more likely than their counterparts in the public sector to have come from a nonacademic background. However, even an internal candidate elevated to the presidency can discover that the financial challenges facing a small college are more serious than previously thought (Puglisi, 2011). Perhaps not coincidentally, there is an emerging trend of deans from larger institutions moving into the presidencies of small colleges (Selingo et al., 2017). Selingo et al. attributed this to the strong fundraising role that deans of large institutions assume, more so than provosts, and which aligns with the importance of philanthropy to the small-college sector.

Regardless of the route through which they assumed the presidency, issues of organizational identity loom large. Ekman (2007) noted that presidents must balance defending and leveraging their institution’s historic mission and values with the potential benefit of moving in a new direction. That is consistent with Anthony and Tripsas’ (2016) conception of leaders influencing identity through innovation. Smerek (2013) found that presidents of small colleges “looked to understand the core identity, unifying vision, and common purpose of everyone on campus” (p. 381). Smerek’s finding aligns with Van Knippenberg’s (2016) view that the
communication of organizational identity is linked to the sensemaking and sensegiving roles of a leader. Similarly, research conducted by the Aspen Institute (2017) indicates widespread agreement among stakeholders that presidents must be able to articulate the distinctiveness and value of their college. Their findings indicate this task is more difficult now than in years past, due not only to increased competition but also a more skeptical public.

The preceding studies serve as evidence of the complexity of leading a college in the current higher education environment. They also serve as a fitting segue to a review of literature which describes how organizational identity has been used to salvage small colleges. This extends the conversation to a reinforcement of the importance of identity to the small-college sector, and as further justification for my study.

**Leveraging Organizational Identity for Survival**

Martin and Samels (2009) noted the risk of multiple crises escalates when confusion about identity and mission takes hold in a small-college environment. They found that colleges are more likely to survive near-closure when this confusion is successfully prevented or navigated. Similarly, Carey (2014) concluded that communicating the organization’s distinctiveness during a philanthropic campaign reversed the downward trajectory of two at-risk colleges. Likewise, Baker and Baldwin (2015) found at-risk small colleges that survived the Great Recession did so because leaders preserved the historic values and mission while simultaneously effecting change. Participants who viewed their college as having a clear identity viewed the adaptive strategy used to survive the recession as effective. However, the reverse held true during the recession for participants who did not consider their college as having a clear identity (Hilbun & Mamiseishvili, 2016).
Findings from a time-series analysis of small, private colleges (Tarrant et al., 2018) echoed the combined effect of identity and adaptability, noting that, “In practice, small private nonprofit colleges will need to consider what is core to their identity, what makes them who they are, and what can shift to allow their continued survival” (p. 362). Continuing that theme, a meta-analysis of studies of small colleges that experienced a turnaround revealed that having a distinctive identity was a common variable among successful institutions (Eaker, 2008). Even when considering strong presidential traits, Bastedo, Samuels, and Kleinman (2014) noted that organizational identity serves as a mediator between presidential charismatic leadership behavior and key outcomes.

MacDonald (2013) stated, “In times of economic downturn, identity issues emerge as particularly salient” (p. 155). Steiner et al. (2013) found it is important from a competitive standpoint for a college to be cognizant of what its core characteristics and values are, and to pinpoint those to leverage in external messaging. In a study of successful presidents, Pierce (2014) noted that throughout the difficult times each president respected the college’s historical saga and central values.

As the preceding examples indicate, organizational identity can be leveraged in a very positive sense. However, the literature also reflects the veracity of Schinoff et al. (2016) and Schultz’s (2016) view that leaders must balance maintaining a clear identity with the need for change. MacDonald (2013) concluded that events internal and external to a college/university often lead to intellectually and emotionally taxing debates over identity and image. Regardless, it is the governing board’s fiduciary duty to ensure that the institution’s historical purpose and mission are aligned with its programmatic offerings and academic outcomes (Henrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). MacDonald further found that these increasingly frequent
conversations require leaders to critically re-examine whether historical beliefs and values are still valid.

The above pressures may be accelerating, but have existed for several years. In their original study specific to small colleges, Bonvillian and Murphy (1996) found there was a strong desire to retain the traditions and heritage of the college. However, they also found that leaders acknowledged the pressure to be responsive to an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace. Stensaker’s (2015) findings reinforce those conclusions within a modern context. Stensaker noted that even if college’s current identity appears immutable, presidents have the ability to gradually influence stakeholders’ interpretations of that identity. The implication is that what is viewed as core to the institution is, in fact, changeable. As a further example, Jaquette (2013) conducted a retrospective time-series analysis of liberal arts colleges covering the years 1972-2010, with the focus being on why certain institutions change their name from ‘College’ to ‘University.’ Results indicated that two primary drivers were (a) enrollment pressures and, (b) actual or predicted movement of peer competitors toward a name change. Jaquette noted that this name change held the potential to disrupt organizational identity, particularly when the college had previously relied heavily on its history and saga as foundational to who it was. Taken together, the above studies further support my argument for exploring the role organizational identity plays as a small college searches for its new president.

The examples in this section attest that organizational identity can be leveraged to turn a failing institution around. Instances of identity adaptations in the face of change were also presented. Presidents clearly are at the forefront of these complex issue. Particularly for college presidents new to the role, those complexities of the modern-day chief executive can be volatile (Alexander, 2014). Alexander noted that the juncture of specific contexts and challenges often
signals either great opportunity or impending failure of a new presidency. Consequently, given the previously described stressors and lack of succession planning, a small institution can be rendered vulnerable when a presidency becomes vacant or when a new president is under duress. The next section examines literature surrounding the consequences of a failed presidency. These studies highlight the importance of making a good presidential selection, the process-related aspects of which will be examined in the final section of this chapter.

**Risks and Consequences of Failure**

Lovett (2016) acknowledged that governing boards generally are successful in hiring a competent college president. Nonetheless, Lovett was blunt in her assessment of the damage that a poor selection can cause for a struggling college:

> Conflicts between trustees and new CEOs are always destabilizing; for fragile institutions they can be devastating. Even the most elaborate and participatory search process will not produce good outcomes when those who have legal as well as ethical fiduciary responsibility for an institution fail to understand or to practice their duties. (para 11)

Bornstein (2015) reported that employee morale, institutional reputation, and stakeholder trust can all be eroded by a failed presidency. The resulting vacancy in the chief executive’s office often puts a temporary halt to strategic planning and fundraising. The Aspen Institute (2017) found that when a presidency fails, the root cause is often the governing board’s failure to understand how the institution’s goals align with the local, regional, and national higher education environment. Selzer (2018b) noted that presidents, boards, alumni, and faculty are not necessarily united in viewing innovative signature programs as consistent with the college’s integral identity, and occasionally a casualty of such disagreement is the president's short term of office.
Trachtenberg et al. (2013), through analyzing multiple failed presidencies, concluded that such failures inflict costs that are difficult to measure, such as downturns in staff/faculty morale and public relations. On a tangible level, a presidential resignation or termination customarily results in legal fees, severance pay, costs associated with a new search (whether or not partially indemnified by the previous search firm), and adjustments to the residence and office space for the new president. Whether in terms of direct or indirect financial outlays, these costs divert resources from other operational priorities of the college (Trachtenberg et al., 2013). Ironically, it is not unusual for a failed presidency to still generate substantial financial benefit for the exiting leader. Contracts typically have favorable severance packages, particularly in the instance of ‘terminations without cause,’ or can even result in the former president moving to a guaranteed faculty position unless he/she accepts a buy-out offer of that contractual provision (Wilde & Finkelstein, 2017). It is the institution that bears the ultimate cost, one which a small college cannot easily afford. Trachtenberg et al. (2013) further noted that in the immediate aftermath of a failed presidency, it is common for a subset of the governing board to want a greatly accelerated search process to take place. Another subset typically wants an intentionally slow process. There is a marked tendency toward board micromanagement of the college’s operations during a repeated vacancy (Trachtenberg et al., 2013).

When a board embarks upon a search for its next president, regardless of the reason for the departure, it may or may not decide to hire a search firm to facilitate the search. The vast majority do opt to contract for such services (ACE, 2017). Before exploring literature about the facilitated presidential search process, I return briefly to the foundational tenets of the identity field.
Pratt et al. (2016) state that organizational identity carries a certain pragmatic appeal: “Intuitively, it makes a great deal of sense that stakeholders need a reasonably clear sense of what is central, distinctive, and more or less enduring about an organization to know how – or even whether – to engage with it” (p. 495). MacDonald (2013) also observed that “the question of university identity often presents itself in times of leadership transition, such as in the hiring of a new CEO” (p. 155). Therefore, it is reasonable that potential presidential applicants should be provided with accurate information about the college’s core identity. However, I was not able to find studies that explored the role organizational identity plays in the search process.

**The Facilitated Presidential Search**

Although not segmented by size of institution, the most recent study of the American higher education presidency (ACE, 2017) reflects that 70% of private institutions used the services of a search firm when hiring their current president. In conducting a sub-analysis of the ACE data set, the Council on Independent Colleges determined that 80% of presidents hired during 2012 to 2016 by its member institutions were placed with the assistance of search firms (CIC, 2018).

Even though the majority of American colleges and universities now hire the services of a search firm, there are very few empirical studies of the search process. This scarcity was noted well over a decade ago by Lingenfelter (2004). In an early call for more research into the higher education presidential selection process, Lingenfelter warned that poor alignment between a president and the institution poses significant risk in terms of time, reputation, and organizational stability. As will be presented later in this section, most scholarly research on the topic has been generated by doctoral students, and even that is fairly sparse. The majority of information in this section of the chapter comes from the professional press, as well as from a manual on the search

The Search Process

Johnston and Ferrare (2013) emphasized that selection of a president is vested with the institution’s governing board, but the majority of boards delegate most aspects of the process to a search committee. Search committee membership generally includes representation from the board, faculty, alumni, students, and, occasionally, influential community stakeholders. It is common for the board to hire the services of a search firm to assist this committee, with a staff member of the client institution functioning in an intermediary support and liaison role. If the search goes well, the committee’s work culminates in a final list of candidates from which the full board selects a president.

Johnston and Ferrare (2013) presented a menu of search firm services from which an institution can choose, summarized as follows:

1. Encourage the board to take an inventory of the institution’s strengths and vulnerabilities.
2. Provide guidance in assembling a search committee if there is not already one in place.
3. Assist the board in constructing a detailed presidential position description.
4. Provide logistical support for the search committee’s work.
5. Use a variety of direct and indirect methods to encourage applications from qualified candidates.
6. Field questions and provide advice to potential or actual candidates
7. Conduct candidate background checks and interview professional/personal references.
8. Provide logistical and procedural support for candidate interviews and campus visits.
9. Serve as a resource to the search committee as it compiles its list of finalists to the board for consideration, as distilled from 15-20 quality candidates to eight to ten semifinalists, and then three to five strong finalists. (pp. 33-34)

The aforementioned services notwithstanding, the professional press contains evidence that not all of the higher education industry agrees with the use of search consultants, citing cost and overreliance on consultants’ services throughout the process (Greenberg, 2014; Kelderman, 2017; Wilde & Finkelstein, 2016). However, survey research conducted by the Aspen Institute (2017) revealed that boards usually find the services of search firms to be of high value.

Interestingly, the same boards also express concern that they are dependent on consultants’ expertise to find a pool of candidates from which will hopefully emerge the right president for their specific institution. Survey findings indicate similar concerns are held by consultants themselves, who wish for more time to proactively educate board members on the role of a college president. Although not explicitly referencing organizational identity, recommendations issued at the study’s conclusion included this admonition:

To further improve search results, boards would do well if they were better informed about the mechanisms of the hiring process, so that they may discern how to select and effectively partner with search firms to yield candidates aligned to their institutional vision. (Aspen Institute, 2017, p. 22)

In considering criticisms that have been levied against the use of search firms, Johnston and Ferrare (2013) acknowledged that, even though most consultants have themselves served in the upper administrative ranks of higher education, “some boards will doubt that they can understand and value properly what makes a particular campus distinctive” (p. 36). This
statement illustrates the importance of the nexus point of organizational identity and the presidential search process.

Leske (2017) offered rationale for when a college might not want to hire a search firm. For example, colleges should consider whether there is a qualified pool of internal candidates, or at least a logical successor, and also whether the cost/benefit analysis of using a search firm is prohibitive. Leske also noted that boards are hampered by search committees’ general inexperience with how to interview and hire effectively for an executive-level position in higher education. This inexperience, Leske concluded, is further complicated by logistical complexities of the search process that, although routine for search firms to navigate, are foreign to most search committee members.

Exploring the candidate perspective, CIC (2018) analyses revealed that three-quarters of the responding CIC presidents indicated the search process provided them with an adequate view of governing board and other stakeholders’ expectations. They felt they received an accurate picture of challenges facing the college. Similarly, in his study of the increase in nontraditional liberal arts college presidents, Beardsley (2015) concluded that “Executive search firms are unquestionably important and relevant in the vast majority of presidential search processes today” (p. 26).

Turpin’s (2013) dissertation is the lone study I located that explored alignment between college presidents and their institutions during the search process. Turpin’s study was the construct of Person-Organization Fit (P-O Fit). The emphasis was on whether a candidate’s personality aligned with the culture, but did not explore the role of organizational identity, per se. Turpin focused on the components of heroes, rites/rituals, and cultural network. His findings suggest that weaknesses in the search process are due to the search firm and search committee’s
lack of understanding of P-0 Fit in the presidential search process. I consider my study to be fundamentally aligned with Turpin’s, but with my conceptual framework grounded in the epistemological perspectives of organizational identity.

Because my study design was heavily dependent on the perspective of search consultants, an exploration of literature concerning the professional ethics of the search industry was warranted. As with other subtopics related to executive search within higher education, empirical research is sparse. The following section reviews scholarly and other literature pertaining to the subtopic.

**Ethical Issues and the Facilitated Search**

Stripling (2014) reported that search consultants commonly keep candidates’ identities confidential. This is ostensibly to protect candidates from prematurely jeopardizing their current positions, but also contributes to skepticism surrounding search firms. Stripling’s sources contend that search firms have competitive reasons for keeping their contact lists secret, and that this imparts an inflated sense of value for what a search consultant actually provides. A contrasting view was offered by Atwell (2009), who asserted that a high level of professionalism and dedication characterize the higher education search industry, stating that the quality of presidential selections has been enhanced through their use.

Although sharing the view that ethical due diligence is more common than not in the executive search industry, Curris (2014) suggested attention is required in the following areas: (a) not permitting direct-recruitment of high-level executives recently placed at other institutions; (b) ensuring that all candidate names advanced to the board for review are those of serious contenders; (c) being transparent and rigorous in conducting background and reference checks; and (d) maintaining mutually acceptable levels of confidentiality. Although not specific to
higher education, a client guide to search consultancy published by the Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants (AESC) includes a code of professional practice to which its member firms are expected to adhere (AESC, 2018). The areas of focus noted by Curris are mirrored within the AESC guide, signaling the potential for ethical breaches within the search profession.

Smerek’s (2011) qualitative study, although not specific to small colleges, indicated new presidents seek out those whom they can trust in order to learn more about the institution. In some cases, Smerek found new presidents asked search consultants to point them toward such individuals. I consider this significant, since it highlights how candidates can view consultants as trusted authorities in the process. The issue of trust notwithstanding, Johnson and Ferrare (2013) emphasized it is important that boards not take a deferential position when working with search firms. Although not common, an indication that a consultant is asking the board to abdicate their fiduciary oversight of the process poses an ethical risk to the process (Johnston and Ferrare, 2013).

McDade et al. (2017) provided a glimpse into the vantage point of search consultants. Although not empirical in nature, the results of a roundtable discussion with four experienced consultants provided insight into what they consider a poorly understood profession. All mentioned the dramatic growth in the number of search firms, their geographic reach, and the shortened timeframe for completion of a search -- generally desired by a board to be no longer than four months. Lending weight to the value of my study was this statement by one of the panelists, “Search committees want enthusiasm about their institution and a compelling vision for its future. This is a challenge for candidates because at the early stage, they rarely know enough about the institution to have a vision” (McDade et al, p. 54).
Chapter Summary

In Chapter 2, I presented a review of literature foundational to understanding the conceptual framework of my study: (a) organizational identity theory; (b) challenges facing small, private, nonprofit colleges; (c) pressures of the college presidency; and (d) facilitated presidential searches. The components of that framework underpin the study’s purpose, which was to understand the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity while facilitating presidential searches for small, private colleges. This chapter has presented evidence of how pressures facing small colleges and their presidents intersect with theoretical views on organizational identity.

In summary, literature on small colleges clearly indicates that the sector is experiencing an unprecedented level of financial stress. Presidents of these institutions are expected to possess a multi-faceted skill set, with emphasis on their ability to spur enrollment growth and philanthropic support. The literature also suggests that some failed presidencies can be partially attributed to organizational-identity-related misalignments between stakeholders and a new president. Furthermore, because the majority of governing boards contract with search consultants to manage candidate recruitment, consultants occupy a gatekeeping position in the presidential selection process.

A thread of continuity runs through all four subtopical areas of this review. Although organizational identity surfaces as a factor during transitional periods, an exploration of how identity is interpreted and communicated during facilitated presidential searches has been lacking. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, that is a topic worthy of exploration. In Chapter 3, I describe and discuss the methodology I used to conduct this exploration.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity while facilitating presidential searches for small, private colleges. The focus of the research was consultants’ reflections on their interactions with governing boards, search committees, potential applicants, and other stakeholders during the search process. No empirical research was found that previously explored this topic, one which is timely and relevant to the small-college sector of higher education. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do search consultants acquire an understanding of a small college’s organizational identity?

2. How do search consultants communicate the college’s organizational identity to prospective presidential candidates?

In Chapter 3, I first present my reasoning for having selected a basic interpretive qualitative design for this study. In doing so, I explain why I excluded other common qualitative approaches. I then describe how my ontological perspective, epistemological stance, and vocational history intersect with the research topic. That is followed by a description and rationale for how I identified, recruited, and selected participants; collected and analyzed data; and implement measures to ensure trustworthiness throughout the process.

Research Design, Approach, and Rationale

I selected qualitative inquiry as the methodological approach for this study. My focus was on how the interpretation of organizational identity factors into the presidential search process at small, private colleges. I used the perspective of search consultants through which to
explore the topic. Therefore, it was important that I acquire a deep understanding of consultants’ experiential perspectives. A qualitative approach is the appropriate choice when a detailed and in-depth understanding of an issue is needed in order to properly address the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Gall et al., 2007). Within the available subtypes of qualitative methods, I concluded that a basic interpretive design was best-suited for the purpose of this study. A basic interpretive study seeks to uncover how people interpret what they have experienced, and is the design of choice when features of other qualitative methods do not align well with the research questions (Caelli et al., 2003; Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Thorne et al., 2004). I next briefly discuss why five other common qualitative approaches did not best fit the purpose for which I conducted this study.

The perspective of search consultants was the route through which I gained insight into the role of organizational identity in the presidential search process. However, the lived experience of being a search consultant was not the focus of my research. Exploring the lived essence of the research participants is the focal point of phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The day-to-day experience of being a search consultant, while perhaps also worthy of examination, would have represented a deviation from the purpose of this particular study. Similarly, my research did not seek to describe a culture-sharing group, the latter of which is the central feature of ethnography (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I initially considered pursuing case study as the method of choice. However, after further reviewing the methodological literature, I decided that approach would not allow me the broader view of the issue that I sought. Stake (2013) explains that a deep and bounded examination of a single case or multiple cases is the hallmark of case study research. My interest was in a
distillation of several consultants’ perspectives obtained over the span of many presidential searches, rather than a highly focused examination of a single presidential search or very small set of searches.

Narrative inquiry, another common qualitative approach, focuses on participants’ life stories. The narratives are generally presented chronologically and contextualized by time and place (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The recollections of search consultants comprised the primary data for my research. However, those narratives were the route through which I explored the interpretation of organizational identity in the search process; the life stories themselves were not the phenomena of interest.

Finally, I excluded a grounded theory design, since a desire to identify and develop emergent theory is the explicit goal of that method (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The major tenets of organizational identity as a body of knowledge served as this study’s primary theoretical base. Although remaining open to all insights that emerged from this research, building theory was not my objective.

In summary, there were specific reasons why I did not select a phenomenological, ethnographic, case study, narrative, or grounded theory approach. Those approaches incorporate elements that fall outside the scope of my study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that a basic interpretive design is appropriate when the characteristics of other qualitative methods are not necessary to address the research questions. Through this process of reviewing and excluding other available methods, I determined that a basic interpretive approach most directly supported my study’s purpose.

Because the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research, it was important that I practice reflexivity throughout the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Glesne & Peshkin,
Specifically, I needed to critically examine my beliefs regarding the nature of reality, how knowledge is acquired, and what I view as being ‘knowable’ within the context of this topic. That leads next to a discussion of how my ontological and epistemological orientation relates to the topic of study.

**Ontological and Epistemological Stance**

I hold the ontological perspective that multiple views of reality exist, and that those paradigms are formed and defined as people interact with each other and with the world. I also believe those paradigms are subject to change. This aligns with an interpretive ontological viewpoint (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Glesne, & Peshkin, 1999). My ontological perspective of the nature of organizational identity flows from that overarching stance, and has been further informed through review of the literature. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, scholarly opinion has historically been divided as to how to characterize organizational identity. The classic view is that it is a constellation of static qualities – those central, enduring, and distinctive features which serve to communicate the essence of *who we are as an organization* (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

A divergent perspective, later introduced, views organizational identity as a *dynamic process* that reflects an ongoing process of change (Weick & Quinn, 1999). As further illuminated by the work of Ravasi and Schultz (2006) and Gioia et al. (2010), identity processes are connected to other social processes, predominant among them sensemaking and sensegiving. Therefore, what originally appeared as being two incongruous constructs can be reconciled through this synergistic perspective. I entered this study viewing organizational identity as a socially constructed set of distinctive organizational features, the central and enduring nature of which is subject to ongoing interpretation.
The preceding ontological stance links directly to my epistemological orientation, which falls into the category of social constructivism. Constructivism views knowledge generation as the product of individuals interpreting their contextualized lived experiences, rather than acquiring knowledge strictly through experimental or other quantitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This served as the basis for my study’s design, since the perspectives of search consultants were used to illuminate the role organizational identity plays in the presidential search process at small, private colleges. This illumination was dependent on my interpretation of their interpretations. Because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis within a qualitative study, I bore the responsibility of also reflecting on and monitoring how my own identity and inherent subjectivity intersected with the topic. That responsibility encompassed decisions made regarding participant selection, data collection, analysis, and reporting (Richards, 2015; Toma, 2011). My interest in organizational identity and the facilitated presidential search process stemmed from my role as a practitioner within higher education. Because of this intersection, it was important to examine my positionality as a researcher within the context of this study. Therefore, in the next section I discuss how my vocational history and experiences intersect with the topic. I also discuss steps I took to mitigate any inappropriate influence of my background on the study’s credibility.

**Reflections on My Identity**

I am currently employed at the mid-level leadership ranks at a regional comprehensive public university. During the conception stage of this study, and throughout the majority of data collection and analysis, I was employed at a small, private higher education institution. My familiarity with the small, private sector influenced my selection of a dissertation topic. I have not served on a presidential search committee, but did participate in intra-institutional discussion
forums with presidential finalists at my former place of employment. From conversations with members of my various professional networks, I am aware of several short-term presidencies at small, private colleges that failed due to a perceived disconnect between the chief executive and who the college considers itself to be. As I routinely pondered those cases, I found myself wondering if that fracturing could have been anticipated and avoided during the search process. That curiosity was further piqued through reading articles in the professional and lay press regarding presidential departures.

I entered my research with a neutral opinion of executive search consultants. Prior to this study, I had never directly interacted with a search consultant, either within the scope of my employment or related to my own career progression. My former employer did not use the services of a consultant during its presidential search process. Although not holding a negative opinion, I have long believed that search firms and search consultants are motivated to stay in business, and that the desire to survive and thrive influences their decision-making. Taking a wider view, my experience with managerial consultants in general is mixed. In the early stages of my career outside of higher education, I worked on short-term projects with general consultants whom I did not consider to be ethical or a wise investment of the institution’s financial resources. Those experiences did taint my early opinions of those employed in a consultancy role. Subsequent experience with managerial consultants were considerably more positive.

With this background in mind, as I assumed the role of qualitative researcher it was important that I critically examine my experientially based viewpoints and potential biases (Finlay, 2012). I realized the possibility of being influenced by either positive or negative portrayals of search consultants in the professional or lay press. Although it is not possible for a
researcher to remove the memories that give rise to presuppositions, it is important to capture
and examine those intervening thoughts as they surface throughout a study (Brinkmann & Kvale,
2015). Accordingly, recognizing and documenting one’s preconceptions throughout a study
through the use of memos, annotations, and journaling can enhance the credibility of the research
(Richards, 2015). To enter this practice of reflexivity, I began maintaining a notebook of my
impressions and questions when reading articles in the professional press that intersected with
my study topic. As I entered into the stages of participant recruitment, data collection, and
analysis, I logged my thoughts within the corresponding software program used during that
stage. Routinely reviewing those entries allowed me to examine and self-monitor my
interactions with the consultants and my interpretations of the interview data. In particular, it
was during a pilot test of the study’s design, described later in this chapter, that I was able to
begin the practice of writing memos and establishing a record of my evolving impressions. With
my positionality documented, I next present the rationale for how I selected and recruited the
study participants.

Participants, Sampling, Access, and Setting

Consistent with a qualitative approach, my focus was an in-depth exploration of the
participants’ interpretation of their experiences, rather than obtaining a statistically representative
sample of the population (Creswell, & Poth, 2017; Gall et al., 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Purposeful sampling, known also as criterion-based sampling, is the method of choice when
participants are being selected based on the depth of insight the researcher anticipates them
providing (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Toma, 2011). In order to recruit participants whose
experience could best address the research questions, I used a purposeful sampling strategy to
identify executive search consultants who have worked with small, private colleges, and whose
depth of experience would likely generate a rich source of data. The specific process through which I identified potential participants is detailed in the following section. In order to further ensure the desired number of participants, I was prepared to also incorporate snowball sampling. Snowball sampling, a subform of purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and involves asking participants to recommend others who might meet the study’s inclusionary criteria. Snowball sampling ultimately was not necessary, since I was able to successfully recruit the desired number of consultants who met the study’s criteria.

The selected participants were search consultants who specialize in facilitating recruitment of executive-level professionals for colleges and universities. Consultants were eligible for inclusion in the study if they had conducted at least three presidential searches for small, private colleges within the past five years. However, since I was seeking narratives that spanned a broad experiential base, my preference was to speak with those who had conducted executive-level searches for at least 10 years, and who had completed 20 or more presidential placements for small colleges. Therefore, I worked to first identify and recruit participants who had conducted several presidential searches per year for at least a decade. Although ultimately not necessary, the balance of the participants was to be drawn from those who met the baseline inclusionary criteria of three or more presidential searches conducted during the past five years.

The pool of potential participants was drawn from those whose corporate location is within the continental U.S. The names and contact information for search firms are retrievable from publicly available business directories. One such directory is listed on the website HigherEdJobs.com and contains a link to each firm’s website. During the time period in which I was recruiting participants, approximately 80 different search firms advertised on the HigherEdJobs website. I also frequently received unsolicited e-mail from search firms, some of
which contained job postings for executive-level positions at small, private colleges. This was an additional source of contact information that I used to further narrow or supplement that available from the HigherEdJobs website.

At the beginning of the recruitment process, I reviewed each website to ascertain the firm’s apparent suitability from which to recruit participants. This initial screening was limited to the firm’s self-described experience with assisting small, private colleges with presidential searches. Without exception, each of the websites I reviewed also contained a listing and individual biographical information on consultants employed by the search firm. Therefore, my second step was to carefully review each consultant’s biographical statement for indications that they met or exceeded the baseline criteria for inclusion. Based on this preliminary review, a total of 32 search consultants appeared to qualify as potential participants.

I subsequently contacted the identified search consultants at their listed e-mail address with an invitation to participate in the study (Appendix A). The e-mail script provided general information about the nature of my research. The script specified that participation would involve an individual interview conducted via web-conference, or, alternatively, by phone. Barring serious issues with acoustic quality, using these mediums through which to collect interview data is acceptable (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The introductory e-mail also conveyed the routes through which consultants could indicate interest in participating and/or learning more about the study.

Guest et al. (2006) suggest that, for most qualitative studies, saturation is generally achieved with 6-12 relatively homogenous participants. In order to fall within that range, the targeted number of participants for this study was 8-10. I received responses from 24 of the 32 consultants to whom I sent the introductory e-mail. Of those responding, 12 indicated their
interest in participating in the study. Of the remaining 12 respondents, nine consultants conveyed that they did not meeting the inclusionary criteria, and three declined to participate due to scheduling constraints.

Consultants who expressed a willingness to participate were scheduled for a preliminary phone conversation. It is critical that potential participants meet a study’s inclusionary criteria in order to prevent later misunderstandings and invalidation of findings (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012). Therefore, during that phone conversation, I shared additional information about my study and sought confirmation that the consultant met or exceeded the criteria for participation. As a result, I determined that two additional consultants did not meet the inclusionary criteria. I thanked them for their interest, but removed them from further consideration. The 10 consultants who met the inclusionary criteria and were amenable to an interview conveyed their preferred date/time for the conversation. The participant list also included three consultants whom I interviewed as part of a pilot test of the study’s design.

**Data Collection**

From the inception of participant recruitment through the last communication with those interviewed, I maintained a log trail within Microsoft Excel of all contact I had with the search consultants. Keeping careful records of communication served as a procedural chain of evidence for how I prepared for, tracked, and monitored data collection. This log trail thus served as one measure of the study’s trustworthiness (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2015; Richards, 2015). In the following section, I further discuss the specific format, tools, and procedures I used in data collection.
Interview Protocol

I adopted a semi-structured format through which to conduct the interviews. My goal was to provide sufficient structure to guide the conversation, yet leave enough time and latitude for any additional insights that the consultants were willing to share. The interview protocol for this study (Appendix B) served as a framework for the interviews. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) state that an interview protocol is a fundamental tool for the novice interviewer. When developing the interview questions contained within the protocol, I followed Brinkmann and Kvale’s caution that each interview question must link to one or more of the research questions. A cross-walk between the research questions and interview questions (Appendix C) demonstrates that linkage.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot test of the design several months prior to initiation of the full study. At that time, my primary goal was to assess whether I could gain access to the participants of interest, and whether they would be willing to engage in an in-depth conversation about organizational identity and presidential searches. An associated goal was to test the utility of my interview protocol. Both goals were met. Although contingent on scheduling constraints, access to the consultants was not difficult to achieve. The pilot-study participants engaged with the interview questions. In addition to their responses specific to working with the client colleges, they also shared unsolicited stories about working with potential candidates. Because this occurred repeatedly and arose naturally during the course of conversation, it supported expansion of the study’s scope. Therefore, I added a second research question and expanded the interview protocol to also address how consultants use their acquired knowledge of a college’s organizational identity when working with potential candidates. After later receiving notice of
HSIRB exemption and dissertation committee approval (Appendix D), I re-established contact and conducted a follow-up interview with two of the three pilot-study participants during the full study. This enabled me to fully explore their previously stated responses to those questions. Although the third consultant did not respond to my request for a follow-up conversation, his interview contained a particularly rich description and view of his communication with potential candidates.

In summary, the pilot study demonstrated that access to the participants of interest was achievable. It further indicated that search consultants were willing to engage directly in conversation about organizational identity and the presidential search process at small, private colleges. The pilot test also suggested that the study’s design would be strengthened by adding a second research question and expanding the interview protocol. Those changes were made prior to engaging in data collection for the full study. I now turn to describing in detail the procedures I followed while interviewing the participants and handling the collected data.

**Data Collection Procedures**

All interviews were conducted by web-based videoconferencing or by phone. That provided maximum scheduling flexibility and geographic reach when recruiting participants. Videoconferencing was my first choice, since eye contact and other nonverbal cues can build trust and provide visual feedback that enhances communication (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Videoconferencing closely approximates face-to-face interaction, provided the camera is close to the participants and the Internet connection is strong (Salmons, 2015). My preference was to use the Zoom software platform, due to my familiarity with using it and the ability to save and extract an audio-only file after the interview. That enabled me to have a face-to-face experience during the interview, while subsequently ensuring a greater level of confidentiality by extracting
an audio-only recording to use in transcription. Of the 10 participants, six agreed to being interviewed by web-conference. The remaining four opted for a phone interview.

To ensure the integrity of the interview recordings and efficient use of time, I followed guidelines provided by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) and Guest et al. (2012) when attending to physical details of the interview setting: (a) interviews should be conducted in a quiet, distraction-free location; (b) volume checks of the computer or speaker phone should be conducted prior to and at the beginning of each conversation; and (c) the interview protocol, recording devices, writing utensil, and notepad should be within easy reach. I used a digital voice recorder to capture a back-up copy of each web-conferenced interview. For interviews conducted via speaker phone, I made back-up copies with the digital voice recorder as well as with a password-protected iPhone. Throughout the interviews, I was mindful of procedures that would promote ethical and credible data collection. From a rapport-building standpoint, I spent the first few minutes engaging in general “small talk,” seeking to establish a friendly, collegial tone (Guest et al., 2012). I sought to remain conversational while reiterating the purpose of the study and other preliminary items of information contained in the interview protocol. This proved to be helpful in reassuring the consultants that my interest was scholarly in intent.

Immediately following each interview, I uploaded a copy of the audio-recording to my computer’s hard drive, the access to which is also password-protected. After acceptance and final submission of the study’s results, only a single digital recording of each interview is to be retained. In accordance with HSIRB guidelines, the recordings will be kept for three years in a secure location to which there is limited access to anyone but me. After the required retention period the recordings will be permanently deleted. These methods are also consistent with those
recommended by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) in order to maintain the physical integrity and security of the data collected.

Taking great care in ensuring the integrity of the transcribed interview is important from a trustworthiness standpoint (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), and also serves as the first steps in data analysis (Dresing, Pehl, & Schmieder, 2015; Roulston, 2014). Although initially considering the use of a transcription service, I ultimately decided to personally transcribe the recorded interviews. I used the proprietary software package AudioTranskription, having gained experience with its features and functionality during the pilot test. While transcribing, I listened to each interview a minimum of three times – the first time slowly while transcribing, the second time to check the transcript for accuracy, and the third time to adjust punctuation and insert parenthetical comments to denote when the participant paused, laughed, drew out a word, and so forth. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Richards (2015) note that participants should be given the opportunity to point out corrections and/or provide clarity to what they have said. This process of member checking is an additional route through which to demonstrate trustworthiness. Accordingly, I sent each participant a copy of their respective transcript, inviting them to review it for accuracy. Seven of the ten participants responded. All seven of those responding confirmed the content accuracy of the transcript, with one notifying me of a typographical error which I later corrected.

Data collection formally concluded with the production and member-checking of interview transcripts. In accordance with the method of analysis selected for this study, the analytic phase began during data collection. In the next section, I first present a general explanation of the method. That is followed by a detailed description of the steps followed.
Data Analysis

The constant comparative method of data analysis, as described initially by Glaser (1965) was the analytical approach I used for this study. This method involves simultaneously coding and comparing data segments with those previously coded to the same category. Coding is defined as the process of assigning a word or phrase (Saldana, 2016) that reflects the “summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). All codes are subject to revision, deletion, or aggregation through the iterative process of constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Throughout the cycle, related categories of codes are analyzed for emergent themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This thematic development is dependent upon researcher-generated notations that capture evolving ideas and insights, commonly referred to as memos (Glaser, 1965). That encapsulates the basic process I followed to analyze the interview data. What follows is a more detailed description of the specific steps involved.

I listened to each audio file in its entirety immediately after each interview, capturing my initial thoughts in a handwritten journal. I then personally transcribed each interview using the AudioTranscription software program. The program offers a notation feature through which I was able to document additional thoughts and comments. This feature enabled me to keep my comments separate from the transcribed content, yet still linked to the corresponding interview once the file was eventually exported to Microsoft Word. These notations served as an additional early stage of memoing. Consistent with the constant comparative method, I returned frequently to earlier interviews to compare them with those just completed, adding additional insights to my memo file.
I initially planned to hand-code hard copies of the transcripts. Microsoft Excel had been my preliminary choice of software to facilitate data analysis, due my familiarity with the software and its standing as an effective and accepted tool for collecting and managing qualitative data (Meyer & Avery, 2009). However, early in the study I decided that the functionality and features of specialized Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software would be preferable. Using CAQDAS software can result a more efficient process, help mitigate the limitations of human memory, and enhance analytical accuracy if care is taken when learning how to use the program (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Richards, 2015). Through researching available CAQDAS software packages and reading independent reviews, I decided that NVivo would best meet my needs for this study. After participants had an opportunity to provide feedback on accuracy of the interview transcripts, I uploaded the documents to NVivo. I then copied the early handwritten notes to NVivo, also ensuring that the notations I had logged within AudioTranskription uploaded correctly. The data and memos developed to that point were thereby centralized within NVivo for reference.

Having opted against developing a pre-defined set of codes, my next phase of analysis consisted of open coding each interview transcript. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize that open coding implies a researcher’s intention to remained “open” to whatever the data might yield. My first coding-specific review of the data yielded 45 codes, the majority of which I assigned using In Vivo coding and Process Coding. In Vivo coding draws upon participants’ own words as code labels; Process Codes denote action (Saldana, 2016). While coding, I memoed extensively within the context of each interview, highlighting a segment of the coded text and adding an annotation pertaining to that segment. This process of annotation enabled me to capture my thoughts as they occurred, link them to the corresponding data segment, and
develop a documentation bridge throughout the data collection cycle (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As advocated by Saldana (2016) I conducted a second round of open coding to ensure that all meaningful segments of the data had been coded.

The next step in the process was axial coding, during which I critically examined the text segments associated with each code and their associated annotations. The purpose of this step was to identify and group related codes into a category (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through this process I aggregated the 45 codes into eight categories. I documented my reasons for combining the codes in a summary memo file, within which I also captured my thoughts about potential themes. For subsequent reflection, and consistent with the constant comparative approach, I made note of both similarities and differences that surfaced across the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Richards (2015) and Toma (2011) caution that it is also important to mentally engage with unanticipated or conflicting information to later prepare a trustworthy account of the findings.

The final step in the process was critically evaluating and tying together the insights that emerged through the stages of analysis. In addition to re-reviewing my full memo file, I ran a matrix within NVivo to denote the categories which were most prevalent across the participants. Then, through systematically reviewing the segments of interview text and annotations within each point of intersection, I identified themes that appeared salient to the research questions. Presenting those themes is the focus of Chapter 4.

**Trustworthiness**

Moving through two or more iterations of first-cycle and second-cycle coding, with careful attention to reflection and memoing, normally results in themes that are logically coherent with well-collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2016). Mertens (2015)
and Richards (2015) also advocate the use of a third-party reviewer. An impartial expert
reviewer can substantiate that methods used to collect and analyze the data were sound.
Additionally, the reviewer can trace the steps used in the analytical process to verify the findings
are consistent with the data collected. My dissertation advisor had access to the interview audio
files, coded transcripts, and drafts of my emergent findings. My full dissertation committee
reviewed my methodology and findings. They were also able to critically assess whether the
results were supported by the data. As with any research project, this study was intentionally
bounded by design-related decisions I made, as well as by limitations largely beyond my active
control. I discuss those delimitations and limitations in the next section.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

The topic of this study was the role of organizational identity in the presidential search
process at small, private colleges from the perspective of search consultants. Because my
interest was in small, private colleges with an enrollment of fewer than 2,500 students,
participant selection, interview questions, and generation of findings was intentionally delimited
to that segment of U.S. higher education. Therefore, I did not extend the exploration to either
larger private colleges or public institutions. I did not impose a geographic boundary for the
selection of participants, with the exception that the interviewed consultants and their client
institutions be located within the U.S. There was no intentional effort to collect data specific to a
particular region, cultural group, or religious affiliation.

I sought the perspective of search consultants to explore the interpretation of
organizational identity within the context of a presidential search at small, private colleges.
There are others whose direct perspective could also inform the topic of organizational identity
and presidential search, such as search committee members, presidents, prospective presidential
applicants, governing board members, institutional staff/faculty, students, and other campus stakeholders. Although their viewpoints were often referenced by the search consultants, this study did not include the first-person perspective of those stakeholders.

The limitations of this study centered primarily around the nature of self-reporting (Brinkmann & Kavale, 2015), including social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993), and the natural limitations of human memory. Although I did not detect it, the possibility exists that the participants attempted to cast their firms and/or the search industry as favorably as possible. Interestingly, several consultants conveyed what I considered a surprising level of self-effacing transparency when discussing their observations and past experiences.

**Chapter Summary**

In Chapter 3, I described the decision process I followed when designing and conducting the study. The study’s purpose, combined with my ontological and epistemological views, drove my selection of qualitative inquiry as the method of choice. After comparing methodological approaches, I determined that a basic interpretive design best supported my goal of explicating search consultants’ perspectives (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Thorne et al., 2004). Using a purposeful sampling strategy, I identified and recruited participants who exceeded the study’s baseline inclusionary criteria. The result of that recruitment effort was a pool of ten search consultants willing to share their experience through videoconference or phone.

In accordance with the constant comparison approach to data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1965), I engaged in reflexivity from the onset of data collection through completion of the study. Capturing evolving thoughts and impressions in written memos were integral to making meaning of the data as I coded and categorized the interview transcripts. I also incorporated several established procedures to ensure trustworthiness of the results. The
culmination of this cyclic process was the identification of themes salient to the research questions. Having described how I conducted the study, I now transition to Chapter 4 where I present my findings.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity while facilitating presidential searches for small, private colleges. The research focused on consultants’ reflections about their interactions with governing boards, search committees, potential candidates, and other stakeholders. This study was designed to explore how search consultants acquire an understanding of a small, private college’s identity, and then communicate that identity to prospective candidates.

Data collection took place via semi-structured individual interviews with ten executive search consultants. All of the consultants exceeded the baseline inclusionary criteria of having facilitated a minimum of three presidential searches for small, private colleges during the previous five years. Interviews were conducted by video-conference or phone.

Following the constant comparison approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1965), analysis began during data collection and continued through the stages of first- and second-cycle coding and identification of themes. Three themes emerged as responsive to the research questions, suggesting that to understand and communicate organizational identity search consultants focus on: 1) Building a composite view of the organization, 2) Using the search profile as an interpretive tool, and 3) Remaining mindful of their professional responsibility. In this chapter, I present the findings that generated these themes, as well as my interpretation of the themes’ responsiveness to the research questions. The participants’ statements feature prominently throughout the chapter in order to contextualize the results. As a prelude to the
thematic findings, I first present a description of the study’s participants, followed by their conceptualization of organizational identity as it pertains to executive search.

**Participant Profile**

The participants in this study spanned six different search firms, with half of the firms employing fewer than 10 consultants and the other half employing 10 or more consultants. The participants, three of whom are female and seven of whom are male, have from 7 to 30 years of experience in the search industry. Eight of the 10 participants were employed at higher education institutions prior to their entry to the search profession, with four of them having served as college presidents. Five consultants possess an earned doctorate. Table 1 provides a snapshot of each participant.

Table 1

*Participants (Executive Search Consultants)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Search Experience</th>
<th>Professional Background</th>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Search Firm Size (no. of consultants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lou Adams</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>College President</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Arthur</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>College Vice-President</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Fewer than 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Brian</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>College Vice-President</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Charles</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>College President</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Fewer than 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason David</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>College President</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy Gail</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Management Consultant</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Fewer than 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam Harold</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>College President</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn Kay</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Higher Ed Agency Senior Director</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Oliver</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>College Dean</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Mills</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>College Vice-President</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>10 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of the participants, although willing to share their perspectives with me, did so with the assurance of confidentiality. Therefore, I use pseudonyms when referring to them and mask identifying information about their client colleges. Any similarity between a pseudonym and the actual name of an individual working in the field of executive search is coincidental.

Participants’ Viewpoints of Organizational Identity

This section provides a broad foundation for the themes that emerged from the study. Before I explored details of the search process with the participants, it was first necessary to obtain their general viewpoints of what organizational identity is within the college context, and whether they believed it surfaces during a presidential search. The latter clarification was important. It was possible that a participant’s responses would deny or discount the presence of organizational identity within the presidential search process. Although that did not occur, it would have been an early finding that shaped the rest of the respective interview.

Prior to the individual interviews, I provided the participants with a copy of the study’s interview protocol to give them adequate time and a structure around which to form their reflections. The introductory segment of the protocol framed organizational identity as: the institution’s central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics as perceived by its members (Whetten, 2006), the members’ view of who or what the college is (Pratt et al., 2016), how internal and external stakeholders and the public view the institution (King et al., 2010), or a combination of those perspectives (Gioia et al., 2010). That description encompassed the social actor, social construction, and institutional perspectives described in the scholarly literature, yet without being unnecessarily complex for purposes of the conversations. Although not explicitly using the terminology, I wanted to gauge whether the consultants’ impressions seemed aligned with the institutional, social constructionist, social actor, or integrated perspective of identity.
With that in mind, this section provides a general framing of the participants’ views of organizational identity. Additional description will be offered when presenting the themes.

In framing their views of identity, the majority of consultants noted the prevalence of faith-based institutions within the small, private college sector. However, whether secular or nonsecular, they stated that small, private colleges vary in how firmly grounded they are in their identity. The participants shared that some faith-based colleges have gradually relaxed requirements which historically have defined them. An illustrative statement by Marilyn Kay highlighted both the presence and complexity of the construct:

> Every institution has its own unique identity. A lot of it stems from faith; if they are religiously affiliated, then the mission, the vision, the sponsoring order, how that has influenced and really affected the institution and the way it thinks of itself. The way in which some of the values, the charisms of the religious identity, how that has factored into who they are; what is distinctive about them, what they value, their foundation, that type of thing. But on the other hand, you also get the institutions that have a much stronger identity, a much stronger sense of self, and the institutions that have less of that. And so, what we see is a range out there, but there is always some form of identity -- something unique.

That statement encapsulated a key collective view from the participants. Organizational identity is always present, although highly variable in how strong or well-articulated it is expressed. This intimates that the participants believe search consultants know how to detect identity’s presence.

Tim Charles was the only participant who noted a difference based on employee longevity. “It’s always interesting to see how newer people on the staff and on the faculty think differently about identity, and understanding how their [the college’s] identity is shaped by some
of the outside factors today in higher education.” That perspective, although not expressed by other participants, appears plausible. The less entrenched an employee is within a given organization, the more attuned that person might be to the effects of educational trends and enrollment pressure on the college’s identity.

All participants noted differences between stakeholder groups. “There are as many different ideas about that [identity] on a search committee as you can imagine,” remarked Greg Oliver. “The Board of Trustees may feel that they see their college on one radar screen. Frankly, the president may see it in a different way. Almost always the faculty see it another way,” offered Tim Charles. Most consultants added the college’s community stakeholders to the list of important perspectives, defined by Sue Mills as, “people who depend on the school to contribute to the economic vitality of a region.”

After noting that different perspectives exist between stakeholder groups, some participants admitted they view college identity as inherently subjective. While conveying that perspective, Sam Harold also suggested that the very definition of organizational identity is subject to interpretation:

It depends on whom you're talking to as to what that identity might be. And so, as far it affects admissions, of course, it depends on what other people think of you. As far as people act in their day-to-day work at their institutions, they're carrying their own identity of the institution. So, it all depends on who's doing the thinking about it. Your major issue is how do you get to the definition of institutional identity? Because it is made up of so many different things that are so very subjective. And you're very wise, I think, to look at that identity both internally and externally, because you see huge variances there sometimes.
Sam Harold’s viewpoint, representative of that heard from other participants, contained elements of the institutional, social constructionist, and social actor perspectives. This melding served as an early indication that consultants lean toward an integrated view of organization identity. What the participants described as a collection of disparate stakeholder opinions actually represents an entwining of the three primary theoretical strands of organizational identity.

The participants intimated there is a direct connection between how clearly discernable identity is and the likelihood of a successful presidential match. “I think it’s critical that the institution understand who they are, what role they play within their area, within their consortium of schools that they belong to,” noted Cindy Gail. Jason David went deeper in drawing a clear link between identity clarity and presidential fit, “When you have to spend a lot of time helping them deal with that identity question, or if they think they’re something other than what they are, that makes it far more difficult to help them find a really good president.” Cindy Gail extended that thought, highlighting the possible consequences for a new presidency when the college’s identity is poorly understood:

A lot of individuals, if you look at CVs and resumes, they have short tenures at certain places. When I ask them why that is, most of the time they’ll tell me, “I didn't realize what some of their issues were going in, and I wasn't the person to help them overcome those.” And some of it deals with organizational identity.

A logical conclusion is that the full expression of organizational identity does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is often interconnected with serious issues facing the college and its new president. What I inferred from this early segment of the interviews is that a college must confront matters of identity during the search process. To do otherwise risks a suboptimal outcome, including the possibility of a failed presidency.
Challenges notwithstanding, discerning a college’s identity with sufficient clarity is not a roll of the dice. Tim Charles offered this point of elucidation, “Now, those points of view, those vantage points -- when I say different, they're not always so disconnected that they don't make sense together.” Sue Mills went further, implying that complexity is, in fact, an expected and necessary aspect of a search consultant’s interpretive role:

There's a many-layered part of understanding the identity of the place well enough to feel as though you feel you are doing the institution and the client justice in the way that you represent it to the group of people that you'll talk to about it.

Although not recognizing it at the time, I later realized that Sue Mills’ statement encapsulates the three themes that emerged from this study.

As the consultants shared their general viewpoints about organizational identity within the context of a college presidential search, I was surprised by how animated their responses were. Some participants were more emotive than others, but all conveyed a sense of genuine inquisitiveness at the prospect of learning about who their new client college is. I would have expected that from consultants relatively new to the profession, but did not anticipate it from those with decades of experience. In recalling the variety of campus identities she has encountered throughout her career, Marilyn Kay remarked, “I keep on thinking I've seen it all, then something happens and I say, ‘Nope! Haven't seen that one yet!’” To this group of participants, the discernment of a college’s identity clearly is not a rote exercise. To the contrary, the consultants’ introductory comments about organizational identity ran as a connecting thread throughout the interviews. Their insights also served as prologue to the first theme to emerge.
Theme 1: Building a Composite View of the College

After articulating their perspectives about organizational identity and its connection to the presidential search process, the consultants moved into discussing how they go about their work. Each of the ten participants described a presidential search as being comprised of four essential phases, all of which require the active involvement of the college’s designated search committee: 1) pre-search, 2) recruitment and screening of applicants, 3) winnowing of the applicant pool to a small number of candidates, and 4) selection of three-to-five finalists from whom a new president is chosen. Although there were occasionally slight variations in the procedural details, each participant’s narrative reflected the presence of all four stages. Several participants also mentioned that they provide, upon request, consultation services to the governing board during a new president’s transition and acclimation to the institution. This could be considered an optional fifth phase of the process. As presented next, the initial phase of the search is particularly important to the consultant’s interpretive role.

Importance of the Pre-Search Phase

The participants unanimously viewed a search’s initial phase as especially critical to a successful outcome of the search. Not coincidentally, it is also the stage during which they learn the most about the college’s identity. Most referred to that stage as the “pre-search.” One consultant interviewed used the alternate term “audit,” while another referred to this stage as “the start-up.” Regardless of the terminology employed, they each described that initial phase as commencing with review of publicly available information about the college, such as IPEDS data, media reports, and social media feeds. They then progress to reviewing strategic plans and internal documents that provide a sense of the college’s overall health, mission, and initiatives.
That is followed by several days of on-campus/community visits during which individual and group meetings are held with various campus constituencies.

The pre-search process culminates with the search consultant drafting a detailed report of their impressions for review by the search committee. That draft report is revised until it is deemed suitable to serve as a search profile, also commonly referred to as the prospectus. The search profile, released in condensed and/or full-text form, serves as the official position posting. There was very little variation in the general description of the basic process between the participants. Thus, it was not surprising when the consultants noted these steps are considered standard within the search profession. However perfunctory those steps may seem, though, the participants emphasized that each component is necessary to a successfully executed search.

If taking a high-level view of the pre-search phase, it appears that consultants employ a standardized sequence of fact-finding activities. However, the participants’ narratives suggested that building a sufficiently deep understanding of the college’s identity requires a keen sense of observation and appreciation of nuance. Sue Mills offered, “I would say that you would consider it [identity] from a research perspective as both data and impression. Some of it is very objective, some of it is quite subjective.” In surprisingly similar language, Dan Brian added, “It's both data points and kind of an impressionistic view of the institution's trajectory. Basically, what we're looking for are the pathologies. Where are the problems?” Brian’s use of the term “pathologies” was evocative of the diagnostic process a health care practitioner might follow. Obtaining vital signs and baseline laboratory data about a patient allows a clinician to contextualize their subsequent conversations and in-depth examination of the individual. Sometimes the patient’s objective and subjective data align, and at other times they do not.
Although not a perfect analogy, and not one expressed by any of the participants, it provided me with a helpful mental model of the early part of the search process.

Similarly, descriptions of the pre-search phase were reminiscent of the adage about melding art and science. Dan Brian remarked, “A lot of it is just simply doing homework and studying, as you would expect. And the trick is how you add it all up.” The participants clearly considered the pre-search phase to be a highly interpretive endeavor, one in which the search consultant’s skill set is of value. As for how a consultant applies their interpretive skill, Sue Mills reiterated the importance of studying the organization from multiple vantage points: “Understanding the institutional identity or personality from many different angles is the key to feeling as though you can capture a deep enough sense of it that you can accurately represent it to someone else.” Obtaining that depth of identity-related insight, however, also requires navigating a college’s political landscape. That dynamic, presented next, comprises a major part of the pre-search stage.

Each participant made clear that consultants are hired by the governing board and work especially closely with the search committee’s chair, who is most commonly either the governing board’s chair or another board member. Not surprisingly, then, this represents an immediate power dynamic of which search consultants must be mindful. Also of note is that several participants mentioned an escalating level of board involvement in the search process. Greg Oliver stated:

I think the most interesting thing I’ve found of late is the boards -- I think the boards are beginning to dictate more. It used to be they were more just sort of partners off in the distance. Now they're more connected to what's going on -- on a day-to-day basis.
Given the fiduciary responsibility of a governing board, that increasing involvement in the presidential search process might represent a positive development. However, much depends on the nature of the previous president’s departure. That merited additional exploration.

As might be expected, nonforced retirements or resignations were noted by the consultants as usually less stressful to the campus community. Vacancies due to terminations are a different matter, especially if the president was popular with key constituencies, such as students and faculty. The participants acknowledged that presidential turnover can create a sense of instability throughout a campus. Marilyn Kay, one of several participants who seemed particularly mindful of campus politics remarked, “One of the things about presidential search in particular is that it is extremely political. Everybody has anxiety and concern about what is going on.” Consequently, cloistering the pre-search process so that it is confined to the governing board would foster campus mistrust. It would also cloud the search consultant’s ability to see who the college really is. As Sue Mills stated, “You can’t just go to an institution and say, ‘Okay, I’m going to talk to three trustees,’ and feel as though you have any feel for what the institution is really like.” Therefore, for both political and practical reasons, participants underscored that their pre-search work always includes as many segments of the college constituency as possible, typically also extending beyond the campus borders. They generally request to meet with certain subsets of the campus constituency, although the actual invitations are extended by members of the search committee’s administrative support team.

Not surprisingly, then, the importance of physical visits to the campus surfaced during the interviews. None of the participants considered phone calls or web-conferencing an adequate substitution for face-to-face conversations and observations during the pre-search phase. A typical on-campus pre-search spans two full days. Several participants acknowledged there are
search professionals who do choose to conduct the pre-search stage remotely; however, the consultants interviewed for this study viewed that as a disservice to the fact-finding and interpretive process. That point was highlighted by their frequent use of imagery when describing this stage of their work. For instance, Sue Mills remarked, “Think of it as putting together a 3D puzzle.” To highlight the importance of the on-campus visit, Mills offered the following analogy:

For x number of days -- usually no fewer than one, no more than three -- in the start-up phase you are absolutely Margaret Mead. You are doing anthropology. You are living among the natives. You're trying to breathe their air, eat their food, and experience the world the way they experience the world. So cultural anthropology is a very good analog to what you actually do, procedurally, when you're doing the start-up phase.

Similarly, Marilyn Kay said of the on-campus visits, “It's about really immersing ourselves in the institution. What we try to extract is the essence of the point of distinctiveness.” Lou Adams often asks constituents, “What's the DNA of this place that makes it so special that you choose to be here?” I found it interesting that the actual term identity is occasionally articulated by campus stakeholders themselves. According Marilyn Kay, it is not unusual to hear a stakeholders say that their president “must be able to embody our identity.”

When I asked why they felt such an in-depth exploration of the campus was necessary, given the time and travel involved, the participants were quick to draw a connection with presidential fit. Cindy Gail responded, “That early stage of the process – it’s critically important -- understanding the organization and do they get where their identity is and what they're looking for?” Greg Oliver stated, “We try to get a sense for where the position might be within the context of the institution's history.” Cindy Gail personalized the response, “As an executive
search consultant, [in] the early part of a search I spend on a campus. I put myself into the role of a candidate: If I wanted this position, what would I want to know?” I sensed that, for at least some of the participants, physically walking the grounds was their attempt to see the campus as the presidential candidates would see it.

The above sentiments were consistent across the interviews, although participants varied in the way they described the structure, breadth, and formality of the pre-search conversations. Robert Arthur described his firm’s approach: “We tend to have group meetings with faculty, with students, with staff. We hold small group or individual meetings with cabinet officers, with the leaders of the faculty, the senate president, the leaders of the student senate, student associations.” That internal focus contrasted somewhat with Marilyn Kay’s protocol, which purposefully also includes a number of stakeholders external to the college:

We meet in a couple of open meetings with faculty, staff, students, alumni, trustees, members of the external community. Sometimes we even talk to major donors. Sometimes we're talking to people who are just influencers in the community, or influencers in the school. So you name it -- it's very intense.

Dan Brian’s approach appeared especially inclusive, taking into account the viewpoints of individuals whom he said might not ordinarily be queried as part of a presidential search:

The most important thing is we go to the site and we spend a couple of days just wandering around talking to people and observing. Talking to people formally, talking to them informally, holding forums, chatting over a cup of coffee, stopping and talking with the guy who's cutting the grass, talking with the clerk at the hotel – “What do you think of the place?” Just start talking to a lot of people.
Sue Mills’ view was similar to Brian’s. However, she drew an especially strong link between the breadth of stakeholder voices and the interpretive role of a consultant. Expanding upon her earlier anthropological analogy, Mills stated:

You want to hear from as many different people who represent different ways of thinking about the institution so that you appreciate it in its fullness. It's an employer. It's a place where a certain set of students have opportunities that they wouldn't otherwise have. It's the intellectual vitality in the life of the faculty. Points of pride for the alumni. So people care about the same institution in different ways and express their priorities for the institution pretty much depending on who they are.

Of the ten participants, Brian and Mills were the most vocal about including as much stakeholder diversity as possible in their pre-search conversations. I sensed Brian and Mills intentionally seek out voices they view as safe from campus political pressure. Brian, in particular, repeatedly stressed the importance of authenticity and candor throughout the entire search process: “Let's face it -- I work at colleges and universities -- and everybody I work with is smart. Everybody I work with is more than capable of bullshitting me, and sometimes they do!” The intimation was that, to do their job well, consultants must approach the pre-search phase with a certain measure of skepticism, seeking opportunities to confirm or challenge their evolving understanding of the college’s identity.

As noted, identity discernment is enmeshed with issues facing the institution. The participants all mentioned the stressful environment in which the majority of small, private colleges exist. Several consultants stated that many of their small college clients are, in fact, in a struggle for survival. Tim Charles remarked the search for affordable resources has become “deeply embedded in the kind of fabric of the place” and surfaces repeatedly during the pre-
search conversations at small colleges. Unfortunately, day-to-day survival then becomes the status quo, with little energy left over for innovation. Campus stakeholders often share with search consultants the compounding detrimental effect of deferred maintenance, outdated facilities, and unfilled faculty positions on enrollment. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of adjusting to steadily dwindling enrollment and revenue. Jason David offered his opinion that, despite this dismal scenario, small colleges “work miracles in many cases because of the dedication and hard work of the people they have involved in the institutions.” Eventually, though, an inflection point is reached that demands attention. Therefore, small colleges’ historical resilience notwithstanding, the participants clearly indicated a new sense of urgency now punctuates the majority of presidential searches. Marilyn Kay contributed this stark view:

What I’ve seen with a lot of schools I've worked with where there have been long-serving presidents, is kind of where the board begins to get very comfortable with the way things are. Even though the indicators are going down -- they keep going [as is]. Enrollment is tanking. Finances are tanking. The school's reputation is going down, but they just keep -- it's just as if they just keep going until there's a point where, “Okay, we've got to do something about this.”

Not surprisingly, desperation creates its own form of identity stress. Sam Harold stated that small, private colleges are, “trying to do their best to maintain the values of small community, mentoring, and close relationships -- but at the same time be part of the modern world. Some will make it. Some won't.” That dilemma, which itself can be the cause of either a voluntary or involuntary presidential turnover, directly impacts the work of the search consultant. Greg Oliver, whose client base is comprised primarily of small, private colleges, said what he often hears is, “How are we going to remain solvent and keep things going, and what kind of
That existential question, highly relevant to today’s small, private colleges, leads directly into exploring how the complicated relationship between identity, organizational culture, and strategic vision is imperative to forming a composite view of the college.

**Be Mindful of Identity’s Intersection with Culture and Strategic Vision**

The participants made clear that discerning organizational identity is critical to their work. However, that construct does not exist in isolation. Search consultants must also navigate the tension that often exists between a small college’s historic identity, its internal culture, and the presence or absence of a strategic vision. This is a complicated endeavor. Due to the struggle for survival many small, private colleges now find themselves in, assembling a candidate pool for those institutions is more difficult now than in decades past. Robert Arthur’s view typified the consultants’ responses in this area:

> The process today really is much harder than it used to be because everybody feels so constrained by the need for immediate success. They are less interested in hiring a comer. They all want to hire somebody who has “been there and done that.” They all want to hire a former president, essentially who already is a turnaround specialist but still has all their values.

The implication for a search consultant is that a committee might prematurely dismiss otherwise excellent candidates in the quest for their idealized version of a college savior. The participants believe that is unwise. Sue Mills stated, “Higher education is full of talent. There are established people. There are emerging people. We encourage people [search committees] to remain open-minded and to resist the urge to say, ‘Okay, we've got it.’”
With that said, not all presidential searches for small, private colleges are quixotic undertakings. Although the process is invariably challenging, the participants stated that many searches proceed smoothly. However, during our conversations, three types of scenarios emerged that signal potential problems for a search: (a) when a campus culture is not aligned with a college’s identity; (b) when a college does not have a strategic vision; or (c) when a college expresses a desire for strategic change, but resists any change to its identity. Each situation complicates a search consultant’s task of correctly interpreting and coherently communicating who a college is to prospective candidates. The following section describes how each situation can be problematic.

When culture does not align with identity. Search consultants’ explication of how a college’s culture aligns with core values and market viability surfaced throughout the interviews. However, it was noted that stakeholders tend to conflate the college’s identity and points of distinction with culture. Marilyn Kay signaled that first differentiating the fluidity of culture from the more stable attributes of identity is important to consultants’ interpretive work:

It [culture] is an amorphous, messy, dynamic, ever-changing concept -- because we just don't know. We think we know, and then things shift and change. But, what we try to extract is the essence of the point of distinctiveness. What makes this place?

Tim Charles, himself a former college president, echoed the caution that identity and culture are not synonymous when it comes to communicating with potential candidates. Although acknowledging the importance of everyday norms and rituals of campus life, his perspective suggests that consultants focus pre-search conversations to distill the essence of the client college’s identity:
It's often the case where staff, faculty, and students identify the distinctiveness of a college based on its “warm and fuzzies.” “I'm comfortable here -- We know everybody's name here.” So, just as one needs to pull the trustee point of view back into focus so that it's precisely stated, that also is a point of view that needs to be pulled back into the mainstream discussion and it needs to be expressed more precisely. With “warm and fuzzies” on the part of the campus-based people, that's not distinctive. That's not going to be the kind of quality that will bring the right kind of leadership.

However, even though distinguishing between culture and identity is important, so is detecting when they are widely divergent.

Dan Brian’s reflections led him to offer the observation that a steadily increasing disconnect between culture and identity signifies a college in jeopardy:

The closer together they are, the healthier the institution is. I've never really thought of it this way, but it's clear. The farther apart an institution's culture and its identity are, the more trouble they're in. Identity is sort of immutable. That's where you get the disconnect between culture and reputation, or self-image, or whatever you want to call it – identity. Culture actually erodes.

At first glance, this collection of viewpoints could appear self-contradictory. However, when placed in the proper context, they are complementary. Charles’ response suggests that solely focusing on whether a prospective candidate would “fit in” with the day-to-day campus culture is misguided. Identifying the core elements of the college’s mission and values, its distinctive attributes, is more critical to a deep understanding of who the college is. Similarly, I do not consider Brian’s warning about an eroding campus culture as a contradiction of Charles’ statement. If the beliefs, ways of doing things, and other campus norms have moved steadily
away from the college’s self-image and/or public reputation, that suggests the college no longer has a reasonably unified sense of who it is.

How, then, does a search consultant differentiate culture from identity during the pre-search phase? Robert Arthur offered his perspective of how a search consultant can draw out stakeholders’ views on culture and identity without over-complicating the question:

We continuously ask the questions about, “What is it you want to be sure does not change in the future under the leadership of your next president? What are the things that you would like this new leader to help you to either stop doing, to start doing, or to enhance?” That then brings out the question and discussion about what they really value -- and also brings out the insecurity about whether there's an active market for what they really value.

Understanding the alignment between culture and identity is also important for later communication with prospective candidates. The participants highlighted that interested parties often ask them about the harmony, or lack thereof, between a college’s culture and identity. Summarizing the type of inquiries she receives from potential candidates, Cindy Gail stated, “They are looking for how people get along on that campus. What kind of a feeling is it? Does the institution understand their identity in higher education today?” Marilyn Kay echoed that perspective, sharing that during the pre-search, “I brace myself, because sometimes the places that have the best reputations -- when you go inside it's like a viper’s nest!” Kay stated a consultant’s goal is to present a client college positively, yet realistically. In her view, that often requires presenting cultural and identity-related issues as leadership “opportunities,” something she referred to as legitimate professional “spin.” I initially found use of the term spin off-putting, given its connotation with political manipulation. However, after learning more about
the search process and its inherent complexity, I re-interpreted her definition of spin as being
points of emphasis designed to attract the right pool of candidates.

Along with the frequently seen conflation of culture and identity, several participants also
noted potential conflict between identity, strategic vision, and change. The following discussion
highlights the difficulty of accurately discerning the relative weight of those three constructs in
the college’s search for a president.

Identity, strategic vision, and change. A resonant opinion across the interviews was
that identity and mission should be congruent with a college’s strategic vision. Dan Brian stated
that he structures much of his on-campus inquiry and fact-finding around the college’s strategic
plan. He asserted, “Strategic plans are where you really find out what the institution thinks of
itself and where it wants to go, and whether it has any clue as to whether it knows where it lives
in this marketplace.” Although not emphasizing their review of strategic plans as strongly as
Brian, the majority of the participants mentioned the documents’ value in understanding a
college.

It was in association with this intertwining of identity and vision that the consultants most
frequently mentioned faith-based institutions. All of them have had experience facilitating
searches for this subsector of small, private colleges, and were able to offer a nuanced
perspective. Sam Harold noted faith-based colleges vary in how strictly aligned they remain
with their core tenets: “Some schools have relied very strongly on a particular religious identity.
For some it's continued to work. For others, it's had to be slightly softened because they've had
to broaden their appeal way beyond that religious connection.” In support of that view, Robert
Arthur offered an example of a strategic and well-accepted broadening of religious identity:
You could be a strongly Christian institution who decides there's not enough market for your particular evangelical brand of requiring [faith-professing] statements. You could decide to become a highly values-centered institution based in the Judeo-Christian tradition and to accept all students and not have anyone sign statements about their walk with Christ or their personal faith, but to try to continue to bring forward the values of Christianity, the values of Christ.

Strategically softening the edges of historical identity within a faith-based tradition can also extend to the presidential search process. Some participants noted the presence of a continuum regarding whether a new president must belong to the associated religious community. Jason David stated:

Most of the institutions I deal with are fairly open to other faiths, even as they prefer to have someone of their own denomination in the leadership role. Not always, but occasionally, the more conservative religious groups tend to want to have somebody out of their particular denomination. Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, [though,] they're more open to considering people of other faiths.

Marilyn Kay did not contradict that view; however, within the context of at least one faith tradition, she highlighted that a new president must be an ally of its core tenets:

If it's a religiously affiliated institution -- I work with a lot of Catholic schools -- having somebody who's a practicing Catholic. There are schools now that are beginning to [be more] open on that. They'll say, “They don't have to be a practicing Catholic. They don't even have to be Catholic, but they must be able to embody our identity. They must be a big champion of who we are, what we stand for.”
Taken together, these experiences tell me that many faith-based colleges realize they are vying for a finite pool of presidential talent. Attracting top-notch candidates requires compromise and, for the more conservative colleges, even a departure from historic norms.

The preceding narratives illustrate relatively smooth identity transitions, generally orchestrated in accordance with a sensibly developed strategic vision. However, as next discussed, either an absent or ambiguous plan offers little of interpretive value to the consultant. Consequently, when they encounter that situation, it is a blind spot that requires their attention.

**When a college does not have a strategic vision.** At first glance, the absence of a strategic vision might seem to represent a blank slate – a wide-open opportunity for a new president to come in and take charge, unimpeded. Similarly, a visioning document full of ambiguous aspirations could be viewed as flexible. However, lack of a vision more accurately signals a college unmoored and at risk. Lou Adams recalled an all-too-common sentiment he hears from a board:

> The classic [opinion] is, “We need a vision, so we're going to hire a visionary leader.” I always have this silly little image of the person [new president] who then goes home and comes to town with their attaché case, and they've got their little vision inside their attaché case. They're going to open it up and --Voila!

Robert Arthur expressed similar frustration over a governing board’s vague articulation of the college’s leadership needs:

> It's trying to get the right match, and institutional vision is an example because it always comes up -- “We want a visionary leader.” What does that really mean as you're evaluating candidates? Is the Titanic about to hit the iceberg and you're about ready to go down in two hours? In which case you need one kind of leader. If on the other hand, the
house is not in fire. You don't want a fireman -- and you don't want somebody who comes in who's a pyromaniac, and who is going to set the house on fire in order to get a new house.

Arthur’s entertaining use of mixed metaphors highlights a viewpoint I heard from several other participants. There is a vast range of leadership styles in the country’s pool of executive talent. Visionary is a common descriptor on both the employer and applicant sides of executive search. Without the additional context of a clear strategic plan, the word carries as much potential risk as it does reward. In continuing his train of thought, Arthur contrasted two opposing presidential outcomes of a poorly articulated strategic vision:

   The most important thing is -- if you really want a turnaround, no-nonsense visionary leader who is going to take you to where they want to go, and that's not where you want to be -- it will be an absolute disaster. If on the other hand if they're just sitting in their office waiting for you to tell them where to go, and you don't know where to go, it will be a disaster.

Searching for a visionary leader, without the guiding structure of a college’s strategic vision, then, places the search consultant in a difficult position. The modifier “search” in “search consultant” is intended to delimit the role. The participants emphasized that their job is not to help a college define or develop its strategic vision, but to understand it within the context of its identity and stated leadership needs.

   The third, and potentially most problematic area also pertains to strategic vision and identity. In this instance, a board and/or the majority of campus stakeholders are not ambiguous about the desire for change. However, they will not tolerate strategic change that requires a change in the college’s identity. The participants had much to say about this category, as well.
When a college wants strategic change, but also resists any change to identity. Lou Adams, also a former college president, offered the perspective that colleges often say they want a visionary leader, but do not articulate what they truly mean:

People don’t want a vision from a new president. They want a president who can understand the vision that's latent in the institution, and who can give voice to that vision, add his or her “salt” to it, and then lead the institution forward.

Supporting the above viewpoint, Tim Charles cited a specific example in which even a widespread expressed desire for change by the college constituents ran afoul of its longstanding core identity.

I did a search for a presidency -- a small, private college in [name of state]. The talk was about change and the need for someone to lead a fresh vision for the place. And when the president appeared on the scene and began to work his magic, the place really pushed back, and they couldn't deal with the change. It was presented to them in a very assertive, but gracefully assertive, way. So, it came from what they clung to -- what they clung to as the bedrock of their identity.

Robert Arthur was blunt in stating what he has occasionally encountered, “Some institutions decide that, regardless, its heritage is such -- its values -- that if they're not in business doing what they want to do, they don't really want to be in business, because they're not changing to do something else.”

The above scenarios represent an unfortunate extreme. Sam Harold described a somewhat different situation he has seen. For purposes of institutional survival, a board intentionally opts for a dramatic change in strategic direction that stresses the college’s identity.
The board then selects a change-agent president to champion the effort. But, whether planned or unplanned, the new president’s tenure is short:

So maybe the institution's reached the point where, “Either we close or we hire someone who maybe won't stay long, but will come in over a period of five years and make a series of drastic changes” -- to shift direction very abruptly and save itself and sort of recreate itself so it can survive. And, so that's a very different kind of approach if indeed you need a savior at a particular point.

The three situations outlined as especially problematic in this section frame the challenges often faced by search consultants. A small, private college’s culture, identity, and tolerance for strategic change often exist in a complicated relationship. Identifying the nature of that relationship is part of forming a composite view of the college. I appreciated Jason David’s concise summary of what this means for the search process: “The better they understand who they are, and what they want to be, the easier it is to help them find a match for a candidate for president.”

Not surprisingly, the search consultants indicated these apparent disconnects between identity, culture, and strategic vision require additional conversation with the search committee and, most often, the governing board. This represents an additional layer of complexity, since the consultants have also often heard disparate opinions across stakeholders about the college’s existing core identity. As Dan Brian starkly noted, “Institutions very frequently have no idea who they really are. Very, very frequently they don't.” Therefore, addressing these disconnects is integral to coherently representing the college to prospective candidates. It is also the stage of the pre-search phase with the greatest potential for conflict, depending on the extent of
dissonance identified. The importance of this stage of the pre-search process emerged as a strong second category within the theme of building a composite view of the college.

**Identify and Address Dissonance**

Although the participants varied on the amount and magnitude of dissonance they hear while in the pre-search phase, all ten acknowledged that it almost always emerges to some extent in every search. Remarked Marilyn Kay, “There is a lot of bias in everything you hear. Everything. Everybody is coming at this from an angle -- their angle, their perspective. We get that -- we understand it.” The search committee, commonly comprised of a variety of stakeholders, is the nexus point for those discussions: “Your cross-constituent committee is so valuable in a presidential search because it's the first place that different points of view pop up around the table,” noted Tim Charles.

The consultants described a recursive and iterative process in which they moved from speaking with the search committee, to conversations with the wider campus community, and then back again. They spoke of taking meticulous notes and preparing a written summary for the search committee and/or full board to report what they heard while talking with a wide variety of stakeholders. That summary serves as an intermediate communication tool, a bridge between the constituent conversations and development of the formal position profile. When I asked why the summary is necessary, Sue Mills responded with a chuckle and remarked, “The institution doesn't necessarily decide on its priorities based on a consensus-seeking model.”

I interpreted Mills’ response, and those of other participants, as an acknowledgment of the power dynamics at play on the search committee and board. Search committees and boards are well aware of the consultant’s pre-search process, which includes numerous individual and group conversations with various constituencies. Nevertheless, the consultants routinely
encounter boards for whom the revelation of divergent campus opinions comes as a surprise and/or an inconvenience. Although not a guarantee of eventual consensus, discussing the consultant’s findings, as documented in the summary, is intended to promote greater awareness and reflection within the search committee. Sam Harold evokes images of meetings punctuated with “aha” moments:

I also provide a summary to the committee. “Here's what I heard. Here's what I heard not only from the board, but from the campus.” So that there's a summary, never identifying anyone in particular, but saying, “Here's the responses to these questions that I've asked.” And I think it gives them a lot of insight to say, “Oh yeah, we are on the same page,” or, “Boy, as board members, we're not seeing things from the inside as the internal people are on a day-to-day basis.” So, I think it's a learning lesson for boards as well as campus community.

Presentation of the summary, therefore, is never perfunctory. It also often is followed by a fair amount of discomfort for the search committee. The most intense conversations during the pre-search phase occur in the time period bracketed by presentation of the summary and publication of the search profile. To convey a sense of that intensity, the participants shared with me the most common areas of dissonance and the approaches they use to address them.

Areas of dissonance. The vast majority of disconnects described by the participants stem from religious tenets, external reputations vs. internal identity, and/or academic reputation as identity referents. This emerged as a further indication of the integrated view of organizational identity. The noted identity referents reflected the social constructionist, social actor, and institutional perspectives, respectively. Although all three identity perspectives are
not always present simultaneously, they rarely surface in isolation. Robert Arthur’s response summarized dissonant views regarding religious identity and presidential search:

And then we take all that and the first thing we say to ourselves is, “Is there a lot of dissonance here? Are there a lot of people looking for a different kind of leader than the other people? Or, is everybody pretty much on deck?” Because from the point of view of writing a search, we want to know up front if there's a lot of dissonance. Can we point that out, and can we reduce the dissonance before we start throwing candidates away because people are fighting about whether they have to be Catholic or don't have to be Catholic -- because it's a Catholic school. I'm just using a very obvious example. In a Catholic institution we'll hear people say, “No -- they just need to be spiritual.” And others say, “They have to be Catholic. They not only have to be Catholic but they can't be divorced. They have to be taking communion. They have to be active in the church.” So, those are the kinds of things we're listening for – “Could never be gay or lesbian -- contrary to our values.” [Or] “Diversity's highly valued -- we don't care.” Sort of the kind of hot buttons that cause you to throw certain candidates away or become attracted to other candidates.

As discussed later in this section and chapter, some participants employ strategies designed to de-escalate such emotionally laden discussions and re-focus the committee on moving forward. Several consultants, most notably Arthur and Mills, mentioned their firms’ commitment to increasing the diversity of candidate pools, yet without violating tenets that are truly central to the college’s present identity. They stated that commitment carries with it the obligation to encourage pre-search conversations that reveal the rationale for certain applicant
requirements. The participants noted that the sensitive nature of these conversations requires a nonjudgmental conversational approach.

Another commonly encountered disconnect is how the college is viewed in the community as compared to the opinion of internal stakeholders. This observation by Marilyn Kay reflected both the social actor and social constructionist perspectives of identity:

So, here's another thing that you need to understand. What is said publicly, and what is the perception of the institution from the outside. What they say about who they are, what they stand for, what they believe in, doesn't always translate into what happens on the inside. And, sometimes it's better than what they're actually saying -- sometimes it's a lot more and really fabulous. And sometimes there's a total disconnect. So there are extremes.

Kay’s above viewpoint validates the expansive approach to the pre-search phase advocated by Dan Brian and several others. If consultants allow themselves to be limited to a pre-selected group of campus stakeholders, that risks missing important perspectives. Sue Mills referred to that as a potential “echo chamber” effect. Spontaneous visits to community establishments, sidewalk conversations with students, and other off-agenda opportunities can yield deep insights about the college the future president will lead.

The third common area of dissonance pertains to revealing how the identity referents of the institution translate into the expressed characteristics desired of the next president. The majority of the participants spoke specifically to divergent opinions between the board, administration, and faculty. For example, if scholarly reputation is viewed by the faculty as critical to the identity and reputation of the college, then they want a president who aligns closely with that referent. Dan Brian framed the issue:
The faculty may say, “Our intellectual reputation depends on us having a leading scholar as our president. A leading scholar may or may not be experienced at or predisposed to be a good fundraiser, but we don't care. We need a scholar who appreciates the life of the faculty and will allocate the resources of the institution for the intellectual life of the faculty.” And the board may say, “That's a luxury that we don't have right now. We're going with the person who can guarantee us that they can bring in five million dollars of funds -- new money for us -- unrestricted endowment money for us in the first three years of their presidency.”

Regardless of which particular disconnects manifest themselves, the participants were unanimous in stating the very challenging nature of assisting a college with working through those difficult conversations. Despite the challenges involved, the participants were adamant that consultants do not have the luxury of bypassing this step of the process. As next presented, it was interesting to note how the participants differed in style and approach when facilitating these discussions.

Consultants’ approaches to addressing dissonance. Working through areas of dissonance, often with significant levels of emotion tied to each view, bristles with the potential for interpersonal conflict. Dan Brian described it as, “one of the most nuanced, dangerous, difficult, but ultimately critical things that people like me have to do.” Not surprisingly, then, participants emphasized the importance of candor among all parties involved in the search. The sooner committee members establish an open working relationship with each other, particularly regarding the college’s identity and how that influences the assessment of candidates, the stronger the search outcome. Robert Arthur stated:
We encourage all members of the search committee to talk frankly with one another. If we can break the ice, then a couple months later when they start really evaluating the candidates, then that ice is broken and they can speak frankly. Consistent with that perspective, the consultants peppered their narratives with examples of situations requiring a very forthright approach with search committee members. Dan Brian spoke of his experiences with small liberal arts colleges, where some stakeholders seemed blinded by their respective college’s historic identity, while others sought to broaden the curricular focus:

[That’s] the reality of what is in virtually every stop we make. It is almost impossible to overstate the level of denial in this marketplace about the circumstances of higher education, particularly in liberal arts colleges and among arts-and-sciences types. Drawing committee members into that frank discussion about the college’s identity and how that will influence how members view candidates is often a focal area.

In considering the scenario described by Brian, there are clear implications for potential presidential candidates. For example, a candidate favoring expansion beyond a traditional liberal arts focus would likely be discounted by stakeholders who adhere staunchly to the college’s liberal arts identity. However, Tim Charles noted that these divergent viewpoints are not always explicit, and thus part of the consultant’s role is to listen carefully and detect their presence:

But, unspoken, that identity is [there] -- that's why I think a candid, open conversation -- where there're things that are spoken in code when you try to get this prospective work down, and the kind of agenda you want for a new president. I think that's where the candor needs to come in, and the extra time may need to be spent on, “Are you really being honest with yourselves?”
Although all the participants expressed the desire for a harmonious view, elusive though that might be, they differed in in how much dissonance they viewed as acceptable. Some expressed the intention to strive for a nearly full reconciliation of viewpoints, such as that conveyed by Sam Harold:

I've tried to surface any set of disagreements or misunderstanding about identity long before the search gets underway, so that by the time you go out in public, everyone's singing pretty much the same song -- and will continue to sing that song through the course of all the candidates.

A fair question in response to Harold’s view, though, is whether that seemingly unified campus voice is genuine, or if some stakeholders have acquiesced either for the sake of expediency or to appease more powerful committee members.

Some participants did not feel the same urgency for a fully unified sense of identity. I interpreted this as reflecting either a less extreme set of past experiences or a higher tolerance for ambiguity. For example, despite having conducted many presidential searches, Cindy Gail noted what I viewed as an unusually well-aligned collection of experiences:

Those who differ in what they think they are or who they think they are from what the board thinks, to what the campus constituency thinks -- they're a little more difficult because they're not all believing in the same thing. There has never, at least in my time, been such a discord between the two that there's a need to say, “Hold the search. You've got to figure out who and what you are before you move forward.” I've never had to do that. It hasn't been that disparate, that huge difference there.

Robert Arthur, although acknowledging the potential for problems later in the search, drew a line when it comes to pushing beyond a certain threshold with the committee:
So, we take that information and we say to the committee, the search committee -- and/or the board -- depending upon what it is we've learned. “Here's what we've heard. We're ready for a search - no big problems.” Or, “Here's what we heard. If we took six weeks or eight weeks, could we smooth over some of these things, or could we fight it out among ourselves -- not with the consultant but as the committee -- before we start interviewing and trying to recruit candidates?” And sometimes the answer is, “No.” Sometimes [the committee says], “No, we can't smooth this over; we can't straighten it out;” in which case we say, “That's fine. We now know that part of what you need is someone who can prosper in this environment.”

Jason David’s approach also emphasizes finding common ground, although, unlike Arthur, he stopped short of Arthur’s acknowledging that an impasse is occasionally inevitable. David states that he approaches identity-related disconnects “through conversations with the campus and with the art of compromise, so that we accurately discuss the institution -- because I won't settle for anything less.”

When I asked for additional details about their approach, the consultants’ responses highlighted the need for patience, careful listening, and asking respectful questions that often pertain to deeply held personal beliefs. One such approach was described by Lou Adams:

If you have a lot of disagreement, you're kind of forced up the level of abstraction to find the higher level on which there is a common view. Because usually that's there; it's just that sometimes you'd say we have to either raise up to it or dig deeper to find it.

This approach, mentioned by several other participants, appears to be a subtly calibrated form of negotiation. Rather than trying to force agreement on a particular issue, a consultant fineses redirection of the conversation to highlight a key area in which there is broad agreement.
Actually resolving the gridlocked issue might not be possible, an acknowledgment I heard from most of the participants. However, once peace has been restored, then further conversations can take place to address other areas of dissonance.

I noted that some search consultants do not fully subscribe to the notion of finesse. Having gained a sense of Dan Brian’s forthright nature, I was not surprised when he described his much more assertive approach:

You make them confront the differences. You sit down with whoever the client is -- and in a presidential search it’s invariably the board and the board’s chair. You sit down and you say, “You think you’re this, but 20 people on campus told me you’re actually that thing over there. I’m not making this up! I’m new here. I don’t know anything. I’m just telling you what people tell me. And what people told me is that ‘A’ isn't true, ‘B’ is.”

Even Brian acknowledged, though, that his approach can never actually force a committee or board to change its view of the college’s core identity. Tim Charles agreed, “You can’t always be successful about having people talk intellectually about what they think they need. Then, emotionally when they get to the place where they need the help, they’re sunk.”

Among those who described search committee conversations that resulted in an impasse, it was clear to me that they find such situations frustrating. The implication of unresolved viewpoints on the committee is not limited to those pre-search conversations. Rather, those issues invariably spill over into the later stages of the search when candidates are being selected and interviewed. Sam Harold’s approach reflected that concern: “I'll say to them, ‘Look, you don't want to go up with a schizophrenic position profile. You've got to be pretty clear about what you are.’” The participants clearly viewed avoiding that scenario a high priority. Despite the potential for conflict and occasional gridlock, the message I received is that most pre-
searches ultimately do proceed to a successful conclusion, with the major areas of dissonance having been explicated and acknowledged. The search consultant then has a vast amount of relatively consistent information with which to work.

The next step in the process is the drafting of the search profile, a translation process that all participants viewed as extremely important. As the search profile takes shape via the keyboard of the consultant, it represents the culmination of the pre-search phase, described by Dan Brian as “the fruits of the due-diligence at the outset of the search.” Its importance as an interpretive tool was the second major theme to emerge from the interviews.

Theme 2: Using the Search Profile as an Interpretive Tool

Throughout the conversations it became increasingly clear that the search profile (also known as the prospectus) serves as an instrument of both communication and interpretation. The document, usually between 10-15 pages in length, is designed to provide prospective candidates with a reasonably thorough overview of the college, the surrounding community, and a description of what the college seeks in its next president. Its value as an interpretive tool stems not only from its published content, but from the recursive and iterative process through which it is generated. The participants first described their experience with building a composite understanding of the college through conversations with campus stakeholders and others. They use a summary of these conversations as a pivot point to discuss areas of dissonance with the board of trustee and/or search committee. The consultants indicated their understanding of the college and its identity continues to develop as they expand their summary into a draft search profile while being mindful that, as Sam Harold stated, “Clearly in 10-12 pages you can't answer every question about the institution.”
Participants spoke to the individual nature of the profile: “The identity of an institution is so complex, and there's no ‘package’ we can put out there. I think it's dynamic.” They also conveyed a sense of responsibility to produce a written product that accurately represents this fluidity and excitement about the college’s future. As Jason David put it, “Sometimes you have to work with them to get that language consistent, and to get them to agree to be open and transparent. But, that's part of my work. To see that that happens.” Sam Harold provided an expanded view of his quest for that transparency, with his response implying that a search committee’s composition should be sufficiently cross-constituent to reasonably reflect the college’s identity:

I lay out in that profile for everyone to see exactly what they say they are, and maybe what they say they're hoping to change into gradually over the next five to ten years. There's nothing hidden at all, and there should be nobody who disagrees with what we say in that because it's gone through enough iterations so that the search committee, which is representative of every constituency on campus, says “okay” with it. So, there should be nothing hidden. The identity should be out there for all to read.

Lou Adams went deeper, articulating the opinion that the search profile can actually serve a unifying purpose for the campus. His response, consistent with other consultants interviewed, spoke of a college’s health in terms of either enrollment or coherence of identity:

You try and bring the various voices together and reflect them in this composite you're trying to write. That can be more or less difficult to do, depending sort of on -- what would you say -- not the health, but the -- maybe the psychological wellbeing of the institution. Does it have one personality or many? But you try and write in a way that brings people together.
The intimation of the above viewpoints is that a college’s health can be partially assessed by the coherence of its identity. However, the actual expression of that identity is not necessarily visible to the casual observer. If it was, then the depth of pre-search work described by the participants would likely not be necessary.

Based on their earlier viewpoints, I was not surprised the participants hold different opinions on the challenges of writing an accurate and coherent prospectus. Remarked Tim Charles, “When I get to the point of writing a search prospectus for a presidency, it is not terribly difficult, even if you've heard different points of view, to bring that together and show a search committee how you've pulled it together.” However, Dan Brian recounted his typical experience much differently:

I have a tendency to be too straightforward and not positive enough, not affirming enough. I don't put enough spin on things. And, they inevitably have to be re-written. Now, the method behind that madness is that that's how I tell the client where they stand. And now, you're in a negotiation as to how much you want to really spin this to where the candidates aren't getting a real picture of you. And so I tend to come from the more direct, the more candid, the more willing to be open about pathologies. And our clients tend to be horrified by that because they think everything at their institution's sweetness and light -- or they wish it were -- or both. So, now you're in negotiation as to how straightforward you can be, and that's how I calibrate.

While Brian employs what could be considered a more linear approach, Lou Adams engages in what he views as an organic, creative process:
My approach is, I guess you’d say, very artistic in that I find I listen and kind of soak all of this up -- kind of a soaking experience -- then I go back to the hotel and lie awake and kind of toss and turn. Then at about 4 o'clock in the morning it takes shape. Most participants told me they commonly have to revise a search profile multiple times before it is ready for publication. Even if hearing what they infer as broad agreement during the post-summary meetings, translating the group voice into document form can be challenging.

The consultants also spoke to the importance of developing the prospectus to articulate a clear link between the college’s identity and the list of desired presidential qualifications. Cindy Gail described her basic fact-finding interview as follows, “Talk to me about who you are; let me know what you’re looking for in a president. What are the personal attributes? What are the professional attributes? What kind of a person do you really want to recruit?”

Achieving that clarity and alignment, however, also requires a realistic perspective of human limitations. Observed Greg Oliver:

People have to realize that we'll list 18 objectives for what a new president should be able to do and have those characteristics. But, no one can have them all. You've got to try to find the best fit within that.

While similarly acknowledging the universal appeal of many desired presidential characteristics, Jason David extended that thought. His response suggests variability in how the college ranks those characteristics in terms of who they are as an institution:

When you read the prospectus, there are 15-20 aptitudes that you would expect of a college or university presidents. And those are pretty standard, and you could call them homogenized. But, how the institution interprets those attributes, and how they prioritize them, really determines what happens at that particular institution.
To assist colleges in explicating their interpretation and prioritization, some consultants work to align their thought process with that of the institution, striving for clarity where needed. As stated by Cindy Gail, “In a search, it's important to hear the beginning stages, and it's very important to build that candidate profile in not only my mind but in the mind of the whole organization of what they're looking for.” Sue Mills offered her perspective of the commonly encountered presidential archetypes:

We produce a document that says, “From what we heard, these are your key challenges and these are your key opportunities.” The board either will engage with that deeply or superficially or, rarely, not at all -- but engage with it at some degree -- and say, “This maps to what we want here. This maps to where we think we're going.” Most people want mostly the same kinds of things, but the place where the rubber-meets-the-road is whether it is the scholar or the fundraiser or the manager. Those are the prototypes that determine who you're going to go looking for in recruiting for a presidency. That's where the rub often will be.

As the consultants shared their perspective on interpreting, clarifying, and translating what they learn during the pre-search phase into the search profile, they spoke of a sense of professional obligation to get it right. Coming full circle, this segment from Lou Adams is representative of the participants’ view of how adeptly eliciting the collective voice of the college; distilling its identity, culture, and vision; and effectively addressing dissonance largely determines the interpretive value of the profile:

So it's been interesting to try and find the themes that try to bring that all together. In fact, one of the points in the profile is about vision, and the challenge for the next administration to articulate a kind of conceptual vision about who the college is today and
tomorrow that gives people a new sense of oneness -- that's a much more complicated picture of oneness. You try and write in a way that brings people together. It's one of the useful functions a search consultant can serve.

The participants’ reflections about the mechanics and artistry of writing a search profile indicate to me that it functions as both input and output for the interpretive process. Its construction requires active engagement between the college community and consultant. Consultants first work to accurately represent the college’s past, present, and desired future, as distilled from numerous conversations with members of the campus community. Then, much like an artist tries to capture the essence of a three-dimensional being on a two-dimensional medium, the consultant seeks through words to capture the essence of the college. However, the consultant’s interpretation of the college’s identity is subject to the scrutiny and final approval of a subset of the campus constituency, the search committee and/or governing board. Consequently, it is only through iterative cycles of drafting, dialogue, and revision that the final portrait emerges. That portrait then serves as a bridge to link who the college is to a description of its ideal presidential candidate, with the latter description constructed through the same iterative process of development with the search committee. It appeared clear to me that the search profile is, ultimately, a product that emerges through a process of negotiation. How intact the search consultant’s interpretation remains in the profile’s final version is often a reflection of institutional power dynamics.

Occasional frustrations notwithstanding, a sentiment expressed throughout the interviews is that the pre-search process, culminating in the production of a high-quality, accurate search profile, is the hallmark of a professionally facilitated presidential search. That profile serves as the foundation upon which consultants base their subsequent interactions with prospective
candidates. Although much of the consultants' narratives consisted of process-oriented details, I noticed an undercurrent present in each of the conversations: Largely without being prompted by me, the participants interwove what they perceive to be their professional and ethical obligation to facilitate a successful search, particularly for a small, private college. That was an unexpected finding, and emerged as the third theme of the study.

**Theme 3: Remaining Mindful of Professional Responsibility**

The categories within this theme stem from the participants’ view that executive search requires a professionally derived and ethically grounded application of finesse, discernment, and tenacity to accurately interpret organizational identity. Given the fragile state of many small, private colleges, the consultants indicated this skill set takes on heightened importance. Nine of the ten participants worked within the field of higher education prior to becoming search consultants, with four having served as college presidents. Several of the consultants considered that background in higher education as an influencer of how they conduct their work. Their narratives spoke to what they perceive as their professional and ethical responsibility to the college as well as to prospective candidates, and the importance of keeping this at the forefront as they move through a search. Dan Brian conveyed this sentiment in blunt terms, which was also representative of what I heard from other participants:

> The problem is that a great many of our clients, particularly smaller institutions -- here's the triple-whammy of death: Very small, very rural, very small endowment. Two of those three things are probably going to kill you. All three of them, and you're just a dead-man-walking. The problem is not that most of our institutions are one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. The problem is that most of our institutions are one
bad president away from being there. And so, frankly, the responsibility we have to keep these institutions going is unbelievably great.

The participants share the view that there is little margin for error in the presidential search process for these at-risk institutions. Many small, private colleges neither have the depth of resources nor the luxury of time to survive a failed presidency. Search consultants therefore consider themselves a form of check valve that can prevent a potentially disastrous outcome. When viewed from that vantage point, the following subtheme represents a point of sensitively for the participants.

“We’re Not Head Hunters”

Throughout the interviews, the participants spoke extensively to the process they feel is inherent to a high-quality search. Their emphasis was on taking great care in listening for, interpreting, and conveying critical information about a college. They clearly took a dim view of those in the search business whom they consider unprofessional in that regard. Robert Arthur conveyed that sentiment in this metaphor-laden viewpoint:

We're not headhunters. We're not that because headhunter has a very specific meaning. It means, “You pay me if I bring you a head.” And you know what? If I'm in that relationship with you, I'm going to bring you heads and I'm going to sell you heads. I'm going to tell you this is the right head for you, and, “Oh, now please pay me!” That's not what you want in an executive recruiter, although there're some who do operate that way. There're some firms that have a small cadre of horses -- some of which are young, and some of which are old nags that they haul around in a tractor trailer. They bring [them] into the parking lot and they say, “Come on, I know you want to buy one of these! Let me show it to you.” And the reason some people are that way is that it is a fairly quick
way to make your fee. In my opinion, it is completely a disservice to your institution. Because, if you've been through the kind of search that I'm describing, the institution not only has made the best choice they can for the salary, for the location, for the challenges they have, but they've also been through a process where they understand why they've made that choice, the candidate understands that, and they're mutually committed to success. So when people say you're a head hunter -- I mean, if it's [at] a cocktail party I don't bother to lecture them on it, you know. It's just a very important distinction. We're a paid consultant. We're on your side. We want you to make the best choice. And I tell my clients, “I will never ‘sell’ you a candidate to close a search.”

Several of the participants acknowledged that the reputation of the search industry, at least in the mind of some colleges, can be a challenge to overcome. Greg Oliver expressed what he occasionally senses as the opinion of boards or search committees. “Who are these ‘hired hands’ we're bringing on? What could they possibly know about us?” Cindy Gail, who acknowledged having heard similar sentiments, has more often experienced a collegial view of her relationship with the client college and discerning its identity:

I love learning about new institutions. It's probably my favorite part of the job -- that early stage of the process. While we're hired as consultants to help them find their next president, I also think we have the ability to be able to look at the institution from the outside and give them that type of a perspective as a consultant. And, don't get me wrong, there are institutions that don't want to hear it and couldn't care less – “You're a consultant. Find my president and that's all we want you to do.” But, nine out of ten times those institutions want to hear -- those board chairs want to hear [saying], “So, from your outside perspective -- you've been doing it a long time -- What do you see?”
Providing that outside point of view is a service the participants say they value highly and work to communicate to a search committee and prospective candidates. However, several consultants noted there is a fine line between leading the search, which all adamantly stated is the purview of the board, versus being an expert partner who can lend perspective. As Robert Arthur stated, “We’re experts on how to run a search, and how to help generate a process that creates a very strong and effective match.” Extending that process-oriented view further into the consultative, Arthur continued, “A lot of times committees don't realize how they're making decisions. And, particularly they need to influence each other so that there's a reasonable consensus at the end and we educate each other.”

Participants were careful in stating they facilitate conversations but are mindful to not force a particular conclusion. “I'm not putting values on any of these decisions. I'm not saying one is better or worse than the other. I'm simply saying those are questions that, as effective consultants, you need to help your client identify,” remarked Arthur. Tim Charles, one of the consultants who previously served as a college president, intimated that presidential experience serves as a good vantage point from which to engage in these conversations:

I'm not trying to sound self-centered here -- but someone who has had experience on a small college campus with issues of survival, with issues of creativity, with issues involving 21st-century learners, can be very helpful in challenging or at least pushing back against some of these points of view. I don't think the search consultant's contract is worth what you pay for it if the search consultant isn't willing to challenge a little bit here and there. And while the decisions, the final outcome of what you say to the world you want in a new presidency, those decision are always -- they have to be -- the college's decisions.
Charles’ comment raises another question. Might past-president search consultants occasionally conflate the scenarios they faced as president with those confronting the client college? Although no one is free of bias, I found myself wondering if those past-presidents’ experiences were, in sum, more liability than asset.

Greg Oliver provided a glimpse of the parameters he sets for himself, and what he has observed in other search consultants’ practice:

You think you've got a great candidate that fits the needs, and then it comes to the search committee and they'll totally overlook that person. I mean, completely! And, we have to be flexible enough -- I'm not in charge anymore; I'm merely assisting. I can't say, “I think this is the best thing for us, and you may not understand it right now, but stick with me on this one.” We don't have that kind of capacity. We can convince the search chair that maybe they ought to look at some additional people, and usually we can. They may bring it up, and in that case I think it helps get some additional people in [the pool].

As I listened to participants explain the limits of their advisory role, it was clear that this is often an area of frustration for them. Each participant mentioned honing their skills as a search consultant over time, and that generally searches go well. However, I found several consultants much more willing than others to discuss searches that did not go well. Marilyn Kay mentioned the “viper’s next” environment that she occasionally encounters when observing how stakeholders communicate with each other. Dan Brian acknowledged that, although he considers himself quite perceptive, he also is aware that clients and candidates are capable of “bullshitting” him. Robert Arthur was definitely the most forthcoming and descriptive of the participants. His account of a board’s heavy-handed approach, which I include below, illustrates how a search consultant’s efforts do not guarantee a smooth outcome:
I still have scars on my back from a very early presidential search. And it was at a religious-affiliated institution. The chairman of the board chaired the search committee; the chairman of the finance committee was on the search committee; and there were faculty, students, and some church people. They were very clear that the denominational affiliation was extremely important. They told me they wanted to see diversity in the search -- at the beginning. But then they saw a candidate from another denomination. They said, “What do they believe in? They don't believe in much!” So, they're off the table. Bye. Then another candidate from a second denomination came in. Same thing.

The committee kept homing in more and more on somebody who preferably even had a college’s denominational affiliation degree. So, they got down to the end and they chose a young man who was fire-and-brimstone college’s denominational affiliation; had been a student affairs person; good personality; somewhat charismatic. They brought him to campus, and he talked to the Biology Dept. about evolution, creationism, intelligent design. And, he told the faculty that he wasn't going to say they couldn't teach evolution but he was also going to make sure they included intelligent design. Now, he didn't go so far as to say it had to be creationism. He thought he was straddling the fence. Faculty rose up and they went straight to the board and said, “We can't have this guy. Can't do it. Academic freedom. Can't do it.”

So, they brought me back and said, “We want you to come in” -- this was the chairman of the search committee – “and want you to sell this candidate to the Board. We want you to tell them why he's the right person.” And I said, “I didn't sign on for that. Because, I don't believe he's the right person or the wrong person. He's the person that this committee in its best judgment has brought.” So, I got up in front of the committee
and said, “Here is the search process. Here are all of the candidates we had; here's this, this and this. This is the candidate the search committee brought forth. Thank you very much.” The board rebelled. The chair of the board of trustees resigned. The chair of the finance committee resigned -- left the institution.

Arthur’s narrative illustrates how the interplay between power dynamics, culture, and identity can put pressure on a search consultant’s sense of professional ethics. He could have acquiesced to the board chair’s demand. However, by doing so, Arthur would have gone beyond what he viewed was his proper role. I am aware there might have been other political elements at work in this situation. Arthur acknowledged to me that he sensed trouble brewing when the search committee began discounting other candidates in favor of someone more like themselves. The outcome of this particular search was the hasty elevation of an internal candidate to the presidency. That person was also a denominational insider, but who was much more in touch with the views of the college’s faculty. The search process had been playing out as intended until it was derailed by politics. That ultimately forced Arthur, as the consultant, into making a very visible ethical stance.

Although not having been a president himself, Dan Brian advocates an even more assertive approach when working with a small, private college, “Our job is to try to help them understand that they're in an existential crisis, and if they don't take arms against an existential crisis, there's no sense in us going out and finding them a new president.”

Several participants spoke of their desire to facilitate searches that result in relatively long presidential tenures. Marilyn Kay stated what she hopes to see, “I am not an advocate for a president turning over every 3-5 years. I like the fact that there's continuity, stability.”

Remarked Jason David, “The majority of my people have stayed more than five years -- up to ten
years. I've only had a couple of cases where that wasn't so.” Although that sentiment was consistent across the interviews, the participants were again careful to clarify that the board, via the search committee, should be the entity that drives the candidate selection throughout its various stages, not the consultants. The intimation, though was that careful execution of the search process, as described, was a key factor in the college-to-president fit. I was somewhat surprised that none of the participants mentioned allegations, occasionally seen in the professional press, that search consultants encourage or benefit from frequent presidential turnover. However, since the participants were aware of my employment as a higher education administrator, this was most likely an unstated assumption. Perhaps not coincidentally, though, Greg Oliver suggested that a topic for another study would be exploring the perception college employees have of search consultants.

Reinforcing that role of facilitator, rather than orchestrator, Robert Arthur provided a counternarrative to a commonly encountered stereotype of search consultants:

We're less of a matchmaker and more of a dating service. We're more about saying, “What kind of information can we collect from people who are looking for a mate that will help other people understand?” It's more akin to that than a matchmaker, because a matchmaker sort of comes down to the end and says, “I've studied you all and here is your best match.”

Providing additional rationale for a consultant to refrain from overly promoting a candidate, Robert Arthur added, “We don't do that, because if we do it and miscue, then we are at fault 6, 18, or 36 months from now when the president leaves because we took them to the wrong destination.”
None of the participants discounted the importance of those boundaries, and emphasized that serving as an advocate for their client college should not cloud their attempts at professional objectivity. For example, Sue Mills described using the pre-search to also test her own preconceived notions about the college:

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\text{I think most people who are in search are not neutral about an institution when they first encounter it. When you're really trying to establish identity, and understand what are the elements -- and better than that, what are the core values of the institution -- in order to help them think through the kind of leadership that would resonate most deeply with them, you're both building your impression and correcting your misimpression simultaneously.}
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In recounting their experiences and perspectives, the participants stated they have a professional obligation to be reasonably transparent with prospective candidates. They stated the need for openness is crucial when discussing a college’s challenges and opportunities, some of which stem from its identity. The collective focus on candor surfaced as the second category within this theme.

**Keep Candor at the Forefront**

Participants emphasized the value of the search profile’s development in allowing identity-related issues to surface. Not all of the issues are captured within the profile, but the consultants said they nonetheless remain mindful of their presence. This knowledge, the participants shared, creates a heightened responsibility to act as trustworthy stewards of the information as they communicate with potential candidates. That stage of the process requires, at times, a delicate balance of advocacy and pragmatism. Dan Brian noted:
The key to it, and the key to everything else that we'll talk about -- is to tell people the truth. Now, we have to be careful, because we don't really go around saying things to people that our clients don't essentially authorize us to say. So, I'm not going to start calling people and say, “Well, this place has got four years and then it's going to go out of business. So, you've got a really nice gig here for about four years.”

Marilyn Kay described her approach in similar terms, with her response suggesting a personal as well as professional concern for the wellbeing of prospective candidates:

So my job is to take what I know and be very honest with candidates about it, but to take it and really -- and I hate the word spin because it's -- When I think about spin, I think about political spin. But, as search consultants, there's spin. We have to do spin. Because if we talk about “Oh my god, this place is falling apart! It's a wreck,” nobody is going to want to come. We have to figure [it] out -- but we have to be honest about it.

The worst thing I could possibly do is have somebody come into a situation, and I say everything is hunky-dory, and they look at me, like, “How the heck could you have not told me about this? I feel blindsided.” That's the worst I could do to somebody.

There was a thread of continuity among the participants regarding the routes through which they communicate with prospective presidential candidates. All routinely exchange information via e-mail, phone, and web-conference.

The consultants reported that inquirers often want to know what the college “is really like,” and ask the consultant for his/her “real opinion” of the institution. When I asked how they reply to such inquiries, some seemed more forthcoming than others. Lou Adams, Robert Arthur, Marilyn Kay, and Dan Brian believe strongly in being very transparent with candidates. They conveyed that transparency early in the process can help forestall misunderstandings and
difficulties later on. The remaining participants told me that they essentially rephrase what is already in the search profile, since that represents what the college wants candidates to hear and know at that stage of the search. I was mindful of the so-called red flags that my question might raise. Although I promised anonymity, it is entirely possible that Adams, Arthur, Kay, and Brian were overstating their levels of transparency with candidates. The corollary of course, is that the rest of the participants might not have wanted to acknowledge giving candidates their unvarnished opinion of a college. I sensed that transparency could be viewed differently from the vantage points of governing board versus prospective candidates. With those caveats in mind, though, I did find their responses to this question consistent with the rest of their respective interviews.

Regarding their standard communication with potential candidates, several participants shared their methods of engagement with interested individuals. Robert Arthur described his customary screening procedure, which consists of an extensive interview with a potential candidate via video-conference. During the interview he seeks to learn as much as possible about the individual’s background, values, and interests, and why he/she is attracted to the presidency at the client college. Arthur, in turn, shares as much information as he can about the identity, culture, and current state of the college. Additionally, he instructs the potential candidate:

Write a memorandum from you to the search committee, not more than two pages, summarizing our conversation this morning. I want you to tell the committee what you thought was important in terms of values, skills, and experiences that you shared with me that you think are essential to being successful as the next president at “ABC” school.
Based on their communications during the active phase of a search, consultants noted it is not unusual for some potential candidates to decide to not pursue the position. Those whose screening interview signals a solid alignment between candidate and college generally advance to the next stage in the process. Most of the participants described interactions with potential candidates that reflected that basic two-way communication and exchange of key information.

During their interactions with prospective candidates, the participants also listen for indications that an individual would not be invested in the identity-related expectations and vision of the college. Jason David stated, “There are a pool of people who are seeking to become president, and they apply for every search regardless of what the fit might be. And those people you can sort of exclude.” Similarly, Lou Adams, who earlier in his career served as a college president, offered the following insight:

The first thing I want to know is, “Is this a candidate who wants to be president, or wants to do president?” There are an awful lot of people out there who’d love to be president. Because you get a nice salary and nice house and often a car to drive. People are nice to you. People notice when you walk into the room. There are just an awful lot of reasons why it's nice to be president. But the real question is, “Do you want to do president? Do you want to do the hard, hard 24/7 work that being an effective president requires?” That's the first -- and for me, that's a qualifier. If a candidate doesn't pass that bar, I’m not really interested. I build the core of this thing around: Is this a person who wants to do president? And then: Do they want to do president at this particular institution?

Screening prospective candidates for identity-related alignment with the college, the participants noted, often requires providing details that go beyond what is contained in the search profile. Robert Arthur recounted situations he has encountered in the faith-based segment:
Where there is [for example] a Baptist contingent that thinks that creative design is acceptable. There're some who think we should teach evolution and some people who think it is strictly creationism. You know -- that's -- we can't fix that. But, if you're going to be president of an institution where that is an issue we say, “Would you like to be president of a place like that?”

With these realities in mind, convincing prospective candidates to be transparent about matters of identity-related fit requires a degree of relationship-building. Dan Brian articulated an approach that was representative of that shared by several of the consultants:

If you're straightforward and truthful with your candidates, they're going to be straightforward and truthful with you. And they'll betray themselves to you. When you're analyzing, you're assessing candidates. And that's the most important thing. Can you get these people to a place where they're unguarded and just saying to you what comes to their minds?

In distilling this recursive process of identity discernment and communication down to its essence, Dan Brian also offered, “How you do it in a way that informs the candidate that is morally and ethically correct, and yet puts your client in the best position for success, that's what makes a great search consultant, to be perfectly frank.” As succinctly phrased by another participant, “It just takes time to work through it.” That word, time, represents an aspect of the search process the consultants view as critical, and one which merits additional exploration within this theme.

**Do Not Rush the Process**

As the participants conveyed their thoughts about professional responsibility, they spoke often of the important role of time. They were uniform in their view that several months are
typically required for the search process to culminate in a successful outcome. Summarizing the processual stages, the consultants stated they must develop an adequate sense of the college’s identity, work with the search committee to identify presidential attributes that will best fit the institution’s needs, and attract a robust and well-aligned candidate pool from which the new leader will be selected. Accelerating a search timeline for the sake of expediency, they have observed, invites a poor outcome. Remarked Tim Charles, “I think the biggest mistake that committees make is to move too quickly. And I think the biggest mistake search consultants can make is to allow them to move too quickly.” Another comment emphasized a consultant’s obligation to monitor the process and not short-change the time required, “I think the unrealistic expectation can often be sort of fine-tuned if the search firm, the search consultant, is willing to put in the time necessary -- every step of the way.”

Tim Charles expanded on that joint responsibility of search committees and consultants to the outcome:

If it goes too quickly, decisions are made based on that timeline and not based on the substance of the matter. And I think that probably reflects some of the -- and this is a pejorative word -- but the naiveté of a committee. But also it reflects, I think, a lack of patience on the part of a search consultant. I have said to search committees after a month and a half to two months of moving through the first stage of the timeline, “We're not ready yet. We don't have the kind of maturity in this pool that you need.” And, frankly, I think there's a responsibility to deal with that time issue on an ongoing basis.

Robert Arthur echoed that perspective, asserting that his responsibility is to work with the search committee to forestall a premature decision. “If the search isn't going to close, we're going to keep going. We don't have the right candidates.” Two participants spoke of what they feel is a
required collective state of mind for a search committee, and that it can take time for that state to be reached. As Arthur stated, “It is part of the process for their thinking to evolve. If they simply can put a scoresheet together at the first meeting and not deviate from that, they’re not doing the job properly.” Sue Mills offered an expanded view of that perspective:

Doing well as a member of a search committee is implicitly a commitment to open-mindedness, to persuading yourself every day that you don't know the answer -- you really don't know the answer -- and liking the fact that you don't know the answer.

Letting the answer reveal itself to you in the process, rather than the much more typical -- just the human condition -- the anxiety of not knowing leads people to think they know more than they actually know.

She also offered a succinct summary of the dangers of rushing through the stages, stating that a search “can go off the rails because the people got out ahead of the process and imagined the outcome with absolutely no data to go on.” The participants’ collective view is that prospective candidates require time to absorb information about the college, typified by Dan Brian’s statement that information is “doled out in teaspoons over the course of a very long time.”

As the participants shared their feelings about their ethical obligation as search consultants, I listened for even subtle mention of an associated profit motive for their respective search firm. I anticipated them stating that positive word-of-mouth for a search firm was the business-related outcome of a successful presidential search. Or, that perhaps an efficient and expedited closure of a search would free the consultant to take on additional clients. However, I was surprised that none of the ten participants spoke to either of those situations as a motivator. Rather, these participants clearly took a dim few of those in the search field who circumvent what they view as a necessarily robust process. As the consultants described what they consider
their professional responsibility, those descriptions clearly intersected with their efforts to build a composite understanding of the college and reflect that in the search profile. The three themes appeared to function synergistically in the search consultants’ interpretive process.

**Chapter Summary**

I entered into this study to understand the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity while they facilitate presidential searches for small, private colleges. At its essence, this has been an exploration of how search consultants make meaning of their interactions with college stakeholders about what is central to the institution, and how they then convey that meaning to potential presidential candidates. Accordingly, I sought to elicit search consultants’ deep reflections about the essence of their work as it pertains to serving as interpreters and communicators of organizational identity.

Three themes were identified. Theme 1 arose from the participants’ stated efforts toward *building a composite view* of the college’s identity during the pre-search process. Theme 2 reflects consultants *using the search profile as an interpretive tool* in constructing and communicating meaning. Theme 3 suggests search consultants *remaining mindful of professional responsibility* in accurately interpreting and candidly communicating identity-related information during the search. These results point to an interpretive approach that is highly process oriented and interwoven with ethical considerations. In Chapter 5, I discuss how these findings relate to the professional literature. I also suggest possible implications of this study for professional practice, and then recommend areas for future research.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the role of search consultants in interpreting organizational identity when facilitating presidential searches for small, private colleges. The data for the study were generated through semi-structured individual interviews with ten purposefully selected executive search consultants. Using the constant comparison approach (Glaser, 1965; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), a cycle of reading, coding, re-coding, and categorizing the interview transcripts was used to analyze the data. Analysis yielded three intersecting themes responsive to the research questions.

In Chapter 4, I presented the findings that generated the themes, sharing relevant extracts from the participant interviews to support the results. In Chapter 5, I focus attention first on how the themes and underlying findings addressed the guiding research questions. That discussion is followed by an exploration of how the study’s results relate to the professional literature introduced in Chapter 2. I then present and describe a revised conceptual framework to schematically depict what was learned. In the final sections of this chapter, I suggest how my study’s findings can be used to inform professional practice, offer recommendations for future research, and share my final thoughts.

Major Findings as Connected to the Research Questions

The themes that emerged from this study indicate search consultants acquire an understanding of a college’s organizational identity and communicate that identity to candidates by: 1) Building a composite view of the college, 2) Using the search profile as an interpretive tool, and 3) Remaining mindful of their professional and ethical responsibility. Theming the data provided me with a high-level vantage point from which to view the search consultants’
interpretive process. Rising above details of the participants’ narratives helped mitigate the risk of “not seeing the forest for the trees.” Extending that metaphor, I gained valuable topographical insight, but there remain pockets of the forest I was not able to clearly see. That fresh perspective thus enabled me to critically examine what I learned about the topic, as well to recognize what remains unknown. And, although not rising to the level of themes or subthemes, additional important findings emerged that are worth mentioning at this point.

I found it paradoxical that the participants’ rich narratives also served to highlight areas about which they remained silent. As presented in Chapter 4, the search consultants collectively expressed a sense of obligation to help their small-college clients remain viable. They also spoke at length about the existential threats facing those institutions. However, I was surprised by their lack of commentary about whether small, private colleges are still relevant to higher education, and what the future holds for the small-college sector. Although I did not solicit their predictions, the consultants’ general silence in that regard was nonetheless puzzling and merits further consideration.

Given the financial constraints prevalent among small, private colleges, I was also expecting a cost-benefit narrative to emerge during the interviews. Surprisingly, none of the consultants spoke about the expense incurred by a small college when hiring the services of a search firm. As mentioned in Chapter 2, articles questioning the value of search firms have appeared in higher education publications. I have no doubt the participants were aware of these criticisms. However, whether intentional or not, the participants did not discuss contractual or financial matters. Although tangential to the purpose of my study, this omission merits attention.
The preceding observations fell outside the scope of my research, but they illustrate the potential for additional exploration. Returning to the themes and subthemes that emerged from the study, I next use the study’s two overarching research questions to frame the discussion.

**RQ1: How do search consultants acquire an understanding of a small, private college’s organizational identity?**

In order to study how search consultants acquire an understanding of a college’s organizational identity, it was important to first establish parameters within which to explore the construct. The working definition of organizational identity I used for this study encompassed its major theoretical strands, as follows: The institution’s central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics as perceived by its members (Whetten, 2006), the members’ view of who or what the college is (Pratt et al., 2016), how internal and external stakeholders and the public view the institution (King et al., 2010), or a combination of those perspectives (Gioia et al., 2010). When distilled to its practical essence, that definition takes into account the collective self-image of those closely aligned with the college, its public reputation, and its relative standing in the higher education marketplace. My study’s findings indicate consultants work toward obtaining an integrated view of a college’s identity, which functionally blends the three theoretical strands. However, as next discussed, understanding a college’s integrated identity within the context of a presidential search can range from superficial to robust.

My study indicates that search consultants form the core of their understanding through building a composite view of the college. Without exception, the study’s participants spoke of the importance of meeting with a variety of college stakeholders to hear the collective voice of the constituencies. The same held true for obtaining a view of the college’s reputation in the community. However, some consultants reported going to much greater lengths in seeking a
diversity of voices – some intentionally going in search of spontaneous on-campus and off-campus conversations. Other consultants seemed content with interviewing those pre-selected or invited by the search committee. I sensed both a quantitative and qualitative difference among consultants in how inclusive they are while constructing their composite view of the college. Even among seasoned practitioners, which was the participant base for this study, some consultants dig deeper than others to learn about their client college. Several consultants used verbs such as “immerse” and “soak in” to describe their efforts to discern a college’s essence.

A strong subtheme within building a composite view of the college was the consultants’ desire to understand how the campus culture and strategic visioning align with its organizational identity. There is a tendency for campus stakeholders to blend culture, vision, and identity during their conversations with consultants. Therefore, careful review of the college’s strategic planning documents was cited as critical. Otherwise, the “way things are done” (culture) and/or “the way they want things to be” (strategic vision), can obscure “who they are” (identity). This is important because consultants initially focus on the distinctiveness of a college, the essence of its identity, to attract a pool of presidential candidates. Therefore, accurately differentiating between the three constructs is necessary for search consultants to build an accurate understanding of the college’s identity that can be communicated to others.

Contrary to my expectations, the narratives of consultants who had once been college presidents did not reveal a stronger focus on strategic vision than on culture when compared to consultants without presidential experience. The past presidents told me their executive experience informs their practice as a search consultant, and I was expecting that to manifest itself in this area. Perhaps past presidents whose tenures were influenced more by campus culture than by strategic visioning might naturally gravitate toward what they experientially
know, and vice versa. Or, due to the fragile state of many small, private colleges, perhaps concerns about strategic direction might indeed generate an equal focus on its ramifications for campus culture. Those additional subtexts associated with differentiating culture, strategic visioning, and identity were not explicated within my study, but merit consideration.

The second subtheme to surface within *building a composite view of the college* was the importance of addressing significant identify-related disconnects with the search committee and/or board. Such disconnects can pertain to the college’s self-image, due to differences of opinions among internal college stakeholders as to who the college is. Disconnects can also exist between a college’s collective self-image, if discernible, and its external reputation in the community and higher education marketplace. Talking through those disconnects with the search committee and/or governing board can assist the search consultant with refining their understanding of the college’s identity. However, consultants also must remain cognizant of powerful stakeholders attempting to “push” their idea of who the college is, as discussed later in this section.

Search consultants also address disparate views among stakeholders regarding attributes that the next president should possess. In particular, attributes that appear misaligned with a college’s identity, such as those conflicting with a faith-based college’s religious tenets, warrant additional conversation with the search committee. Although appearing tangential to the research question, addressing these forms of disconnects is integral to discerning between what is core to the college’s identity versus what exists in juxtaposition or in conflict with it.

The theme *building a composite view of the college* exists in a recursive relationship with the second theme to emerge from this study: *Using the search profile as an interpretive tool*. The search profile, known also as the prospectus, serves to both present the college to external
parties and communicate its leadership needs. Through iterative cycles of drafting and discussion, search consultants further refine their understanding of the college’s identity. The search profile ideally serves as a filter and bridge between the consultant’s pre-search work and recruitment of prospective candidates.

I was surprised by the strength of the study’s third theme, and how it appeared to permeate all aspects of the participants’ sensemaking activities as search consultants. **Remaining mindful of professional responsibility** emerged as the theme in which the first two appear to be nested. Most participants highlighted a sense of professional obligation when describing their tenacity in getting the search profile “right.” They cited their efforts to address dissonance as an occasionally uncomfortable but necessary aspect of their work. Although appearing genuine, I found myself wondering if their ethical stance might still be subject to blind spots and/or business pressures. Search firms compete with each other for contracts, and the college’s governing board is technically the firm’s client. The participants acknowledged the search committee and board have final approval rights regarding the published search profile, and occasionally disagree with the consultant over its content. Therefore, consultants cannot force the inclusion of their desired language over the objection of the committee or board. This seems a situation ripe for conflict. However, none of the search consultants cited an instance of having recused themselves from a search due to ethical conflicts. Perhaps an ethically intractable situation has never presented itself to these particular consultants, but this might be an area worthy of future exploration.

Although I believe there are stories remaining to be told about navigating power dynamics when addressing dissonance, the above three themes and their underlying components
provide insight into search consultants’ interpretive process. As next discussed, that insight extends into the second research question this study addressed.

**RQ2: How do search consultants communicate the college’s organizational identity to prospective candidates?**

In many ways, the two research questions underpinning this study can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. The participants emphasized that their attention to the pre-search phase, culminating in the release of the search profile, enables them to accurately discuss the college with prospective candidates. The importance of the search profile featured prominently in participants’ narratives. It clearly is viewed by consultants as the primary route through which a college’s identity is communicated. The final version of the search profile reflects only what the search committee or board has approved. Occasionally the consultant disagrees with aspects of the final version, but is obligated to follow the direction of the client. The participants shared that those areas of disagreement, when they arise, usually stem from a board choosing to portray the college in what the consultant views as an unrealistically positive light. Such situations become problematic later in the search if presidential candidates detect differences between a college’s professed identity and what they observe. This has professional and reputational implications for the search consultant, as well, since candidates may infer the consultant and firm are disingenuous or poorly informed. Therefore, as next discussed, consultants must often strike a delicate balance between advocating for their client college and being sufficiently transparent to prospective candidates.

Beyond the search profile, consultants communicate identity-related information about a college largely through phone or videoconference conversations. The participants are alert to individuals whose primary motivation is to secure any presidency without regard to fit, and are
able to screen them out from consideration. For applicants who appear to be serious contenders for candidacy, the participants advocate a candid approach to sharing identity-related information about the college. However, even the most assertive of the participants I interviewed said they still exercise caution when doing so. For example, if board members of a conservative faith-based college believe the college should adopt a more progressive stance, even if that view is not shared by the majority of stakeholders, search consultants choose their words carefully when making candidates aware of the disconnect. Unless the dissonance is public knowledge, conveying that information could be construed as inappropriate and carries particular risk if not treated confidentially by candidates. Therefore, such disconnects between culture, strategic vision, and identity require sensitive handling by the consultant. When conversing with candidates, consultants often choose to frame the disconnect as a leadership opportunity for the right person, rather than focusing on the discord itself. That was described by several participants as a legitimate use of *spin*. However, it was also noted that spin should not be used to mask the intensity of situations of which candidates should be made aware.

Although willing to speak in generalities, the majority of participants did not share highly detailed stories with me of their communication with prospective candidates. Despite assurances of anonymity, this was an area in which I sensed the most hesitation to divulge detailed information. Interestingly, the most forthright participant noted that he is nearing the end of his career, and so he was not particularly concerned about whether his viewpoint could be linked back to him. As for the others, I believe three inferences are reasonable. Perhaps the search consultants were concerned their anonymity could be compromised when my study is published. Or, perhaps they were reticent to provide details that could portray the search profession as being insensitive to matters of college identity, particularly within the conservative faith-based college
sector. Thirdly, and I inferred least likely, it is possible that some of the participants had not, in fact, entered into truly deep identity-explicating conversations with prospective candidates, but were reluctant to acknowledge it.

The absence of specific details notwithstanding, the communication of a college’s identity to prospective candidates appears important to search consultants, or at least those within this study. They expressed a personal interest and professional obligation to helping their small, private college clients survive. Facilitating a strong presidential match advances that goal, as well as potentially enhances the consultants’ reputation within the competitive executive search market.

Based on comments made by several participants, however, there are other search consultants in the field that do not subscribe to a high level of professional responsibility and attention to process regarding identity discernment. The potential sullying of the search profession’s reputation by less responsible consultants was quite distasteful to the study’s participants. This raises questions about whether boards are sufficiently judicious in this regard when hiring a search firm, especially since matters of organizational identity are likely not part of a governing board’s vernacular.

Although more remains to be explored about the topic, my study meaningfully addressed the purpose for which it was designed. The data proved to be responsive to the research questions, and provided a level of insight that significantly advances knowledge about organizational identity and presidential search for small, private colleges. The next logical step is to examine where my study is situated within the related professional literature.
Relationship of Findings to Current Literature

In Chapter 2, I presented a review of professional literature germane to this study’s topic. Literature related to the following subtopical areas was discussed, the intersection of which served as the nexus point for my study: (a) the widespread use of search consultants in higher-education presidential searches; (b) organizational identity theory; (c) challenges facing small, private, nonprofit colleges; and (d) pressures of the college presidency. The role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity within a small, private college context had not previously been empirically studied. In this section, I discuss how my research is positioned within the related scholarly and professional literature, thereby contextualizing the study’s relevance to the body of knowledge.

Connection of Theme 1 (Building a Composite View of the College) to the Literature

The participants in this study confirmed that organizational identity is important to interpret during a presidential search. They report identity is more explicit within small, private, religiously affiliated colleges, but is detectable across all colleges, whether secular or nonsecular. The strength of that identity lies along a continuum, ranging from those with a comparatively weak and fragmented sense of organizational self to those where it is strong and unified. Accordingly, they consider it critical to build a composite view of the client institution, particularly during the pre-search stage of the process. Search consultants’ efforts to form that composite view emerged as a core finding of this study.

Classic versus dynamic view of organizational identity. The theme building a composite view of the college intersects with empirical and theoretical literature related to organizational identity, much of which centers on how the membership of a collective body defines itself (Pratt et al., 2016). Results of this study suggests that understanding a small,
private college’s identity is not a matter of unearthing a singular definition of what is “central, distinctive, and enduring” to the organization, as coined by Albert and Whetten (1985, p. 265). Rather, the pre-search phase of the search aligns with the views of subsequent theorists that organizational identity is multi-faceted and often dynamic in nature (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). It is also consistent with the typology developed by Schinoff et al. (2016), which indicates expression of organizational identity ranges from poorly to well-defined.

Institutional perspective of organizational identity. There was a great deal of similarity in how the pre-search phase is carried out from consultant to consultant. Several consultants described this stage as being fairly standard in its procedural elements. A search consultant or associate researches publicly available information about the college prior to a search consultant’s on-campus visit. The information is comprised of objective and subjective accessible data retrieved primarily from internet-based sources. The assembling of this preliminary data set enables the consultant to begin forming a baseline view of where the college exists within the higher education marketplace. It is the starting point from which the consultant begins to develop a portrait of who the college is.

This preliminary stage of the pre-search aligns with an institutional perspective of organizational identity, whereby an organization is assessed by its status within the broader institutional context in which it resides, and upon which it often bases its sense of legitimacy (Glynn & Abzug, 2002). It is also consistent with the two-stage valuation theory advanced by Zuckerman (2016), a subset of the institutional perspective of identity. According to the two-stage model, an organization must demonstrate that it possesses features identified with the industry to which it claims to belong. Only after making that determination will potential customers include it for consideration with competing organizations, with that further assessment
then based on its distinguishing characteristics. Within the context of a presidential search, a search consultant seeks to understand the points of commonality that a college has with other institutions of higher education. Particularly for a small, private college, those points of commonality signal the college’s legitimacy to prospective candidates. Factors such as accreditation, financial health, enrollment, and other publicly available information are of interest to search consultants. Once that legitimacy has been established, the consultant looks for distinctive features of the college that can serve to set it apart from other institutions competing for presidential talent.

**Social constructionist perspective of organizational identity.** Soliciting the input of multiple stakeholder groups, both internal and external to the college, is a hallmark of the on-campus segment of the pre-search phase. The on-campus visits comprises the majority of the pre-search work. Epistemologically, this aspect of the process aligns with the *social constructionist perspective*, which focuses on how members define and articulate their collective identity. Inherent in this perspective is a form of intra-organizational negotiation, with members engaged in an ongoing sequence of formal and informal dialogue over the organization’s values and attributes (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Search consultants intentionally seek the input of various stakeholder groups and subgroups in order to provide a more complete picture of the organization. Member affiliations mentioned by the consultants included students, faculty, staff, academic administrators, cabinet-level executives, alumni, and the governing board. In a small college setting, the expressed views of these organizational groups serve to represent the socially constructed identity claims of that subset. Documenting stakeholder viewpoints allows the search consultant to create a combination of identity claims which, collectively, represents the socially constructed perspective of who the college is. This
stage of the process also affords the consultant the opportunity to detect potential disconnects that require additional exploration.

**Social actor perspective of organizational identity.** The third epistemological frame, the *social actor perspective*, was also evident within my study. The social actor perspective within organizational identity theory views the organization as the personification of a collective individual (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016), and focuses heavily on image. As part of the pre-search phase, the search consultants in this study described also meeting with community members and others with no direct employment or educational ties to the college. The consultants’ interest is in learning about the college’s reputation in the local community, and then adding the information to that collected from the campus constituency. In doing so, the consultants are able to compare what they hear about the college’s local reputation with the socially constructed claims of organizational members. This provides another avenue through which to identify disconnects for later discussion with the search committee and/or board as the search profile is constructed.

King et al. (2010), in alignment with the social actor perspective of identity, state that those external to the organization learn about it largely through its actions and the commitments of those who claim to speak and act on its behalf. They contend that an organization decides how it wants society to view it, and then takes actions to establish its reputation accordingly. The subtext associated with that perspective is that there is someone, or a group of individuals, who function as the authoritative voice of the organization. Schinoff et al. (2016) coined the term *identity custodians* to denote those organizational members who claim to speak on the organization’s behalf. Those individuals typically occupy leadership or similarly influential roles that position them as authoritative voices regarding identity (Howard-Grenville et al.,
Learning who communicates college identity to consultants during the presidential search process was a key aspect of my research. I found that search consultants recognize the inherent authority of the governing board and, by extension, members of the search committee. This level of authority positions the search committee and board with custodial-level influence over how identity is communicated. Search consultants navigate within the background of that power structure during all phases of the presidential search.

The liberal use of individual and open-forum meetings with multiple stakeholder groups during the pre-search phase is viewed as critical to uncovering the college’s identity in its fullness. However, it is not uncommon for search consultants to be overruled by the search committee or board regarding the search profile’s content. Participants in my study noted board members’ concern about public image, and a reticence to share anything that could be viewed negatively by external parties. This primarily reflects the social actor perspective of identity, and has implications for a candidate if important aspects of the college’s identity are masked. Negative elements of the social constructionist perspective can arise if the board, ignoring other voices, rigidly adheres to its own self-created narrative of who the college is. This aligns with the findings of Kenny et al. (2016), reflected in the general organizational literature, who concluded that apparent unanimity regarding an organization’s core identity generally reflects power dynamics and corporate politics more than it does stakeholder consensus.

**Integrated view of organizational identity.** With these three perspectives of organizational identity in mind, a qualitative approach to this study enabled me to explicate the process through which search consultants seek to uncover a college’s identity. Manifestations of all three epistemological perspectives were apparent within the participants’ narratives, with all three perspectives often surfacing during reports of conversations with a stakeholder group. This
result aligns with the recent direction of organizational identity research, evidenced by its steady movement toward a harmonization of the three perspectives. Many theorists now consider an integrated view of the institutional, social constructionist, and social actor perspectives as necessary to forge a sense of an enterprise’s core values and defining characteristics (Gioia et al., 2010; Pratt et al., 2016).

**Stress among small, private colleges.** Also resonant within these themes, results of my study reinforce the high-stress environment within which many small, private colleges exist and, thus, which consultants also enter when conducting the pre-search phase. In confirming that small, private colleges, as a sector, are subject to an unprecedented level of stress (Morphew, 2009; Selzer, 2018a; Wylie, 2018), most of the participants spoke to the level of urgency they sense during the pre-search phase. Several noted that declining enrollment and the resulting lack of resources can steadily become part of a small college’s identity, even eventually becoming embedded in its collective mindset. This finding connects with literature that chronicles the steady physical and emotional toll of long-term enrollment declines on small, private colleges (Biemiller, 2015; Chabotar, 2010; Ekman, 2014; Thomason, 2017).

In a finding that aligns with that of Biemiller (2018), Brown (2009), and Burrell (2008), participants in my study indicated it is common for small, private colleges to delay confronting enrollment declines until their situations are dire. Their governing boards then often signal that drastic action is required for the college to survive. MacDonald (2013) concluded that events internal and external to a college/university frequently lead to intellectually and emotionally taxing debates over identity and image. Often at issue, my study’s participants reported, is that many small-college governing boards, since they are removed from the day-to-day operations of the college, tend to form their own identity-related conclusions. This is especially apparent when
discussing leadership needs and strategic direction. These findings align with conclusions reached by MacDonald (2013), and also support the results of studies highlighting the risk of existential crisis rises when a college is unclear about its identity (Eaker, 2008; Martin & Samels, 2009). The implication is that a college, if confused about who it is, lacks the necessary cohesion to determine its future direction and leadership needs. My impression is that a search consultant ideally serves as a moderator during the search process, most notably during the pre-search phase while working to interpret the essence of the college’s identity. Even within a small college, the various stakeholder constituencies are not necessarily used to communicating with each other, especially within the context of searching for a new president. A search consultant seeks to unify those voices.

Perhaps not surprisingly, results of my study indicate the most frequently encountered dissonance relates to college identity and strategic direction. The majority of disconnects arise from religious tenets, external reputations vs. internal identity, and/or academic reputation serving as identity referents. Facilitating such conversations, even if long overdue, was stated by my study’s participants as integral to the presidential pre-search phase. Consequently, this study highlighted an area of critical existential significance to small, private colleges that should not be underestimated: The tenuous position of many small colleges leaves little, if any, margin for error. A board caught in a self-referential cycle of determining who the college is makes decisions based on seeing through a one-dimensional lens. This study contributes to the emerging research which suggests small colleges that ignore identity when implementing strategic change initiatives do so at considerable risk (Baker & Baldwin, 2015; Hilbun & Mamiseishvili, 2016; Tarrant et al., 2018). Furthermore, the exposition of how identity-related
factors surface during a facilitated presidential search fills a previously identified gap in the empirical literature.

**Explicating desired presidential attributes.** Discussing how organizational identity referents of the institution translate into the characteristics desired of the next president is another aspect of the pre-search process. Findings indicate that search consultants actively work to reveal cross-constituent opinions about the type of leader sought. They stay attuned to widely divergent opinions, particularly those which appear at odds with the college’s composite identity. That aspect of the pre-search merges with the next theme that emerged: *Using the search profile as an interpretive tool.* I next discuss how that theme and its associated findings connect to the professional literature.

**Connection of Theme 2 (Using the Search Profile as an Interpretive Tool) to the Literature**

The pre-search phase exists in a recursive relationship with development of the search profile. The search profile (also known as the prospectus) serves as an instrument of both communication and interpretation. The document, usually between 10-15 pages in length, is designed to function as a reasonably thorough overview of the college, the surrounding community, and a description of what the college is seeking in its next president. It originates from a summary document prepared by the search consultant near the end of the pre-search phase. It is within the evolving prospectus that the consultant synthesizes stakeholder viewpoints and presents them to the search committee and/or governing board for discussion. In the participants’ experience, the negative consequences of disparate identity-related viewpoints among stakeholders can be highly problematic. These repercussions can persist throughout the search process and magnify during the new president’s term in office.
Communicating organizational identity. The harmful repercussions of disparate identity-related viewpoints align with the findings of several organizational identity researchers. Van Knippenberg (2016) contends that the identity communicated by leaders must be in harmony with that of the organization to avoid potentially harmful disconnects. In a further connection to organizational identity’s social actor perspective, discerning and adeptly navigating power dynamics through diplomacy and neutrality is important (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013; Kenny et al., 2016; Schinoff et al., 2016). Otherwise, the voices of less powerful constituents and other stakeholders are suppressed during the pre-search phase. The outcome can be a search profile that does not accurately represent who the college is, and how that identity relates to its leadership needs. Consequently, prospective candidates can be denied an early opportunity to proactively assess their true fit with the institution before applying for the position. In an attempt to minimize that risk, participants described a frequently intense cycle of dialogue with the board and/or search committee when discussing the search consultant’s summarization of campus meetings.

Search consultants’ attempts to include multiple voices/constituents in defining the organization for the search profile is contiguous with studies specific to organizational identity within higher education. In a meta-analysis of studies conducted over a 40-year timespan, Dumay, Draelants, and Dahan (2015) noted a pattern indicating that a recursive relationship exists between internal identity claims, marketing efforts, and reputation. Those three aspects align with the social constructionist, social actor, and institutional perspectives of organizational identity. Dumay et al. (2015) note that higher education institutions increasingly compare themselves to their competitors, a clear connection to the isomorphic tendencies explicated through the institutional perspective of organizational identity. Weerts et al.’s (2014) meta-
analysis revealed a gradual progression from college identities that were solely culture-based to those focused more on external comparisons with marketplace competitors. Participants in my study noted heightened attention of board members to maintaining a positive public perception of how their college compares to other institutions. However, this pressure can reinforce the creation of a board narrative within the search profile that does not mirror the reality on campus. My research extends that conversation in the literature by illuminating how search consultants strive to holistically interpret and communicate a small, private college’s identity within the high-stakes environment of a presidential search.

Reconciliation of presidential attributes with organizational identity. My study indicates search consultants’ primary reliance on the search profile to convey accurate information to potential candidates. Several consultants consider the search profile to ideally function as a “unifying voice” for the institution, although they acknowledged that a fully united voice is not always achievable. However, they stated there is considerable variability in how a college interprets presidential attributes within the context of its identity, and in how they prioritize those attributes based on that interpretation.

The search consultants in my study attested that the demands upon a college president are greater than ever, with an ever-expanding list of desired skills and characteristics. These expectations are consistent with those reported in the literature (CIC, 2018; Hammond, 2013; Pierce, 2014; Trachtenberg et al., 2013). My study’s participants highlighted fundraising experience as the most sought-after presidential skill, which also aligns with report from multiple sources (Aspen Institute, 2017; Bourgeois, 2016; Byron, 2015; Carey, 2014; Mrig & Sanaghan, 2015). However, a legitimate question is whether the focus on fundraising acumen might cause search committees to overlook other important attributes. For example, an increase in
philanthropic support exclusive of identity considerations could leave a college vulnerable to exploitation by deep-pocketed donors seeking to influence its ideology. Similarly, and also in light of the pressures facing small colleges, study participants stated that search consultants are often faced with reconciling a board’s desire for a highly innovative president with conflicting messages from other stakeholders. This is especially important if they sense that an aggressive approach would be viewed by those stakeholders as an unacceptable threat to the college’s core identity. This surfaces most commonly when colleges with a liberal arts focus are faced with executive-mandated programmatic changes that alter its historic identity.

The above finding extends research by Selingo et al. (2017) which suggests the importance of a complementary linkage between the president’s skill set, leadership approach, and the college’s organizational identity. My study’s participants contend that the dialogic process required to build the search profile is key to raising this awareness among the search committee and governing board. Previous research indicates a history of governing boards failing to assist a new president in creating a shared institutional vision through which innovation can occur (Hendrickson et al., 2013; Pierce, 2014; Trachtenberg et al., 2013) and of aligning what it says it wants in a president with what it is willing to support (Mitchell, 2013; Stowe & Komasara, 2016). My study suggests that search consultants endeavor to prevent misalignments between a college and its new president. They do so by working systematically to accurately interpret and communicate identity-related information, with the search profile serving as the primary conduit.
Connection of Theme 3 (Remaining Mindful of Professional Responsibility) to the Literature

The scholarly and professional literature is sparse regarding the field of executive search as a whole, and even more so in search consultancy’s higher education subset. The extant literature is comprised primarily of articles and opinion pieces in the higher education press. The existing body of writing reflects a largely polarized view of the value of search consultants within higher education.

One identified professional organization in the field, the Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants (AESC), has published a code of professional practice to which its members are expected to adhere. Statements regarding integrity, confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and professional objectivity are included. Four of the ten participants in my study were employed by search firms that hold AESC membership. However, none of the participants mentioned the presence of an explicit professional code of ethics, whether used internally by their respective search firm or an association such as AESC. That does not necessarily indicate the absence of intra-firm codes of professional practice. A guide published by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), which itself offers search services, highlights the importance of maintaining confidentiality, preventing conflicts of interest, and defining the respective roles of those involved in the search process (Johnson & Ferrare, 2013).

As might be expected, that guide takes a positive view of the value provided by search firms. A similarly positive view of search consulting was also offered by Atwell (2009). A contrasting opinion was put forth by Stripling (2014), who highlighted the perceived business case for consultants maintaining a cloak of secrecy around their process. Curris (2014) found middle ground, asserting that although due diligence likely predominates across the search
industry, search firms should do more to improve their levels of transparency regarding ethical
business practices. The intimation is that, whether valid or not, secrecy plants the seeds of
suspicion and mistrust.

My research has penetrated the above void, having explicated and examined the practical
“why” which underlies phases of the search process and subsequent communication with
candidates. In doing so, this study has deepened the understanding of how search consultants
carry out their interpretive work. More specifically, the study has been a contextualized
illumination of the nexus point of organizational identity, presidential executive search, and the
existential threats facing small, private colleges. I next summarize those interconnections to
highlight this study’s contributions to the body of knowledge.

Summary of Major Findings

The participants were uniform in their assertion that the search process should not be
viewed as transactional. They view it as a fiduciary relationship with an inherent level of ethical
responsibility and, as such, consider the colloquial moniker headhunter as pejorative. The
interviewed consultants acknowledged there are other firms and consultants that bypass critical
segments of the process they described, but stated that, in their experience, the majority of those
in the search field carefully follow the processual steps described in this study.

Participants stated a college must be honest with itself about the consequences of hiring a
president who would assertively pursue a vision misaligned with the college’s identity. Some
participants spoke of their willingness to challenge disconnects, even in the presence of powerful
constituents. Most of the participants expressed the view that failed presidencies often stem
from change efforts not accepted by the stakeholders, and that many of those could be avoided
through proper attention to the pre-search phase. Circumventing the necessary time, they
contend, carries high risk of a short presidential tenure. This adds important background context to Bornstein’s (2015) report that employee morale, institutional reputation, and stakeholder trust can all be eroded by a failed presidency.

The participants in this study view the responsibility for a well-executed presidential search as resting with the consultant and search committee. They emphasize that authority and ultimate accountability, though, rests with the governing board. Accordingly, the participants assert that a search consultant should not presume to tell an institution whom they should or should not hire. However, to support the board in its fulfilling its duty, they believe the role of search consultant does carry the professional obligation to seek clarification and help guide dialogue to as close to consensus as possible. This perspective advances that raised by Lovett (2016), who noted that even a well-designed search process cannot mitigate the damage of a board that does not embrace its proper fiduciary role in the process.

The participants collectively expressed a sense of professional obligation to help small, private colleges remain viable. One participant shared the view that some small colleges are “one bad president away from going under,” and indicated this realization compels search consultants to be accurate, transparent, and highly conscientious in their work. All expressed that establishing an authentic relationship of trust and credibility with both the college and prospective candidates was a top priority.

Although the search profile serves as the primary route of identity communication, the participants said prospective candidates often probe for additional information, and that candor is the best approach. Several remarked that they are often contacted by individuals who want to know off-the-record information about “what the college is really like.” This extends the conversation initiated by Lohse (2008) and Smerek (2013), who suggest new presidents seek to
understand identity-related information about their new institution, and consider search consultants one potential source of information. Most consultants stated that within the bounds of professionalism, they discreetly make serious candidates aware of those issues. Similarly, they asserted that they do not signal to prospective candidates that consensus exists on a campus if it does not.

However, the participants in this study differed somewhat in how direct they are in pointing out what they view as problematic areas to prospective candidates. There remains much that is unknown about the details of those conversations. Especially when working with religiously affiliated colleges, the participants stated they take note of identity-related factors that could be challenging for a new president. The rationale for that discernment is that deeply held tenets could conflict with a candidate’s desire for programmatic changes. They feel it is important to highlight those differences. This signals that these conversations are important, and therefore represents a potential avenue for further empirical exploration.

This strong undercurrent of remaining mindful of professional responsibility permeated the search consultants’ narratives. The frequency and intensity of its expression was an unexpected finding. This theme, in tandem with building a composite view of the college and using the search profile as an interpretive tool, serves to meaningfully address the study’s guiding purpose and research questions. In the next section, I describe how the research findings serve to augment and complete the study’s conceptual framework.

**Expanded Conceptual Framework**

When I embarked upon this study, I held the impression that search consultants would build their understanding of a college’s identity in strictly linear fashion. My expectation was that the findings would generate themes best displayed in flowchart format. After all, the very
term “search process” connotes a defined sequence, and the findings do indicate a structural aspect to the work. However, ending the analysis there would have provided an incomplete picture. The participants’ narratives instead reveal a role replete with interpersonal nuance that requires a multi-layered interpretive approach. This deeper view of the interpretive role underscored the value of the study’s qualitative design. Figure 2 is a schematic depiction of the finalized conceptual framework. The following summary description is offered for clarity.

The three epistemological perspectives within organizational identity theory serve as a lens into how executive search consultants interpret and communicate college identity. As conceptualized in Chapter 1 and expanded upon in the early sections of Chapter 5, the integrated view of organizational identity serves as the primary reference point for consultants as they assist a small, private college with a presidential search. This integration is achieved through a systematic process of: (a) researching publicly available information about the college’s relative standing in the higher education marketplace, (b) conducting interviews to obtain the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders, and (c) soliciting external feedback on the college’s reputation in the community. This reflects a synthesis of the institutional, social constructionist, and social actor perspectives of organizational identity (Pratt et al., 2016).

Obtaining information about existential threats and other stressors upon a college is another source of input to the interpretive process, obtained through the same process of dialogue with campus constituents and other stakeholders. The desired leadership characteristics of the next president is the third primary category about which a search consultant seek information. Synthesizing this acquired knowledge into a composite understanding of the college forms the core of the search consultant’s interpretation. Development of the search profile builds upon that core understanding, serving as an interpretive tool and conduit of information. Enveloping the
process is the search consultant’s sense of professional responsibility to accurately interpret and communicate the college’s identity to prospective candidates. This three-layered structure bounds the search consultant’s work, functioning as a filter through which the essence of a college’s identity and leadership needs can be understood.

\[\text{Figure 2. Expanded Conceptual Framework}\]

The above conceptual framework represents the context of my study, and serves as a visual depiction of its underlying components. As with all research, this study has generated as many questions as it answers. In the next section, I offer recommendations for further empirical exploration that could extend the scholarly conversation.

\textbf{Recommendations for Future Research}

This study can be viewed as gateway research into the largely unexplored topic of organizational identity and executive search within higher education. The focus of the study has been upon the role of search consultants in the interpretation and communication of
organizational identity within the context of presidential searches for small, private colleges. Lingenfelter (2004) highlighted the need for empirical studies regarding higher education executive search. My study has contributed to addressing that gap, but many opportunities for research within the topical area remain. Turpin (2013) called for additional research into college-and-president fit, an understudied area to which my study has also made a contribution. Furthermore, MacDonald (2013) notes that identity issues within higher education present themselves most notably during leadership transition. My research has metaphorically opened the door to studying the intersection of those topics. Although not an exhaustive list, I offer the following suggestions for consideration.

Exploring the organizational identity within the presidential search from the vantage point of other college stakeholders could provide additional insight. In particular, a case study approach could offer a deep, multi-stakeholder perspective of a single presidential search or small number of searches. As suggested by Stensaker (2015) a comparative analysis of differences in identity interpretation across campus stakeholders would be of value. In addition, I believe examining differences across institutions, especially if using mixed-method designs, would provide both a deep and broad view of the topic. This is supported by Foreman and Whetten’s (2016) recommendation for cross-institutional studies of organizational identity using a variety of research approaches.

In my study, the role of governing boards emerged as particularly important, due primarily to their power differential. That finding highlights the value of future research into the individual and/or collective perspectives of board members regarding identity and presidential search. This suggestion aligns with Carey’s (2014) recommendation for studies exploring small-college board dynamics, particularly of colleges in decline.
Further extending the recommendation for cross-institutional studies: My study was delimited to small, private colleges. Investigating how organizational identity is interpreted and communicated during presidential searches at larger and/or public institutions would represent a natural expansion of the scope of my study. It would also serve as a ladder to subsequent research of whether the interpretation and communication of identity differs based on size or type of institutional control. This is supported by Smerek’s (2011) finding that new presidents of small colleges have a greater focus on learning about the college’s identity than do presidents of larger institutions.

Findings from my study indicate identity-related issues are more intense within religiously affiliated colleges. A narrower focus on the interpretation of organizational identity within those institutions, as contrasted with small nonsecular colleges, is a promising future area for investigation. Further delimiting research to a given denomination or faith tradition could add additional insight.

The relevance and future long-term viability of the small, private college sector, as viewed from the perspective of search consultants, is another potential area for exploration. Although the participants were largely silent in that regard, results of this study suggest the timeliness of that existential question. And, to reverse that lens, empirically examining small-college stakeholders’ perceptions of the cost-benefit analysis of using search consultants would be a natural corollary to my study.

Several search consultants in my study had previously served as college presidents. Possible differences in approach by search consultants with presidential experience is another avenue for exploration. Slightly broadening that focus, research into how search consultants’ previous professional background informs their work could contribute to the body of knowledge.
Although this study explicated aspects of the search consultant role, it was not designed to serve as a phenomenological exploration of the vocation. Accordingly, further insight could be gained by a multi-faceted study into the lived essence of being a search consultant. Acquiring a holistic understanding of the search profession could serve as a scaffolding for the other studies I have suggested. For example, a focused exploration of failed presidential searches from the vantage point of consultants could provide additional insight into their interpretive role. Such research could serve as a continuum of Trachtenberg et al.’s (2013) work regarding failed presidencies.

Empirically studying the implications of alleged ethical issues within the search industry, such as competing business priorities or conflicts of interest, would also contribute to the field of knowledge. Concerns raised by Lovett (2016) and others in the higher education press signal the importance of addressing these ethical questions. Similarly, exploring the perceptions that various college stakeholders have about search consultants in general might help explain why some presidential searches proceed more smoothly than others.

In conducting my research, I used organizational identity theory as a lens through which to study the interpretive process of search consultants working with small, private colleges. That theoretical perspective was foundational to generating understanding. At its core, though, this study was designed to illuminate aspects of a process of widespread practical significance to higher education. Therefore, my reflections would be incomplete without also discussing how the findings of this research can be used to enhance professional practice.

**Implications for Professional Practice**

During the conceptual stages of this study, I envisioned that findings generated from the research could be of use to the following professional groups within a small, private college
context: (a) search consultants, (b) presidential search committees and governing boards, and (c) prospective presidential candidates. After analyzing and compiling the results, I believe those initial impressions of the study’s potential utility are sound. In this section, I will expand upon how I foresee these findings being of use to those groups.

Search consultants, particularly those new to the profession, could use these findings to inform their work with small, private colleges. Generating an awareness that their work is connected to a theoretically grounded body of knowledge, as empirically explicated via this study, could serve as a motivator. This is supported by Johnson and Ferrare’s (2013) emphasis that search consultants offer a well-developed skill set to their clients. As interpreters of identity custodians (Schinoff et al., 2016) understanding the nuances of the social constructionist, social actor, and institutional perspectives of organizational identity would help new search consultants recognize these constructs as they emerge during a search. Tracing how the three theoretical perspectives coalesce to form an integrated view of identity, and how identity often exists in tension with culture and strategy, can assist with sensemaking (Pratt et al., 2016). Accordingly, this study could function as a discussion initiator within multi-consultant search firms, and assist in acclimatizing new search consultants to the role.

Search committees and governing board members could also benefit from the results of this research. Understanding the purpose underlying the systematic pre-search process might promote greater acceptance of the time commitment required for a well-executed presidential search. More importantly, governing boards could be alerted to the reality of power dynamics during the search process (Kenny et al., 2016), and hold each other accountable to remaining inclusive of other stakeholder perspectives. Additionally, board and search committees, by virtue of their inherent authority and delegated authority, could encourage the campus
community to fully engage in the pre-search conversations. This study could also assist search committees in vetting search firms and consultants. Firms which describe a search process inconsistent with that explicated by this study might warrant extra scrutiny.

The findings of this study could also be of assistance to prospective presidential candidates. Understanding the depth of insight that a search consultant typically gains during the pre-search phase could encourage prospective candidates to ask particularly salient questions. As suggested by Turpin (2013) understanding that college-to-candidate fit is a high priority for consultants could encourage prospective candidates to recognize the importance of a strong match. Additionally, greater awareness of the importance of identity-related alignment between a small, private college and candidate could dissuade the submission of frivolous applications, a view supported by Kolomitz (2016). Individuals eager to ascend to the presidency at any institution, regardless of fit, might exercise greater discretion when reviewing position postings. Screening out noncompetitive applicants would thus require less expenditure of time and resources by search firms, resources that could instead be directed toward working with colleges and serious candidates.

**Summary and Concluding Thoughts**

This study has been an exploration of the role of executive search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity within the context of presidential searches for small, private colleges. Results suggest that search consultants view themselves as actively contributing to the viability of their small, private college clients by facilitating a strong match between college and new president. They work toward this outcome by systematically building a composite view of the college, comprised of an integrated perspective of the college’s identity, its expressed leadership needs, and existential stressors.
Through a recursive and iterative process, search consultants use development of a written search profile as an interpretive tool to further refine their understanding. While performing this function, they identify discrepancies between identity, culture, and strategic vision that could prove problematic during the search process. The search profile serves as the primary mode of communicating the college’s organizational identity to prospective presidential candidates, with supplementary insight provided directly by the consultant. Although questions of consistency across the search profession exist, results of this study suggest search consultants are guided by a sense of professional responsibility toward both their client colleges and prospective candidates. The findings also support the existence of a relationship between search consultants’ sense of professional ethics and their interpretive role.

Through qualitative inquiry, this study has addressed the gap in empirical research regarding organizational identity and the facilitated presidential search process in small, private colleges. In doing so, it has further illuminated the general scarcity of scholarly research pertaining to executive search consultancy. This study has also expanded the body of knowledge regarding the integration of organizational identity perspectives within a higher education context.
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APPENDIX A

E-mail Recruitment Script
Dear [Search Firm Contact Name]:

My name is Dawn Markell. I am a student in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI.

I am currently conducting research into the experiences of consultants who work with small private colleges during the presidential search process. The goal of this research is to understand the role of search consultants in interpreting and communicating organizational identity while facilitating presidential searches for small private colleges. I am interested in interviewing consultants who have facilitated at least three presidential searches for small private colleges (less than 2,500 students) within the past five years. Consultants who fit those criteria will be asked to take part in an individual interview lasting 60 minutes or less, as well as a possible follow-up conversation.

If the above description fits you or your colleagues, I invite you and/or members of your firm to participate in this study. Interviews will be held via your medium of choice, either an onsite interview at your corporate office, if geographically feasible, or via video conference (such as Zoom, Skype, or another video platform of your choosing). Interviewees will be given an opportunity to review the transcript summary from this interview and will be able to correct, clarify, or elaborate on their responses, if they so choose.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only. No operational aspects of your firm will be shared with other participants in the study, and only I and my dissertation advisor will have access to confidential information. Pseudonyms will be used in place of any and all identifying information in the actual dissertation. There are no known risks for taking part in this study, and participation is completely voluntary. Participants may decline to answer any particular questions or withdraw completely from the study at any time.

If you agree to take part in the study, please contact me via e-mail or phone (contact information listed below). I will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have while deciding whether or not to participate. My dissertation advisor, Dr. Regina Garza Mitchell, can be reached at regina.garzamitchell@wmich.edu. You may also contact the chair of Western Michigan University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298.

Sincerely,

Dawn Markell
Western Michigan University Doctoral Student
dawn.m.markell@wmich.edu; (810) 923-0621
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol
Research Topic: Organizational Identity and the Presidential Selection Process at Small Private Colleges: The Perspectives of Executive Search Consultants

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Interviewer: Dawn Markell

Interviewee Name and Title:

Name of Firm:

Preliminaries:

- Introductions and obtain verbal consent to record
- Turn on both recorders
- Reiteration of the study
- Explain primary interest in their examples, stories, and perceptions; emphasis on information that will help me ascertain the meaning/understanding of their experience within the context of their job
- Length of interview is approximately 60 minutes
- Remind the interviewee of the confidentiality parameters of the study
- Opportunity to review of transcripts and final report
- Questions or concerns before we begin?

Introductory Script re Project and Purpose:

Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. I’m looking forward to our conversation, and appreciate your willingness to spend about an hour talking with me about your experience in working with small, private, nonprofit colleges that are looking for a new president. As I mentioned in our earlier correspondence, I am researching the influence of organizational identity on the presidential search process at small colleges. For purposes of this study, organizational identity could be viewed a variety of ways: the institution’s central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics as perceived by the organization’s members, the members’ view of who or what the college is, how internal and external stakeholders and the public view the institution, or perhaps a combination of those.

As a reminder, my final report will not in any way identify you, your firm, your client institutions, or any individuals who might be discussed during the course of this interview. Whenever a naming convention is needed, pseudonyms will be used. Similarly, only very vague geographic descriptions will be included (e.g., “Midwest area of U.S.”). I am recording our
conversation for later transcription. You are free to ask me to stop the recording at any time, or to end and/or reschedule the interview should the need arise.

**************

1. To start us off, please tell me about your professional role. How long have you been working as a consultant; with what type of higher ed institutions; how many searches do you typically conduct in a year, and any other pertinent background information about you or your role.

2. Next, could you please provide a general overview of how you begin working with a client institution? What is the basic process, with whom do you interact, etc.?

3. What do you think of when you hear the term “organizational identity?”

4. I would now like to discuss in greater detail how you learn about your client institutions. I will be going through a few items, and am interested in hearing about your experiences regarding these as you work with small private colleges. How do you go about gathering this information? With whom do you talk/correspond with about each of these? If you have individual or collective stories that would illustrate any or all of these, please feel free to share those instances. Those will be of the greatest value in helping to shape my understanding.

5. Thinking about your work with a client institution (small private college), please share your recollections that relate to:
   - How the college views itself
   - The college’s [perception](/word) of how external parties view it – its self-perceived reputation, as conveyed by those with whom you interact during the process.
   - The college’s actual public reputation – how you learn about that, if it is part of the process.
   - What the college wants to become, if something other than what it currently is
   - The most common stressors/threats to the college
   - Any interaction and/or conflict between the above

6. What do you do with the insight you gain from the above? Does that make its way into the job posting and/or the screening criteria as you work to assemble a pool of applicants? What happens if there are significant differences in opinion about the search criteria (between members of the college, or between members and the college and you)?

7. What happens if the college doesn’t seem to have a firm sense of its own identity? How do you proceed? Can you think of examples where there was a strong sense of identity, others where the identity seemed “muddled” or unformed? How did you work with each of those categories?

8. When working to attract potential candidates for your client, how do you make sense of everything you have learned from them that relates to their identity?
9. In what ways do you convey information about the college to potential candidates? How do the items we discussed earlier in our conversation (*repeat if necessary*) factor in? Do other issues supersede those? In what ways? How do they relate? How do you go about communicating identity disconnects, if they exist, with potential candidates? Are there risks associated with that?

10. As we near the end of our time, is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you again for your time and consideration. What you have shared will be extremely helpful as I continue working on the project. If you think of anything else that you would like me to add to the information I’ve collected, please feel free to contact me. As discussed, I will like to provide a copy of the interview transcript to you via e-mail to review for accuracy and clarity of meaning.
APPENDIX C

Cross-Walk Between Research Questions and Interview Questions
Cross-Walk Between Research Questions and Interview Questions

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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
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<td>How do search consultants acquire an understanding of a small private college’s organizational identity?</td>
<td>Please provide a general overview of how you begin working with a client institution? What is the basic process?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do search consultants communicate the college’s organizational identity when recruiting and working with candidates?</td>
<td>What do you do with the insight you gain from the above? Does that make its way into the job posting and/or the screening criteria as you work to assemble a pool of applicants? What happens if there are significant differences in opinion about the search criteria (between members of the college, or between members and the college and you)? What happens if the college doesn’t seem to have a firm sense of its own identity? How do you proceed? Can you think of examples where there was a strong sense of identity, others where the identity seemed “muddled” or unformed? How did you work with each of those categories? Can you give me examples of when a search hasn’t gone well? What happens then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In what ways do you convey information about the college to potential candidates? How do the items we discussed earlier in our conversation factor in? Do other issues supersede those? In what ways? How do they relate? How do you go about communicating identity disconnects, if they exist, with potential candidates? Are there risks associated with that?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

Western Michigan University HSIRB Exemption
Date: January 29, 2018

To: Regina Garza Mitchell, Principal Investigator
    Dawn Markell, Student Investigator

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: Approval not needed for HSIRB Project Number 18-01-40

This letter will serve as confirmation that your project titled “Exploring the Role of Organizational Identity on the Presidential Search Process at Small Private Colleges: The Perspective of Executive Search Consultants” has been reviewed by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB). Based on that review, the WMU IRB has determined that approval is not required for you to conduct this project because you are not collecting personal identifiable (private) information about individuals 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.

“About whom” – a human subject research project requires the data received from the living individual to be about the person.

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.