Understanding the Experience of Mid-Level Community College Change Leaders

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF MID-LEVEL COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHANGE LEADERS

by

Kelley L. Conrad

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology Western Michigan University August 2021

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF MID-LEVEL COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHANGE LEADERS

Kelley L. Conrad, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2021

This qualitative study investigates the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a Michigan community college. Specifically, this study explores how three leaders experienced their roles in implementing the guided pathways strategic change initiative, how they describe the emotional aspects of leading change, and how they made sense of their experiences. One overarching research question guided this study: How do guided pathways leaders at Michigan community colleges experience their roles in the strategic change process?

The results of multiple, in-depth interviews are presented as three profiles, one per participant, using their own words to tell their stories. Looking across the profiles, two main findings emerged. The first major finding was how change was happening through supports and resistance. Supports were teams, communication, and relationships, and resistance related to maintaining the status quo, fear, and a college’s culture. The second major finding was the role of leadership in change. The participants led differently, but common themes were leading authentically, top-down versus mid-level leadership, mandates from other entities, selling and motivating, managing emotions, and sensemaking.

Three very different stories of mid-level change leadership also emerged, illustrating differences between faculty and administrative leaders, leaders with some authority versus those
with none, and top-down versus shared leadership. The stories also show the difference between willing and prepared leaders compared to a less experienced and more reluctant leader. The results provide examples of sensemaking, sensegiving, and emotional intelligence, concepts related to change and change leadership that help frame the study.

Although the participants did not indicate they felt unprepared to lead the change efforts, they did not know what they did not know, and perhaps they could have been more effective. Changes of the magnitude called for with guided pathways redesign, those that impact the core of faculty work at a community college, are difficult. Intentionally preparing the leaders for the work at their specific colleges is important. The participants felt their efforts were successful, with caveats. Change leaders cannot predict all the doubts and challenges they will face, but studying the experiences of these three participants who faced resistance, top-level college leadership changes, a pandemic, and diverse college cultures extends the understanding of implementing change from a mid-level leader perspective.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Using the word *journey* to describe my doctoral experience seems trite. This definition of journey is better: “a traveling from one place to another, usually taking a rather long time.” My travel through Western Michigan University’s higher education leadership doctoral program has been long. It has also been enlightening and gratifying, and has helped me become a better leader, educator, and person.

My doctoral work might not have started without the initial conversation I had with Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer, who, years ago, demystified the process. Thank you, Dr. Bierlein Palmer. And thank you, Dr. Sue Poppink, who taught qualitative research as a legitimate, rigorous, and valuable endeavor.

I appreciate the time, energy, attention, and challenges my dissertation committee provided. My advisor, Dr. Regina Garza Mitchell, was patient, encouraging, and willing to review dissertation chapters quickly when the words started flowing after long droughts. Dr. Garza Mitchell continually opens doors to publish and present to her students and I’m grateful for that. Dr. Pamela Eddy’s research on community colleges and leadership influenced my work at a community college long before I met her, and I am still in awe that she served on my committee. I value Dr. Eddy’s insights and questions. Her interest in my research is humbling. Dr. Donna Talbot is a caring, committed, education leader who asked challenging questions, and continued to ask them until we arrived at an understanding of how my proposal, research, and dissertation could be better.
Acknowledgments—Continued

The community college mid-level leaders who participated in my dissertation research and pilot study generously gave their time and thoughtful attention. It was a big ask and I am indebted to each.

I could not have traveled so far and long without the help of family and friends. My colleagues at Muskegon Community College served as sounding boards, encouragers, and mentors for the last seven years. I am thankful for my friends and family who tolerated my long absences from their lives and still care for me.

I’m most grateful to my husband, Jerry, and son, Alex, who provided time, space, encouragement, and an abundance of love.

Kelly L. Conrad
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 2014, I was employed as the Chairperson of the Counseling and Advising Center at my community college and was asked to lead the implementation of a major change strategy to increase student completion rates. The Center for Student Success in Michigan had initiated a statewide effort to support community colleges willing to apply principles of the guided pathways model to their academic and student services programming. At the time most community colleges offered a cafeteria model of education, with students largely on their own to choose from a disconnected and confusing menu of courses, programs, schedules, and services (Bailey et al., 2015). The guided pathways model featured more structured and coherent academic programming with support services provided in an intentional and timely manner (Bailey et al., 2015).

Several months into the guided pathways work, which was incredibly challenging, I ran into a colleague who had been charged with leading the guided pathways implementation at her community college. Her response to my “How’s it going?” was a resounding and only slightly surprising “I hate faculty!” We commiserated about the lack of support and cooperation we experienced and shared feelings of frustration, anger, confusion, and insecurity. We questioned our ability to lead our colleges through the challenges of guided pathways implementation and

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1 The term guided pathways is capitalized (as if it is a title) by some authors. I use lower case letters throughout this study because I am describing a comprehensive model, or a body of reforms (Bailey, 2017), rather than a specific project.
felt guilty about our lack of progress. That exchange was the seed that led to this study as I wondered what other people in our roles experienced as they led major change initiatives at their community colleges.

Mid-level leaders at community colleges are frequently tapped to lead the adoption of guided pathways reforms on their campuses (J. Schanker, personal communication, January 31, 2018). This makes sense as they are often the registrars, counselors, deans, and faculty with institutional knowledge, experience, and credibility necessary to successfully adopt the guided pathways model. But they do not always have the knowledge, attitude, skills, and abilities to lead. They are not necessarily prepared for managing their own and others’ emotions while navigating the leadership challenges of a transformative change effort. They may not even identify themselves as leaders or mid-level leaders.

For the purposes of this study, I defined *mid-level leaders* as college faculty or administrative staff who occupy positions with some authority, who may manage an office or department but are not in top positions of vice-president, chief academic officer, provost, or president. Examples include deans, directors, department chairs, and associate or assistant deans. Faculty who led projects or initiatives were also considered mid-level leaders.

This study explored how mid-level community college faculty and staff approach and experience the responsibility of leading a major change initiative on their campuses. Specifically, using a phenomenological approach, I sought to understand how mid-level leaders experience their roles in strategic change, the emotional aspects of leading change, and how they make sense of their experiences.
Background

Much has been written about change and change leadership in higher education in the United States. Kezar (2001) described the distinction between first-order change and second-order change, with first-order being evolutionary, linear, incremental, and characterized by minor adjustments and improvements to an organization. Second-order change is transformational, revolutionary, disruptive, and irreversible (Kezar, 2001; Levy & Merry, 1986). A review of change theories by Gersick (1991) suggested individual and organizational change occurs along a continuum with long periods of stability and incremental adaptations punctuated by brief periods of upheaval. Change, whether continuous adaptation driven by external forces, innovations fostered from within the institution, or overall organizational improvement, is necessary to maintain the historic mission of public higher education in America in the face of changing political and economic demands (Kezar, 2014).

Demands on colleges from multiple internal and external stakeholders are not new. There are pressures related to costs, affordability, accountability, changes in technology, alternative models of information delivery, and the explosion of knowledge (Eckel et al., 1998). More than 75 years ago H. L. Smith (1941) wrote of the “unprecedented” (p. 122) impact of external influences on higher education, particularly changing demographics, diminished control over young people, the trend from private to public support of education, the increased role of federal government, shifting funding sources, and changing standards of accrediting bodies. Internally, higher education professionals accepted scientific knowledge and developed a better understanding of the learning process to guide changes (H. L. Smith, 1941). In 1998, Eckel et al. wrote of the need for intentional and continuous change. Now, although higher education has always experienced change, the context in which higher education operates is different for
several reasons: a stronger connection to external influences and sensitivity to pressures from the
global economy, public demand for accountability, diversity in students and how they pursue
knowledge, a businesslike environment, for-profit institutions, more knowledge of how people
learn, technology, and the internationalization of colleges (Kezar, 2014).

Two new trends have affected community colleges over the last several years and have led to pressures for change: the demand for better student outcomes and the involvement of
nonprofit organizations in influencing policy, priorities, and practices (O’Banion, 2019).
O’Banion described the interest in, and conflation of, the access, success, and completion
agendas: “Never in the history of the community colleges have so many foundations provided so
many funds to support student success” (p. 6). Wyner (2014) described the enormous pressure on
community colleges from “simultaneous recognition of community colleges’ importance and
poor student outcomes” (p. 2). Community colleges have become an increasingly important
source of liberal arts education for students bound for four-year colleges and vocational
education to prepare skilled workers for high-growth industries, such as manufacturing and
healthcare (Wyner, 2014).

Astin and Astin (2000), in a report on the need to develop transformative leadership in
higher education, defined leadership as “a process that is ultimately concerned with fostering
change” (p. 8). Leaders, as change agents, come from many places within an organization and
may or may not have formal titles to match their leadership roles (Astin & Astin, 2000; Davis,
2011). While leadership is expected of people in certain positions in higher education, having a
title is not enough to guarantee positive outcomes; neither is having a strong desire to lead but no
administrative title. Postsecondary leaders are more likely to be effective when they understand
what leadership is, understand the context they are operating in, and have the necessary knowledge, attitude, skills, and abilities to lead (Davis, 2011).

In times of change in higher education, which is almost always (Kezar, 2014), colleges are challenged to maintain services and reduce uncertainty for students, community, and employees, while transforming their institutions to meet internal and external demands for improvement (Huy, 2002). Leaders and those they lead approach initiatives with feelings of fear, stress, and uncertainty, as well as optimism, hope, and anticipation (Nixon, 2014).

The community college sector of higher education has unique pressures and challenges, due in part to multiple, sometimes conflicting, missions (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). Cohen et al. (2013) wrote of the history and growth of American community colleges since their inception in the early 1900s. Community colleges filled the need for better trained workers, opportunity for social equality, and places for youth to go as the period of adolescence lengthened, within a sanctioned institution of higher education (Cohen et al., 2013). Two-year colleges, or junior colleges, provided an alternative to four-year colleges and universities that could not, or would not, accommodate the needs of lower-class, place-bound, and female students (Lucas, 2006). In the 1950s and ’60s, junior colleges were generally independent or church-supported and served as feeder schools for the more demanding and prestigious four-year colleges (Cohen et al., 2013; Lucas, 2006). During that period, the term *community college* often referred to comprehensive, publicly supported institutions offering terminal degrees in skilled trades (Cohen et al., 2013; Lucas, 2006). Lucas (2006), from a historical perspective, described the “ambiguous and paradoxical role” (p. 230) of two-year institutions in American higher education: to provide access to all who desired higher education by serving as a gateway to four-year colleges, and to provide vocational training for an educated workforce. Two-year colleges
have continued to evolve and adapt in response to changing social, economic, and political conditions (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006), offering a variety of certificates, degrees, vocational and technical training, community education, and developmental education. While some states now allow community colleges to award a limited number of bachelor’s degrees (Cohen et al., 2013), this study considered community colleges to be regionally accredited institutions that primarily award the associate degree as their highest degree. 

Cohen et al. (2013) described “perennial problems of funding, public perception, relative emphases, purposes, and value” (p. 38) and developments over the last few decades that are related to changing demographic patterns and public opinion of the purpose of community colleges. The historic mission of community colleges to provide an opportunity to all has become more complicated (Eddy, 2010a). Challenges include the need to provide both access and evidence of success for even the most unprepared students, the blending of vocational education and liberal arts to provide various paths to bachelor’s degrees, and changes in instruction to accommodate students more accustomed to images than printed text (Cohen et al., 2013; Eddy, 2010a). Additional pressures facing community colleges are an increased need for developmental education and questions regarding the worth of a college education in the face of increased costs, growing student debt, and an uncertain job market for college graduates (Beaver, 2014; Bennett & Wilezol, 2013). This is despite evidence that attending a community college has economic, health, and social benefits even for those who do not graduate (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). There is dissonance between measuring the value of a college education for individuals and measuring the effectiveness of the college by the achievements of its students (Cohen et al., 2013).
Political, economic, and educational forces are now pushing community colleges to make fundamental changes to increase student completion rates (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Couturier, 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Russell, 2011). Bleak statistics are often cited. Only 27% of first-time, full-time students who started at a public two-year college in 2015 in the United States completed a degree within three years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Only 39.2% of part- and full-time students who began at a community college completed any college degree within six years, far below the 65.7% completion rate for students who began at a four-year public college (Shapiro et al., 2018). In 2012, 33.4% of the students who began college began at a community college; six years later almost half of those students had not graduated and were no longer enrolled in higher education (Shapiro et al., 2018). The six-year graduation rate of students who started at community colleges ranged from 19% for part-time students to 46% for full-time students (Shapiro et al., 2013).

The college enrollment and completion picture became more complete and more complex through a 2019 report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The report described the 36 million adults in the United States who had prior college enrollment since 1993 but no college completion (Shapiro et al., 2019). Identified as “some college, no degree” (p. 1), two thirds of these students began at a community college (Shapiro et al., 2019). About 13% of the “some college, no degree” students returned to college, and of the returnees, 25% completed a degree and 29% were still enrolled as of December 2018 (Shapiro et al., 2019). Sixty percent of the “new completers” (p. 6) earned an associate degree or certificate from a community college, signifying the important role community colleges play in higher education access, entry, reentry, and eventual completion (Shapiro et al., 2019).
More people are going to college in America, but the completion rate has not changed (Shapiro et al., 2019). In 2017, the United States ranked 11th out of 35 countries for the percentage of adults between 25 and 34 years old with tertiary and above education levels, with tertiary including community college education and associate degrees (OECD, 2019). The dismal numbers resulted in changed expectations for higher education institutions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, several state- and national-level organizations studied trends and future needs of community colleges (Cohen et al., 2013). All reports addressed the importance of community colleges serving diverse populations and maintaining their tradition of balancing multiple missions, including open access, remedial instruction, vocational training, and liberal arts education to prepare students for transfer (Cohen et al., 2013). Researchers also discovered the high attrition rates at community colleges and questioned whether open access meant true opportunity for upward mobility or a second-class educational system with a revolving door for disadvantaged students (Sydow & Alfred, 2013). Calls for greater accountability, in the form of increased retention and degree completion, ensued (Cohen et al., 2013).

Transformative change is expected, and one reform gaining momentum across the country is the guided pathways approach. As Cohen et al. (2013) wrote, “The practice of letting everyone in and letting them take what they want has been put to rest as the open door effectually closes” (p. 444). Guided pathways is a multidimensional redesign of community colleges to start students in an intentional manner, facilitate early selection of an academic program, improve success in college-level courses that are directly applicable to a program, and increase certificate and degree completion rates (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2013).

In 2014, the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS, 2016) initiated the Guided Pathways Institute to help community colleges in the state develop, or transition to, a guided
pathways approach. One group of colleges, Cohort I, began efforts in 2014, and a second group, Cohort II, began in 2015. In 2017, the MCSS launched a three-year effort, Guided Pathways Institute 2.0, to help community colleges redesign advising processes to align with the guided pathways model. Meetings, conferences, webinars, and an online classroom were devoted to helping the colleges’ project leaders move forward. Twenty-three of the 28 community colleges in the state worked toward this goal of implementing the guided pathways model, with varying degrees of success (J. Schanker, personal communication, January 31, 2018). Mid-level leaders are responsible for initiating and coordinating the massive changes associated with this process (J. Schanker, personal communication, January 31, 2018).

Problem Statement

A litany of books, articles, and reports present evidence that change is constant, leading transformative change is difficult, and change in higher education differs from change in other organizations (Buller, 2015; Eckel, Hill, et al., 1999; Kezar, 2001, 2014). Much has been written about what should change in higher education, processes for change, and leaders’ approaches to change (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Kezar, 2014). There is a body of literature on the leadership and change experiences of college presidents (Eddy, 2003, 2005, 2010b; Smerek, 2011) and mid-level leadership, both in higher education and in business (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008; Hope, 2010; Klempin & Karp, 2018). Other studies have looked at college leadership during times of change initiatives and found multilevel leadership is necessary for successful implementations (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Klempin & Karp, 2018). Top-level administrators control resources and have positional authority but need support from mid-level leaders with interpersonal and project management skills as well as the ability to navigate the organizational processes (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Klempin & Karp, 2018).
There is a small but growing body of literature on mid-level leaders showing those at community colleges do not usually aspire to positions of leadership but are tapped to become leaders. They have little desire to advance, and they draw on their own resources and experiences to develop a leadership approach (Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). Research has shown mid-level leaders are important and influential to change initiatives as they are the link between top leadership and ground-level workers (Hope, 2010), and they provide credibility and end-user expertise (Klempin & Karp, 2018). Studies focused on the experiences of mid-level leaders found people came to these positions in a variety of ways, rarely seeking them out and rarely developing college leadership skills in an intentional manner (Eddy, 2013; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). The leaders learned on the job, by observing others, from mentors when those were available, and from making mistakes (Eddy, 2013). Lacking a formal mentoring program, leadership development plan, and intentionality in preparing for their positions, the individuals “were often left to figure things out for themselves” (Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008, p. 806).

Despite the growing body of literature on issues of change, leadership, and mid-level leaders in community colleges, there is a gap regarding the actual experience of leading a major change initiative as a community college mid-level administrator or faculty member. Little is known about how community college faculty and staff, who lack the positional authority of the president, approach the responsibility of leading a major change initiative. My study has helped fill a gap in the change and higher education leadership literature by describing the lived experiences of faculty and mid-level staff responsible for leading the strategic change effort to implement guided pathways reforms at community colleges in Michigan.

The problem this study addressed is that of mid-level community college employees responsible for leading a major strategic change effort, who may or may not be prepared to lead a
change initiative. Mid-level people are often tasked with leading strategic change initiatives, and their level of preparation for leading a charge of this magnitude varies (Balogun, 2003; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008). They also face the difficult task of having to lead people who may be positionally above them or in units that do not report to them. Their experiences may affect the success of the initiative as well as their professional and personal development, and it is important to understand the phenomenon. My study explored and described the phenomenon of leading major change as a community college mid-level administrator or faculty member. Specifically, I explored the lived experience of those individuals charged with leading the major change effort of implementing the guided pathways model at community colleges in Michigan.

Results of this study are important to community college leaders and those who are driving the statewide change initiative of guided pathways in Michigan. The success or failure of this movement rests primarily on the shoulders of those who have been tapped to lead the efforts on their campuses. Information and understanding of their individual and personal experiences are important for future progress toward the overarching goal of improving the success rate of community college students. This study is also important to those responsible for succession planning at community colleges. This study showed gaps in skills and knowledge that should be addressed in a key group of mid-level leaders who may aspire to higher-level positions.

**Purpose Statement and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a Michigan community college. Specifically, using a phenomenological approach, I sought to understand how these leaders experienced their roles in strategic change, the emotional aspects of leading change, and how they made sense of their experiences.
Phenomenological research questions seek qualitative rather than quantitative information about the human experience, and comprehensive descriptions rather than measurements and scores (Moustakas, 1994). In keeping with that purpose, one overarching research question guided this study: How do guided pathways leaders at Michigan community colleges experience their roles in the strategic change process?

**Conceptual Framework**

Kezar (2001) described research-based principles of change for institutions of higher education that draw from cultural, political, social-cognition, and teleological models of change. She also acknowledged that the change process is messy, ambiguous, and sometimes irrational. Effective leaders are those who have developed the ability to read and understand a situation from different perspectives, and their actions follow from a more flexible, holistic approach (Morgan, 2006). With these views as a backdrop, and community colleges implementing the major strategic change of guided pathways as the context, this study focused on how leaders experience the change process, including emotional management (Callahan & McCollum, 2002; Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey et al., 2008; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019) associated with leading from the middle. I drew from literature on the external and internal forces for change in community colleges to provide context for the study and research on sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) in the change process to help understand the community college leaders’ perspectives. Figure 1 illustrates the core concepts I used to provide a framework to investigate the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a Michigan community college.
Figure 1

Conceptual Framework

Note. Framework for understanding the context of community colleges and the experience of mid-level community college employees charged with leading change.

This study is concerned with the experiences of mid-level community college leaders charged with leading a strategic change initiative in Michigan, shown in the center of the conceptual framework (Figure 1). The left side of the figure shows topics related to community college leadership and change that are external to the individual leader and create the organizational environment within which the leader must work. To the right of the circle that signifies the individual leaders are factors which, based on previous research (Eddy, 2003, 2005; Hamilton, 2016; Kezar, 2013; Parrish, 2015; Smerek, 2011), relate to the experience someone has when given the role and responsibilities of change leader at their community college.
Political, economic, and educational forces are pushing community colleges to examine and fix the perceived lack of success of many students who enroll in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Couturier, 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Russell, 2011). In 2009, President Barak Obama addressed the joint session of the United States Congress and announced a new educational goal for the country: by 2020 America would have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. In April 2010, the American Association of Community Colleges and five other national organizations dedicated to the governance, administration, faculty, and students of community colleges joined forces and signed Democracy’s Colleges: Call to Action, a commitment and pledge to support the completion agenda through changes to policies, procedures, and institutional cultures (McPhail, 2011). In October 2010, President Obama focused attention on community colleges by convening the first ever White House Summit on Community Colleges (The White House, 2011). The national attention focused on student success in community colleges has grown with the collaboration of nonprofit organizations such as Achieving the Dream, Jobs for the Future, the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas – Austin, the Community College Research Center at Teachers College of Columbia University, the Lumina Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. However, according to Tinto (2012), “Despite years of effort, institutions have yet to develop a coherent framework to guide their thinking about which actions matter most and how they should be organized and successfully implemented” (p. 5). One concept promoted as a major reform movement for community colleges, which may address Tinto’s critique, is guided pathways. The four main practices of guided pathways are mapping academic programs to students’ end goals, helping students
choose and enter a pathway early in their college careers, supporting students to keep them on their paths, and ensuring students are learning (Jenkins et al., 2018).

Pressures on community colleges come from within, too, with multiple and competing demands from governing boards, administration, faculty, and students. There are over 1,050 community colleges in the United States with varying numbers depending on who is reporting and the criteria they use to define community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019; Cohen et al., 2013). Control of community colleges is determined by each state and varies from statewide systems where a great deal of authority rests with a centralized board to states with no state-level coordinating or governing board (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017).

Michigan is one of just a few states with no state-level governing board (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017), although all 28 public community colleges belong to the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA). MCCA is an organization devoted to legislative and public advocacy as well as support of a collaborative network of the state’s community college presidents, trustees, staff, and faculty (MCCA, 2019). Michigan’s community colleges are governed by locally elected boards (Michigan Community College Act of 1966).

Local boards of trustees connect their communities to their colleges, to ensure the community’s educational needs are being met and to engender a positive image and support for the college (Cohen et al., 2013). An Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) survey of community college trustees showed they were motivated to become trustees by their desire to improve programs for students, to serve the community and the college, to promote student success, and to improve educational opportunities (ACCT, 2018). While they are legally responsible for all college affairs including personnel, fiscal matters, and purchasing of property and goods (Cohen et al., 2013), among their top three priorities and challenges are improving
student access, success, and completion (ACCT, 2018). Community college presidents, administration, staff, faculty, and students are also stakeholders in the student success agenda. Much research has been done to examine a multitude of factors related to community college persistence, retention, completion, and transfer to four-year colleges. Student characteristics as well as college and community characteristics have been found to affect completion and transfer rates (Bahr, 2013; Kopko & Crosta, 2016; Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

In addition to the forces related to change in community colleges that are within and outside the colleges, I also summarized and connected literature related to change leadership using the concepts of sensemaking, sensegiving, and emotional intelligence to inform this study. Higher education is characterized by ambiguous goals, changing goals, and inconsistency between action and goals (Kezar, 2001). It is an environment ripe for the cycle of sensemaking for self and sensegiving for others.

Sensemaking refers to communication within an organization that helps people label, organize, focus their action, and reflect on their behaviors in response to a disruption to their normal activities (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking answers the inevitable questions of “What is going on here?” and “What do I do next?” (p. 412). It is how people construct meaning in ambiguous and changing situations. Weick (1995) provided a framework of seven characteristics of the process of sensemaking: identity construction, retrospective, action upon and within the environment, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 17). I have added emotion to the concept of sensemaking as emotions may trigger, shape, and bring closure to a sensemaking process (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Sensegiving is the process organizational leaders and stakeholders use to influence how others construct meaning “toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia &
Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sensegiving is an attempt to shape the sensemaking of people with the goal of getting them to understand and support the leader’s agenda (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Research related to higher education has found leaders engage in a series of meaning construction and reconstruction, sensemaking and sensegiving, during periods of strategic or transformational change (Eddy, 2003; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kezar, 2013).

I included framing, communication, and emotions in my conceptual framework as aspects of sensegiving. These concepts have been explored in organizational change research (Logemann et al., 2019; A. Smith et al., 2010; Sonenshein, 2010; Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012), including change in higher education (Eddy, 2003, 2010a; Hamilton, 2016). Fairhurst (2005) described framing “as both a cognitive device and a communicative activity defined by selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion” (p. 167). Change leaders manage the meaning they give to others by framing, by choosing what they communicate and what they do not, how they communicate, what they emphasize as important, and what they dismiss as irrelevant. Eddy (2003) identified two perspectives two new college presidents used to frame their approach to strategic change: a visionary, future-focused frame and an operational, problem-solving frame. The presidents communicated their messages by “talking the frame,” “walking the frame,” “writing the frame,” and “symbolizing the frame” (Eddy, 2003, p. 457), using formal and informal tools such as metaphors, stories, rituals, ceremonies, speeches, and newsletters. Leader cognition, how and what a leader thinks, is important to the sensegiving process of framing (Eddy, 2003). However, while cognition may determine what people believe, emotions influence how strongly they believe (Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012). Increasing followers’ emotional arousal and associating those emotions with the vision, goals, and new understanding of the organization
can increase the likelihood a leader will be successful in changing an organization (Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012).

Emotional intelligence, the third broad concept I used to explore change leadership, is defined by Mayer and Salovey (1997) as the connection between emotion and reason. Those who are aware of and understand emotions, draw on and generate emotions to help them think, and reflect on and regulate their own and others’ emotions are considered emotionally intelligent (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). According to Goleman (2005), there are five components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Understanding and managing one’s own as well as others’ emotions are important and relevant in higher education leadership (Parrish, 2015; Thornton et al., 2018). Research suggests managers in the workplace with higher levels of emotional intelligence are seen as demonstrating more leadership behaviors than their peers (Barling et al., 2000), and aspiring leaders in higher education recognize qualities of emotional intelligence as important and relevant (Parrish, 2015). And while a high level of emotional intelligence is typically seen as a good thing, Kilduff et al. (2010) suggested people who are better at reading and regulating their own and others’ feelings may use emotional intelligence to advance their agendas by evoking and shaping emotions as they engage in sensegiving.

The conceptual framework I used to guide my study shows community college change leaders operate in an environment with a multitude of expectations from a variety of internal and external stakeholders. The expectations and demands may be at cross purposes, and the leaders may or may not be equipped to manage the expectations, an organizational change process, and the day-to-day responsibilities of their jobs. I am interested in understanding how the leaders are
faring and how they are making sense of their experiences, and I used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to help me understand.

Methods Overview

I conducted a phenomenology to understand the experience of mid-level community college employees charged with leading a major change initiative. This qualitative approach is designed to learn what people have experienced, how they understand this experience, and what the essence of the experience is (Patton, 2002). The essence, or nature, of a specific experience is “that which makes a some- ‘thing’ what it is—and without which it could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). In this study, the participants’ shared experience is leading the strategic change effort to implement guided pathways at community colleges in Michigan. This study focused on the phenomenon as experienced by mid-level administrators or faculty members.

Twenty-three community colleges in Michigan have participated in the Michigan Guided Pathways Institute (MGPI) and are implementing guided pathways (E. Orians, personal communication, November 16, 2016). From these, I interviewed three leaders from three different colleges. The interview process for each participant consisted of three in-depth, taped interviews over a two-week period, via videoconferencing. The original research plan was to conduct in-person interviews at the participants’ colleges or another site of their choice, but that plan was adjusted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In early 2018, I conducted a pilot study on this topic with one individual. The interview data were rich and thick, and the participant’s story, in her own words, was compelling. Results were shared as a vignette using Seidman’s (2013) process for developing profiles, which was also applied in this dissertation study. Data collected from each participant, what they experienced as well as how they understood their experiences, were transcribed and reduced
through several readings to develop a profile of each participant. While I was open to discovering what all have in common, “a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76) of leading change at a community college, allowing participants to tell their own stories took precedence.

**Significance of Study**

This study is important for two reasons. First, despite the growing body of literature on issues of change, leadership, and mid-level leaders in community colleges, there is a gap regarding the phenomenon of leading a major change initiative as a community college mid-level administrator or faculty member. Second, the experiences of those leading the guided pathways initiatives could impact their desire to assume higher and more formal leadership roles within their institutions.

A significant number of the highest-level leaders, including presidents, at community colleges are expected to retire or leave their positions in the near future (Katsinas & Kempner, 2005; Phillippe, 2016; Weisman & Vaughan, 2007). A 2013 report by The Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream indicated people become college presidents via two routes: through continuing education and academic programs, and through internal training and professional development motivated by succession planning. However, research has shown that mid-level administrators are satisfied with their positions and are not interested in advancing (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Garza Mitchell & Eddy, 2008).

Understanding the mid-level leaders’ experience is meaningful and important as it may inform the future work of college change agents and may provide insight to those concerned with succession planning and growing leaders from within their community colleges.
Community colleges are undergoing nearly constant change as they strive to increase completion rates. Guided pathways is a major strategic reform effort almost all community colleges in Michigan are implementing. The colleges have named leaders, usually faculty or mid-level administrators, to lead the initiative on their campuses. The leaders have all participated in the Michigan Guided Pathways Institute over the last few years. With this change came the need for the leaders to make sense of the changes for themselves, provide sense to others in the organization, and deal with the emotional aspects of change and change leadership. This study, a qualitative phenomenology, sought to describe and understand the experience of mid-level community college employees charged with leading a major change.

Chapter 2 of this study provides a review of related literature, defines the contextual and conceptual constructs identified in the framework for this study, and shows the relationships between and among the constructs. In Chapter 3 I describe the research design and my rationale for that design, reflect on my identity as it relates to this dissertation study, and provide a detailed description of the sample and site. I describe the data collection procedures and interview protocols, the data analysis, how I assured trustworthiness, and the limitations and delimitations.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I define the constructs that make up the conceptual framework shown in the previous chapter. I show the relationships between the constructs as they are embedded in my framework, the relationship of the constructs to my methodology, and the connection of the constructs to related literature. This chapter is organized by headings and subheadings as they appear in the conceptual framework, moving from the environment in which my participants are working to individual and personal characteristics of the experience of leading change.

This is not an exhaustive or extended review of the literature. It is a review of relevant literature to support the argument that the topic of leading change from a mid-level position in community colleges is important, and a phenomenological approach to the research is appropriate (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). I referenced foundational studies in leadership, sensemaking, sensegiving, and emotional intelligence, which may be considered old, but I considered relevant.

Contextual Environment for Change in Community Colleges

To appreciate the challenges and pressures for change facing community colleges and their leaders, it is helpful to understand the history, mission, and populations served by community colleges. The first community college in the United States, Joliet Junior College, was founded in 1901 by University of Chicago president William Rainey Harper as a place for an extended high school experience to prepare students for success at the university (Kane & Rouse, 1999; Stumpf, 2013). The origins of today’s community colleges came from the support of a few
university leaders who felt the true university mission of research and professional development would not be realized if they continued to educate first- and second-year college students (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). That support, the rise in the number of high school graduates, and the broadening of the mission to include occupational training led to the growth in junior colleges to 207 by 1922, 450 by 1930, and more than 600 by 1945 (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). By 1971, 850 community junior colleges (*junior* was the umbrella term for two-year and community colleges) were in operation in the United States, with at least one in every state. Seven states, California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Texas, and Washington accounted for more than one third of the colleges and over two thirds of all enrollment (Harper, 1971). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2019), there are currently 1,051 community colleges and just over 40% of all undergraduate students in the United States attend a community college. In fall 2018, enrollment in credit-bearing classes at community colleges exceeded 5 million students and 62% of those students attended college part-time (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

Public community and junior colleges democratized the opportunity for higher education by providing college classes, often close to home, at an affordable price, to those who might otherwise have been denied or unable to attend college (Harper, 1971). The tenets of the community college doctrine included open admissions; low cost or no cost; varied programs including occupational, transfer, and training; community service; accessibility; teaching institutions; and innovation (Harper, 1971). Community colleges continue to provide educational opportunities to historically underserved populations. Students of color and first-generation, low-income students are more likely to start college at a community college and are less likely to complete a degree than their more advantaged peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ginder et al., 2018).
Without community colleges there would be fewer college students who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups, the first in their families to attend college, immigrants, or from low-income households (Bragg & Durham, 2012). Community colleges are expected to provide an opportunity for higher education to those who will not or cannot attend competitive four-year colleges (Bailey et al., 2015).

Community colleges served as a relief valve for four-year colleges during enrollment booms fueled by the G.I. Bill of 1944, which provided education funds for veterans returning from World War II, and the baby-boom generation coming of college age in the 1960s and ’70s. In the 1980s, the situation changed as community colleges and four-year colleges began competing for students (Vaughan, 1984). Community colleges were challenged by the need to balance open access with quality programming (Vaughan, 1984). Services essential to maintaining the tenet of open access, such as developmental education and career guidance, were criticized and often the first to be cut when budgets were tight (Vaughan, 1984). Harper (1971) foreshadowed a major current concern and reason for the demand for change when he wrote of community college critics who, citing the high rate of attrition from two-year colleges, described the open door as a revolving door.

The shift from an emphasis on higher education access to higher education outcomes began in 1990 (Bailey et al., 2015). The federal Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990 requires extensive information from colleges, including graduation rates (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Although it took several years to define graduation rates and several more years before colleges were required to publish them, community colleges were brought face-to-face with their low completion rates (Bailey et al., 2015). Graduation rates for students after three years, 150% of the time expected for a two-year degree, were often below 20%, and even
arguments about open access and unprepared students could not absolve the colleges of the responsibility to change something to increase student success (Bailey, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015). Access remains important, but community college student progression and completion has become the focus of calls for organizational change (Boggs & McPhail, 2016).

Pressures to change, specifically to address student completion rates, come from many places. Stakeholders from within and outside the institutions voice their concerns, criticisms, and advice in public and private forums. This is important for my study because this is the environment in which community college leaders responsible for leading student success change initiatives find themselves.

**Forces for Change Outside the College**

Pressure on community college leaders comes from many external sources. Some, such as the members of the community where a college is located, are key stakeholders with a vested interest in the success of the college. Other external sources of pressure, such as state and federal governments and nonprofit organizations, may be farther from the campus but still exert influence and control (Bailey et al., 2015). Sydow and Alfred (2013) described a “landscape of turbulence and unstoppable change” (p. 48) within which community colleges and their leaders are called upon to do more and better with fewer resources. The open-door access and traditionally low cost have contributed to higher rates of enrollment for underprepared students, older students, poor students, first-generation students, and students of color as compared to traditional four-year colleges (Tandberg et al., 2014). In addition, public attention and governmental pressure have shifted from access to completion (O’Banion, 2010; Sydow & Alfred, 2013).
Public Opinion

Community colleges were created to address social, economic, and political needs that varied with the locations and periods of each college’s founding (Sydow & Alfred, 2013). Community colleges, with multiple missions, are often caught in the middle of competing demands from business and industry seeking a skilled workforce and from social justice advocates seeking equal opportunities for social mobility for students regardless of their college choice (Cohen et al., 2013; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Cohen et al. (2013) described public criticism of the role community colleges play in vocational training: By steering their students into job training, the colleges fulfill the needs of global and American corporations at the expense of the students themselves. Community colleges are also questioned as educational institutions: Do the students really learn the basic skills they could not learn in kindergarten through 12th grades? Do students gain the foundation necessary for higher learning at a four-year college? Have they obtained the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to succeed in work or transfer (Cohen et al., 2013)?

Successful community colleges are products of and important partners in their communities (Miller et al., 2015). This is relevant to my study because opinions, criticisms, and support of community college operations come from many directions. Change leaders may find themselves working with K-12 educators, employers, alumni, and community members to address concerns and enact measures to improve their students’ success.

Government

There are compelling social benefits to a better educated citizenry, such as higher levels of volunteerism and voting, and lower levels of criminal activity (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). At the same time, there are financial constraints for low-income students who cannot or will not
borrow enough funds to attend college. Furthermore, processes for accessing and completing college are so complex that young people may not have the information or support they need to understand the benefits of college, prepare for college, enter college, and navigate the bureaucracy of higher education through to completion (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

While the mission of most public community colleges is centered on open-access admissions, comprehensive programming, serving the local community, teaching, and lifelong learning (Vaughan, 2006), the governing and administrative structures of community colleges vary from state to state and even within states. A 2015 survey of state-level community college leaders, with 45 states represented in the responses, showed in 41 states’ colleges operate under the coordination or control of a state governing board, which may or may not also control K-12 and/or the university system within the states. Of the 41, 26 reported the governing board had a “great deal” of authority, 11 reported the board had “some” authority, and 4 reported the board had “a little” authority (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017, p. 319). Just four states reported having no state-level coordinating or governing board (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017).

The governance structure and control of states’ community colleges affects, among other things, decisions related to funding, labor negotiations and contracts, budgeting, program planning, record keeping, and reporting (Cohen et al., 2013). The type and level of state authority over community colleges is also related to the composition of the colleges’ trustees, who may be elected or appointed, local or selected from the entire state, and articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year universities (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017).

An analysis of state trends in enacted and pending educational legislation related to community colleges suggested three topics are of interest at the state level: performance-based funding (PBF), state financial aid programs, and transfer and articulation of credits (Sponsler
et al., 2015). Historically, state funding for public colleges is based on the number of students enrolled, not the number of students who have completed degrees. Now there is more interest from state legislators in the effective use of state funds to produce more college graduates (Dowd & Shieh, 2014). State policy makers have a renewed interest in PBF (Hillman et al., 2014). While the way in which states use PBF to influence institutional behavior varies greatly, the trend of using it continues to increase. By 2017, 36 states either had implemented such policies or were in the process of developing them (Gandara et al., 2017).

There is no consensus on the impact of PBF on student outcomes. Challenges to measuring its effectiveness are that there are no agreed-upon performance indicators (D’Amico et al., 2014) and the funding formulas vary considerably by state (McKeown-Moak, 2013). A review of 12 states’ performance measures, as of 2011, showed 22 different measures, with all 12 states agreeing on just one: degrees awarded. Other measures included graduation rates, time to degree, transfer rates, course completions, and momentum points (e.g., points given for students who complete 30 credits or a college-level math class). In some states, colleges choose their own indicators, while in others they do not (McKeown-Moak, 2013).

According to Stan Jones (2015), a former state legislator, commissioner of higher education in Indiana, and founder of Complete College America, many states are adopting policies of performance funding, structured class schedules, and highly structured pathways for students to complete degrees. A 2012 survey designed to gather information on the status of performance funding in public community colleges found 19 of 49 responding states used performance funding (D’Amico et al., 2014). Couple that with issues of rising tuition, declining state aid, and access for underserved and underprepared students (D’Amico et al., 2012; Dassance & Prihoda, 2011) and the result is “community colleges . . . under pressure to improve
completion rates and efficiency despite limited evidence on how to do so and the consequences of different reform movements” (Belfield et al., 2014, p. 327).

At the federal level, government influence is seen in federal student financial aid programs, including need-based grants and loans, tax credits and deductions, grant programs for colleges to provide support to targeted populations, and aid to veterans (Baum et al., 2018; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). The Federal Pell Grant Program is the largest source of need-based funds for college students in the United States (Baum et al., 2018). Aid is first awarded based on need, but continued aid is contingent upon recipients meeting satisfactory academic progress (SAP) requirements, frequently defined by institutions as maintaining a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 or above and completing at least two thirds of the credits attempted (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Research by Schudde and Scott-Clayton (2016) suggests SAP policies may push low-income students out of college before they can adjust to the demands of higher education at higher rates than their more affluent peers who do not rely on federal funding.

An understanding of the different levels and policies of government is important for mid-level change agents at community colleges because “policies can be levers or barriers to change ... and can be substantial barriers if unacknowledged” (Kezar, 2014, p. 88). This is important for my study because without designated staff to follow legislative activities, it may be challenging for mid-level leaders to stay abreast of important trends and governmental policies (Kezar, 2014).

**Nonprofit Organizations**

Nonprofit organizations have become a source of support, influence, and pressure to public education, including community colleges, and their leaders (O’Banion, 2010; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). Giving patterns of the largest educational foundations have shifted over the last
15 years, providing greater funding for national policy advocacy, greater funding for organizations that compete with or provide alternatives to public education, and more support for a shared set of organizations (Quinn et al., 2014; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). In an opinion piece, John Jackson, president and CEO of the Schott Foundation for Public Education, called on the “philanthropic community” to collaborate to leverage their investments in education reform. Invoking President Obama’s goal for the United States to be a global leader in postsecondary education, Jackson (2010) wrote, “Our philanthropic community must ensure that our investments are supported by evidence of success, are scalable, and include the voices of affected communities” (para. 4).

In a comparative case study, Gandara et al. (2017) explored the role of national intermediary organizations in the spread of policies related to college completion in three states. The authors defined intermediary organizations as “boundary-spanning groups that provide a translating function between principals with different values and perspectives” (p. 702). Examples of intermediary organizations in higher education include Complete College America, funded in part by the Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education; Jobs for the Future, funded in part by the Gates Foundation, Google, and Walmart; Public Agenda, funded in part by the Gates Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation for Education; and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (Gandara et al., 2017; Jobs for the Future, 2020; Public Agenda, 2019). Gandara et al. (2017) found intermediary organizations help set the policy-making agenda by using financial incentives for research and program initiatives, public shaming of institutions with low completion rates, and information dissemination on performance-based funding to educational leaders and state policy makers. Intermediaries oversimplify the issue of college completion, ignore or challenge empirical
evidence, serve as gatekeepers of information for policy makers, and are influenced by the interests of the foundations that are funding their work (Gandara et al., 2017; Scott & Jabbar, 2014).

In Michigan, the influence of nonprofit influencers was apparent during the statewide effort to implement guided pathways at community colleges. All community colleges belong to the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA), whose goals include legislative and public advocacy, maintaining and supporting a collaborative network, and assessing the needs and providing quality services to member colleges (MCCA, 2017). The Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS), which operates under auspices of the MCCA, was established in 2011 with funding from the Kresge Foundation. The impetus for the MCSS was to provide opportunities for collaboration to community colleges that were responding individually to growing calls from various stakeholders to increase educational attainment in the state and the country (MCAA, 2017). In 2014, the MCSS convened the Guided Pathways Orientation Institute for community college leaders in the state to learn about the principles and reasons for guided pathways as an approach to student success. Colleges were invited to apply for a spot in one of two Guided Pathways Institutes that would provide training, tools, and support for colleges willing to work toward a guided pathways approach on their campuses. Presentations over the two-day meeting and subsequent institute trainings included representatives from Jobs for the Future, Public Agenda, and Complete College America (Schanker & Orians, 2018).

The role of nonprofit organizations is important to acknowledge in this study because they have been major proponents of guided pathways as well as other higher education initiatives that result in transformative change processes that are led by mid-level leaders. At the same time, there is concern that these organizations, in the push for colleges to grant more degrees more
quickly, ignore factors related to actual learning (Boyce, 2013; Kelly & James, 2015; Kumashiro, 2012). My study drew participants from the members of the MCSS Guided Pathways Institutes, where nonprofit, foundation-funded organizations were directly involved in the training and presentations to Institute members. Participants experienced the tension between forces focused on increasing college completion, forces focused on improving the quality of higher education, and their daily roles and expectations.

**Guided Pathways**

Within higher education, community colleges have unique challenges due to their multiple missions, including their historical mission of providing access to higher education to all who wanted it (Cohen et al., 2013). The open-door community colleges were designed to provide access to large numbers of people who could not, or would not, attend traditional four-year colleges (Bailey, 2016; Lucas, 2006). The concentration has traditionally been on maximizing course enrollments and serving those most in need rather than program completion (Bailey, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015). The focus has now changed, and community colleges are under pressure to increase their students’ retention and completion rates (Bahr, 2013).

Bailey (2016) described the structural and operational challenges community colleges face in their efforts to increase completion: a wide variety of courses and programs to appeal to a diverse population with many different goals, limited intake and advising to guide students, and lengthy sequences of developmental courses. Important lessons were learned from an early effort to reform community colleges, led by Achieving the Dream (ATD), a nonprofit started in 2004 by the Lumina Foundation for Education (Brock et al., 2016). The first wave of ATD member colleges tended to implement discrete interventions, such as learning communities for a small percentage of students or a required orientation for new students, and average rates of persistence
and graduation remained flat (Brock et al., 2016). Following the original ATD initiative, Completion by Design (CBD), another foundation-backed organization, was started in 2011 with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Brock et al., 2016). Having learned from the ATD experience, CBD helped small groups of colleges work together to implement reforms based on broad and comprehensive principles, such as getting students into programs of study early in their college careers, minimizing time in developmental education courses, and making sure students know the requirements to succeed (Brock et al., 2016). CBD encouraged colleges to bring more structure and coherence to their students’ experiences by creating program pathways and mapping out the requirements to completion (Brock et al., 2016). This approach is an example of the guided pathways reform movement.

Guided pathways reforms aim to improve student success and increase the graduation rates of college students. This approach involves straightforward information for students, clearly stated learning objectives, mapped academic programs, advising and developmental education to get students into programs of study early in their college careers, and continuous advising, tracking, feedback, and support (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2013).

Guided pathways is a transformational change reform movement (Bailey et al., 2015) that perhaps represents another crossroads for community colleges in America. Over the last decade, much research has been focused on promoting student success in community colleges, with success defined as completing a certificate or associate degree, or transferring to a four-year institution (Bailey et al., 2015). First-year persistence and retention data from the National Student Clearinghouse showed 62% of the students who started college for the first time at a community college in the fall 2017 semester enrolled at any college the following fall, compared to 83% of those who started at a four-year college (National Student Clearinghouse Research
Center, 2019). Less than half of the community college students returned to the college where they began, while just over 70% of the four-year college students returned to the same four-year college (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). The six-year bachelor’s degree completion rate for students who started at a community college in 2012 and transferred to a four-year college was 15.8%, compared to the 66% completion rate of students who started at a four-year college (Shapiro et al., 2018). Proponents of the guided pathways movement argue that continuing the open-access model of community colleges without changing the programming and services provided to students is unlikely to lead to more completed degrees (Bailey et al., 2015; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Research related to community college completion, or lack thereof, has explored the effect of part-time faculty (Jacoby, 2006; Leslie & Gappa, 2002); labor market changes, the role of habitus, and a shift in the political climate to favor a business approach to education (Ireland, 2015); and race, socio-economic status, and college-preparedness (Lee & Frank, 1990; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Swirling enrollment from one institution to another (Bahr, 2012), developmental education (Bailey et al., 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010), age (Kelly & Whitfield, 2015), ethnicity (Wang, 2009a, 2009b), online education (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014) and enrollment in a first-semester college success course (Cho & Karp, 2013) are just some of the factors related to community college completion. Bahr (2012) found almost 30% of community college students transferred from one community college to another within a six-year period, while 13% enrolled in two community colleges simultaneously. Developmental education has been found to negatively affect the likelihood a student will transfer from a community college and complete a bachelor’s degree (Roksa & Calcagno, 2010), while completion of developmental courses was found to be a better predictor of community college
retention and persistence than number of credits taken, financial aid status, ethnicity, parents’ level of education, and several other factors (Fike & Fike, 2008). Stuart et al. (2014) claimed research on students’ persistence must include a cost-benefit analysis, as students treat higher education as an investment of time and money.

The factors related to community college completion are complex and “despite years of effort, institutions have yet to develop a coherent framework to guide their thinking about which actions matter most and how they should be organized and successfully implemented” (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). Guided pathways is a comprehensive approach to address many issues related to college completion that may address Tinto’s critique. Colleges must make transformational changes to fully realize the breadth and depth of the guided pathways approach for all students, and this reform work is being implemented at more than 250 community colleges across the United States (K. McClenny, 2019).

The relationship of guided pathways to my study is important because there have been few studies focused on deep and transformational change in higher education (Kezar, 2013). In Michigan, the people charged with leading this change, such as deans, department chairs, and program directors, are in mid-level leadership positions at their community colleges (J. Schanker, personal communication, January 31, 2018). The implementation of guided pathways presented a unique opportunity to explore the experiences of the mid-level leaders responsible for this transformational change at their individual community colleges.

**Forces for Change Inside the College**

In addition to the pressures for change that come from outside the college, people who are elected to govern the college, students, administrators, and faculty make up a diverse group of internal stakeholders. Birnbaum (1988) noted that the concept of governance, specifically
shared governance, is what makes colleges different from most organizations. Elected governing boards have the legal right to make decisions for their colleges, but this authority is usually passed on to college presidents and administration (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2014).

Kezar (2014) wrote that leadership may be the most important facilitator of change, and change theories have focused on people in positions of authority. There is less research on how people in lower positions, like mid-level leaders, might employ different strategies and approaches to lead a change initiative (Kezar, 2014). Unlike community college boards and presidents, mid-level leaders do not have the authority to mandate change, allocate funds to support a major change initiative, develop incentives to motivate change, or significantly restructure a college (Kezar, 2014).

Eckel, Green, et al. (1999) wrote that colleges, like many organizations, are change-averse. Colleges are also complex and loosely coupled, meaning there are many diverse units that operate with a high level of independence and autonomy (Eckel, Green, et al., 1999; Weick, 1976). The following section describes groups within community colleges that must be considered and incorporated into any transformational change effort.

**Board and Senior Administration**

Community colleges across the United States are organized and governed in a variety of ways. Thirty-two states have a combination of state and local governance, 11 states have a single statewide system, and some states with a system also have a local college advisory board. Four states, including Michigan, have no state governing or coordinating board (Association of Community College Trustees [ACCT], 2021). Despite the wide variance in structure, all community colleges are governed by citizen trustees who are appointed or elected to their positions (Vaughan & Weisman, 2003). Board members are responsible for ethical decision
making while dealing with multiple, often conflicting, demands from a multitude of stakeholders (Amey et al., 2008; Craft & Guy, 2019). They are expected to do what is right for the community while advancing the mission of the college (Craft & Guy, 2019). Board members are responsible for developing policies, ensuring compliance with laws and government regulations, and hiring the college president (Cohen et al., 2013). The role of boards is changing, and they more frequently impact day-to-day operations.

An outgrowth of the ATD work taking place at community colleges was trustee training focused on student success and completion (B. McClenney, 2013). In 2011, ACCT convened an Invitational Symposium on Student Success, which resulted in the Student Success Policy Action Agenda (K. McClenney, 2019). The Policy Action Agenda reaffirmed the community college mission of access, success, and equity for all students. Boards were encouraged to give priority to student success and equity in strategic planning and to ensure the institutional budget reflected that priority (B. McClenney, 2019). As boards became knowledgeable and committed to student success, college leaders created or were expected to create a shared vision and build broad-based support for transformative change (B. McClenney, 2013). K. McClenney (2019) described a new role for board members: “monitoring what matters most in pursuit of student success and completion” (p. 280) as well as “creating a climate within which a CEO can do courageous work” (p. 280).

Ideally, community college presidents and trustees work as leadership teams to define, communicate, and fulfill the mission of their colleges (Vaughan & Weisman, 2003). A 2013 report by Achieving the Dream and the Aspen Institute, two organizations heavily involved in student success efforts, described qualities of exceptional community college presidents. These included the “deep commitment to student access and success” (p. 5), willingness to take risks in
the work of student success, ability to create lasting change, and skills to raise and allocate resources aligned with student success. These aligned with board priorities in the Student Success Policy Action Agenda adopted by the ACCT in 2012. A survey of community college CEOs showed that some presidents are financially rewarded for improving student success. One in five CEOs reported receiving incentive compensation. Of those, 28% received incentives based on student success measures (Phillippe, 2016).

The daily work of running a community college and initiating new programs often falls to senior and mid-level administrators (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Rosser et al., 2003). These leaders are generally responsible for making sure fiscal and human resources are allocated to institutional priorities, preparing the college for change, and facilitating the change process (Cejda & Leist, 2013; Palmer, 2014). At the same time, these leaders may be resistant to change, focusing on concrete solutions to specific problems, rather taking a big picture approach (Alfred, 2003) to the complex issue of student success.

The influence and participation of trustees, community college presidents, and college administrators is important to acknowledge in my study. Stout (2016) described the challenges of establishing and maintaining a sustained focus on student success initiatives when local priorities, unrelated to student success, take precedence. Mid-level change leaders lack positional authority and are dependent on the highest-level leadership to set the vision, direction, and sense of urgency. Yet mid-level leaders are often in positions to see the need for and to lead college-wide changes, such as building a focus on student success. Amey and Eddy (2018) suggested colleges might be better served by establishing networked leadership that builds upon capabilities, collaboration among groups of leaders, and multidirectional interactions, which would capitalize on the capacity of mid-level leaders.
**Faculty**

The principle of shared governance is a longstanding tradition in higher education that allows for, and expects, faculty participation in decisions affecting their colleges (Birnbaum, 2004; Fletcher & Friedel, 2017; Gappa et al., 2007; Levin et al., 2006). The tradition was formally articulated in 1966 when the Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities, known as the Joint Statement, was formulated by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AAUP, n.d.). The Joint Statement, recognizing the legal authority of the board to speak for the college and president to manage the college, identified faculty as professional authority with primary responsibility for “what shall be taught, who shall teach, and who shall study” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 8; Birnbaum, 2004). The Joint Statement presumes an ideal environment with shared goals and values. It does not give guidance on implementation, recognize the diversity of colleges, or acknowledge the conflict and competition within colleges (Birnbaum, 1988).

There is no single definition of shared governance. It is described as the cooperation of the board, president, administration, and faculty in decision making (Minor & Tierney, 2005), the structure and process of decision making (Amey et al., 2008), and the shared responsibility for the health of a college and its faculty members (Gappa et al., 2007). Shared governance is idealistic and easier to talk about than enact (Birnbaum, 1988; Gallos, 2009). As various points of view are discussed and considered, shared governance may be an obstacle or an effective means to decision making (Boggs & McPhail, 2016; Minor & Tierney, 2005). Misunderstandings about shared governance may imply faculty members have decision-making authority on matters that belong to the administration or board (Bowen & Tobin, 2015).
However, even though faculty may not be considered the decision makers in many areas of a college, their expertise and interest are essential, and they frequently have the opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process (Bowen & Tobin, 2015).

In community colleges, shared governance is particularly challenging because of the number of external influencers with diverse interests. These include state and federal agencies, business and industry, local communities, K-12 and four-year colleges, and the nationwide college completion agenda (Amey et al., 2008). Levin et al. (2006) noted that participation in institutional governance is sometimes permitted and sometimes required in community colleges. With the rise of unionization of faculty in the 1970s, Levin et al. (2006) suggested shared governance was replaced by “rights and responsibilities . . . of labor and management” (p. 50). Rather than joint decision making, there could be an expectation that faculty take on an advisory role, sharing in the work of managing the institution (Levin et al., 2006). In a qualitative study exploring shared governance at community colleges, Kater (2017) found having a voice, trust, and transparency were important to faculty. But participants also expressed concern over the apathy and disengagement they saw in themselves or colleagues. As community colleges have responded to calls for more efficiency and higher productivity in an environment of limited resources, the culture has become more corporatized (Levin et al., 2006). Faculty apathy may reflect fewer full-time faculty, overextended with teaching and nonteaching responsibilities, and more part-time faculty who are hired to teach but are otherwise disengaged with the college (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Levin et al., 2006; Pons et al., 2017)

Any discussion of community college faculty is incomplete if the subject of part-time faculty is not included. Across the country, the percentage of college classes being taught by part-time faculty has increased over the last several years. According to a 2020 report published
by the American Association of University Professors, the largest group of instructional
employees at United States’ colleges are “adjunct” instructors, who are regarded as part-time and
temporary, not normally provided health insurance nor any other fringe benefits, and are paid a
fraction, per course, of a full-time faculty member’s salary (Colby & Fowler, 2020). In 2016,
almost 68% of faculty at public two-year colleges were part-time (National Center for Education
Statistics, 2017). In a more nuanced study, Charlier and Williams (2011) found that although
there were more part-time than full-time instructors in rural, suburban, and urban community
colleges, they were responsible for teaching fewer credits and impacting fewer students. Most
part-time instructors are motivated by a desire to teach in their field and work with students, even
though they are dissatisfied with pay and may not feel a part of the college community (Pons
et al., 2017).

Faculty are included as a force to be considered in my research because the literature on
improving student success says faculty need to be engaged, but many of the initiatives focus on
student services supports, such as new student orientation, advising, tutoring, and mapped
programs (Bailey et al., 2015; Mellow et al., 2015). O’Banion (2019) noted that 10 years of
initiatives and interventions have still not helped the most disadvantaged students complete
college at higher rates. He called out the lack of attention to transforming the community college
curriculum, which is “the collective wisdom and expertise of the faculty about what is important
for students to learn” (p. 285). Faculty must be on board and engaged with any transformational
change effort that impacts what they teach, who they teach, and how their course curriculum
relates to the bigger picture of degrees and certificates. Specifically, the guided pathways
approach, with an emphasis on streamlining certificate and programs, and suggestions to include
student services staff on instructional teams, threatens the freedom of faculty to teach the classes
they hold most dear, rather than classes that meet the students’ needs for an efficient path to a degree (Bailey et al., 2015).

Mid-level leaders, who may come from the faculty ranks, must recognize that change initiatives that significantly affect student success will transcend academic department structures (Bailey et al., 2015; Bowen & Tobin, 2015). Bailey et al. (2015) wrote, “Faculty must move from a reactive to a proactive stance” (p. 145), which is not especially helpful guidance to the mid-level leader charged with initiating and implementing a change that is dependent on faculty buy-in.

Students

Completion rates for students who start at a community college are low compared to those of students who start at a four-year college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2013; Shapiro et al., 2016). Compared to four-year colleges, community college students are more likely to be poor, part-time, older, first-generation, African American, Hispanic, and/or academically unprepared (Bailey et al., 2010; Gibson & Slate, 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; McFarland et al., 2018). Transferring is common for community college students, with almost 30% moving from one community college to another and 13% enrolling in two community colleges simultaneously (Bahr, 2012). Poor completion rates in community colleges are often explained by the “high risk” characteristics of the students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). But evaluating the success of community college students, and by extension the colleges themselves, is much more complex than looking at raw numbers and assuming they accurately represent students with similar reasons for attending college.

Data from the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), a survey given to entering community colleges students, indicated 79% plan to complete an associate degree
Bahr (2010, 2011) identified six types of community college students with seemingly different goals. Using a large database of community college student records covering a seven-year period, Bahr (2010) identified the types based on students’ course-taking and enrollment behaviors. He determined just 13% were oriented toward transfer, and only 3% were on a vocational degree path. The two largest groups were those who enrolled in a mix of transfer and vocational classes (19% of the students) and those who gave college a try but did not continue (30% of the group) (Bahr, 2010, 2011).

Including students in the framework for this study is important because students are at the center of the completion agenda. Community colleges provide opportunities for students to improve their lives, both financially and socially (Edgecombe, 2019; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Students’ behavior determines community college success using measures of completion, retention, transfer, and employment. But the reasons students enroll in community colleges are sometimes unclear and subject to change (Clagett, 1989; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Voorhees & Zhou, 2000). Implementing transformative change to increase student success without understanding the complexities of students’ motivations, challenges, and behaviors, as well as the difficulty in defining and measuring student success, would be naïve and a set up for failure.

**Mid-Level Community College Leaders’ Experiences Leading Change**

The focus of this study is the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a community college. This section of the literature review will discuss leading change from the middle, describe the concepts of sensemaking, sensegiving,
and emotional intelligence, and explain the purpose for including each in the framework for this study.

Throughout this section, the role of emotions in change leadership appears in different aspects and from different angles. According to Callahan and McCollum (2002), “Practitioners must be aware that they are intervening in emotional systems when they lead change efforts” (p. 225). Emotions shape our responses to others (Johnson, 1998). Managing emotions requires control and thoughtfulness in how feelings are presented to others in different interactions and settings and may involve suppressing, exaggerating, or modulating emotional expression (Callahan & McCollum, 2002). When people are in situations where they choose to manage their emotions to benefit themselves, they are engaging in “emotion work” that has “use-value” (Callahan & McCollum, 2002, p. 221). Emotion work may be exchanged for things without monetary value, such as positive work relationships or help on projects. People perform emotion work when there are organizational expectations about what is appropriate or required in specific settings, when there is a desire for better organizational outcomes, and when they must navigate difficult situations (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). When people are in situations where they choose to manage their emotions as a requirement of their job, they are engaging in emotional labor, which has “exchange-value” (p. 221) that can be traded for wages and other benefits of value. Callahan and McCollum refer to emotion management as the overarching concept of emotion work and emotional labor. Other authors use emotion management and emotion work as synonyms (Hochschild, 2012), others refer just to emotional labor (Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey, 2012), and others discuss emotion management in terms of managing one’s own and others’ emotions (Gardner et al., 2009).
It is beyond the scope of this study to describe and analyze the literature related to emotions and leadership. It is well within the scope to explore the emotional experiences of community college change leaders as they have felt, managed, and witnessed others’ emotional expressions. Exploring emotional experiences and their impact is important because change leaders, in addition to those they lead, experience significant emotional reactions during a change initiative, and acknowledging and supporting their emotion work is important for the success of the initiative (Lawrence et al., 2014).

**Mid-Level Leadership and Change**

This study explored the experiences of mid-level, guided pathways leaders, so it is appropriate to include related literature to provide reasons for the importance of this research and to situate it within what is already known. Some of the research I cite used the terms *managers* and *administrators*, and the distinction between leaders and managers or administrators is important. Administrators are responsible for managing a college, which includes mediating between the faculty and the college president, implementing policies and procedures, and ensuring a college carries out its mission (Birnbaum, 1988; Davis, 2011). Mid-level managers play an important role in implementing change as they are the experts in their areas, they control resources such as information and budgets, and they determine who participates in decision making (Hope, 2010). Leaders create, initiate, build, and move organizations in new directions, which always implies change (Davis, 2011). Leaders come from many levels and places within an organization (Amey et al., 2020; Conrad & Lemay, 2020). Capitalizing on this idea, there is value in a shared leadership approach, consisting of people at different levels of the hierarchy, or a collective leadership approach, where people at similar levels from various departments work together to implement change (Kezar, 2014). Leaders’ challenges during periods of change
include altering their own roles and responsibilities, helping others through the change,
managing the ongoing work of the organization, and implementing the needed changes
(Balogun, 2003).

Kezar (2014) described the reasons most change initiatives in colleges fail: leaders focus
on the initiative and ignore the change process, leaders do not understand or ignore their
institution’s culture, leaders use a simplistic change model, and leaders try to facilitate change
based on others’ anecdotes and stories rather than real research related to organizational learning
and change. Failure rates of change initiatives reportedly range from 50 to 90% (Burnes, 2011)
and, although those figures have been challenged as being based on anecdotes, opinions, and
marketing campaigns, 70% is the figure frequently cited for change failure rates (Hughes, 2011).
That narrative and the warning from Kezar (2014) that change is disruptive and “can lead to poor
morale, disengagement by employees, and wasted time and productivity” (p. xvi) underscore the
seriousness of launching a transformative change initiative.

Mid-level community college leaders in Michigan have been charged with implementing
a “fundamental redesign” (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 3) in the way they do business. They have been
tasked with moving their community colleges from a cafeteria-style, self-service model with a
wide array of course and program options, which are often disconnected and confusing, to a
guided pathways model. This requires considerable commitment from college leadership,
faculty, and student services personnel. Implementation and success of pathways depends on the
coordination of efforts of these groups who historically have had limited interaction (Bailey
et al., 2015). Former Macomb Community College president James Jacobs (2015) stated that
even with strong and decisive direction from a president, the middle-level managers of
community colleges, in charge of academic and functional areas, are necessary and critical to
such fundamental organizational change. He described the need to develop and empower the people in these roles as an important step in implementing guided pathways reforms.

Kezar (2012) used a case study approach to explore bottom-up and top-down leadership and institutional change at three colleges. In one college, she found that shared leadership, combining bottom-up and top-down efforts, resulted in significant changes that bottom leaders felt they could not have accomplished without top-down support. With the second college, Kezar found some bottom-up leaders felt their initiatives had been compromised by involvement with the top-down but acknowledged the change had been institutionalized and had support. At the third college, the bottom-up change was compromised, and eventually abandoned, after too much top-down support pushed the change initiative too quickly and too forcefully. She concluded that the convergence of leadership from the bottom and the top can emerge in many ways, sometimes helpful to institutionalize change and sometimes not. Given the number and diversity of community colleges in Michigan working on implementing guided pathways, the different positions of the guided pathways leaders, and varying levels of support from the presidents, it is likely different patterns of converging leadership have emerged. It is also likely the guided pathways leaders bring different skillsets and experiences to the role, making some better prepared and better suited to lead the change effort.

**Sensemaking**

Sensemaking is a key component of the transformative change process. Weick et al. (2005) described sensemaking as an ongoing, explicit process that occurs in an organization “when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world” (p. 409). When something surprising happens, sensemaking occurs among group members to answer questions such as how did it happen, what does it mean, and what should be
done (Weick et al., 2005)? Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) also found sensemaking occurred in the beginning stages of strategic change as a new leader engaged in activities to help understand the organization and develop a vision for the future, while stakeholders attempted to understand the proposed changes, the effect on them, and what their roles would be. When people are trying to understand and explain something that has disrupted their normal flow of information and behavior, they engage in sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). The inclination is to “look first for reasons that will enable them to resume the interrupted activity and stay in action” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). If that does not work, then people use sensemaking to create an understanding of why change is needed and what the change means for them (Eddy, 2003; Kezar, 2013).

According to Kezar (2014), change happens when values and actions clash. In higher education, especially in community colleges, access to a college education is a core value (Wyner, 2014). In the early 2000s, when data regarding the low retention and completion rates at community colleges began appearing, community college leaders and faculty entered a sensemaking period of self-examination and “courageous conversations” (Rothkopf, 2009, p. 26). It became apparent that open access to a college was no guarantee of learning, education, and completion. With new and disruptive information in the form of data, the usual way of doing business at community colleges clashed with the value of access to education. Change needed to happen, but leading a successful change effort in higher education is challenging.

A survey study of 35 college presidents concluded the major challenge in introducing change at their institutions was the culture that evolved from history and tradition and the policies and procedures that expressed the culture (Basham, 2012). In a similar vein, Shugart (2013), who described the history of higher education from 12th century European monastic institutions to the present-day marketplace model, suggested transformative change requires
culture-changing leaders who understand the deep roots of attitudes and behaviors. Kezar’s (2013) case study on organizational sensemaking and sensegiving in institutions of higher education showed successful transformational change was more likely in colleges that worked deeply, broadly, and continuously throughout the entire change process to help people make sense and give sense to the changes.

The concept of sensemaking is included as part of the framework for my study because it is an overarching characteristic of most transformative change strategies (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). To further explain sensemaking and how it appears in change leadership, I have included Weick’s (1995) seven characteristics of sensemaking that Eddy (2010a) used to show the steps community college leaders can take to become multidimensional leaders for complex and multidimensional institutions. I have added emotion as a concept within sensemaking because, although he did not include it as a characteristic or property of sensemaking, Weick (1995) described sensemaking as being infused with emotion.

Identity Construction

Weick (1995) sets identity construction as the first of his characteristics of sensemaking because establishing and maintaining an identity is central to sensemaking. As a change leader, questions of “Who am I?” “Who are they?” and “Who are ‘we’?” (Weick, 1995, p. 77) are important. Answers are tentative and start the process of sensemaking. Eddy (2010a) described identity construction in college leaders as drawing on their past experiences, including their academic discipline, career pathway, personal and professional influences, and approach to the world, to make sense of who they are in new or changing situations. Identity construction is important because it helps people identify with groups and roles, reducing the uncertainty that comes with a new or changed situation (Ashforth et al., 2008).
Weick et al. (2005) described the retrospective nature of sensemaking as people developing a plausible explanation, from many possibilities, for what they are doing. Periods of crisis and periods of change are situations ripe for sensemaking, as both create feelings of confusion and ambiguity (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). An emerging issue, such as the demand for greater accountability and student success in community colleges, may be seen as a threat or an opportunity for change, depending on past experiences (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). Weick (1988) described the retrospective nature of sensemaking in crisis situations, when quick decisions are needed, as action preceding cognition. Responding in certain ways during a crisis reduces complexity and ambiguity as a chosen response eliminates other possible responses, but it is after the fact that people develop the explanations for their behavior (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1988). In periods of change, when choices and behaviors take place over an extended time and information with many possible meanings must be synthesized, reflecting on past experiences helps people make sense of new or changing situations (Eddy, 2010a; Weick, 1995).

While retrospection is a primary feature of sensemaking, according to Weick (1988), Gephart et al. (2010) wrote of a dimension of sensemaking that is future-oriented, prospective, and enacted during periods of goal-setting and institutional planning. Gioia et al. (1994) coined the phrase *prospective sensemaking* (p. 378) to label the decision-making process used during a university’s strategic change effort. Prospective sensemaking described the group’s considerations of the future impact of their actions and nonactions. However, in relating retrospective and prospective sensemaking, Gioia et al. (1994) wrote prospective sensemaking “might have been a special case of retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1979), wherein people reflect on possible courses of action as if they had already occurred” (p. 378).
The concept of retrospection as it relates to sensemaking is important in my study because I asked participants to look back and recall how they came to be leaders, how they led a change initiative, and how they made sense of their leadership experiences. The in-depth interviewing invited them to reflect on their leadership roles, their past actions, and their perspectives on leadership, all activities Eddy (2010a) recommends for multidimensional leadership.

**Enactive**

The enactive nature of sensemaking refers to the ongoing interaction between people and their environments that creates the constraints and opportunities they then must deal with (Weick, 1995). It is the acknowledgment that things are always becoming. Although things like start and end dates may put brackets around an organizational change effort, there is no beginning or ending to the interaction between the environment and the people operating within that environment (Weick, 1995).

In a case study of six institutions of higher education that were selected because they were making good progress toward transformation, Kezar and Eckel (2002) described “visible action” (p. 20) as important to sensemaking and change. Group discussions, professional development, data sharing, and redefining positions show people the change is important and show the effects of the work being done (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Effective leaders create and use these enactive strategies to help others make sense of the change process (Eddy, 2010a, 2010b).

The concept of enaction is important for my study because participants were selected based on their experience of leading the guided pathways initiative at their colleges. Their experience in recognizing, shaping, and responding to the interaction between their campus
environments and their colleagues provided insight into how they experienced their roles and their emotions.

**Social**

The act of sensemaking always involves more than one person (Weick, 1995). Meetings and conversations are simple examples of the social nature of sensemaking, but even engaging in self-talk assumes an imaginary audience (Weick, 1995). Implementing change on a college campus involves communication through formal discussions, casual conversations, training, written reports, and meetings. Every social interaction, from the most informal chats with peers to comprehensive professional development programs, is an opportunity for people to make sense of what is happening and how that will affect them (Eddy, 2010a, 2010b). Effective leaders understand they have different audiences and can alter their communication style to suit the occasion and the group (Eddy, 2003, 2010a, 2010b).

The social concept of sensemaking is included in my framework because understanding the social aspect of sensemaking is important for strategic change leaders. The message leaders intend to send may be interpreted differently when people engage in gossip or informal conversations, resulting in unintended consequences and counterproductive behaviors (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Kezar (2014) wrote of the importance of providing multiple, ongoing, and inclusive opportunities for social interaction so people can wrestle with new ideas and proposed changes to arrive at shared meanings.

**Ongoing**

Weick (1995) described sensemaking as ongoing because “people are always in the middle of things” (p. 43). While the flow of information never stops, a change may interrupt the flow as people know it, causing them to take notice and try to make sense of what the changes
mean. Balogun and Johnson (2005) found an ongoing cycle of sensemaking occurs during planned, strategic change as new information and expectations collide with known systems and routines. Ongoing communication, both formal and informal, continues as change develops and people seek an understanding. Weick et al. (2005) described this as an evolutionary process based on retrospective interpretation and selection of certain meanings over others, arrived at through interpersonal interactions. Eddy (2010a) described the ongoing nature of sensemaking for leaders when they use feedback from colleagues, help from mentors, and an awareness of the environment to always seek better understanding of an issue or organization.

**Extracted Cues**

The sixth of seven distinguishing characteristics of sensemaking, according to Weick (1995), is that sensemaking is “focused on and by extracted cues” (p. 17). Weick described cues as seeds that will develop into a larger, more developed sense of what is happening, depending on the context. Context is important in determining what gets a person’s attention and is extracted in the first place, and how the extracted cue is interpreted (Weick, 1995). Leadership is demonstrated by those who generate, or control, the cues that become reference points for sensemaking, organizing, and action (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick, 1995).

Leaders in higher education extract cues and establish reference points for others through things like strategic planning, bringing a speaker in, circulating selected readings and arranging discussion groups, and forming cross-functional teams to work on an issue (Eddy, 2010a; Kezar, 2014). The concept of extracted cues is relevant to my study because all the participants engaged in state-level activities to learn about the change initiative they were appointed to lead, how to make the case for the changes that would be needed at their colleges, and what broad changes should be made for the initiative to be successful. The leaders of the national and state
organizations that designed and conducted the activities controlled the cues delivered to the mid-level leaders. The mid-level leaders, in turn, were learning how to generate and control the cues that would become reference points for their colleagues when they returned to their home colleges (MCSS, 2016). Kezar (2014) encouraged college leaders to reflect on change initiatives being considered to make sure they are the “right type of change” (p. 60) and worth the effort. My study shows how the participants selected the cues they did, how they influenced the cues presented to their college colleagues, and how this relates to Kezar’s thoughts on reflection.

**Plausibility**

Weick’s (1995) seventh property of sensemaking is plausibility. According to Weick, accuracy is secondary to plausibility when it comes to making sense of something new or different. For something to be plausible, it need only be perceived as reasonable, coherent, socially acceptable, or probable. This allows for people to make sense without being overwhelmed by data, waiting for all the information, or needing to agree on everything as objective truth before starting a course of action (Weick, 1995). Eddy (2010a) wrote that plausibility can be seen in a college leader’s selection and use of possibilities over mundane realities to create a vision for the future. In a study of new college presidents, Smerek (2013) described a brainstorming process used by two presidents to gather information and prioritize future action steps. The result was plausible definitions and explanations for the new presidents that they could then use to develop strategic plans.

The concept of plausibility is related to my study because mid-level leaders were asked to implement whole-institution reforms without strong, research-based evidence to show the guided pathways measures worked. The leaders needed to convince others that the explanation of the problem was plausible and the proposed solutions would likely be successful. Scott-Clayton
(2011), in a working paper for the Community College Research Center, reviewed the decision-making process community college students go through and the number of choices they face. Her hypothesis argued for tightly structured programs with little room for students to impulsively or inadvertently stray from the path to completion. The guided pathways model was influenced by Scott-Clayton’s research from the fields of psychology, marketing, and behavioral economics and Jenkins’ (2011) research on highly effective four-year colleges, the K-12 system, and non-educational institutions (Bailey et al., 2015). With data showing poor retention and completion for community college students, guided pathways offered community college leaders a plausible explanation and a plan of action. As Weick (1995) wrote, “People see and find sensible those things they can do something about” (p. 60).

Plausibility, according to Weick et al. (2005), leads to action in confusing and changing circumstances and “if plausible stories keep things moving, they are salutary” (p. 415). If organizations have stable goals and a fixed set of choices for the actions they take, accurate information can help determine the feasibility of each choice. But real organizations do not often fit that model and people need to be able to make enough sense of a situation to move toward general goals (Weick et al., 2005). In some situations, including those with shifting or unclear goals, low standards of plausibility can lead to disaster. In the 1984 Bhopal pesticide plant disaster, weak explanations of warning signs were accepted, contributing to a critical delay in sounding an alarm to area residents to shelter in place (Weick, 2010). Although much less dramatic, there is a risk with guided pathways that leaders will invest time, energy, and resources in promoting this solution to the problem of low rates of community college completion because it is entirely plausible that streamlined and prescribed programs of study will lead to more completions.
Emotional

Weick (1995) did not list emotions as a characteristic or property of sensemaking, but he did describe sensemaking as being infused with emotion. In a literature review of the sensemaking research, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) found that emotion was a core theme of sensemaking and that a key activity for mid-level managers in times of strategic change is tending to the emotions of those they manage (Huy, 2002). Bartunek et al. (2006) found individuals’ emotions had a significant effect on whether and how they engaged in sensemaking related to organizational change initiated by other people.

Maitlis et al. (2013) proposed the idea that emotions play a role in three stages of sensemaking. First, emotions signal the need for sensemaking. Not all novel events trigger sensemaking (George & Jones, 2001; Maitlis et al., 2013). An unexpected event is more likely to trigger sensemaking when the event causes negative emotions, such as anger or fear, and the emotions are intense enough to give energy to a sensemaking process (Maitlis et al., 2013). This follows the findings of Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) that crisis facilitates change and managing strategic change without a crisis is much more difficult. Second, once sensemaking begins, emotions affect the process of sensemaking. Positive emotions are more likely to produce a creative or novel explanation, while negative emotions are more likely to evoke and rely on critical analysis of new information (Maitlis et al., 2013). And third, emotions play a role in determining when sensemaking ends. Sensemaking is more likely to conclude when the action and the plausibility of the explanation are consistent with a person’s emotions about the triggering event (Maitlis et al., 2013). For example, if leaders suggested a crisis was looming to get their colleagues’ attention and then created an environment of hope and positivity, the ensuing sensemaking might generate creative approaches to the problem of poor community
college completion rates (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis et al., 2013). If the leaders presented the low completion story as something that needed to be addressed in some way but there was no urgency, and it needed to be addressed because nonprofit organizations said it needed to be addressed, their colleagues would probably not give too much energy to the sensemaking. In this case, the emotions evoked might be anger or irritation. Without a crisis or urgent need, change would be more difficult (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The negative emotions might lead to scrutiny of the data to find an explanation or a flaw in the request for change (Maitlis et al., 2013), including debate over what student success at a community college is and who is entitled to define it (Ernst et al., 2015).

Dan Phelan (2014), president of Jackson College in Michigan, wrote of declining enrollments, reductions in state aid, government initiatives that temporarily inject money into community colleges, and unfunded government mandates as contributors to a community college funding crisis. Rising operational costs and increasing calls for accountability suggest community colleges’ mission of open access is unsustainable (Phelan, 2014). Using emotions, particularly fear, to persuade community colleges to adopt guided pathways is evident as performance funding is described as a policy incentive in Redesigning America’s Community Colleges (Bailey et al., 2015), despite a lack of evidence that it improves student outcomes (Dougherty et al., 2016; Tandberg et al., 2014).

**Sensegiving**

Sensegiving occurs when someone has made sense of new information and then attempts to influence others’ understanding of the information to align with their own agendas and goals (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In organizational change, sensemaking and sensegiving are sequential and reciprocal (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As a leader makes sense of an
organization and then develops a new image, they then attempt to help others make sense of and support that vision through sensegiving. The recipients of their attempts cycle through sensemaking of their own, which may or may not align with the leader’s vision. Hope (2010) described the political nature of sensegiving as different players working to influence each other through communication and interaction. Sensegiving can also be a day-to-day practice leaders use to reinforce an organization’s values and to build members’ identities around those values. In organizations where people identify with shared values, change is more likely to be positively received because it aligns with the values and identities already instilled in members (A. Smith et al., 2010).

Aspects of sensegiving that are included in my conceptual framework are communication, framing, and emotions. Sensegiving is dependent upon communication, as sensegiving is an activity of influencing people, or creating meaning for a target audience, to align with the leader’s preferred definition of reality (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick et al., 2005). Framing is the method leaders use to communicate their message to those they are attempting to influence (Eddy, 2010a). A literature review by Kraft et al. (2015) suggested emotions influence the relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving and, during periods of organizational change, emotions can help or hurt the efforts of a leader.

**Communication and Framing**

College leaders communicate differently depending on their own skills, experience, styles, and audience or groups they are interacting with (Eddy, 2010b; Hamilton, 2016). Eddy (2010b) described communicating as an important element of multidimensional leadership for college presidents.
Framing has to do with choosing what to focus communication on—choosing one set of meanings to convey over another (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). In a study of presidents whose colleges were undergoing institutional change, Eddy (2010b) compared framing in sensegiving to framing a picture. A frame is used to focus attention on what you want to be seen or understood. As described by Fairhurst (2005), “To the extent that uncertainty or ambiguity mark a given subject, what is real and important is often what we say is real and important” (p. 168). During periods of strategic change, framing can be used “to align the norms, values, and beliefs of a leader with those of the various stakeholders” (Hamilton, 2016, p. 626) and to bridge the goals of organizations that are not structurally connected. Framing is accomplished through spoken words, behaving in certain ways to send a message, writing through formal and informal means, and using stories or symbols (Eddy, 2010a, 2010b; A. Smith et al., 2010). College presidents have used framing in three different ways: visionary—emphasizing future possibilities, step-by-step—laying out the immediate steps needed to achieve an organization’s goals, and connective—facilitating dialogue and communication between people to foster mutual understanding and shared visions (Eddy, 2010a, 2010b; Hamilton, 2016).

Communication and framing are included as concepts in my study because the mid-level leaders I interviewed were in positions where they could manage and communicate the meaning of the pathways work through framing (Fairhurst, 2005). It was interesting to explore how they framed the messages related to pathways and change for their colleagues, the communication methods they employed, and how they were able (or unable) to bridge the goals of the larger organization of community colleges and nonprofits with those of their own community college.
**Emotions**

In periods of crisis or change, top-level leaders often provide the direction for an organization. Mid-level managers engage in sensemaking, to come to a sensible understanding for themselves, and play a pivotal role in how the messages are passed on to the frontline employees (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). According to Huy (2002), a key activity for mid-level managers is emotional balancing through sensegiving. Using sensegiving to create a sense of continuity during times of change helps manage employees’ emotions.

Playing on emotions can also be used during periods of change, in sensegiving, by emphasizing the seriousness of the situation, signaling change is needed, causing worry and anxiety, and then presenting a course of action to alleviate the problems (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) termed this *ambiguity-by-design* (p. 445) and noted its usefulness in setting the stage for change to happen. In a literature review of moderators in leader sensegiving, Kraft et al. (2015) found that people who are feeling positive are less likely to engage in creative problem solving. Establishing a sense of urgency by stressing the drastic nature of an impending change motivates people to engage in more difficult, bottom-up approaches to change (Kraft et al., 2015).

Emotion as a factor related to sensegiving is included in my conceptual framework because emotions play a part in strategic change. Change can create ambiguity, confusion, insecurity, and distrust as it undermines the status quo (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Nickerson (2014) wrote of leading change from the middle and described four negative emotions that threaten change efforts: disrespect, envy, fear, and anger. These emotions lead to resistance, undermining, and lack of support and can come from stakeholders and/or the leaders themselves (Nickerson, 2014). Brown (2018) wrote about the importance of vulnerability, courage, trust, and empathy
for successful leadership. She also discussed the constructive use of guilt compared to the destructive nature of shame. Guilt is an uncomfortable feeling of “I did something bad” (Brown, 2018, p. 128) and signals the need for change. Shame is a destructive feeling of “I am bad” (p. 128) and is associated with perfectionism, cover-ups, and self-worth, which is tied to productivity (Brown, 2018). Leaders who use shame to manage may bully, publicly reprimand, or criticize people in front of their colleagues (Brown, 2018).

Preparing mid-level leaders to initiate and successfully lead a change initiative requires training, including time to process their concerns (Bolman & Deal, 2013) and time to learn to engage in difficult conversations with empathy and kindness (Brown, 2018). A successful innovation requires “that all involved have the talent, confidence, and expertise to carry out their new responsibilities” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 381). Given the different educational and experience paths people take to arrive at mid-level leadership positions in higher education, it would be surprising if all felt they were well-prepared to carry out the challenge of leading a college-wide change initiative. Being open to the role of emotions in my mid-level leaders’ stories of preparing for and leading a major change initiative was important for understanding the leaders’ experiences.

**Emotional Intelligence**

Sensemaking and sensegiving may be thought of as the “what” of change leadership. Emotional intelligence may be thought of as the “how.” Mayer et al. (2016) defined *emotional intelligence* as “the ability to reason validly with emotions and with emotion-related information, and to use emotions to enhance thought” (p. 296). Mayer, Salovey, et al. (2008) described a four-branch hierarchy of emotional intelligence, building from fundamental to more complex skills: perceiving one’s own and others’ emotions accurately, using emotions to facilitate thinking,
understanding emotions and the signals conveyed by emotions, and managing emotions to reach certain goals (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Research suggests managers in the workplace with higher levels of emotional intelligence are seen as demonstrating more leadership behaviors than their peers (Barling et al., 2000). Aspiring leaders in higher education settings recognize qualities of emotional intelligence as important and relevant for academic leadership (Parrish, 2015). In the following sections, I briefly define aspects of emotional intelligence using the model developed by Mayer, Salovey, et al. (2008) and Mayer et al. (2016), as well as the reasons for including them in my conceptual framework.

**Self-Awareness and Perceiving Emotions**

At its most basic level, emotional intelligence involves being aware of one’s own emotions and being able to detect others’ emotions based on verbal and nonverbal cues (George, 2000). This includes being able to understand how emotions are expressed, identifying deceptive emotional expressions (such as a warm smile and handshake from someone in a public meeting who belittles you privately), and being able to discriminate between accurate and inaccurate emotional expressions (Mayer et al., 2016). Recognizing and perceiving others’ emotions accurately is a necessary component of empathy and being sensitive to what others are feeling (Goleman, 2005).

**Using Emotions**

Felt emotions serve as signals for where attention should be directed and what the focus of attention should be (George, 2000; Mayer, Roberts, et al., 2008). Change leaders have their own emotions, and those they lead experience emotions. Positive emotions facilitate integrative thinking, inductive reasoning, and creativity, while negative emotions may facilitate careful
information processing, attention to detail, and error detection (George, 2000; Mayer et al., 2016). Leaders use emotional work to manage their own felt emotions, to comply with social norms and expectations, and to improve their effectiveness in areas such as bolstering enthusiasm or alleviating stress in followers (Humphrey, 2012; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

Emotional labor was first studied in service occupations where employees were expected to display positive emotions to please customers (Hochschild, 2012). Emotional labor describes the work required, but not always recognized or compensated, to suppress or evoke behaviors that may not match a worker’s true emotions (Gardner et al., 2009; Hochschild, 2012; Humphrey et al., 2015). As initially proposed by sociologist Hochschild in 1983, the assumption was that emotional labor in the form of surface acting is negative; it is distressing for workers to fake emotions for employers’ financial gains (Grandey et al., 2013).

Leaders use emotional labor to influence followers’ moods and emotions, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty (Humphrey et al., 2008). Surface acting, displaying confidence and optimism even when a leader feels anxious and worried, leads to emotional exhaustion (Humphrey et al., 2008). However, two other forms of emotional labor, deep acting and genuine emotional labor, can be positive and helpful to leaders when they are trying to motivate their followers, set an appropriate tone for a situation, or operate in any of the many situations leaders must adapt to (Gardner et al., 2009; Humphrey et al., 2015).

Deep acting occurs when a person tries to experience a desired emotion so their behaviors and feelings will be in sync (Diefendorff et al., 2005). Researchers have found deep acting is slightly related to emotional exhaustion but is also associated with improved job performance, job satisfaction, and feelings of personal fulfillment (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Humphrey et al., 2015). Using Ashforth and Humphrey’s (1993) definition of emotional labor as
“displaying the appropriate behavior” (p. 90), genuine and spontaneous expression of an expected emotion is also considered emotional labor. Leaders who display genuine emotional labor are perceived favorably, and “leading with emotional labor” (Humphrey, 2012, p. 741) involves using a set of behaviors that help leaders establish better and more authentic relationships (Humphrey, 2012). However, emotional labor may also be used in an inauthentic or unethical manner by leaders who intend to deceive or mislead others by using surface acting to make emotional appeals (Fulmer & Barry, 2009; Humphrey, 2012).

Leaders likely use the three different forms of emotional labor in different situations and to communicate different types and levels of emotions (Humphrey, 2012). Using emotional labor to promote well-being, achieve ethical goals, and establish trusting relationships may help leaders be more effective (Humphrey, 2012). In my study it was important to listen for stories that include references to the emotional labor the participants may have expended to move their projects forward and how that affected their experiences leading change.

Understanding Emotions

Mayer et al. (2016) described the ability to understand emotions as a more complex aspect of emotional intelligence. People who understand emotions can recognize and evaluate cultural differences; understand complex, mixed, and changing emotions; determine antecedents, meanings, and consequences of emotions; and understand how someone might feel in the future or under certain conditions (Mayer et al., 2016). In a work setting, leaders who understand emotions can better predict colleagues’ reactions to proposed changes given the current circumstances and the way in which the proposals are communicated (George, 2000).

Transformative leadership requires what Byrne et al. (2014) described as personal resources: higher levels of positive mood (Walter & Bruch, 2007), optimism, hope, resiliency
(Peterson et al., 2009), pragmatism, and self-confidence (Ross & Offermann, 1997). Diminished personal resources affect a transformational leader’s ability to expend the energy necessary to serve as an inspirational role model, support innovation, and treat followers as individuals with unique needs, strengths, and aspirations (Barling et al., 2000; Byrne et al., 2014). Anxiety, depression, and substance abuse at work are symptoms of depleted personal resources that lead to less transformative leadership and, perhaps worse, abusive supervision (Byrne et al., 2014; Tepper, 2007). The capacity of a leader to understand and care for their own emotional well-being is important for their health and their ability to sustain the behaviors required for transformative leadership (Byrne et al., 2014; Cashman, 1998; Goleman, 2006).

**Managing Emotions**

Change elicits emotions and even positive change can be associated with intense and negative emotions (Kearney, 2013). Resistance to change may come because people disagree with the change but may also come because they do not understand the change and how it might affect their roles and their work (Kezar, 2014). Change leaders may also be faced with “cynics, victims, and bystanders” (Block, 2013, p. 190). The cynics publicly give voice to all the reasons the proposed change will not work, often with enough truth to sow doubt, even within the leader. Victims claim they are powerless to make changes, and bystanders are those who withhold commitment until they have proof an initiative works (Block, 2013). Others, the “controllers” (Davis, 2011, p. 213), seek a voice in every decision and block progress when decisions do not meet their approval. Change leaders risk being marginalized, attacked, and sidetracked by those who prefer to maintain the status quo (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). Frost (2004) wrote, “Leaders create pain” (p. 115) by virtue of their responsibility to implement initiatives and lead change. Leaders may also find themselves in the role of helping people through change by listening,
buffering, creating safe physical and emotional spaces, and sometimes by extricating people from painful situations (Frost, 2004).

Within emotional intelligence theory, Mayer et al. (2016) described managing emotions as the ability to manage one’s own and others’ emotions to achieve a desired outcome, including staying open to all emotions, engaging with emotions that are helpful, and assessing strategies to maintain, reduce, or intensify an emotional response.

The work of managing the emotional balancing of employees often falls to mid-level managers (Huy, 2002), who must also manage their own emotions. Emotional labor may be an expression of emotional intelligence in the workplace. Emotional labor is the expressed feelings and emotions, which may differ from a person’s actual feelings and emotions, that are necessary to gain the cooperation of coworkers (Meier et al., 2006). Over time the work of managing incongruence between private feelings and public behavior is stressful (Hochschild, 2012). Although not likely to be acknowledged, trained for, or rewarded by an employer, emotional labor includes managing one’s own emotions as well as the emotions of others to meet the expectations of the employer (Koster, 2011). Heifetz and Linsky (2017) wrote of the emotional perils involved in leading change: “Leadership takes the capacity to stomach hostility so that you can stay connected to the people, lest you disengage from them and exacerbate the danger” (p. 18). Davis (2011), in his handbook for postsecondary administrators, wrote of the importance of maintaining emotional balance. Leaders are subject to criticism, both valid and invalid, as well as admiration, both real and pretended, from many quarters (Davis, 2011).

Mid-level leaders responsible for a major change initiative may or may not be prepared to manage their own feelings of anger, frustration, and guilt. They may or may not be prepared to deal with people who look up to them and look to them for direction, wisdom, favors, and,
sometimes, perfection. Listening for the emotional experiences of the participants in this study was interesting and important for understanding their broader experiences of leading change.

Chapter 2 Closure

Community college leaders operate within a complicated environment where calls for change and pressures to maintain the status quo are constant. Kadlec and Rowlett (2014) described challenges these change leaders face:

Common challenges to sustainable, scalable innovation on behalf of student success include heavy workloads, initiative fatigue, lack of leadership buy-in, resistance to mandates, justifiable fear of change, legitimate arguments against a given initiative, resource constraints, and even disagreement about the nature of the problem. (p. 89)

Wallin (2010) described community college change leadership as broader and deeper than transformational leadership because it involves both individual and organizational change. Kezar (2013) studied colleges making transformational changes over a period of three years. Her findings suggested “campuses that made the most progress implementing transformational change around interdisciplinary work engaged in both sensemaking and sensegiving processes at both the department/division level and campus-wide level that unfolded in phases” (p. 767).

Mid-level community college leaders attempting to implement strategic change measures to impact student retention and completion have a challenging job. Conditions inside and outside the colleges contribute to the problems of poor rates of student success. Whether they realize it or not, according to literature on organizational change, community college mid-level leaders charged with implementing transformative change have most likely engaged in emotion-infused sensemaking and sensegiving.

My study explored the experiences of mid-level leaders, through their own words, as they led the implementation of guided pathways initiatives on their campuses. The next chapter describes the method I used, a phenomenological approach, and the rationale for this method.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a Michigan community college. In this chapter I describe the research design and rationale for the phenomenological approach I used; reflections on my identity as it relates to this study; the sample and site; the instruments and data collection procedures, including how I assured trustworthiness and secured data storage; how I analyzed the data; and limitations and delimitations of the study.

Researchers use the phenomenological approach to elicit comprehensive descriptions of people’s experiences, striving to come as close as possible to understanding a person’s true experience, as relayed through their subjective perspective (Moustakas, 1994; Schultz, 1967; Seidman, 2013). In keeping with that purpose, one overarching research question guided this study: How do guided pathways leaders at Michigan community colleges experience their roles in the strategic change process?

Research Design and Rationale

I used a qualitative phenomenological approach for this study. The qualitative research process is designed to learn the meaning that the participants hold about the issue and is valuable for exploring and describing, among other things, phenomena about which little is known and populations that may be ignored or marginalized (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Phenomenological approaches seek to understand the essence of participants’ shared experience through descriptions, exploration, analysis, and comparisons of their individual lived experiences.
Phenomenological research is the “search for what it means to be human” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12), to understand what it is to live in the world as a man, woman, child, or, in this study, a mid-level community college leader responsible for leading a change effort. Human research using a phenomenological approach “is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). As a quilter selects, arranges, and rearranges bits of fabric of various shapes, colors, and textures to make one unified piece, each bit is important, but the power of the pieces come through the patterns they form when they are bound together as a whole. So it is with the researcher using a phenomenological approach, who gathers and describes, as thoroughly, vividly, and accurately as possible, each participant’s experience (Moustakas, 1994) in a search for patterns, their common essence, and a better understanding of the nature of the phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

This study focused on the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level community college administrator or faculty member. The experience all participants had in common was leading the strategic change effort to implement guided pathways at community colleges in Michigan. Data collected from the participants, what they experienced as well as how they understood their experiences, were analyzed to identify themes (Saldaña, 2016) on what it means to be a change leader at a community college. I was interested in what a Michigan community college leader responsible for leading the strategic change of implementing guided pathways experienced, how they experienced it, and how they constructed meaning from it, based on the words of that leader.
Reflections on My Identity

My interest in this subject comes from my personal and professional work as a counselor and administrator at Muskegon Community College (MCC) in Michigan. Since 2010, I have been deeply involved in leading the student success agenda at the college, which includes reviewing and changing policies that impact student retention and degree completion, such as mandatory orientation for new students and requiring a college success course for students who place into developmental courses. I have been involved in improving educational practices by accelerating developmental English and math, requiring tutoring for certain subjects, focusing faculty professional development on teaching and learning, and increasing student engagement both in and out of the classroom. Participating in the Michigan Guided Pathways Institute (MGPI) and implementing guided pathways at MCC was a logical assignment for me because it fit with our student success work and my faculty role as chairperson of the Counseling and Advising Center. In 2017, I moved from a faculty role to the vice president position within academic affairs. Changing from a role with much responsibility but little authority to a role with more responsibility and significant positional authority added to my personal understanding of the challenges and advantages of leading from the middle of the institution and those of leading from upper administration.

MCC was in the first cohort of the MGPI, which began in early 2015 and continued through summer 2016. MGPI support consisted of several conferences and meetings at various colleges around the state, conference calls, and webinars. Training for pathways leaders included orientation to the pathways approach, engaging stakeholders, building program maps, and using technology. Through those conferences and meetings, I met and talked with several guided pathways leaders from various community colleges and became familiar, in a very general sense,
with the progress, challenges, and frustrations the leaders experienced. At my own college, leading guided pathways was, and continues to be, a challenge as incorporating the measures prescribed by guided pathways is perceived as one more initiative rather than a comprehensive plan, incorporating our already robust student success agenda.

While change leadership at community colleges is the topic for this study, the leadership of guided pathways provides the shared experience of the participants. Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggested bracketing my personal experience with guided pathways and change leadership to help me see the phenomena anew, through the participants’ experiences, and to recognize the divide between insights based on personal experiences and insights based on data collection. However, Toma (2000) supported a different approach, one of viewing the study as a collaborative partnership between the participants and researcher. Toma’s position is that if the goal of qualitative research is better data and the data are gathered through interactions and conversations, it makes sense to build stronger, more intense relationships with participants rather than construct an artificial divide. Toma’s approach is a better fit with my experience as a college counselor and a guided pathways leader at my own college. This issue is important to me, and I felt if I communicated that to participants and they perceived my interest as strong and personal, the discussions might be richer and more candid. Prior to going into the field, to help me recall my experience as a mid-level leader and clarify the emotions I felt, I wrote my own personal profile.

**Sample and Site**

Purposeful sampling in qualitative research is the process of selecting participants who will best help the researcher understand the phenomenon being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell, 2013). In order to best understand the phenomenon of leading major change as a
mid-level faculty or staff member at a community college, I selected participants who have been involved as guided pathways leaders at institutions of different sizes and settings, where they have used structured approaches to implementation. I used the process described below.

The guided pathways movement in Michigan is voluntary. Community colleges have not been mandated by the state or the federal government to implement pathways. However, 23 of the 28 community colleges in Michigan are doing so. Support and resources have come from the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS), an organization within the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA). Although there is no state community college system or other regulatory board, community colleges in Michigan established the MCCA to self-regulate and advocate for community colleges. MCCA is an association of all 28 public community colleges in Michigan, whose mission is to provide leadership on issues affecting member colleges. Among other things, MCCA engages in legislative and public advocacy and fosters collaboration and connections among community colleges and their stakeholders (MCCA, 2019).

The MCSS, an initiative of the MCCA, is designed to provide state-level support and coordination to the community colleges by serving as the point of connection for the colleges’ leadership, administrators, faculty, and staff in their efforts to improve student persistence and completion. MCSS was established in 2011 in response to public, political, and social concerns over the growing need for a college credential to enter the workforce. Michigan’s decentralized system of higher education led to colleges developing student success initiatives in isolation, and the MCSS was established to address the disconnect and provide opportunities for collaboration (Baldwin, 2013). Since then, MCSS has joined the Postsecondary State Policy Network, an initiative of Jobs for the Future, a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to ensure
lower-income people have the skills and credentials to be successful in our economy (Jobs for the Future, 2020).

In 2015, MCSS began the MGPI to help Michigan community colleges work together to create awareness of the need for pathways, deal with institutional barriers to student success, and build student supports into clearly defined program pathways. The goal of guided pathways is to get and keep students on planned programs of study, so they will be more likely to complete a certificate or degree (Bailey et al., 2015). All community college leaders who participated in MGPI were considered potential participants for this study. The institute had two cohorts: the first consisted of leaders from 12 community colleges, and the second consisted of leaders from 11 colleges (E. Orians, personal communication, November 16, 2016). I interviewed participants from these cohorts to better understand the phenomenon of mid-level leadership and change at different types of community colleges,

I recruited potential participants with the inclusionary criteria that they are, or have been, employed by a Michigan community college, have been identified at that college as the leader of the guided pathways initiative, and have participated in MGPI. The goal was to purposefully select participants who represent institutions with structured approaches to their guided pathways implementations and institutions of different sizes and settings, who were accessible for interviews. An additional goal was to interview participants to the point where people outside the sample would be able to identify with the participants (Seidman, 2013). J. A. Smith et al. (2009) recommended three to six participants so there would be adequate data to realize meaningful similarities and differences between participants but not so much that the researcher is overwhelmed. The pilot study I conducted, using the method I planned for this research, showed me the volume of data I could expect. Practical aspects of participants’ availability, willingness,
and time required of them also influenced the number of individuals included in the study. After I successfully recruited and conducted productive interviews with three participants, I determined three was sufficient for the purposes of this study.

Dr. Jenny Schanker, of the MCSS, provided names and contact information for guided pathways leaders at the community colleges for the pilot study I conducted, and I used this list to recruit prospective participants via email. Of the prospective participants from 23 different colleges, I eliminated myself, the participant from my pilot study, three other colleges and their guided pathways leaders because I knew them personally, and one other because the leader had left the college. Of the 17 remaining, I purposefully recruited the leaders from two colleges, which I will refer to as Midtown Community College and City Community College, because they had implemented guided pathways in structured ways and had presented their process and results at workshops. Their approaches were different, and I thought interviewing the leaders from each college would be interesting. I also selected prospective participants to represent at least two different sized institutions based on their full-time equivalent enrollment and Carnegie classification (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017), and their settings based on the colleges’ website descriptions.

Using the sample email (Appendix A), I introduced myself and described the study to three prospective participants, including those from the two colleges I was particularly interested in. I received one reply within a week and scheduled a phone appointment with that person, who indicated he was interested in learning more about the study. This participant was from Midtown Community College. I received no reply to my email invitation or a follow-up email from the two other prospective participants. One month later, I sent invitations to four more prospective participants, including a different person from City Community College. I received a reply from
the guided pathways leader from a third college, Small Town Community College, the next day
and a reply from the second person at City Community College within a week. I talked with
those two people via phone to inform them of the particulars of the study, and when they agreed
to participate, I stopped recruiting participants.

During the phone appointments, I reviewed the consent form (Appendix B), including all
aspects of the study, explained what would be expected of the individual should they agree to
participate, determined if they were interested, discussed informed consent, and answered
questions the prospective participants had about the study (Seidman, 2013). Three individuals
responded to the email invitation, and during the phone appointments all three agreed to
participate in the study. I assigned pseudonyms to the individuals and their colleges: Dr. Michael
Yav from Midtown Community College, Diana Page from Small Town Community College, and
Antonio Charles from City Community College. Michael Yav and Antonio Charles were
members of the first MCSS guided pathways cohort, and Diana Page was a member of the
second cohort.

The goal of the phenomenological approach to research is to make meaning of experience
by gathering comprehensive descriptions of the experience within the context of the participant’s
life (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2013). Extended time is used to build relationships with
participants and “establish a contextual history for the participants’ current experience”
(Seidman, 2013, p. 20). Data for this study were collected primarily through three in-depth
interviews with each participant, using Seidman’s (2013) model. The first interview focused on
life history, to put the participants’ experience leading up the present in context; the second on
the details of the participants’ present experiences as they lead change at their colleges; and the
third on reflection—how the participants felt about and made sense of their experiences leading
change. The three-interview sequence also allowed for greater rapport to develop over multiple visits.

Seidman (2013) discussed the principle of equity when using interviewing as a research method: participants are giving the researcher something they want so the researcher must reciprocate by allowing the participant to choose the time, date, and place for the interviews while keeping the arrangements comfortable for themselves and avoiding any feelings of resentment on the part of either party. Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the requirement for social distancing, interviews were conducted using videoconferencing with WebEx as the platform. I conducted the interviews via videoconferencing from my personal home office, which is quiet and private. During the phone appointment to explain the study, I discussed with each participant their comfort level and ability to participate in three interviews via WebEx. Prior to beginning the first interview, I reviewed the consent form with each participant and had the participant sign the form.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures**

To gather and tell the stories of these individuals, I used in-depth, semi-structured interviewing according to the three-interview model described by Seidman (2013). I video- and audio-recorded the interviews and used the protocols in Appendices C, D, and E to guide my questions. The protocols facilitated active listening by allowing me to write notes and follow-up questions without interrupting the participant. Field notes were kept for each interview using the guide in Appendix F. Field notes helped organize the data collection, document time and place, and prompted my written reflections immediately after each interview. Each interview took 45 to 90 minutes, and the three interviews took place over a two-to-three-week period.
The first interview explored the participants’ life histories by asking questions about educational and professional backgrounds and how the participants became guided pathways leaders. The second interview explored the participants’ contemporary experiences by asking questions like: How do you describe leadership? How do you lead? How would you describe your role with guided pathways? What were the relationships like? Can you tell me about the challenges you’ve experienced in your work related to guided pathways? Can you tell me about the rewards? The third interview explored the participants’ reflections on the meaning of their experiences by asking them to discuss their roles at their colleges prior to the guided pathways initiative compared to now. Additional questions included: How do you make sense of your work to implement guided pathways? What does the work mean to you? Can you tell me about the emotional side of your experience with guided pathways? What has been the emotional impact on you? The interview questions were designed to provide some structure and direction while allowing enough leeway to explore individual experiences and feelings, as well as what the experiences and feelings meant to each participant.

The participants seemed to enjoy remembering and talking about leading the guided pathways experiences at their colleges. The first interview, when each participant talked about their own educational and career path that led to the leadership position, was the shortest for all three participants. The second and third interviews were of similar lengths, between 60 and 90 minutes, for all participants. The participants were more engaged when they talked about the people they worked with, in both positive and negative ways.

In 2018, I conducted a pilot study with one participant using the procedures I used in this study. I learned the importance of setting up an organized system for all the data records before beginning the data collection. By listening and transcribing the interview recordings, I also
learned the importance of following up with “real questions” (Seidman, 2013, p. 87). Open-ended questions with answers that I do not already know and cannot anticipate are “real questions.” I did not use the data from my pilot project in this study because I tested the three-interview method for the first time, did not intend to use the results for this study, and did not tell the participant I would be using the interviews for dissertation research. In addition, I changed some of the interview questions to eliminate leading questions and added probing, or follow-up, questions that I used when something pertinent to my topic required more exploration.

**Trustworthiness in Collecting Data**

Trustworthiness is the level of trust we have in a research study and has to do with the credibility of reported results or claims, the judgments about the claims, the evidence to support the claims, and the usefulness of the claims (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather participants’ understanding of their lived experiences of leading guided pathways implementation on their campuses. I recorded the interviews so accurate transcripts were made. After each interview I wrote field notes (Appendix F), including my reflections on the process, the topic, the interview setting, and the participants’ appearance, body language, and affect so that I could provide rich, thick descriptions in the final narratives. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) referred to the art of thick descriptions as seeing and judging information to “produce new, insightful knowledge about the human condition” (p. 102). They consider thick descriptions an essential part of ethical research behavior. Rich, detailed descriptions of events, participants, and settings situate the research in context to help readers understand the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) and enable them to transfer the information to other settings (Creswell, 2013).
Member checking, which involves having participants judge the accuracy and completeness of statements made in the research report, was built into the study (Gall et al., 2007) by offering to share any material I wrote that related to an individual participant and by offering to share the final report with every participant prior to releasing it for public access. After a near-final draft of each profile was complete, I shared it with the corresponding participant by email, asking if I “got it right” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 230), and asking for their reactions, insights, and corrections. If they wished, I also offered to change the pseudonym I had given each participant.

**Storing Data**

Creswell (2013) provided guidance on storing data: participants and their institutions were assigned pseudonyms so there is no identifying information in the interview files or transcripts. Interviews were digitally recorded using high-quality equipment, and the recordings were stored on a secure laptop with a backup copy locked in a cabinet in my home office. Transcripts of the interviews were also stored on a secure laptop with backup copies on a flash drive, which was stored in a locked cabinet. A master list of the interviews with dates and places and a master list of any supplemental material gathered during the project were stored on a secure laptop with a backup copy on a flash drive locked in a cabinet in my home office. Research data from this study will be maintained according to the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) of Western Michigan University requirements: recordings were destroyed after transcription and the transcriptions will be maintained for at least three years following the conclusion of the study. Good organization and storage are important to safeguard participants’ anonymity, to protect the data necessary for the study, and to contribute to the

**Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis in qualitative research involves organizing the data, reading through the data and taking notes, coding or sorting the data into small categories of information and then searching for themes, interpreting or making sense of the data, and developing a visual representation of the data (Creswell, 2013). The steps within the process are interconnected and Creswell describes a data analysis spiral where “the researcher engages in a process of moving in analytic circles” (p. 182) as opposed to a linear approach.

I worked through this process using the data analysis strategy described in Foss and Waters (2007). This strategy involves taking the data (transcribed interviews) and working with the material using colors and codes, physically separating and sorting sections of transcriptions, using sticky notes to label the sorted piles of data, and using the labels to explore relationships and patterns. I chose this strategy because the various ways of physically and mentally interacting with the data appealed to me. Organizing the data with the aid of color coding and physically sorting meaningful bits of information into related categories was a good way to keep the data traceable to its origins while allowing me to try out different patterns and themes. The quilt-making process—sorting fabric pieces by color, texture, or pattern and arranging and rearranging to create a meaningful whole—is again an apt metaphor for working with the words and sentiments gathered from the participants’ interviews.

**Analysis Steps**

The raw data from the interviews with each participant consisted of three interviews each for a total of nine interviews, which was about 12 hours of videotaped material. The steps I
followed to analyze the data are described in Foss and Waters (2007) and Seidman (2013) and were informed by the pilot study I did in 2018. First, after collecting all the data from the three interviews, I transcribed the recordings and field notes into about 200 pages of text. I transcribed the material so I would know the data better and make consistent decisions on how to represent nonverbal signals, such as laughter or sighs, as well as pauses and changes in the tone of voice (Seidman, 2013). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) described transcription as an “interpretive process” (p. 203) that takes evolving conversation and fixates it into abstract text. Transcribing the recordings myself helped me build the bridge between oral and written, rather than having a recorded version and a typed version of what I could only assume were the same thing (while knowing, intuitively, that they could not be the same). After transcribing each interview, including all the “ums,” “ahs,” “you knows,” pauses, and laughter, as well as the words and sentences, I reread the transcription to make sure the text matched the recording as closely as possible. Some phrases on the recordings were unintelligible and I noted that in the transcript. Brinkmann and Kvale discussed the difference between oral and written language styles, and while there is no true transformation from oral to written, it is an issue of trustworthiness to recognize and describe decisions made during transcription. After transcribing, I combined the three-interview series for each participant and printed a copy of each interview series. Following Creswell’s (2013) advice, I read and reread the transcriptions and field notes multiple times to get a sense of the interviews in their entirety, taking notes on things I found interesting or ideas that were repeated multiple times by a participant. At this stage, I worked with each transcript, one participant at a time, and, as Marshall and Rossman (2016) recommended, engaged intimately with the material by reading, sitting, staring, thinking, and writing.
Once I distilled each participant’s three-interview transcript into a readable profile that I felt conveyed their stories, using their own voices and words, I sent it to the participant via email. I asked each for their reactions, corrections, and insights and gave them the opportunity to change the pseudonym I had assigned, should they wish to. The participants’ reactions to the member checking confirmed I understood and expressed their stories in a way that was consistent with their intentions. One participant described it as a “weird and interesting read” and felt I did a great job with his profile. The other two thanked me for providing their profiles to review and suggested a few corrections to committee or degree names and position titles. I had masked those items in the profiles to protect their identities and did not make the corrections they suggested. As the dissertation was nearing completion, I communicated with each to thank them again and let them know why I did not incorporate the changes they suggested.

After making minor spelling and grammar changes based on the participants’ feedback, I printed another copy of each profile. I marked and labeled passages I found interesting using guidance from Seidman (2013), who paid more attention to conflict (between people or within a person); expressed hopes; frustrations and resolutions; indications of isolation, collegiality, and community; and language that indicates beginnings, middles, and ends of processes. The label tentatively identified the subject of the marked passages or a category in which a passage might fit.

Using Seidman’s (2013) steps for “crafting a profile” (p. 123), I made two copies of the marked and labeled transcript of the three-interview sequence for each participant. The next steps helped focus my selection of meaningful bits of information in the vast amount of text generated from the taped interviews. Using one copy, I physically cut out the marked passages, sorted them by the label I added, and filed them in individual folders. Using the other copy, I used a word
processing program to put all the passages I marked together in a single transcript, leaving out the unmarked text. Following that step, I read the single transcript, marked the most compelling passages, and used those to build three narratives using the participants’ own words. Using the cut-up pieces of labeled and sorted transcription, I reread the passages again, listening to what the participants told me, and selected those that were compelling, those that connected to other participants’ words, and those that connected to the literature and my conceptual framework. I looked for topics that could help organize parts of the participant profiles and, as Seidman noted, found it difficult to give up some of the interview material.

My plan to present the results of this study as profiles came from my pilot study experience. In my pilot study, I wrestled with the transcripts from three interviews using data coding, theming, and clustering strategies from Foss and Waters (2007) and Saldaña (2016). Nothing resonated as a good way to share the participant’s experience until I read Seidman’s (2013) rationale for crafting profiles. Profiles and vignettes use the participants’ own words to tell their stories. Profiles are narratives with a beginning, middle, and end, and a feeling of conflict and resolution. A vignette is shorter and reflects a piece of the participant’s experience (Seidman, 2013). I used a vignette to present the results of my pilot study because the participant’s words were compelling and illustrated the concept of emotional intelligence in leading change in a thought-provoking manner. I chose to present the results of this study as profiles because the material was rich, thick, and included beginnings, middles, and ends as well as conflicts and resolutions.

While narratives and profiles could speak for themselves Seidman (2013) wrote of one more step—describing what the researcher learned throughout the entire data gathering, transcribing, reading, marking, selecting, sorting, organizing, and putting excerpts together to tell
a story. So, I completed the data analysis by reflecting and interpreting what the material and work meant to me, how I understood it, how I made sense of my experience, and findings that emerged from the data.

**Trustworthiness in Data Analysis**

By building trust with the participants, engaging in in-depth interviews, learning their stories and experiences, checking with them to make sure I understood clearly, and maintaining a journal of my reflections on the subject and the process, I built the foundation for trustworthiness in this study. Lincoln and Guba (2007) and Creswell (2013) discussed prolonged engagement and persistent observation as being important to the validity of qualitative research. My goal was for the interviews to yield rich and thick descriptions of the participants’ stories and the meanings they gave the experience of leading change, ensuring I had a wealth of data to work with for reading, labeling, sorting, examining patterns, and reporting results.

Member checking helped ensure the credibility of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I also talked with professional peers who are not involved or familiar with the research on leading change and mid-level leaders to maintain a check on the methods I used and the conclusions I assigned to the study. Throughout I maintained an audit trail, documenting the time, date, place, participants, and circumstances of each meeting and exchange of information; documenting the process of analyzing the data; and documenting the member checking.

Throughout the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data, I took care to protect the confidentiality and trust of the participants by using pseudonyms and by masking or omitting information that could inadvertently identify the colleges or individuals. For instance, if a participant discussed a problem with an administrator, I described the problem but did not include any identifying information about the participant or the institution in which the issue
occurred (e.g., “one faculty member noted a lack of support from the dean during the implementation phase…”).

Lincoln and Guba (2007) discussed the importance of “parallel criteria of trustworthiness” (p. 18) in qualitative research because the conventional criteria of reliability and validity used with quantitative research does not fit approaches that require the researcher to become involved with the participants. Their constructs for evaluating trustworthiness (which they see as parallel to rigor in quantitative research) are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Trustworthiness in this research project is important because the community college stakeholders (administrators, staff, faculty, students, board members) as well as a wider audience of people interested in community colleges should be able to believe the claims and results of the research and should be able to see and judge the evidence upon which the claims are based. Further, the claims should have some potential to be useful in addressing the problems of leading change from the middle (Creswell, 2013).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was undertaken to understand the experiences of a small group of community college faculty and administrators who were charged with leading the guided pathways initiative at their colleges. One limitation of the study was the inability to meet with the participants in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Interviews were conducted virtually, which saved travel time and allowed participants to speak from their homes, but this format did not allow me to view the environments in which they worked. Technical difficulties also interrupted some of the interviews but never to the point that an interview had to be shortened or abandoned.

Qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable to larger populations; it is meant to further the understanding of the research participants and the phenomena being studied, and to
educate the reader about the phenomena and the research approach (Toma, 2000). This study was meant to describe the experiences and emotions of people charged with leading the guided pathways strategic change effort at a handful of community colleges in Michigan and to understand the essence of their shared experience. Delimitations of this study included choosing only community colleges in Michigan, selecting only those mid-level leaders who were tasked with leading guided pathways implementation, and selecting just a few of those so I could manage the logistics and data of three extensive interviews with each participant. This study was not intended to describe, explain, or predict the experiences of other community college leaders involved with guided pathways or leading change efforts. It was intended to help readers gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of mid-level community college leaders responsible for implementing a major change initiative.

Chapter 3 Closure

In summary, this study used a qualitative approach, specifically a phenomenological approach, to attempt to describe the lived experiences of Michigan community college faculty and staff members charged with leading the guided pathways strategic change effort at their colleges. A series of three in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders from three colleges, and the data were transcribed, analyzed, and organized to provide thick, rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences and the essence of their shared experience of leading a change initiative.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a Michigan community college. Using a phenomenological approach through a series of three interviews with each of three participants, I sought to understand how they experienced their roles in strategic change, the emotional aspects of leading change, and how they made sense of their experiences. One overarching research question guided this study: How do guided pathways leaders at Michigan community colleges experience their roles in the strategic change process?

The results are presented as profiles, one per participant, crafted from transcripts of the three interviews. The profiles may speak for themselves, but I have written a reflection following each to highlight the connections to the research question. The final section of this chapter describes the findings that emerged from the participant interviews and relate to the question of how guided pathways leaders from Michigan community colleges experienced their roles in the change process.

Participant Profiles

In the following sections, I introduce each participant to provide context and my impressions of the interviews and follow those with profiles crafted from the participants’ own words. I edited the interview transcripts for length and readability, omitting the sounds the participants would not use in writing (Seidman, 2013). The profiles contain relevant passages that tell the participants’ stories and pertain to the research question. Within the profiles, I used
three ellipses for omitted text within a sentence, and four ellipses for omitted text at the end of a sentence. This approach allowed me to honor the words of the participants. Following each profile is my reflection on how the interviews with that participant helped me learn more about leading change at a community college.

**Dr. Michael Yav**

Dr. Michael Yav is the chairperson of the developmental studies department at a small rural community college located near a small city in Michigan. He is a faculty leader and institutional reformer. He has worked his entire professional career in education, teaching middle school, high school, and college students in the United States and overseas and was approaching retirement at the time of the study. Michael served as the co-lead for the guided pathways initiative at his community college and was charged, along with a college administrator, with implementing the pathways approach. Michael saw guided pathways as a total college redesign, and it fit well with his history of working as an institutional reformer. During the interviews, Michael was thoughtful and serious. Although our conversations were low-key, his passion for education and making large-scale improvements every place he has worked was readily apparent.

*My Heart Is All About Reform*

I was an English teacher; that’s my background. I was an English and Spanish teacher in middle school and high school. . . . My dream job was to work in a foreign school system. In the early ’80s I visited a university in another country . . . the whole premise is that the purpose of education is the same as the purpose of life, which is to be happy, and people are happy when they are using their potential for doing good in the world. I just love that philosophy. In 1981 my wife and I visited again and I met with a professor, an English professor, at the university and . . .
we corresponded for the next five years, and then in 1986 he called me and said he wanted to recommend me to the department as full-time professor in the English Department there. And so, in 1987 I took my family abroad. I stayed at that university for 14 years and returned in 2001.

I think that experience was pretty foundational for me because I was teaching English in their department, but also, when I got there, I found out their English program was not very good. After three years I said, “The way that English is taught here is not effective and this has been a wonderful experience but . . . I would like to have my teaching be more impactful.” They said, “If you’ll stay, we’ll let you . . . engineer our English program to make it better.” I stayed for another 11 years and we totally revamped their English program. . . . I spent the ’90s totally reforming the English program at a university in another country and that was great.

When I was living abroad, we . . . were totally redesigning the English language program, and that was a massive redesign that involved dozens of people and lots of phases and I was a middle leader. I was . . . leading the steering committee and designing what was going to happen and setting goals and doing hiring and training and all that stuff. But I feel like what I learned about leadership at that time was that the administration . . . helped me so much by empowering me to find out what I thought was the best and let them know what that is. And then they went to work providing resources, trouble-shooting issues that came up, just providing support so the visions we came up with . . . would be realized. So based on that experience I came to really believe that a good leader is the person who identifies the individuals who are in the best position to have a vision, to recognize what things need to be changed . . . the frontline people who should be empowered to make decisions and do the work. And then, as a leader, how can I support them? What can I do to make their job not too overwhelming and to [help them] actually enjoy the work?
My kids grew up . . . and were ready to start high school and college, so we moved back to Michigan. I taught one year at a liberal arts college in their education program and then I came to community college as the coordinator for developmental education. And at my college we have done lots of reform work.

My heart is all about reform. Reforming systems, reforming schools so that they can do a better job of what they do. Even when I was teaching high school . . . they asked me to lead the steering team to prepare for accreditation visits. . . . We had a working team, a whole high school and public-school system team, and created a whole bunch of reform plans, strategies. . . . I love working with people to figure out how to do things better.

That’s really what my heart has been about at my college. . . . How can we do better what we need to do? Especially folks in developmental education. From the very start I could see our developmental students weren’t faring well. . . . There were a lot of us that said, “This is not working. What can we do better?” So, when things like guided pathways came along or corequisite developmental courses or changing how we do placement . . . all that stuff, we said, “What’s here isn’t working so let’s go all in on what seems to be working . . . and let’s go full speed.”

We had what was called the Student Readiness and Success Committee, which was the forerunner of the College Success Committee that I chair now. And that was more of a, kind of a think tank—what can we do better? That committee didn’t have any power. It was a group of people that cared about student success with no power and no teeth. And then when Achieving the Dream came along . . . it was more of an authentic committee that could actually get things done. And then in 2010 we created the College Success Committee which was . . . the next evolution. . . . And that’s been the engine of all the changes that you’ve seen at the college
because that is a formal committee just like assessment or curriculum. It is co-chaired by an administrator, that’s part of her job, and me.

I guess my philosophy of school reform and leadership is you really have to have a team. . . . It can’t be the individual. When the College Success Committee was established, that was my recommendation. Create this student success committee and let it be all departments, all divisions of the college, all campuses. It’s like 50 people on that committee. And it’s all people who really value student success. But . . . I made two conditions for taking the leadership of that committee. One is that it wouldn’t be only faculty-led. It would be a team of co-chairs with one faculty and one administrator. That worked out really well. The other condition was that the recommendations of this committee would not just go up to leadership and they decide what to do with it and that’s that. I said,

If we make a proposal and . . . it isn’t accepted, we want somebody to come back and say why it wasn’t accepted or why it was changed. We want to review everything . . . to have a say before the final decision is made.

And that was agreed to. That’s in the charter of the committee. And I think that’s really important.

In 2014 at the Achieving the Dream conference . . . a panel of people were talking about . . . big initiatives and that’s when I heard about guided pathways. And it sounded like . . . rather than a project or an initiative . . . like a college redesign. That’s what I liked about it. When I came back to the college . . . I proposed to our College Success Committee that we research guided pathways and if it’s something we all agree we should do, then let’s do it. And over the summer I think our leadership also got wind of guided pathways. . . . That’s one of the reasons we were able to really get buy-in, because the faculty were already pushing it even before
leadership said, “Let’s do it.” If it had gone the other way around, there would have been a lot more pushback.

People that are doing the hard work and all the think-tanking, brainstorming, and implementing have to have some power, and I think that’s another reason why this college has been successful at the “all-in” approach. It’s not the thinking happens here and then decisions get made elsewhere. I mean leadership still has the final say, but we get to have dialogue before the final decision is made. I think that’s really important. . . . That would have been a deal-breaker if that wouldn’t have been the case.

When the guided pathways program started, I didn’t think it should just be a faculty lead in charge. So, we had an administrator and a faculty person in charge of that. And I think we put a lot of effort as leaders, the administrator and I, [into] selecting people for the steering committee who would be able to take leadership in their respective areas. . . . We tried to have those people feel they had our support, that they . . . had ownership of their domain, and whatever support they needed collectively we would provide it for them. I hope that’s clear.

I would say that I’m pretty good at coming up with a vision. . . . First of all, identifying the issues, problems, concerns, and then . . . what does the system look like that addresses those concerns? I’m not very good at minutiae and details and doing all that, so my leadership style is to find those people who are really good at implementing a plan and doing the day-to-day management. As a co-chair of the guided pathways it was a little different . . . because that wasn’t a situation where there’s clear division of who’s responsible for what. In my department the lead faculty for reading just handles everything that’s related to that. With guided pathways it’s much more of a fluid kind of interconnected web of . . . interacting systems and so that was a little more tricky. I think my leadership style was to be willing to deal with a whole lot of
ambiguity and messiness. And I’m pretty good with that. I’m pretty good with that. I can tolerate ambiguity and just trust that we’re going to be able to work out the issues. I’d say my leadership style with guided pathways was to initiate broad, difficult, messy conversations and try to make other people comfortable with . . . it’s not going to be a linear progression from where we are to where we need to be. There’s going to be a period of complex . . . I don’t know . . . like going to rapids and all we’re going to be able to do is point what direction we want the boat to go and we’ll react to things as they come up with the trust that—what we always said that first year was it’s not going to be pretty, it’s not going to be perfect, but what we come up with this first year . . . is going to be better than what existed before. And our job is . . . to pay attention to . . . the issues and bring those up and not try to find out who did things wrong but understand nobody’s going to do it exactly right. We’re going to have to be really nimble.

[My co-leader] and I . . . supported each other pretty good with that. She’s a very detail-oriented administrator, not that much of a visionary, so she trusted me to wrangle together a vision and she would work on making things happen. And all the time we were empowering the different people in charge of the different areas to do what they needed to do, be comfortable saying, “Hey this isn’t working, we need to do something different.” Lots of communication. . . . I think facilitating two-directional communication was my main strength that helped us do guided pathways pretty effectively.

I think guided pathways was brilliant. . . . [As a co-lead it was] exhausting, exhilarating. I would almost go as far as to say fun, but it was just . . . there was a lot of stress. I take these things seriously and it was exciting. I have to say overall, looking back because it panned out well, . . . I don’t have regrets, I’m really glad we did it, I enjoyed the process. If it had turned out badly, I would be resentful of the amount of energy and time that went into it. But we’ve, the
college has stuck with it and so I would say it’s a total positive. I’m really proud of the work we did. I do have to say, and this, I think this is relevant to your research question, I told you that we decided to do pathways at the end of 2014; we launched guided pathways 100% in fall of 2016. So along about 2018 . . . when the president did his convocation message [on the] state of the college . . . I was livid because he didn’t even mention guided pathways. . . . After we had done all the guided pathways work and it was really going . . . it seemed like our president had moved on. To the next big thing. I went to our vice president . . . and I just said,

I am pissed, I just can’t believe it. Please, please tell the president . . . he’s going to lose a lot of credibility and support and buy-in for everything we try to do if he doesn’t bring up guided pathways.

The next time we all met as faculty . . . she did a really good job of framing all this . . . new stuff we’re doing. . . . It’s all part of our guided pathways approach. And I think, thanks to that, we didn’t lose . . . everybody. I think that would have been disastrous because everyone is always afraid this is just another flavor of the month and we’re going to go from this to that and the next thing. The fact that we saw that was beginning to happen and made corrections, made sure that wasn’t the perception that was out there, I think saved us from backsliding.

We met so often . . . and we had such productive, constructive conversation that I would say relationships were evolving and strong and honest. . . . At the very beginning we laid out that we don’t know the answers to everything. . . . The ownership of where this goes is on everyone . . . all the different department chairs and committee chairs. We always said that if you . . . have a concern, if you see a problem, please bring it up and don’t hold back. I think the relationships were good, they were honest, they were constructive, and when issues came up, we really did a good job of promoting dialogue, getting people together to talk through what the issues were.
When the provost first asked me to be the co-chair [of guided pathways] with her, I thought, ah shit. . . . I kind of dreaded this because I knew what a heavy lift it was going to be, and I knew there would be pushback. But then when we got into it, I enjoyed working closely with [a director, after the provost left the college]. She’s just a wonderful, wonderful, hard-working person without an ego and I just loved working with her. I had a team of people that I really like working with and they’re so capable and . . . everyone was working hard.

Once things got rolling . . . I had anxiety. I remember meetings when we were explaining to the faculty what we were going to be doing. I didn’t know how it was going to be perceived so I was pretty nervous going into that. . . . But you do what you have to do, and I have to say the faculty were more receptive than I expected. I’ve come to admire and appreciate the faculty that I’m able to work with. They’re so student-centered and hard workers. It’s been good again. The emotions are stress, dread, nervousness, and then . . . exciting. . . . It’s kind of a fun adventure to be redesigning the whole college not knowing how it’s going to go. People seem to be willing to give it a try and do the hard work. I mean designing those program maps. That was a big ask . . . in the summer of 2015. They asked faculty, who put in a hard year of teaching in fall and winter, to stay . . . to meet all through the summer to create these program maps. Something they’d never had to do before. They actually did it. It was amazing. . . . That was really great. Since then, as the data showed it seemed to be working, people just kept the nose to the grindstone and kept working. It’s been pretty good.

This year we were kind of ambushed, hit by the COVID thing and now it’s kind of, I feel almost back to square one. I think COVID blew the shit out of everything. Everything. . . . At least from my perspective. We’ve gone back to the president doing weekly townhall meetings. Calls them townhall meetings but basically, he’s presenting what’s going on. And I don’t know
that that’s avoidable. I don’t know that you could recreate what we had before, but I would say COVID has dealt a major blow to a lot of the student success efforts that we’re doing. I hope that we don’t . . . our data took a huge uptick and then another uptick and I’m just concerned that it’s going to slide back down. My biggest concern is that a lot of our students don’t have the resources they need and they’re floundering in a non-face-to-face setting. Now we have to reinvent how we’re going react to this new crisis. And I think I’m going to be relieved when I retire [he laughs]. I think.

I think [the people I worked with through guided pathways] probably had a lot of . . . that emotion of, “here we go again.” I think they felt imposed on . . . to do a whole lot of work without any guarantee that this initiative is going to be around five years from now. I know one thing we asked them to do . . . we asked our faculty to plan a day. We call it pathway showcase day. And this is something we had never done before, and we said:

We’re going to build into the schedule a day where there are no classes and we’re going to have all our students in the seminar in life pathways course . . . attend one or more pathways sessions. We need to plan six pathway showcases. . . . We would like you to plan this day and do it in a way that’s going to be informative . . . interactive, where students can find out about their programs.

There was some pretty hard pushback. It was a little bit ugly. Even people that I consider myself close with, they were kind of snotty to me. . . . But they did it. They did it and now that pathway showcase day has become a tradition that people recognize the value of.

I would say some relationships were rocky for part of that period [of implementing guided pathways]. One of our science teachers who was a department chair for a time . . . there was something going on. We had some leadership change and we felt the chairs needed to stand up and pushback a little bit. . . . This science instructor said to me, “People’s eyes are on you right now. . . . People really respect you and if you say this is what we should do . . . then our
faculty are . . . going to probably go along with that.” I was so pleased to hear that. . . . It was gratifying that after this four-year, five-year period of grinding through, trying to do this total college redesign. If that’s true, that people do trust me, as one of the faculty leaders, then I would say it was all worth it. It’s really gratifying to hear that.

The biggest [challenge] is the tension between playing a leadership role at the college and teaching my classes. I teach a pretty full load. . . . I do get some release time but still have classes I have to conduct. . . . And I think it becomes problematic when I feel like there’s this thing I have to do to get ready for this meeting or to put out some fires that are going on and I feel like my students are going to suffer because I can’t be there 100% for them. So that tension between just wanting to do the best I can with my students and also wanting things at the department level or committee level or college level to go smoothly.

Before guided pathways . . . I was pretty busy and pretty active as a faculty leader through our College Success Committee. I was one of the team leaders for Achieving the Dream. I think the change was that rather than being on one of three or four active committees on the campus, when I became the co-leader of the guided pathways initiative, that was college-wide. It was working directly with the provost and was all-consuming and it subsumed all the other work I was doing. I was busy before that and . . . I knew when I agreed to do that it was going to be a very long-term, full-time, probably pretty exhausting commitment. I would say the difference is that I was busy, and then I was busy on steroids. . . . It was big. It was . . . exhilarating and challenging and hard work, but until COVID hit it was pretty much all worth it. I was ready to hand that off, and it was a slow and grueling process of handing it off, but I definitely did hand it off.
I just loved the idea that we redesigned the whole college around a model, sort of a theory, of what was going to provide the kind of support that students would need to make an early, informed decision, decide on a plan for completion. We had all the systems in place to support them along that path. I just think COVID blew that whole thing up. The systems are still in place, but for the at-risk students who might not have the resources, the technology, the family support, those relationships, I just think that sitting in their home . . . probably in a crowded room . . . where they’re sharing a computer or don’t have a computer, all these systems we’ve created . . . they’re not hitting them. They’re not there. If we had this interview in January, I would be all starry-eyed and say this was hard work, but it was really worth it because we’ve got this system in place that’s working, we’ve got data showing that it’s working. I think now all bets are off.

What I value is . . . contributing, adding value to where I work. It’s just really important to me that I’m involved in an institution that doesn’t want to waste people’s time. . . . I really felt like this has been very worthwhile, it all makes sense, there are other colleges statewide and nationwide that are involved in this same work. We’re working together to share what’s working, what’s not working. It all came together very nicely in guided pathways and so I felt really good about it. I felt proud of what we’d done. . . . The challenges were, a lot of the challenges were steep, like high mountains to climb, but we pretty much did that. I felt great . . . my colleagues that I worked with . . . I felt really good. My department . . . developmental studies . . . we were all feeling great. . . . It was all pretty good. I feel like we’re a community that’s committed to student success. . . . We came up with faculty commitments, things that we’re willing to commit to as faculty. . . . I like that we . . . reached a consensus on the best system for serving our students and we implemented it and we saw that it was working, we saw it in the data, we saw it in the lives of our students. It was a pretty good feeling. We felt proud.
Emotions that I went through early on were a little bit of fear, a little bit of anxiety and . . . exhaustion as we worked to put these things into place. It was not easy; it took a lot of time, a lot of meetings. And then when things started working out and we had fewer and fewer meetings, it was more of a feeling of accomplishment and camaraderie that we had done a good thing. Done it together as a team. So emotionally I would say I was in a pretty good place heading into retirement.

I feel pretty good about the way that we rolled things out with the faculty. We did so being very honest and open and expecting that there would be dissent and a lot of strong opinions, a lot of questions, and we welcomed those. I would definitely do it that way again rather than . . . leaning on our . . . administrative leadership to come in say what we were going to do. We didn’t want to do that. I’m glad we didn’t do that. [What] I might do differently is bring younger people, more potential successors, into the inner circle. We had a lot of meetings with the provost . . . and the deans. Now I’ve got a couple members of my department who will be stepping into departmental leadership roles and it probably would have been wise to have them in that inner circle earlier on, so that when I retire, they’re already part of that group . . . better succession planning.

**Reflections on Michael Yav’s Story**

Michael’s words indicated to me that he recognizes his own passions and strengths. He has sought and accepted change leadership roles that tapped into them. He set up systems to compensate for his weaknesses by leading with people who complemented his visionary focus with their focus on detail. He repeatedly spoke of large, broad, college-wide teams, shared power and responsibility between faculty and administration, dealing with ambiguity, and the importance of communication during periods of change. He described a good leader as someone
who empowers the people who are doing the work and who provides resources and support throughout the change initiative.

As Michael accepted the guided pathways leadership role, he understood the energy and time it would take. He understood there would be pushback but was still a little surprised, and perhaps hurt, by the attitudes of people he considered friends. The event that seemed to cause the most intense emotion for Michael did not happen while the guided pathway changes were being debated, planned, and implemented. He became quite angry after the changes were in place and the college’s president seemed to move on to another initiative. The lack of appreciation for the work he and his colleagues had done, and disregard for the impact the changes were having on student success at his college, bothered him a great deal. In retrospect, Michael listed a wide range of emotions he experienced leading the change and deemed it all worth it because the initiative has been very good for his school and its students.

Looking back on my interviews with Michael, I was struck by the self-awareness and experience Dr. Yav brought to the guided pathways leadership role. He knew, as a faculty leader, he had to have the power and authority of an administrator as a co-lead. And, looking back, he realized that having faculty interested in guided pathways before the college’s administration showed interest gave him the advantage of early faculty buy-in. It was interesting that he described ambiguity, messiness, and difficult conversations throughout the change process, but the tension he felt most was from the competing demands of his roles as a teacher and an institutional change leader.

I felt Michael experienced his role leading change at his college as one of the final chapters in his career as an education professional and institutional reformer. If not for COVID-19, he would have been very satisfied with the work he and his colleagues did to implement
guided pathways. With the pandemic and his college “embracing online learning,” Michael predicted it would be “to the detriment of our more at-risk students.” Michael was uncertain and worried the supports his institution put in place for students cannot be delivered as intended. He was worried about the students trying to cope with problems no one ever anticipated. And he was concerned the work he led will be destroyed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Diana Page

Diana Page is the dean of liberal arts at a medium-sized community college, located in a medium-sized city in Michigan. Diana was born and raised in Michigan. She began her career in higher education serendipitously when a contact through a neighbor led to an adjunct teaching position at a community college in another state. That state has a highly regulated system of higher education, and Diana’s story highlights the differences between that system and Michigan’s independent approach to postsecondary education. She left an administrative position at a very large community college to move back to Michigan three years ago. Diana is pursuing a doctorate in higher education leadership. During our conversations, I was struck more than once by Diana’s forthright and candid manner, and her sincere and eloquent belief in the community college mission.

When Diana started her position in Michigan, her community college had been involved with guided pathways for a few years. She became a co-leader of the initiative in addition to developing the college’s assessment program and making sure the college met the Higher Learning Commission’s requirement for faculty credentialing.

You Have to Dance Lightly Sometimes

I have a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and a master’s degree in science education with a concentration in chemistry. I taught chemistry for maybe 12 years at the community college [my
former college] before I went into administration. I started off as an adjunct and I taught chemistry . . . for environmental and pharmaceutical technology programs, and then I started teaching for the college transfer area and for a while I was teaching for both. Then the college transfer folks offered me a full-time position. I started in the early 1990s and became a department chair in probably 2004-ish. The last time I taught I was serving as interim dean of math and science. That was the last semester I taught chemistry. I did teach a first-year seminar course . . . in 2011, just because I wanted to get back in the classroom for a minute . . . just to connect, because I did it a long time.

I was chair of natural sciences, dean of math, science, and engineering, and then . . . I became associate vice president for science and arts, and I came here as dean of liberal arts. And the reason [I left the associate vice president position] . . . I looked around and said, “There’s nowhere for me to go from here” because my boss and the executive vice president and all of my counterparts—we were all the same age. I . . . thought, well, I don’t have to stay here, my kids are all launched. So just kind of on a whim . . . there’s a position in Michigan. I thought I’m never going to get an interview. No question. But anyway, here I am. I started here in February of 2017. And Michigan is like a whole new ball game. It is completely different from the state I left. It’s like the wild, wild west here. In some ways that’s good because . . . every college has a character and it’s unique . . . but I’m not sure it’s always the best thing for students.

[I came to work at a community college] completely by accident. I had four children . . . a five-year-old, a two-year-old, and infant twins. I’d come to [Michigan] to visit my family and when I returned home one of my neighbors said, “I gave your name to some guy at community college. They need a chemistry teacher.” And I had never taught. Just like the classic community college thing, right? And I was sort of desperate to get out of the house . . . so I called the guy
and I went and interviewed. He was desperate for a warm body in the classroom. He hired me. And I only had a bachelor’s degree then. That’s why I could teach for the occupational people. Years later I acquired my master’s degree. But yeah, [I came to work at a community college] completely by accident. I didn’t even apply for the job. But I loved it. I really loved teaching.

This college is an interesting place. There’s a culture problem. Every college says that. But there is a serious culture problem here. A serious lack of trust. Also, a pervasive culture of just ignoring things and hoping they’ll go away. Which has improved because we have a number of new leaders. When I got here, they had been piloting ALP [Accelerated Learning Program, a co-requisite model of developmental and college-level English] for years. Literally years. There was nothing . . . consistent or cohesive in the effort. Not that people weren’t working on it, because they were. In order to not . . . force faculty . . . to be on board with this, they had gone about it sort of like . . . be on board if you want to?

When I got here three years ago, the dean of student services had just taken over as chair [of guided pathways] and she did a great job of pulling some of that together. For some reason our advisors didn’t like ALP. Well, okay, I can fix that. There won’t be an option. Every student will be in ALP and . . . there was great concern that no one would register. I don’t like to do it that way . . . but there were a couple of things I said: “Okay, this is what we’re doing now, be on board. Be on board or just don’t be, but I don’t care to hear about it anymore.”

We’re well on our way to meeting most of the [guided pathway recommendations] . . . . The thing that has been the most difficult for this college, oddly, is the [program] map. To get the maps done and published. And the publishing part we’ve just gone round and round and round. But they’re finally, I think they’re all up now. We just changed some placement measures. We don’t have a co-req model for math yet, but that’s our next big target. We also had a data
problem here, which I know a lot of places have. We did not have reliable data and we did not have timely data, so it was hard to make an argument for anything because there was this pretty pervasive attitude that we’re . . . special and the national data doesn’t apply to us. There was a long period, maybe a year, before we were getting data that was good data. It was a long build up and now it is pretty embedded in our culture. I think people have realized it’s not going away.

When I was hired, I think a couple things in my background were of value to my college. I have a lot of experience with assessment and this college was in trouble with assessment. That was the key thing, but also . . . the college where I worked was a Completion by Design school and I had led the structured pathways. I led that element and the acceleration of developmental education effort for our Completion by Design grant.

I think, because it [guided pathways at my college] had been chaired by a student services dean, there was not buy-in from faculty. The student services dean didn’t really have any authority. And I don’t have authority over all faculty, but I have some authority . . . you get referred authority when the vice president of instruction says no. Or you will do this.

All the folks who are leading guided pathways at the state and national level are the same people who led Completion by Design. The framework is slightly different, the way that it’s focused, but it’s all the same. In my former state, five colleges were selected to pilot this idea . . . one of things that was a tenet of Completion by Design is policy change. We all looked at our own policies at our own colleges but also the system policies and state-level policies that needed to be changed. Then we made recommendations to the system office and the state implemented a lot of changes based on the experiences of these five colleges. We didn’t all do everything exactly the same, but it’s the guided pathways thing. It’s acceleration of developmental education. And it’s structured pathways.
I can tell you at my [former] community college we eliminated over 200 courses from our own catalog. This was not a popular thing. The way I approached that, because I knew I had my marching orders, I went through the catalog myself and eliminated everything that I thought . . . the basic premise is we offer the first two years. We shouldn’t be offering forensic psychology. It’s a great course, [but] they can take it when they transfer. What’s our mission? I went through and slashed and then met with all the chairs and said:

Take this back to your faculty, and they can argue for any course to be put back in. But they have to argue how it benefits the students. Either students need it to complete a program here or they need it when they transfer into a program . . . and they should tell me if I left anything in that should be taken out.

But the environment is different [from Michigan] because everybody has a one-year contract. Everybody but the president. Faculty don’t have a union and they don’t have tenure.

All five schools [in the pilot in my former state] did that with their courses, and we brought that to the system office. Then we had to do it again because they cut even more. It was a couple years of real angst. It was not an easy, well, it wasn’t a sell, I didn’t pretend to sell it. I just said, “This is the rationale; this is what we’re doing.” Do I love it? I think it makes sense. I support it. I also recognize the other side of it though [when people get bored teaching the same classes every semester]. As a chemistry teacher though it’s harder for me to empathize. I taught the same course every semester, and I never got bored. . . . You have different students every semester.

Not having unions and tenure makes it different and it’s not always good for faculty, obviously. But at my community college in the other state we had 300 full-time liberal arts faculty. I was literally doing the dog-and-pony show at multiple campus sites and expecting to have things thrown at me. It was not fun. In the end it was going to be done for us anyway. That was the other thing I kept saying: “Look, we are being asked for input. This is our opportunity to
attempt to keep some of the courses we think are really important. But some of these courses have to go.”

Another thing I didn’t realize when I moved here, another advantage to that structure of a system and the agreements, is we got all this data back from four-year schools. Not only did we know how many students transferred to a given school, we knew what major they transferred into and their GPA [Grade Point Average]. We could brag. Our students always outperformed. In Michigan we know this anecdotally, but there, we could point to our own data and say, “Look, our students.” I was shocked when I got here. What do you mean we don’t get data? . . . This has been eye-opening. In good ways and bad ways. I do think there are advantages to this, but overall, I wish we were a little more structured here. I know it could be easier.

The faculty qualifications were very similar. More than 20 years ago we dealt with that in the state I left, so I was shocked because people here acted like having to have a master’s degree was new. . . . But, at this college anyway, it was a wink and a nod. It had not been done and when I got here it was, “Oh, gee, we have to do this.” All this stuff was happening at the same time here and the faculty were mad. . . . The head of our faculty union said to me, “Well, who is the HLC [Higher Learning Commission] to tell us what to do?” . . . I think we’re all good now . . . guess we’ll find out.

I have been leading our assessment effort since I got here in 2017. We did not have an assessment plan at all. We had to develop a three-year startup plan . . . this was a do or die for this college, because they hadn’t done what they needed to do. There was buy-in to the extent that people knew we had to do it. We had to do it, to make the HLC happy, but the challenge was we should be doing this anyway.
Taking into account the culture of this college, developing and implementing that assessment plan was important because there had been a lot of failed attempts. We got a lot of input from faculty, put together a team that was at least half faculty, and we did it backwards from how a lot of places do it. We started at the course level and worked toward gen ed, because we did not have an assessment plan, and our gen ed was kind of a mess. We had hundreds of courses in our gen ed course list and it was about turf, not about what students need to learn. There was a lot to do and we just sort of mapped it out. We’ve met all of our timelines and sometimes I’m shocked. It hasn’t been easy, but it’s gone well. It would be interesting for me, though, to know what the faculty really think. They’re compliant. I will say they’re compliant. They’re doing what they’re being asked to do. And I think I’m starting to see a shift in the quality of conversations that we’re having . . . what we do with the assessment data and how we’re using it. It’s a big job. It consumes my life.

When I started as [guided pathways] co-lead, we had been involved for a couple of years and we had to tackle the [program] mapping. For some reason that was a challenge and I think people were already tired of it. They were tired of not accomplishing what they needed to accomplish. Because of my background, I came in with a different eye and said, “Okay, this is how I would approach this.” Because I had already done it, even though I did it in a completely different setting, in a state where if you didn’t do it, it was going to be done for you. I took a different approach with the maps. . . . I moved it back to the departments but then I did what I always do. Here’s what we need to accomplish, here’s our timeline, and we have interim deadlines along the way . . . the faculty have to be involved, and they have to be able to behave like faculty.
I’ve noticed a lot of times people outside of instruction... I don’t know if they’re threatened by, or they just feel when faculty ask a lot of questions they’re not buying in, or they’re challenging them. And they can ask me all the questions they want. I don’t care. That’s what faculty do. That’s what they’re trained to do, right? It was helpful in that regard to meet in small groups where they were free to say they didn’t like this or whatever. Whereas in a larger group setting, or with a lead that was outside of instruction, there wasn’t the ability to have those kinds of critical conversations.

We need to be able to disagree and move on. And that has not been part of this culture either. People here don’t have those discussions in the meetings. They may leave the meeting and then talk. That’s a subconscious goal of mine, too, to have those disagreements in the meeting, while we’re all in the room and we can talk through them. Instead of having the post-meeting meetings that prevent progress. . . . And it’s sort of passive aggressive. It’s also introvert extrovert, where some people are just not comfortable speaking out [in large groups].

In the guided pathways group, we didn’t have problems; I would say the relationships are fine. There are a couple of people who just personality-wise, I didn’t like the way they approached disagreement. But I think we . . . didn’t agree on everything, but as a steering committee group, we worked well together. . . . I . . . appreciate people for what they bring to the table, because everybody brings something to the table. It’s been a pretty good group. It’s been a pretty constant group. There hasn’t been a lot of shuffling in and out of the steering committee. We did have some subcommittees we restructured or disbanded as needed . . . but the people on the steering committee have remained pretty constant and I think that’s a pretty good sign.

The biggest challenge that we had with guided pathways was the implementation of our first-year experience, which includes mandatory advising, mandatory . . . student orientation, and
all our degrees now have an FYS course, the First Year Seminar, and it is a graduation requirement. But it can be waived under certain circumstances. All new students have to do those three things and it turns out that people have opinions. Our IS [Information Systems] folks were opposed to these things. . . . And our advisors are not supportive of FYS. They’re constantly trying to get people out of it. I met with them. They wanted to understand which students could have the hold removed, but that’s not really what they wanted. What they really wanted was to find out all the different ways they could get a student out of taking FYS, and finally I said:

I’m done having this conversation. Here’s the deal. I am not waiving anyone’s graduation requirements. So, if you are advising students . . . to wait and continue taking classes, because the hold gets removed after a certain number of credit hours, they will not graduate. You will be preventing students from graduating. Let me make that clear. I will not waive it.

Now, would I waive it? Of course. I’m not going to be an idiot. But I finally had to say we’re done talking about this now! . . . It’s interesting because I think it’s a very valuable course. It’s one credit. We had all these conversations about the content, and we continue to review and revise it every semester. We made it a 12-week course, so students are done with it before finals their first semester. We’ve gotten tons of input. We’ve made lots of changes. I don’t know. I think people just get entrenched sometimes.

We packaged three things together as student success initiatives for the first-year experience, and I worked very closely with the dean of student services, so it wasn’t like it was some conflict between instruction and student services. It was more like this [advisor] group, and I’m not sure how that feeling got started with them. Our admissions folks were opposed to it as well. It was an uphill battle but now it is part of what we do. That was tough, I have to say. It was. I think it was tough for me just because I didn’t anticipate it. I just thought, “Wow, why would you not want a student to get a course that’s going be helpful to them?”
We’ve been gathering data on our FYS over three or four semesters . . . at least three semesters. It very clearly indicates that students who complete FYS successfully take more credits in subsequent semesters, their GPA is significantly higher than those who don’t, and they obviously are retained . . . at a higher rate. It’s kind of rewarding to say, “See, it does work.” There have been some things like that along the way where we say, “Well, now that we’ve done that, look at the impact to the student.” And when you can point that out, that’s helpful. It also plays into the focus on equity. To me it’s just all related, it was all part of what we should be doing.

I think guided pathways has gone well. I think everybody is mostly on board with the concept at least . . . of getting students on a path. Keeping them on a path. We did have to say [to faculty], “Look, if you say you’re going to offer this course every spring, you need to offer it. You need to run it because students are relying on you to do that.” There’s still I feel like . . . well, I give faculty some grace. It’s not their realm. They’re teaching. But making them aware of this is helpful. There’s still some work to do there . . . maintaining the students’ needs as the primary focus.

When I came in, I was charged with some pretty big things, pretty big initiatives that actually don’t reside in this job, in this position. But I knew coming in what was going to be expected . . . leading the assessment initiative, having oversight over guided pathways, and there were lots of significant policy issues that needed to be addressed. And the faculty credentialing. I came in as the dean of liberal arts but . . . I was asked to take charge of those things. I became this . . . it’s weird . . . I became a quasi . . . I wasn’t the vice president, I was never perceived to be the vice president, but I was the person that you asked. . . . Now we have a different vice
president who provides . . . much better leadership. I have backup on some things because we are aligned. Thank goodness.

I have removed some [things] from my plate. I’m still the person who is leading assessment, but . . . I have backup now. I’m not the only bad guy. I’m happy to be the bad guy if I have to be the bad guy, but I don’t like to. Before, the previous vice president, he kind of backed me up, but in a way that made it clear that it was me, it was Diana, who said we have to do this. It’s not Diana. It’s the HLC or the Department of Ed or whatever. With our new vice president there’s no questioning. People have figured out if I say, “This is something that we need to do” . . . they’re not doing the end run. I guess that doesn’t speak as much to my leadership as it does to the leadership of the person to whom I report. It makes a huge difference. Because I’m not constantly having to validate.

We were talking the other day about leadership style or what leadership means. Every horse needs a head. And that’s the thing. Faculty should drive assessment and they should lead it, but you still have to have a head on the horse. The horse isn’t going to run without legs . . . but you have to have someone who’s saying, “Here’s what we have to do, here’s how we’re going to get it done, here are some timelines,” and keeping people on track. And that just wasn’t present here before, and I’ll be honest, I think people appreciate it. There was never a definitive answer to anything. If you said, “No,” we’ll just wait a couple weeks and we’ll badger you half to death and then you’ll change your mind. It was almost like if mom says no, let’s go ask dad. And it permeates the culture. Or did. It’s much improved now after lots of changes in leadership.

One of the faculty who was the most egregious at pushing to get her own way all the time came into my office a few months ago and said, “I wanted to let you know I think it’s good that you and the vice president are closing all the loopholes. . . . You’re making it hard for me to get
my own way . . . but it’s good.” It was so funny that I just started laughing. . . . I hate to liken faculty to little kids, but I always thought, as a parent, kids need structure. People need structure. Otherwise you’re in turmoil all the time. The difference now is that because the culture of the college has changed some, my role is . . . I don’t want to use the word easier, it’s better defined, and it is easier. It makes it easier to lead.

I guess, for me, my role as a leader is to . . . hire competent people and remove barriers and provide them what they need so they can do their job to the best of their ability. It’s providing direction and guidance, but mostly I want to let people do what we hired them to do. I think the most important part of my role is removing challenges to them getting that done. We hire competent people and I want them to be able to do their jobs the way they think is best to do it. We all know what our goals are, we talk about that, but I’m not going to tell them how to achieve them.

I am pretty collaborative. . . . I will make a decision when I need to, but I like to get a lot of input. I also never think I’m the smartest person in the room . . . especially with the chairs and directors that report to me. We are a team. At the end of the day I can make the decision, or if I have to say this is the way it’s got to be, I’ll do that. But I think I’m a pretty collaborative leader. If there’s anything that I think, “Oh, this is not good,” my approach is always to say, “Here’s what we need to do and here’s how we’re going to make the best of it. Here’s how we’re going to approach it.”

I think what was important about guided pathways . . . and still is important, is to eliminate the boundaries, the silos, and get people to work together. . . . There was a big divide here . . . between instruction and student services and [the guided pathways] initiative.

Something the previous vice president did well, when it started in 2015, was to put teams
together that were cross-divisional. We always have a student services person and an instruction person co-chairing that steering committee. And then we pull in people from all over the college. There’s still, “They got another advisor. What do they need another advisor for?” Well, because we have 3,000 students. But there’s a whole lot less of that. Guided pathways . . . worked well to do something at this college that needed to be done. In addition to doing what it needed to do for our students.

That side of the house or this side of the house. . . . I hate it when we say that. Because who lives in a house with the dividing line down the middle? That doesn’t work. I think it’s so important to [work across divisions]. . . . It allows us to, even if we disagree or we have different priorities, understand where the other opinion or perspective is coming from and why it’s important. And I think it allows us to make institutional priorities that make sense for our students. You can’t always get what you want every time you want it, so it facilitates prioritization of resources for our students more than anything else, because we collaborate better.

I think the work I did with guided pathways is so important. It’s back to the structure thing. I came into the community college in my career when it was a complete free-for-all. Not even any transfer articulations. . . . It was just a complete free-for-all. Having served in all these different roles, I could see when students weren’t being served very well . . . not getting good advice or not getting any advice, and they navigate things in ways that you’re like, “What???” Most of us had the benefit of [attending] a four-year school, where everything was laid out for us. . . . I didn’t understand any of that when I was first teaching.

That [guided pathways] work was important. It was hard work, because it didn’t make . . . faculty happy. So that was sort of a . . . you have to dance lightly sometimes. But I think it
made a huge difference for our students and I think it makes advisors’ jobs easier. Just eliminating confusion. . . . We still have lots of work to better communicate to students how to work with the system.

Based on my first exposure [to the guided pathways concept], which was structured pathways through Completion by Design, it has absolutely changed the way I feel about my college. I was all about the structured pathways, the very small piece of creating the pathways. But the rest of it, the whole wraparound, the changes to dev ed, the intake, initially I was not very much on board. . . . I taught chemistry. I saw students with very poor math skills. Very difficult to teach math while you’re trying to teach chemistry. And so, I was initially opposed to eliminating prerequisites. . . . It took a lot of reading and research and convincing for me. . . . I think probably the thing that’s swayed me the most is the inequity of who goes into dev ed. You start to see.

Really, it’s society that needs to be fixed. It’s difficult because it starts so early. It starts when kids are born almost, but that’s what finally swayed me to say, “Okay. We’re disproportionately requiring these students [to take developmental classes].” In my mind it was also very financial. Not only were they not finishing, but in order to finish, it was costing them so much more money to get through that huge . . . those dev ed sequences were huge.

To me, there’s this huge sort of Venn diagram of assessment, guided pathways, and equity. And they’re all about equity, and the reason I work at a community college. . . . The reason I’ve stayed working at a community college, is because our mission is about equity. And that’s important . . . to me. It’s . . . a uniquely American institution, maybe the only one we have left. So, the guided pathways work is very important work.
In a role like this, because I don’t see students as much [and] I work with faculty a lot, when I can facilitate something that [faculty] want to do, that’s going to help students, it makes me feel good. We have some innovative people and being able to say, “Yeah, we can do that, why not?” Because sometimes people say, “Oh, we can’t do that.” I say, “Why can’t we?” “Can we?” “Of course, we can. Let’s do it.” That’s always a great feeling when you can say yes.

I feel like we’re doing a better job of helping our students and that makes me feel better about the work I do. . . . It energized me in the beginning to want to fix the things that we could fix. And I think now, when you hear those student stories, it reminds me why we’re here. I don’t want to get religious about it [but it] is almost like living the mission . . . and it makes me feel good about the work I do.

I probably wouldn’t change decisions we made when I was leading guided pathways, but maybe I’m harder on myself, I don’t know. There are lots of times I come away from meetings feeling everybody else left saying, “Wow, what a bitch.” I wish I could have better control sometimes of my facial expressions. Sometimes I speak more harshly than I intend. Sharp. People sometimes think I’m mad, but I’m not mad. I’m just like, “What?” Anytime I leave a meeting and then feel like I should apologize to someone . . . I regret that. I’ve gotten much better. I don’t have to do that very often anymore. But . . . occasionally.

I haven’t unilaterally made many decisions here. I think most of the decisions we’ve made with guided pathways have been good decisions. There have been a few [that weren’t good]. I think how we started off creating the maps with the committee approach. That was kind of a mess and we’ve altered how we’re doing that. But most of the decisions have been good decisions. Sometimes decisions take much longer than they should, but . . . at least you know
everybody’s had their say. I think whenever you can, it’s better to let that play out than to say, “This is what we’re doing.”

I think the hardest thing, this is not just about guided pathways, the hardest thing is, sometimes we can’t fix what our students need. And hearing those stories, if we’ve been any part of that problem, that’s frustrating. If we’ve done everything we can possibly do, and we’ve made all these changes . . . it makes you feel a little bit better about it. But there’s still the students that you just can’t . . . you can’t fix everything. It’s the way it is.

Reflections on Diana Page’s Story

As I interviewed Diana and learned her story I was struck by her transformation from a stay-at-home mother, to an adjunct chemistry instructor (to get out of the house), to a community college reformer. Diana realized she was an example of a classic community college story: a last-minute hire for an adjunct teaching position who became dedicated to the mission of community colleges. Diana appears quietly but determinedly driven by issues of educational, economic, and social inequities. I found it meaningful that the inequitable funding of community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012) that led to reliance on often underpaid adjunct instructors (Colby & Fowler, 2020; Curtis & Thornton, 2013) created a career path for Diana, in turn, to fight for equity for community college students. Diana is a pragmatic leader who has relocated from a state with a very structured system of higher education to Michigan, where community colleges have, for the most part, been left to their own devices to figure out what works for them. Diana’s experiences at a large community college in another state and her small community college in Michigan highlight major differences between the states. Diana’s impressions are that a state-system seems to favor student success over community college faculty and staff job security and individualism. Michigan’s loosely organized system allows for
“every college to have a character,” but the uniqueness of each college may not always benefit the students trying to complete an associate degree and then transfer to a four-year college.

In Michigan, Diana was surprised by the strong emotional attachment faculty and staff have to her college, and the reluctance to change things even with mandates from HLC. Leading Completion by Design change initiatives in her former state was challenging because of the sheer number of faculty who reported to Diana. But with the state’s mandates she “had her marching orders” and whether or not to implement a change was not a question. In her words, “It wasn’t a sell; I didn’t pretend to sell it.”

Diana’s description of the culture at her college was interesting as she seemed to describe a place, and people, bound and determined to stay in a bygone era. This culture prevailed for many years and only changed recently when there were several changes in the top leadership roles, including the college president in 2020 and the vice president for academic affairs in 2019. Diana’s experience illustrates the difference changes in the highest levels of college leadership can make and the need for strong presidents and vice presidents who support the mid-level leaders of change initiatives. With a new vice president for academic affairs, Diana feels things have improved and she now has very clear support, which was lacking with her previous supervisor.

**Antonio Charles**

Antonio Charles is the special projects director at a large, urban community college in Michigan. He reports to the provost. Antonio has worked at this college for 28 years, as an adjunct instructor, advisor, and special projects director. Other than an assistantship as a graduate student, this is the only place he has ever worked. Antonio is also a writer and throughout the interviews his words, phrases, facial expressions, and body language were colorful, expressive,
and upbeat. The affection he feels for people he has worked with, and those he works with now, is apparent. Antonio tended to minimize his role as a leader, but I was left with the impression that he is a valuable resource for information, institutional history, and collegial support at his college.

*Don't Really Consider Myself Much of a Leader*

I have a bachelor’s in English and history and a master’s in English and in history. I went back to do a doctorate in English, and I was plugging along at that, but . . . in retrospect I was working more than usual between community college and the university. I was teaching two classes at community college, doing my assistantship, and taking classes at the university. And driving about 500 miles a week. I had a really fun assistantship . . . to the dean of liberal studies. . . . I did their publications and newsletters. At the community college I was getting out of teaching . . . doing more and more advising. So, I just bailed from teaching, got into advising as my whole gig. I ended up just sort of fading out of [the doctoral program] . . . and I rolled it into a second master’s . . . in English.

I taught at this community college from 1992 through 2000 and I was advising from 1994 up through maybe 2015 or so. Around 2000 I switched to advising for 34 hours a week. . . . That was my job, which I greatly enjoyed. And then I did some stuff for the provost, a couple of provosts ago, and the position I have now was a temp thing. When they made it full-time . . . there were a whopping two or three people who applied for the job. And the best person won. So, here we are.

I started at this community college right out of grad school [with my first master’s degree]. In fall 1992, I literally had my transcript and resume in hand, and I went in to see the chair of humanities. We sat in her office and she looked at my stuff. And then she opened the
schedule books, “You can do this class on Monday, Wednesday, at 11:00.” And I realized, “Oh, well, I guess I’m hired.” It was much different back then. There was no concept of “let’s make sure the degree is correct.” That's one of the things I do in my job now. When [applications] come in, I double check to make sure that it’s even worthwhile to interview them.

I never had a full-time job until 2015. I would have loved to have advised full-time, but those jobs didn’t exist. We had two full-timers and the rest was covered by 30-hour folks and some part-time people. . . . Then, I think in 2015, we were hiring. . . . We were going to get rid of part-time advising and hire six full-time people. Really, in all honesty, most people thought that the top two people that were going to get hired were a friend of mine and me. Interestingly enough, I did not get one of those jobs. The three people on the committee were new in advising and, in retrospect, I didn’t market myself as clearly as I should have. Because I did a lot of things besides advising. I did a lot of policy procedure outreach, a lot of liaison stuff.

Anyway, then I nagged the provost, “Well, gee, I think I should have a job split between advising and registrar’s office. You know this is a great idea.” Eventually I got a release doing some business analysis stuff, and I helped, kind of a small part, start our Degree Works [degree tracking tool]. That was good. Then I went to work for the provost’s office to help them. In 2016 I did get a full-time advising job, so I went back. I was there for two or three months and a guy in academic affairs was killed on his way to work. The provost asked me to come over and help part-time . . . sort of temporary . . . and a couple of years ago they made that job full-time and permanent. I love it. Love it.

I came to this college just out of grad school. . . . I lived close by and as a kid of 20-whatever I poo-pooed the notion of working in community college. I was pursuing some grandiose graduate degree and figured I was going to teach at a university and wear a robe and
four-corner hat every day. That’s the kind of stuff back in the ’80s and early ’90s one thought of. But I’m so glad I got here, so glad I got here.

I was involved in guided pathways at our very beginning in a small way. There was another person, a faculty member, who was our point person on guided pathways. And I was one of the . . . maybe two or three other people on the steering committee. . . . My friend, the faculty person, did the overwhelming majority of the work on guided pathways. I tried to help her at the time, but she did a lot of good work and got everything going, she went to all those conferences, she had huge spreadsheets up on her wall.

I ended up replacing her after her temporary, full-time position as the guided pathway person ended. I mean it had an end date. It came to that date and it was not renewed. And on an unrelated thing, her program was being dissolved. So very, very dutifully she helped taper it down and get everything ready and then she didn’t have a job. And the previous provost was gone. . . . She [the faculty person] was one of the people who went for that job I ended up getting. . . . And I was just glad it wasn’t me. I felt bad for her.

With guided pathways, first, we asked the academics to really look at their curricular guides. Did they make sense? No, they needed to be remapped. Was there pork that didn’t need to be there for the . . . degrees which are fairly high transfer? Do they really fit with what the four-year schools want? Because that wasn’t always the case. So remapping, looking at sequencing, being really careful about sequence.

The relationships with the people who were in charge of guided pathways were really strong. It was really a cozy time. The gal who was in charge of guided pathways was working directly with the provost and the vice president for academic affairs. She had a lot of slack. She
was doing most of this . . . and calling on me and on my friend for advice and it was very exciting. I felt close to these folks. I felt like we were doing a good job.

Then . . . when it was just about time to roll out these pathways, our person [guided pathways lead] kept them close to the chest. She was a design person and she wanted to do this. . . . So, she did, and then academic affairs had to check all the program pathways before they went out. Some weird choices were made. Like why are all these liberal arts people choosing [a particular chemistry course]? What the hell is this? Then I realized [it was] for their second science. They were choosing a non-lab course. And then I realized that our [guided pathways leader] was misinterpreting what [the Michigan Transfer Agreement] said about the lab sciences. She just misread the damned thing. One has to be a lab. She thought one had to be lab and one had to not be a lab. That sure narrows down your choices. I caught those, and I explained to her, and she played it off. . . . I felt terrible to have to catch it. I felt really glad I did. But that puts a little strain on it when I’m trying to correct someone without being a big jackass. And I’m not trying to make it a you, you, you . . . but rather, “Well, there’s a glitch here . . . so what we need to do is to recast it.” . . . She had to go back to those academic areas and essentially say, “Well, the advice I gave you was wrong; here’s the correct advice.”

One mistake we made early on was the notion of too many choices is bad for a student and, of course, that’s right. Where we had choices, like in a gen ed category . . . we thought we needed to narrow down so students don’t flounder, so it’s not cafeteria style. The academics were asked to choose their top six [classes]. Rather than recommending six, they were honest-to-God required to choose six. . . . And number seven, no. That would not count for a degree. Now why? I tried to work on our provost on this. . . . He was an English major [too]. “It doesn't matter what science you and I take. You know it doesn’t matter. For Juan in computer science, it
doesn’t matter what humanities he takes. We can recommend, but do we really want to limit it? Really?” He did. “Okay, a lot of substitutions will occur.”

“Well, yes, Antonio, but those are just students that have been here. The brand-new students won’t blah, blah, blah.”

“Well, yeah,” I said, “but what if our top six [courses] are these, but a university really wants students to have number seven, and another university really prefers number eight?”

The provost said, “Well, yes, but it won’t be that much.” Yeah, well. We had those pathways up, we call them program pathways, up . . . for, like, two months. And then we reverted to the old way. Also . . . we changed provosts. Perhaps there was some causality there [Antonio chuckles].

Some of the mistakes that were made, they made big impressions on faculty. Faculty were asked to pick the best six gen ed courses for their fields, and went to all that time to do it, [even though they] . . . didn’t buy into it. They knew it didn’t really make sense, but they had to do it. . . . And I had to sell it, and I don’t like selling something I don’t really like. Later, “Oh, we’ll just flip it back around.” Well, why did [faculty] waste all [their] precious out-of-class faculty time doing that? And some people didn’t realize we had flipped it around . . . even three months later. I had to talk to our academic senate because of some, I guess you could say one person, was saying, “Oh, we don’t let students have choices and blah, blah, blah.” I said, “We did [limit choices], we made a mistake, it was stupid, we fixed it two months later. This is what it looks like now.” There were listening sessions with faculty, there were college-wide meetings. I had kind of a small part in that. But not everybody was in the loop.

The [previous] provost asked me to look into predictable course scheduling. His idea. . . . thought it would be a good idea to offer a full two-year schedule and registration, with flex for
things that happen. . . . Basically, to guarantee we’re going to offer this course at this time, and hope to god it has enough students because we’re going to run it. Well, that’s a big thing. That’s what I was working on and there were reporting issues. . . . There’s some kind of reporting we do to the state and it apparently is on a summer-to-spring basis. . . . More like on a fiscal basis.

There were questions about that. There were questions about how we predict right now, based on last year. So that’s what I was doing, the kind of project that was enormously huge. And kind of frightening, because it was difficult to see how it was really going to come together. It’s one of those great pie-in-the-sky ideas. Then it was going to get scaled back to [students will] register for one year at a time. And then it just faded away, especially after that provost left.

I got along really well with [the provost who led guided pathways] when I worked with him. I really felt close to him. When he left, abruptly, it was a couple of weeks before a communication said he’s gone on to pursue other opportunities. One of those deals. My friend took it really hard. . . . She had real emotions and I guess I did too. You know, we felt like we were doing something really exciting. We worked with him. It was a neat connection. I like the people I work with now; with that guy, though, it was something special. He’s a big idea guy and sometimes he would just send you on a mission. He wants you to go find out something. And he would just slide down a sunbeam and you’d go into some meeting and say, “Well, the provost asked me to check on . . .” There was always a bunch of things up in the air. He probably had more plates in the air than he could actually handle. It was exciting. And then he left. For some reason.

I love the concept of guided pathways. I think our college is doing a pretty good job. . . . My role now with guided pathways I consider fairly minor because we’re pretty far along. I’m helping work on the meta major thing. I’m the guy that reports back to the Michigan Center for
Student Success. And to Community College Research Center. . . . In academic affairs, along with our director of academic services, who’s co-lead of guided pathways with me, we keep an eye on the curriculum, kind of nitpicky stuff. The curriculum guides come to us and we check them to make sure they aren’t contradictory, the numbers add up, and there’s not a course on there that has a prerequisite they haven’t put on. Make sure all the gen eds are there. We basically just try to make sure that our program pathways make sense. I think the heavy lifting has already been done.

For me, personally, guided pathways was good. Across the institution though, I’m sure it solidified faculty relationships in an us-versus-them way . . . because they sure complained. And sometimes they had their reasons, as with the too narrow [general education] choices. Sometimes it helped solidify their personal relations I think, because it was something that came from above. The provost said, “We’re going to do this.” “Well, how dare you tell me?” That, I’m sure, was very cozy for them. They were misery loves company. It makes things more difficult between administration and faculty because we’re trying to get something good done and the super old guard are just complaining that we’re not letting students explore, because that’s what college is all about.

I was in a professional development meeting one time and the former faculty union president . . . we were sitting within three feet of each other . . . I’m not going to say she was screaming . . . She was sure as hell talking loudly . . . Loud enough to fill a room. Telling me about students. “The stupid college isn’t letting them; this is a part of college and our financial aid department won’t pay for . . .” I reminded her, “I’m hearing you, but about financial aid not paying, that’s a federal regulation. That’s not stupid college. That’s a federal reg.” . . . We’ve got
to obey this. . . . Faculty often thought that was the college just being jerks. Let people explore. . . . It still comes up.

My friend likes the term *trope*, and a standard faculty trope at my college is, “This is from the top down, I haven’t been consulted, or this is something we tried 20 years ago and it didn’t work and here it comes again.” Those are the three main tropes.

Related to emotions as part of leading guided pathways, I was going to say resistance, but that’s not an emotion. Sometimes people felt indignant because we were telling them something they needed to do. . . . They probably felt we were implying they’re not smart enough to do the right thing. And they felt we’re taking away from their position. They have a master’s or a Ph.D. in some field. Well, dammit, they know how to create a curriculum, they know what to do. And who are we to tell them they have to do something different? There’s that type of resistance. But sometimes you can see the light bulb go on and people say, “Oh, I see what you mean. Yeah, we can do this.” Fortunately, I was a little bit on the periphery of the extreme resistance. But I saw it at the time, and I still see some. When we made those [mistakes with] too narrow choices, that was fixed by the next provost . . . almost immediately. We had it fixed in just a few months and yet, three, four years later, people are still talking about it. They don’t even know it’s been changed.

I’ve felt a little bit of pride that we’re doing the right thing. A little bit of trepidation, because we’re working in this unstable environment and people are against us. It was also difficult because, I can’t remember why, but timeline-wise we got behind. I remember at one point the guided pathways leader was going to take a little one-week vacation. Academic vice president said, “No, sorry, you’re not approved for that. We’re behind on this.” In retrospect, [the guided pathways leader said] what I complain about now. “People are dragging their feet, I don’t
have any power to blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” She had that same thing too. Because she was a small administrator who worked under the provost. The provost said to do X, and she reached out to the deans, reached out to the faculty members. “Hey, this is stuff we need to do.” On the one hand, there could have been more buy-in because she was a faculty member, or there could be the opposite. “Oh wow. We hate her doubly now. How could she ever leave faculty life? She just wants to tell us what to do.” If they dragged their feet, she had no power over them. . . . It’s difficult to be in that position. It’s very frustrating and it’s scary to try to accomplish something.

I think I did a good job with guided pathways and I did try to keep us from going off the rails. I did advise the provost at the time as strongly as I could to not narrow things down unduly. You know, we had a conception and that conception outranked the reality. . . . There were things that I tried and couldn’t accomplish. Whereas the provost had the conception, he may not have understood the nitty gritty. You don’t expect him to. That’s too low. But somebody’s got to advise him. He came to the advisors one time early in his tenure, and he said how things were changing and we’re going to have a different culture. . . . student-friendly and blah, blah, blah. He didn’t say, “It’s my way or the highway. You can get the hell out if you don’t like it.” But he did say, “If anybody doesn’t want to do that, there are other places to go. . . . You might need to find something else if you don’t want to fit in at this college with all the wonderful things we’re doing.” He said that three or four times in an introduction of five minutes. . . . He was a nice guy, but he could get like this.

What we have now, I feel is in pretty decent shape. There are always things to improve, but there’s nothing that makes me cringe. That’s a start. The people who are in charge of guided pathways now are me as project manager, and my friend who’s director of academic services.
We also have an advisor who had been involved throughout the whole thing who had been to many of those conferences.

Before guided pathways, I was this small, temporary administrator; now I’m a small, permanent administrator. I don’t think guided pathways changed my role too much, because I was not the big public face. There were never any busts of me on a pillar.

There are a lot of little things that I lead, and it can be a lot of fun. They can be very biteable now. Consumable. Because that is one of the things about colleges that sometimes spins your head. . . . Things that take years and then you still don’t know if you’re done. And where you started and where you ended . . . is it even the same project anymore or the same initiative? It sometimes feels like people come and go and, unless you have that person who remembers the history of it, you lose sight of those signposts along the way.

Leadership is generally, unfortunately, not telling [people what to do]. Telling would be the simplest, most wonderful way, but that isn’t how the world works. So, it’s having some kind of vision, which is for the students, and finding a way to get folks onboard. It’s leading by example. It takes a lot of patience and I have people who kindly coach me in that. I really appreciate that. I’m probably the least patient person in the world. . . . You’re in a meeting, and some people are just so freaking obtuse, and some people have not bought in to what modern research shows. . . . You’re working with those kinds of people and you’re trying to be smooth and bring people along. There are some things you have to either let go or prioritize and deal with down the road. . . . Some things you can get done with a small bite, chew it, boom, it’s great. Some things are so huge it’s just like oh, my God, how am I ever going to approach this?

This will seem kind of small, but I think the largest leadership role I was in was when we rejiggered our general education. . . . I spent a lot of time working on this and I talked with the
registrar, I talked with the advisors, I worked with curriculum committee, I talked with the provost, most importantly I talked with senate leadership. The senate president at the time is a friend of mine. And I really appreciated his advice on how to spin it, how to make it happen. I was able to schmooze and show the senate that everybody would work together. And that was sad to say, probably the biggest single thing I’ve done at this college.

The way I personally lead? Well, first, I’ve got to have an idea, right? Got to have an idea and it has to make sense and I will cross check that idea with other people. Am I right or am I missing something? And if it’s right, then I’ll try to figure out how to move forward. Is it a small thing? If it’s a big thing and I anticipate some crap then I will check with the provost and make sure she’s 100% on board. When I approach people like this, I try to have as much of the idea done as I can. And I’ll ask, “First, do you all agree and, if you do, am I missing something? Have I contradicted something? Am I breaking something? Is there some ripple I haven’t thought of, which is good, but we should spell out?” I try to be informal and personable. I don’t want to ever appear dictatorial. That should be pretty easy because I don’t have any direct reports. I’m an administrator, but not anybody’s boss. I try to be light-handed as opposed to heavy-handed. Try to be really explanatory.

I don’t know if I’m a good leader. Don’t really consider myself much of a leader. The things I do, I think are kind of small. And then there are certain things, like I’m nominally in charge of our embedded academic support effort. There are plenty of things that I can do, but it’s a huge campus-wide committee, and there are some naysayers on it. They don’t say they’re naysayers, but they’re not yea-sayers. They’re not charging ahead. They want to rest on their laurels. I gave examples to our three deans, arts and sciences, tech, and health, and said, “Hey, is there any chance of promulgating this and seeing what faculty could do? See if they
want to build such things in?” I sent about three emails. And supposedly they did talk about them in the professional development days last year, but, of course, it goes nowhere. The provost and I talked about it. . . . The deans don’t report to me, I sure can’t tell them what to do. . . . The provost is going to push these things a little more. . . . That’s something I find extraordinarily frustrating. It’s not a simple win. If the provost wanted to stamp her scepter, she could do that. . . . Obviously, we don’t want to do that.

I try to be the guy who helps people understand how things work in the areas that I know. And I try to understand how things work in other areas so that I don’t screw them up. . . . I’m a realist or a pragmatist. I don’t have a negative view of human nature. No, I don’t. I know people sometimes make mistakes and people are sometimes jerks. I myself have had a really charmed life. I don’t know if I mentioned this, but I haven’t worked outside of academia. . . . I don’t have that [other] experience that almost everybody has. And I’ve been really lucky.

A number of years ago, maybe four years ago, I was contemplating one of those PhDs in college leadership. And then I looked at my age. When I was a kid, even when I was 30, schools paid me for the pleasure of my company. . . . Well, those days are long gone. It means actually having to pay money and I’m kind of loath to do that. . . . I’m getting a little far into my career. It’s something that would be fascinating. I would really learn, which I love, and if I had 10 years after that or 15, maybe, but no. . . . I’m not a young person who’s going to stay in this job for a while longer. When I bought a house when I was 40, I planned on working till 70 . . . but the work gets harder as you get older. There are more responsibilities.

**Reflections on Antonio Charles’ Story**

Throughout the interviews, Antonio minimized his role as a leader. He sees himself as more of an administrator, a go-to person to carry out the vision of the provost. His story is one of
a college that had a very charismatic, big-idea leader who left as the guided pathway efforts seemed on the brink of either taking off or falling apart. While things were very exciting and stimulating during his tenure, the guided pathways leadership was situated within a very small group, led by one faculty member whose academic program was being eliminated. The effort was a top-down approach that led to an “us-versus-them” relationship with faculty. It was interesting to me that Antonio recalled the relationships between the people who were involved with leading the guided pathways initiative as “very strong” and the period as “a really cozy time” when the administration was “trying to get something good done.”

The guided pathways initiative was scaled down, or perhaps right-sized, when the charismatic leader left. Antonio alluded to some frustration with this when he described projects that take so long, with people coming and going, that you may not know when an initiative is complete or if it’s even the same initiative that was started.

Antonio’s story illustrates the need for broad-based support and lots of communication with various stakeholders when colleges are working through major change initiatives. His personal style is to build relationships, make sure he thoroughly understands the policies and procedures of the college, and communicate with groups and individuals who are affected by changes. He likes to be a problem solver but seems to rely on the provost and her authority when his powers of persuasion fail to convince people to make changes he feels would help students.

Antonio’s experience, and his recollection of the experience of the guided pathways faculty leader whose teaching position and guided pathways position both ended, exemplify the conundrum of people who are tapped to lead from the middle: authority without power. He made light of and minimized his role as a leader, and at times described himself as “on the periphery” of the most intense resistance to the change efforts. Antonio seemed to guard against any
extreme emotions related to the guided pathways change initiative. He “felt a little bit of pride we’re doing the right thing.”

Chapter 4 Summary

The profiles in this chapter, using the participants’ own words, provided a rich, thick description of what brought them to their positions and their experiences leading the guided pathways change initiative at their Michigan community colleges. My reflections after each profile highlight and summarize their contribution to a better understanding of the experiences of each leader.

The three participants had several things in common. All started their work at community colleges in the classroom as adjunct faculty, all were accidental leaders who were elevated or placed in certain positions based on skills, experience, and/or relationships, and all were tapped to lead the guided pathways initiative at their colleges. All three struggled, a little or a lot, with motivating their colleagues, and all felt at some time that they had to sell the idea of guided pathways. Two participants, Michael and Diana, came to their roles with a significant amount of experience leading change initiatives and working other places. That served them well. Except for a graduate assistantship, Antonio’s experience was all at the same community college, and this may help explain his more managerial approach to leading guided pathways. In Chapter 5, I identify and discuss findings that emerged when I broadened my view and looked across the profiles.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS

Throughout this project I collected data through extensive interviews with three mid-level guided pathways leaders from different community colleges in Michigan. The purpose was to explore and better understand the experiences of the participants charged with leading a change initiative from a mid-level position. As Marshall and Rossman (2016) recommended, I engaged intimately with my data. I worked with the material over several weeks through a continuous process of listening, recording, and transcribing. The data from three interviews with three participants was transcribed into hundreds of pages of text. I then spent much more time reading and rereading, marking, editing, and reducing the text to what I felt was the most important and pertinent to the research question. The process of listening to the participants and reading their words multiple times; highlighting, marking, and sorting passages; and labeling and grouping words, as well as discussing with my dissertation committee, led to the following findings that emerged to me and relate to how the participants experienced leading a change initiative at their colleges.

The first major finding that emerged from this study was how change was happening through supports and resistance. Supports were teams, communication, and relationships, and resistance related to maintaining the status quo, fear, and a college’s culture.

The second major finding from this study was the role of leadership in change. The participants led differently, but common themes were leading authentically, top-down versus
mid-level leadership, mandates from other entities, selling and motivating, managing emotions, and sensemaking.

**How Change Was Happening**

The participants in this study did not question that change was needed and, while their colleagues may not have liked or agreed with the types of changes guided pathways required, student success was important at all the colleges. A shared vision of improving student success motivated the work of the participants and the groups they led. Michael, whose college is known for its “all-in” approach to reform, stated it clearly:

> If reforms are put into place it’s done so with the idea that this is going to make our institution more effective in supporting the learners; it’s going to help our faculty be engaged in ways that their efforts are maximized.

Although a shared vision is important, it is not sufficient to entice or persuade people to make the changes to make the vision a reality. Change leadership is necessary and leaders have different tools and resources based on their position within the college (Kezar, 2014). The participants in this study described teams, communication, and relationships as tools and resources that supported their efforts.

Change resistance in organizations, including colleges, is normal (Buller, 2015). Change “challenges people’s habits, beliefs, and values” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). The participants in this study experienced resistance through the desire of people to maintain the status quo, fear, and the culture within the colleges.

The following sections will provide examples from the participants’ stories of how change was happening on their campus, what was supportive and what was resistive.
Support

Leading change is difficult and can be risky. Mid-level leaders, who lack authority and often lack resources, risk failure or, more likely, a project that stalls and never reaches completion. Leaders are also in danger of being marginalized, diverted, or attacked (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). To achieve the goals and to maintain their well-being, leaders need support. The participants in this study described teams, communication, and relationships as things that were supportive and helpful to them.

Teams

In leading the change initiative, teams were important. Teams made of people across divisions and departments helped break down silos and create strong relationships that continued to grow and evolve as the change process evolved. People looked to their team members for support, and teams needed to be empowered to make decisions. If a group’s recommendation was not implemented, knowing why it was not employed built trust and credibility in the college’s administration.

Communication

Lots of open and honest communication, including welcoming dissent, helped people understand others’ perspectives. Diana spoke of the benefit of small meetings, where people could voice their opinions, feel they were heard, talk it through, and then move on. She also described situations when people left organized meetings, where they did not engage in critical conversations, and then held informal “post-meeting meetings that . . . derail[ed] everything.”

Trust and conversations helped move change initiatives forward; keeping things secret led to mistakes and long-lasting suspicions. Antonio described an innocent mistake his colleague made when she misunderstood the requirements of the Michigan Transfer Agreement (MTA)
and directed faculty to put together degree maps with one lab science and one science without a lab. The intended requirement of the MTA is two different science classes, and at least one must have a lab component. Because his colleague kept the work “close to her chest,” the error was not discovered until after the faculty had done quite a bit of work developing the maps with limited science choices. When Antonio discovered the error and shared it with his colleague, “She played it off like there was some kind of miscommunication. . . . It made her life difficult because she had already told people to do X and now . . . we have to do Y instead.” Antonio felt that mistake, which could have been avoided with more open communication, helped solidify the faculty’s resistance to the changes.

**Relationships**

Relationships with peers as well as high-level administrators was important to the leaders in this study. They spoke of their position as mid-level leaders as one in which there is very limited authority, and that authority comes mainly in relation to the person they report to who has greater positional power, such as a provost or vice president. Leading, or even having a small role in leading transformational change, was challenging, and positive and explicit support was needed from the college’s top-level administration. The change leaders needed to be empowered with resources, support, and overt backup when decisions were made. Diana’s experience illustrates the difference she felt when her college had a change in the top leadership positions. Prior to that, her supervisor, a vice president, would not directly challenge Diana’s authority as they implemented change, but he would undermine her. As Diana recalled:

He never did say “Oh, no, we’re not doing that.” He never would. But it was always clear that it was sort of . . . my [decision]. . . . And now it’s “Here’s what we’re doing.” And that makes a huge difference.
Faculty involvement was challenging, but necessary, to implement broad changes to improve student success. Faculty occupied a unique role in the student success change efforts, and Michael, who was a faculty member, enjoyed a stronger, more trusting relationship with faculty than Diana or Antonio did. And although Michael was nervous going into faculty meetings to describe the changes that would be happening, they were “more receptive than I expected” and he has come to appreciate his fellow faculty members as “so student centered and hard work[ing].”

Personal relationships were important to the participants during the change process, but in different ways. Antonio described the relationships among the people in the small group working on guided pathways as “cozy” and “strong,” but contentious between that group and faculty. He was part of an inner circle where decisions were made. Outside of that circle, relationships seemed to be more transactional and political: “There are a lot of little things in the catalog in rules that I have pushed for. . . . It’s better to get my coalition together, double-check with the registrar. That makes sense. Let’s do that.” Antonio also told me that he now has a connection to the college president that he did not have during the guided pathways implementation. He described being able to “backchannel” things to the president’s office and said that if he had that relationship during the change initiative, he would have used it to accomplish some of the things he was overruled on.

The approach to guided pathways change at Michael’s college was quite different as there were many people involved and, as co-lead, he felt that was important and necessary. Michael, who was a faculty member, spoke of the relationships on his campus during the change initiative as “good, honest, and constructive.” The relationships evolved and, as trust grew, the faculty and staff could engage in difficult conversations. Michael saw part of his role as making
others comfortable with the uncertainty that comes with change and facilitating a lot of two-directional conversations. Michael also spoke of empowering others to do what they needed to do. It was clear there was a high level of trust at his college.

Diana, who was new to her college, did not have a long history with her colleagues. She came to an environment where people were tired of trying things and never really seeing results. Relationships between the college’s faculty and staff, and their professional roles, seemed to be muddied up with their extensive personal histories with the college. Diana’s approach to the relationships was pragmatic:

I was just trying to find something that I can appreciate about everyone. It doesn’t mean I want to go out and have a drink with [them], but, you know, we’re at work. I think we need to behave professionally and civilly and keep [our] eye on what we’re trying to accomplish here.

Diana purposefully separated her work and personal life to achieve a balance she had lost at her previous college:

I give my[self] little pep talks. I’m not taking this home with me at the end of the day. Some days, of course, I still do. I care about people. But I have gotten to a place where . . . I don’t have to be happy with every decision. Life is going to go on. I’m going to come back to work again tomorrow and I’ll be happy with a different decision.

Diana did build trusting relationships with those she worked with, including one person who left a meeting in tears after Diana challenged a process and deadline. Diana respected the person’s work ethic and value to the institution but let her know she could not “behave like that in meetings. . . . People will not take you seriously. You want to advance at this college, and you are ruining your reputation.” The staff member ultimately asked Diana to mentor her.

Resistance

Resistance to change may be human nature, a rational response to real or perceived threats, or an ethical response to prevent poor implementations (Kezar, 2014; Schein & Schein,
The participants in this study experienced resistance in different forms: protection of the status quo, fear, and the embedded culture of the college. The sections below expand on these ideas and give examples from the participants’ stories.

**Status Quo**

Guided pathways is often described as a college redesign, a term perhaps popularized by the book *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015), which implies something is wrong with what is in place. Not surprisingly, all the participants described fierce protection of the status quo and resistance to change. They experienced the resistance from a place of little or no positional authority to force change and relied on relationships, arguments for student success, and logic to help move the guided pathways projects forward.

Resistance to change also came from other places across the colleges. Diana described the biggest challenge they had with guided pathways was implementing their first-year experience. Resistance came from advisors, admissions staff, and information systems employees. The information systems staff stalled for a year and a half because they did not agree with mandating advising, a first-year seminar course, and new student orientation. As Diana described, “We could not get our IS folks to code so that we could put holds on student accounts. . . . We just kept hammering and hammering and hammering. . . . It was maddening.” Diana also described advisors trying to find ways to waive the mandatory first-year seminar course, ostensibly on behalf of students.

**Fear**

The participants described conflict with faculty, most often over streamlining degrees, eliminating courses, and developing program maps. Michael, who was a faculty member, was the most generous with faculty and characterized their behavior as pushback because they felt
imposed upon to make changes with no guarantee those changes would last. Diana and Antonio, college administrative staff, were more critical. They perceived faculty behavior as obstructive, turf-guarding, and unnecessarily dragging things out.

Faculty in community colleges, especially those who are tenured and protected by union contracts, are experts in their disciplines who operate fairly independently (Buller, 2015). Challenging the work they do and streamlining degrees by eliminating specialty courses threatens that expertise and independence. Even when arguments are strong and people agree change is warranted, implementing change may create anxiety if it requires new learning (Schein & Schein, 2017). Learning anxiety can result from the fear of losing power, feeling incompetent, being punished for incompetence, losing personal identity, and losing group membership (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Michael did not experience the same resistance from faculty that Diana and Antonio did. He described guided pathways as a concept the faculty took to the college and pushed for. And Michael was a faculty member whose colleagues trusted him. Diana came from the outside and imposed changes, but she did understand the faculty role is to question everything, so she was sympathetic and managed the conversations well. Antonio’s college, with the top-down approach and decisions made within small groups, likely increased the anxiety of faculty, which increased the resistance.

Culture

Each of the leaders operated within a culture unique to their college and that impacted their experience. Michael’s college is known as a very progressive, all-in college when it comes to student success. The college president is very visible and his message is clear and consistent with doing whatever it takes to improve student success. The faculty and staff at Michael’s
college are accustomed to broad, sweeping changes, which explains his positive experience. He acknowledged it was a lot of work implementing guided pathways and took a lot of discussion, but he did not indicate that anyone felt threatened or angry.

Antonio’s college culture was one of power in the hands of a charismatic provost who ruled in a charming, but top-down, manner. The faculty-versus-administration feeling was pervasive and persistent. This set the provost up for failure when his vision could not be realized because groups across campus were not engaged in the decision making. The top-down approach was so strong that even when faculty were directed to make changes to their programs that they knew did not make sense, they made them because “they had to do it.” A major mistake was discovered after faculty spent many hours reworking their degrees and they had to revise them again. When the provost left the college, Antonio described a feeling of personal loss and some recognition that what the provost was trying to create went with him.

Diana described the culture at her college as an insulated, tight-knit community where changes were resisted to the point of possible loss of accreditation. People who worked at the college had attended as students, their family and friends were students and alumni, and they were very invested in maintaining the processes and programs they helped develop. When top leaders left the college and were replaced by people like Diana, who came with experience from other places, things began to change. Diana brought a fresh perspective and she had the experience and credibility to tackle issues the college had ignored for a long time. Diana leveraged an upcoming Higher Learning Commission reaccreditation visit to motivate change and supported that with group discussions, empowering others, and removing barriers.
The Role of Leadership in Change

Leading Authentically

The participants each described themselves differently. Michael characterized himself as visionary, Diana labeled herself pragmatic, and Antonio portrayed himself as more of a connector and not much of a leader. It was important to each that their approach to leading the guided pathways effort was sincere and consistent with the image they held of themselves. In order to advance the guided pathways change initiative, certain characteristics and behaviors emerged as important for all. Dealing with difficult conversations, disagreements, and ambiguity was part of leading the change process for the participants. Antonio’s story suggested his college, with a charismatic leader and top-down approach, didn’t manage this very well, which contributed to faculty mistrust and resistance.

Authenticity in the participants’ leadership experiences came up in a couple different ways. Antonio, an administrator who serves as a support to the provost and has no authority of his own, described having to “sell” faculty on the idea that they needed to limit students’ choices:

That puts a bad taste in a lot of people’s mouth when the administration tells them with a straight face that you should pick the top six gen eds out of this category even though we have a dozen choices . . . Pick the top six and nothing else works. Antonio did not agree with this, argued with the provost who ordered it, and lost the argument. The policy was reversed within a couple months, but the damage with faculty was done. Antonio mentioned this several times in our interviews, and my impression was that he regretted the part he played but felt he did not have a choice at the time.

Diana, who has a position of authority, faced the same issue of having to tell the faculty at her college in her former position that they had to cut many courses to meet the Completion by
Design requirements. She “refused to sell it.” She described her approach as factual by telling people the decisions that were made at the state level, what they needed to do, and how they were going to approach it. In her words, “I want to be authentic too. . . . I’m not a used car salesman.”

The leaders in this study were humble. When asked to look back on the guided pathways leadership experience, Michael consistently referred to “we.” “We’ve got this system in place that’s working, we’ve got data showing it’s working. . . . We’re working together.” Antonio continually downplayed his leadership role, likening what he did to supporting the leaders. The participants did not pretend to have all the answers, admitted to their groups they were going to make mistakes, and when mistakes were made, they acknowledged them.

**Top Versus Mid-Level Leadership**

Antonio’s words described his experience when the change initiative was controlled by the top as opposed to a team effort:

> You know you have to do X and you’re getting resistance and you may not have a clear way of overcoming that resistance. You can be as right as you are, but unless you can stamp your signet ring on the wax and seal it, if you [can’t do that] or your boss isn’t going to do that, it’s just hellacious.

Diana talked about the faculty role in mapping degrees and her belief that the work had to be done at the department level, by faculty. Michael, who was a faculty member, insisted on co-leading the guided pathways initiative with an administrator because he felt strongly that neither could do it alone.

**Mandates from Other Entities**

Two participants described mandates from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and the U.S. Department of Education as creating the need and pressure for change. Diana’s college had ignored the Higher Learning Commission’s rules for making sure and documenting that
faculty were qualified to teach the courses they were teaching. She described it as “a wink and a nod.” It was only after the college had missed in important deadline and there was an impending HLC visit that Diana was able to convince faculty that they had to abide by the rules.

Antonio described past issues his college had with the federal Department of Education regarding financial aid. His college had to return funds that were used for ineligible courses, and he used that experience to educate faculty on the need for guided pathways and the structured approach to programs. A faculty member blamed the college’s financial aid office for not allowing students to explore many courses, and Antonio shifted the blame to the Department of Education. He invoked the Department of Education regulations as the need to limit course choices.

**Selling and Motivating**

Part of the change leadership involved helping faculty understand the issues and gaining their buy-in. The participants all understood and spoke of the role of faculty as teachers, whose focus was on their disciplines. Faculty members’ lack of awareness of student success issues was understandable, but not necessarily acceptable, as the colleges were implementing guided pathways. Leading guided pathways involved educating the faculty as well as the rest of the college community.

Antonio and Diana described faculty as being focused on the courses they taught and unaware of how classes fit into degree programs overall. Faculty were also unclear about how excess courses or courses not offered in a predictable schedule were barriers to student success. Their input and cooperation was essential, but a major guided pathways activity, setting up default program maps for students, threatened the courses instructors may have loved the most. As Diana described it:
It meant a lot to me to eliminate courses that don’t work for our students, which is not a popular thing. I totally understand the faculty viewpoint that this is a really great course and it’s their favorite and it’s fun to teach. I get that. But I don’t think that’s our mission. I think our mission is to teach the fundamentals. That’s the first two years [of college].

Diana spoke of her faculty being cognizant of the cost of education, and even if they did not like giving up courses, they could appreciate how students would benefit.

**Managing Emotions**

The participants were asked about the emotions they experienced during time they led the guided pathways change initiative. They described a myriad of emotions that seemed to skew negative at the beginning and in the midst of the change process, and shift to more positive emotions as they saw progress with guided pathways becoming integrated into their college cultures. To me, it is important to note the guided pathways work took place over several years. The emotions and particularly the stress the participants experienced impacted their relationships and their ability to tend to other aspects of their jobs for a long time, and perhaps permanently.

Callahan and McCollum (2002) wrote that managing emotions requires control and thinking about how feelings are expressed in different interactions and settings. As Callahan and McCollum described, the participants’ stories show their emotional management included suppressing, exaggerating, or modulating emotional expression. Michael described fear, anxiety, and exhaustion as his college rolled out changes. He did not say he hid his feelings of fear and anxiety from his colleagues, but he did not describe sharing those feelings with co-workers. Michael recalled there were many meetings, especially at the beginning of the guided pathways work, when “I didn’t know how it was going to be perceived so I was pretty nervous going into that . . . But you do what you have to do.” The words “you do what you have to do” implied to me that Michael engaged in emotional work over a period of time to get to the goals he hoped for at his college. At the time of the interviews, Michael was distressed over the impact of COVID-
19 on the students and the practices his college had put into place. He felt they might have gone back “at square one” with providing the support and direction to students that the guided pathways practices provide.

Diana expressed self-awareness of her tone and facial expressions and the effort required to manage those: “I wish I could have better control sometimes of my facial expressions. Sometimes I speak more harshly than I intend. Sharp. People sometimes think I’m mad, but I’m not mad.” Diana was also very aware, from her experience in her former position, of the need for work-life balance. Her words here describe the emotional aspects of leadership in higher education:

This is going to sound terrible. I came into this job thinking I’m not going to be invested in this institution. Which is, of course, not true. . . . I wanted better work-life balance and so I give myself little pep talks. “I’m not taking this home with me at the end of the day.” Some days, of course, I still do. You care about people. But I have gotten to a place where I distance myself from “Oh, I’m not happy with that decision.” I don’t have to be happy with every decision. Life is going to go on, I’m going back to work tomorrow, and I’ll be happy with a different decision. But what I’ll take home with me is the stuff we all take home with us, which is the people. Because of the position we’re in, we hear everything. We’re privy to people’s personal bad news and challenges and that weighs on me. . . . But I have gotten to a place where I’m not going to love everything we do at this college. And not that it doesn’t matter, but I can move forward. There are other important things in my life, so I hope that’s healthy and not a sign that I just don’t care. No, I care. . . . [but] I like that I was able to get to that place.

Antonio seemed averse to showing or discussing any emotions related to his change leadership role. The closest he came to revealing emotion was to acknowledge a sense of loss when the provost who had directed the guided pathways movement from above left the college abruptly. When asked about emotions he experienced during the guided pathways initiative, Antonio mentioned resistance but also recognized resistance is not an emotion. Antonio did describe tensions between the faculty and the administration and frustration with the “old guard” who blocked the guided pathways group’s progress toward getting “something good done.” And
he was often in the position of defending the college’s honor, as when he explained to a faculty member that federal regulations determined what financial aid covered, and not the college’s financial aid office. Perhaps, as articulated by Cherkowski et al. (2020), Antonio “relied on defense mechanisms such as putting on our masks, feigning competence, and stoically putting our heads down to pull the weight of the work and push through” (p. 3). Antonio was a member of an intimate group of people who seemed to be in awe of the charismatic provost. The provost pushed guided pathways changes from the top down, through the members of that small group, dismissing Antonio’s concerns along the way. There were missteps, the provost left abruptly, and the faculty person who was the official guided pathways leader lost her job at the college after her academic department was closed. Antonio got a job they both applied for, replaced her as the guided pathways lead, and said, “I feel bad, but every bullet has its billet. Right?” There was a great deal of turmoil over a few years. Perhaps Antonio’s cynicism, evident when he described the provost leaving and the guided pathways leader losing her job as “random political things,” was a mask to cover “fear, feelings of inadequacy, and even despair” (Brown, 2018, p. 93).

Although the participants described feeling anxiety, stress, exhaustion, nervousness, fear, and frustration, they also felt exhilaration, excitement, pride, closeness with colleagues, and a feeling of fun. The participants also experienced the change process in different ways. Michael, as a faculty member who brought the guided pathways idea to the college from a grassroots level, described it as all-consuming work that subsumed all other work. He enjoyed having credibility as “one of us,” a faculty member leading the change, as opposed to “one of them.” Michael’s effusive “I really fell in love with my college and my colleagues” was sincere and heartfelt. Antonio struggled with the faculty-versus-administration dynamic and was impatient with “the old guard” faculty members who would not change. He wanted to rely on
administrative authority but knew that he did not have any and was frustrated when the deans
and his current provost, who had power, did not use it. Diana, as a former faculty member and
person who led a major change process at another college, approached the initiative in the most
business-like manner. With the advantage of her past experience and her newness to the college,
Diana saw what was going on with fresh eyes and seemed to cut through some of the emotional
messiness with her matter-of-fact style. She was impatient with the culture that allowed problems
to fester with the hopes they would go away, but was sympathetic with faculty and staff who
were tired of making changes and not seeing results.

Sensemaking

In the final interview with each participant, I asked them to look back and try to make
sense of their leadership experience.

The participants felt their efforts were successful, with caveats. Michael was concerned
the work his college did would not withstand the COVID-19 pandemic, and the students most in
need would be left behind, as his president shifted focus to building online instruction. Diana felt
her college’s guided pathways work had become part of the college culture but was concerned
about their inability to ensure students are learning at the program level. Antonio gave his
college’s guided pathways work a mediocre assessment: “There are always things to improve,
but there’s nothing that makes me cringe.”

The participants felt the most difficult work of implementing guided pathways was
finished and each was glad their colleges went through the process. They feel their colleges are
serving students better now that principles of guided pathways are in place.

As I reviewed the interviews, it struck me that Diana was the only participant who
specifically mentioned student learning and learning outcomes. Perhaps this came from her
expertise with assessment. It seems a glaring omission for extensive discussions about a change initiative designed to increase student success but makes sense when you consider the difficulty community colleges have defining “programs.” Occupational programs, such as nursing and welding, can and do define learning outcomes for programs, and they assess for those. And instructors define learning outcomes for their individual liberal arts courses. But defining learning outcomes for a liberal arts transfer degree, with students preparing for various majors at different transfer institutions, is one of the tougher aspects of the guided pathways movement.

Looking back, Diana and Michael described approaching the change initiative from a place of not knowing how it was going to proceed and bringing teams together to figure things out. Although this took a long time and involved many difficult conversations, the changes at these two colleges were internalized and became part of how they do business. Michael’s college also publicly proclaimed their “all-in” approach to student success. He described, “Posters up all over campus that say TCS squared, Total Commitment to Student Success.” He also said, “We decided on faculty commitments together that we put onto a mousepad and distributed to all the faculty.”

Antonio described his experience as more management than leadership. His strengths and contributions were in the areas of making sure degree maps were accurate, students would meet graduation requirements, policies and procedures were explained and adhered to, and changes were communicated to the staff working with students. Antonio’s college had a charismatic provost with very big ideas and strong opinions on how things should be done. When mistakes were made early in the process, even if they were corrected quickly, people at his college remembered and talked about the mistakes for a long time, which made a difficult process even more difficult.
As I immersed myself in the participants’ words and came to understand their experiences leading change, it brought back an initial question I had about mid-level people leading a potentially transformative change effort: Are they prepared? The participants did not say they were unprepared. As human beings who had all experienced changes throughout their lives, the participants could identify with their colleagues’ feelings and reactions, and that seemed to serve them well. But they also did not talk about how they prepared their colleagues for change or how they had expected things to go before the change initiative started. My impression was, although they spent time in trainings to learn to implement guided pathways, they had not spent time reviewing literature on change or learning about managing change.

Chapter 5 Closure

Analyzing the data and identifying the findings that emerged was not an easy process. Looking back, given the literature on higher education leadership and change, the findings seem self-evident. However, they evolved from much labeling, sorting, grouping, and regrouping. The content within the findings is what might be surprising or enlightening. Three mid-level people from different Michigan community colleges, working with the same principles of guided pathways, described very different experiences with common threads that connect them to each other.

Chapter 6 of this study provides an analysis and discussion of the major results, the relationship of the results to existing studies, and implications for future research. I also include implications for higher education administrators who are planning or undergoing change initiatives led by mid-level leaders.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study investigated the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a Michigan community college. Using a phenomenological approach, I interviewed three people, from three different colleges, who had been designated as leaders in their colleges’ implementation of guided pathways. Guided pathways has been described as a major change strategy to redesign colleges with the goal of increasing student success.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation provides an overview and descriptions of the intersections between the topics of change, higher education, and mid-level leadership. This was the foundation for the problem this study addressed: mid-level community college employees responsible for leading a major strategic change effort who may or may not be prepared to lead a change initiative. I sought to understand how the participants experienced their roles in strategic change, the emotional aspects of leading change, and how they made sense of their experiences.

One research question guided this study: How do guided pathways leaders at Michigan community colleges experience their roles in the strategic change process?

Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature to support the argument that the topic of leading change from a mid-level position in community colleges is important and a phenomenological approach to the research is appropriate (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The literature review was guided by the contextual and conceptual topics in my framework, which was introduced in Chapter 1. Major topics were the environment in which my participants are
working, with a variety of internal and external stakeholders, and individual and personal characteristics of the experience of leading change.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods I used to recruit participants and the in-depth, semi-structured interviewing (Seidman, 2013) I employed to gather rich, thick descriptions of the participants’ experiences. Chapter 3 also includes a reflection on my own identity as a former mid-level, guided pathways leader and current vice president at a Michigan community college. The reflection and the personal profile I wrote proved very helpful as I connected with participants and empathized with their experiences but refrained from injecting much of my own story into the conversations.

In Chapter 4, I presented my findings as participant profiles, distilled from the voluminous text produced by nine interviews and field notes. I feel I have honored the words of the participants and helped extend my knowledge of leading change at a community college (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Chapter 5 consists of the findings that emerged when I looked across all the participants’ profiles and stories and includes references to relevant literature when they help to clarify concepts. In Chapter 6, I conclude this study by summarizing the major insights I have gleaned from my research, relate those to existing studies, and propose implications for future research and practice.

**Summary of Major Insights**

This study captured the experiences of three people who were tapped to lead the guided pathways initiatives at their Michigan community colleges from mid-level positions. Two broad findings emerged: how change was happening through supports and resistance, and the role of leadership in change as it relates to leading authentically, top-versus-mid-level leadership, mandates from other entities, selling and motivating, managing emotions, and sensemaking.
Three very different stories of mid-level leadership of the same initiative, in different but similar settings, also emerged.

The participants’ stories showed that implementing a broad, strategic change was difficult but more doable when there was a shared vision of student success that came from both the top and grassroots levels of a college. A truly shared vision, as opposed to a slogan or something that was imposed by an outside agency, was important. Leading change from the middle meant being in a position of responsibility with little power, relying on referent authority or authority passed down from someone above who did have power. When the people in top leadership positions at two of the colleges changed, the change leadership work of the participants was altered too. In one case, it became easier as the participant’s leadership role was validated. In the other, the change work became less dramatic but more achievable. Cross-functional teams were important to the change effort, and the most challenging and most productive conversations came as a result of purposefully building opportunities for everyone to have a voice and be heard.

The participants were authentic, and they recognized and did not like when they were expected to sell something to their colleagues. Two participants described a range of emotions, positive and negative, and sometimes quite strong, throughout the period they were leading the guided pathways change initiative. Resistance to the change initiative was common and came from various places within the colleges. Making sense of the leadership experience for two of the participants meant looking back and recalling that they started the process without really knowing where it was going to lead and what the results would be. Guided pathways was perceived as a model, or set of proposals, based on theories from various fields that seemed to make sense. The leaders helped disseminate the information, facilitate conversations, and move their institutions to improved student success by applying the principles of guided pathways.
Antonio’s experience showed that the person designated as the leader of a project may not be the true leader. There may be someone else controlling an initiative, using the named leader to carry out directives. This compromised the leadership experience as the named leader’s already diminished authority as a mid-level leader was further reduced to managing administrative tasks.

What I expected to find, but did not, was something from the participants indicating they felt they did not have the knowledge, skills, or abilities to lead the change efforts. Perhaps this was because they began the process not knowing how or where it was going to proceed, and while that caused some anxiety and stress, they did not attribute that to their own abilities or lack of abilities. It could also be that two of the leaders had extensive experience leading large change initiatives at other institutions and brought skills to this process. The third participant did not have that kind of change leadership experience, but he also felt he played a small role in the guided pathways work, while the visioning and change leadership were done by others. Preparing mid-level people to successfully lead a change initiative requires training and time to process concerns (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Antonio was not prepared to lead a change initiative, was not given much opportunity for training to prepare, and was left as the designated leader when others left his college. This speaks to the need for colleges to intentionally prepare employees for the roles they may assume, not just the roles they are in, and intentionally select people to lead strategic change efforts who have, or want to obtain, the “talent, confidence, and expertise” (Bolman & Deal, 2013) necessary to lead.

**Relationship of Insights to Existing Studies**

The conceptual framework I used to guide this study consisted of the environment within which higher education change leaders operate, the experience of mid-level employees leading
change, and concepts of sensemaking, sensegiving, and emotional intelligence that research has shown are related to a leader’s personal experience. The following sections show connections between the research literature on these topics and my study.

The Contextual Environment

Community colleges are influenced and impacted by external stakeholders, including the general public, government entities, and nonprofit organizations. Gandera et al. (2017) found nonprofit, intermediary organizations helped set policy by selectively funding research and programs, shaming colleges with poor completion rates, and disseminating information that aligns with their causes. The influence of nonprofit organizations established the need for the guided pathways change initiative at community colleges, which led to the participants’ roles as leaders of guided pathways at their colleges. Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design (CBD), Community College Research Center, and the Michigan Center for Success were mentioned often as sources of exposure to guided pathways, and later as sources of support, training, and demands for data and accountability.

The federal government was mentioned indirectly by the participants when they discussed accreditation requirements and financial aid regulations, both used to justify changes the participants sought. Antonio used the federal financial aid requirement that aid may be used only for courses that contribute to a student’s program to explain the need for guided pathways to a faculty member. Diana had to educate people at her college on the importance of faculty qualifications and assessment for the Higher Learning Commission. The state government agencies in Michigan did not play a large role in the participants’ work with guided pathways in Michigan, but the highly regulated state Diana came from played a significant role in her work with CBD. That state has a state-level governing board for community colleges, whereas
Michigan is one of just four states with no state-level coordinating or governing board (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017). Diana frequently compared the two states and her experience leading changes to improve student success in each.

Although Michigan does not have a state-level agency with authority over higher education, the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) does play a significant role in coordinating the efforts of community colleges across the state. MCCA is a voluntary organization and all 28 Michigan community colleges belong. The organization has grown significantly over the last several years and includes the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS). In 2014, the MCSS brought guided pathways implementation support to all Michigan community colleges with funding from the Kresge Foundation (Schanker & Orians, 2018). The MCSS was mentioned many times by the participants, as that organization brought the colleges together in cohorts, provided training, and tracked guided pathways implementation progress across the state.

Internally, the participants knew their primary stakeholders for guided pathways and student success efforts were their students. They described their community college students as underprepared, poor, first-generation, and students of color. Familiarity with their students and the challenges they faced motivated the change leadership work they did. Michael, a faculty member who taught developmental English, described what led to his move from a small, liberal arts college to a community college: “[Students at the liberal arts college] were going to being fine no matter what I did. . . . Students who can’t succeed in my class [at the community college], that’s the end of their chances for post-secondary education.” Diana, when she described her work with CBD in her former state, spoke of the inequity of who is placed into developmental education and the costs in time and money as the factor that finally
convinced her that changes needed to be made in community colleges. The participants all understood and agreed with the work of researchers such as Bailey et al. (2015) and Page and Scott-Clayton (2016), who concluded comprehensive changes are needed in academic programming and student services if community college completion rates are to improve.

Although all participants espoused the idea that students were at the center of their concerns and changes, only Diana discussed issues of students’ learning, assessment, and equity. Given the participants’ temporary roles as guided pathways leaders and the idea that guided pathways is a series of activities to implement, the leaders may have focused on technical challenges rather than adaptive learning. Technical challenges are problems to be solved with what we already know and directives from authorities (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). The authorities related to guided pathways were the college leaders but were also experts from the Community College Research Center, who published a book on guided pathways, and the Michigan Center for Student Success, who organized the guided pathways leadership trainings. Student learning, high-quality assessment of learning, and equity issues are adaptive challenges, which require new learning, as well as attitude and behavior changes. Leading to resolve adaptive challenges and implement adaptive change is difficult and hazardous for a leader, as people must examine and possibly change their values, habits, and beliefs (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Faculty and, to a lesser degree, staff members were mentioned often in the participants’ stories. As O’Banion (2019) noted, it is essential for faculty to be involved in transforming the colleges’ programming, and they were. Faculty were also the biggest source of resistance, as they responded to what Bailey et al. (2015) described as a threat to their freedom to teach what they most want, rather than what students most need.
Mid-Level Leadership and Change

Each of the participants in this study were designated a guided pathways leader by their respective colleges, but the roles they played differed. The way in which each college structured its guided pathways leadership and teams seemed to reflect the top leadership styles and the cultures of the colleges. The guided pathways movement at Antonio’s large urban college was driven by a charismatic provost who had big ideas, but who left the college midway through the pathways implementation. Michael’s college, known for its “all-in” approach to student success efforts, was led by a president who championed big, bold changes. And Diana’s college suffered from complacency and an unwillingness of former top leaders to break the status quo until several top leadership positions changed a few years ago.

Although Antonio was named as a guided pathways leader, he operated more as a manager, someone necessary to implement college policy and procedures (Davis, 2011). Antonio mediated between the more forceful or charismatic guided pathway leaders and internal stakeholder groups, including faculty and advisors. He made sure the documents were accurate and communications about changes were funneled to the people who did the ground-level work. Antonio did not describe his college’s change efforts as a failure, but the changes did not measure up to the initial, grandiose goals of the guided pathways leadership team. This aligns with Kezar’s (2014) findings on why change initiatives fail: the leaders focused on the initiative rather than the change process, they did not understand or they ignored the college’s culture, and they used a simplistic change model.

Michael, a faculty member, enjoyed a shared leadership model where the guided pathways team was co-led and there was representation from across the college. The co-leaders were Michael, as a faculty member, and a high-level administer. He recognized advantages to
this approach that Kezar (2014) described: there was early faculty buy-in and the initiative had legitimacy because it was a faculty member who initially brought it to the college, and the initiative would not be successful without access to and involvement of someone from the college’s leadership team. Michael, though, as a faculty member who continued to teach while leading the change process, was challenged by what Balogun (2003) described as the need to alter his role and help others through the change while managing his own ongoing work.

At Diana’s college, the dean of student services was the first guided pathways leader and there was not buy-in from faculty. When Diana, as dean of liberal arts, took over, she worked closely with the dean of student services and they continued to use cross-campus teams. Partially because Diana had more credibility with faculty, things improved. Kezar (2014) described this as collective leadership, with people at similar levels in the institution leading together. The benefits include a shared support system, better understanding and problem solving, and no single person is the target of resistance and criticism (Kezar, 2014).

**Sensemaking and Sensegiving**

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) wrote that sensemaking and sensegiving are sequential and reciprocal during periods of organizational change. There are multiple examples of cycles of sensemaking and sensegiving in the participants’ stories. Michael engaged in sensemaking when he was exposed to guided pathways at an Achieving the Dream conference and “it sounded like . . . a college redesign.” He took the idea back to his college and proposed they research it and move forward if they all agreed they should. Michael described his strengths as being able to come up with a vision, identifying the issues, problems, and concerns, and imagining a system that would achieve the vision. When he communicated his vision, the issues, and proposed solutions, even though they were not fully formed, Michael engaged in sensegiving. In line with
Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) description of sensegiving, he created meaning and influenced the people he was leading to adopt the principles of guided pathways. Kezar (2014) wrote that for sensemaking to occur during periods of change, it is important for people to “wrestle with what the new understanding or change is and what it means for them” (p. 64). Michael saw his role as helping people feel comfortable dealing with the messiness of change—what Kezar (2014) might think of as wrestling with what the change is and what it might mean for them.

Michael also engaged in a cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving after guided pathways was incorporated into the college culture. His college president spoke of a new initiative at a convocation and seemingly the college was on to the next big thing. Several tenets of sensemaking and sensegiving, as described by Weick (1988, 1995) and Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), can be seen playing out in this incident. Michael had constructed his identity as a reform leader, and the reform was guided pathways at this college. He was surprised and angry (emotional) that guided pathways was not mentioned at a convocation, but after reflecting (retrospection), he concluded the president made a mistake and risked losing credibility if it was not addressed. He engaged in enaction to help shape a different outcome by taking the issue to the vice president who, through social interaction with Michael, determined his understanding of the situation and potential consequences was plausible. The vice president then continued the sensegiving when she spoke to the faculty and “did a really good job of framing all this . . . new stuff we’re doing [as] . . . part of our guided pathways approach.”

Diana employed sensemaking when she was “shocked” after arriving at her Michigan community college. Her new college had no assessment plan and had ignored a mandate from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) regarding faculty qualifications for teaching, and there was a lack of good data regarding student success. Diana asked herself the questions
sensemaking is employed to answer: “What is going on here?” and “What do I do next?” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412). She made sense of it all by comparing Michigan’s higher education system to the “wild, wild west” and perceiving her college as having a “pervasive culture of just ignoring things and hoping they’ll go away.” She constructed her identity as the new dean of liberal arts by referencing her experience with assessment and her past leadership of a structured pathways effort in her previous role at a community college in another state.

Diana also engaged in sensegiving with an approaching HLC accreditation review as leverage. Diana used communication and framing, tools of sensegiving (Eddy, 2010a; Hamilton, 2016), to educate the college community and create a sense of urgency regarding the need for change. She rolled the college’s stalled guided pathways work in with the need for an assessment plan and faculty qualifications. With her experience and CBD background, she was able to move things forward by framing and communicating the issues differently. As she said:

I came in with a different eye and said, “Okay, this is how I would approach this.” Because I had already done it, even though I did it in a completely different setting, in a state where if you didn’t do it, it was going to be done for you.

And Diana employed another aspect of sensegiving—emotion. As she said, “This was a do or die for this college, because they hadn’t done what they needed to do. There was buy-in to the extent that people knew we had to do it.” Diana increased the likelihood faculty and staff would follow her lead by increasing their emotional arousal and associating those emotions with the vision and goals she was trying to achieve (Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012).

Sensemaking helps resolve confusion and ambiguity during periods of crisis and periods of change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Antonio engaged in sensemaking at a minor crisis point as his college was ready to roll out guided pathways. He caught a mistake his colleague made putting together degree revisions and attributed it to her misreading the Michigan Transfer
Agreement requirements. He also blamed it on her keeping the documents “close to her chest.” That was how he dealt with the confusion of what happened and the uncertainty of what to do next. Once he identified the problem and the cause of the problem, they could move on to resolving it. At another crisis point, when the provost he admired abruptly left the college, Antonio made sense of it as a “random political thing.” This allowed him resume the work without questioning it too much, but might also have contributed to his reluctance to take risks, dependence on those with positional power, and desire to focus on business processes rather than big-picture changes.

Sensemaking and sensegiving can also be seen in how Antonio constructed his identity in relation to the others charged with leading guided pathways at his college. He was distanced from major responsibilities, decision making, and accountability. Identity construction is a characteristic of sensemaking because establishing and maintaining an identity, a role, is central to making sense of the experience (Weick, 1995). Identity construction involves drawing on past experiences, relationships, and education to make sense of a leader’s role in a new or changing situation (Eddy, 2010a). From the start of the guided pathways initiative at his college, Antonio drew on his experience as an advisor and saw himself playing a small part, not the part of a leader. He never really deviated from that, even after the more visible leaders left the college and he was the designated co-leader. Antonio clearly expressed the identity he constructed: “Before guided pathways, I was this small, temporary administrator; now I’m a small, permanent administrator,” which communicated his inability or unwillingness to take on a true change leadership role.
Emotional Intelligence

There were many examples of emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2008) in the conversations with the participants. Two of the study participants demonstrated self-awareness when describing the broad range of emotions they felt throughout the change process as well as the emotions they observed in others (George, 2000).

Michael’s ability to understand, manage, and use his emotions was most clear when he described being “livid” and “pissed” when the college president neglected to mention guided pathways in a college address. He used his emotions as a signal to where his attention was needed (George, 2000). Rather than attacking the president directly or indirectly, Michael went to the vice president to let her know how he felt and to request the president be told he was going to lose credibility if he did not talk about guided pathways. Michael’s ability to engage and manage his emotions and then assess strategies to alleviate his anger are components of emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2016).

Diana described self-awareness when she talked about people thinking she was angry when she was not. Diana has a business-like persona and she presents information regarding changes in a matter-of-fact manner. Changing her demeanor to a friendlier, warmer style is an example of emotional labor, which involves expressing emotions that may differ from personal feelings to gain cooperation from coworkers (Meier et al., 2006). She knew her voice and her facial expressions conveyed a message she did not want to send, but she was aware and worked to change this. Over time, this could become stressful (Hochschild, 2012), and Diana was prone to carry the emotional weight of caring for and about others. She was also very aware of the need to care for her own emotional well-being, which is important for sustaining the behaviors required for change leadership (Byrne et al., 2014).
Antonio was more of an enigma in relation to his use of emotional intelligence. It seemed he was not aware, or those above him were not aware, of the need to tend to others’ emotions during times of strategic change (Huy, 2002). He repeatedly presented himself as having a minor role and as somewhat removed from any emotional turmoil, but I had the sense there was a great deal of emotional upheaval as the visionary provost left the college abruptly without much explanation. Antonio described himself as “not much of a leader,” and I tend to agree that his strengths lie in managing information and policies rather than leading change initiatives.

Brown (2018) wrote of the need for leaders to engage in difficult conversations with empathy and kindness. The participants’ stories demonstrated this over and over as they were sympathetic to faculty who were experts in the classroom but ignorant of the policies and procedures that negatively impacted students. Michael and Diana also conveyed an understanding and respect for the positions of people at their colleges who were asked to work on changes with no guarantee that the changes would last or that they were the right changes.

**Implications for Future Research**

The qualitative approach I used, with in-depth interviewing of three participants, worked well to further my understanding of their experiences leading guided pathways from mid-level positions. The more I worked with the material through multiple readings and highlighted passages that surprised or moved me to explore further, the more I gained from the participants’ stories. I recommend this method for future exploration of leaders’ experiences.

I expected the participants to mention feeling unprepared to lead an initiative of that magnitude, but none did. A future research project could focus on what prepares, or what has prepared, mid-level employees to lead a change effort.
I was also interested in the relationships participants had with the top-level college leaders, including the presidents. Only one president was mentioned in this study, yet a case study of Miami Dade College’s college-wide effort to strengthen program pathways showed the vision and pledge of dedicated resources from the college president was critical to Miami Dade’s success (Rodicio et al., 2014). Further research might focus on case studies of colleges that have been successful with change initiatives while lacking strong vision from the president.

One of the three participants in this study was female, and the expectations she had for herself as a leader were different from the male leaders. She felt the need to apologize for a look or a tone of voice that might have been misinterpreted. Future research exploring gendered leadership would be interesting and helpful to higher education, where in 2016 just three of 10 college presidents were women (Howard & Gagliardi, 2017).

This research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which inevitably led to conversations with the participants about their colleges’ experiences from the start of the pandemic. This is a rich area for research. Learning how college leaders made decisions under rapidly changing circumstances, how faculty and staff quickly shifted education and services to a virtual mode, how students adjusted or not, and how all are faring given the length of the crisis are just a few topics that deserve attention.

Implications for Practice

This research confirmed Kezar’s (2001) recommendations for higher education change leaders: understand the culture and politics of the college, provide institutional data to help people understand the need for change, facilitate interaction of people from many different areas, be willing to have difficult conversations, promote collective decision making, make sense of what the change means for your college and communicate that widely, and understand the
emotions and potential resistance involved in change. Although the participants did not indicate they felt unprepared to lead the change efforts, they did not know what they did not know, and perhaps they could have been more impactful. Changes of the magnitude called for with guided pathways redesign, those that impact the core of faculty work at a community college, are difficult. Intentionally preparing the leaders for the work at their specific colleges is important.

The study also highlighted the importance of selecting the best prepared people to lead major change initiatives from mid-level positions, rather than people who hold particular jobs. College presidents and provosts should look for people with diverse experiences, including experience at other colleges or organizations. Working at one place for an entire career provides tremendous institutional knowledge, but the scope of experience is narrow. Potential leaders should have the ability to engage in open, honest, and courageous conversations with an open mind and good listening skills. An effective mid-level leader is one who understands that people with expertise in their areas should be trusted to do the work that is specific to those areas. Creating co-leadership roles was effective, especially when the co-leader came from different parts and different levels of the college.

Making support of mid-level leaders explicit is important. Top college leadership should frequently, both privately and publicly, thank the mid-level leaders for their service. Drawing attention to the mid-level leaders’ willingness to serve the college, in a challenging role, models respect and civility. Verbalizing that it is understandable and acceptable to disagree with decisions being made or the direction of a project, but it is not acceptable to treat the leaders poorly, helps leaders’ confidence and ability to persevere. The college president or a high-level administrator should check in with mid-level change leaders frequently. They are carrying out important work for a college, and top leadership needs to understand what is happening, how it is
proceeding, and any barriers. This will also provide support, direction, and mentorship to those in mid-level positions. When a project is finished, or a leader’s work is through on a special project, they should be publicly acknowledged, thanked, and formally relieved of their duties on that project. That provides closure to the mid-level leader and set expectations for the college that the person’s work is done.

A final insight that is unrelated to the guided pathways change leadership has to do with the career paths of the participants. Each began their community college work teaching in an adjunct instructor role. The implication is that change leaders come from many places within the colleges and it is likely future leaders are already there, working as adjunct instructors. For purposes of succession planning and filling future leadership vacancies, there is a large pool of professionals within the college who should be considered for professional development and mentoring.

Conclusion

Seidman (2013) said the last stage of interpreting material gathered through interview research is to ask myself what meaning I have made of the work. I was interested in the topic of change leadership in community colleges based on my own experience leading a guided pathways initiative. The idea of deep conversations with others who were in similar roles appealed to me as a way to try to understand and tell the story of the experience of leading change from the middle.

The experience has elevated my respect for change leaders, especially those who lead from the middle. I understand the stories within this dissertation are an excerpt from the participants’ lives as community college professionals, which started long before I met them and have continued even as I made a permanent record of their words from a snapshot in time.
The major insights I gleaned from this study are the following:

- Change is difficult and leading change is very difficult;
- A shared vision versus a slogan is important;
- Mid-level leaders rely on referent authority, so those selected for these roles must be able to develop positive relationships;
- Changes in top leadership have tremendous impact on the work of mid-level leaders;
- Cross-functional teams create the most difficult and most productive conversations;
- A named “leader” may not be the true leader;
- Change may mean starting without knowing how an initiative is going to proceed—leaders must be comfortable with that.

Returning to the question that guided this research: How do guided pathways leaders at Michigan community colleges experience their roles in the strategic change process? The answer, after all the conversations, transcripts, and profile writing is, it depends. Bronowski (1973) and Siedman (2013) reference the need to allow a tolerance for uncertainty in reporting research findings. “It depends,” although very uncertain, may be a helpful finding. It may prompt future leaders and those charged with leading change to have ongoing conversations about visions, goals, needs, resources, people, challenges, and how they are faring.
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Appendix A

Email for Recruiting
Dear _______________,

My name is Kelley Conrad and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Western Michigan University. The purpose for this email is to invite you to participate in the research I am conducting for my dissertation. The focus of my work is on community college leaders who are, or have, led change efforts at their institutions.

I received your name from Jenny Schanker, of the Michigan Center for Student Success, as you have been involved with the Center’s Guided Pathways Institute as a guided pathways leader at your college.

I am planning to use a research method which involves in-depth interviewing and listening to people’s stories in an attempt to understand their experiences leading change and the meaning they make of those experiences. This will involve three interviews, each lasting 45 to 90 minutes. I’m interested in an individual’s approach to and experience with leading the guided pathways change initiative.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email or call me at 231-730-3891. Responding to this message in no way commits you to participating in the research – it does give us the opportunity to talk, ask questions, and review the purpose and procedures of my study.

Sincerely,

Kelley Conrad
Appendix B

Consent Form
STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to investigate the phenomenon of leading major change as a mid-level administrator or faculty member at a Michigan community college and will serve as Kelley Conrad’s dissertation research project for the requirements of the Ph. D. in Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to participate in a series of three interviews. We anticipate your total time in the study will take 2.25 to 4.5 hours over a two to six–week period. Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be discomfort from answering sensitive questions and the time to participate in three interviews. Potential benefits of taking part may be the opportunity to reflect on how change leadership works in higher education and the experience of leading a transformative change effort at your college. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

You are invited to participate in this research project titled “Understanding the Experience of Mid-Level Community College Change Leaders” and the following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

What are we trying to find out in this study?

We are attempting to understand the experiences of individuals responsible for leading the change effort of guided pathways at their community colleges.
Who can participate in this study?

We are seeking to interview community college employees in Michigan who have been, or are, responsible for leading the guided pathways change initiative at their colleges. Community college presidents will not be included in this study.

Where will this study take place?

Interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon location and the student researcher will travel to the interview site. If face-to-face interviews cannot be arranged, virtual meeting technology, such as Zoom video conferencing, will be used.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

There will be three interviews spread out over two to six weeks. We anticipate interviews will last 45-90 minutes each for a total of 2.25 to 4.5 hours.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?

You will be asked to participate in three interviews, over a two to six-week period.

What information is being measured during the study?

Information that will be obtained as a result of participating in the study will be answers to semi-structured interview questions related to mid-level leadership and change within a community college environment.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

There are no anticipated risks to this study. However, pseudonyms will be assigned for use in place of the college name and your name during transcription, analysis, and presentation of findings, and we will mask information that may be unflattering or may portray the college or the individual in an unflattering light. For instance, if a faculty member discusses a problem with an administrator, we may describe the problem but will not include any identifying information about the faculty member or the institution in which the issue occurred (e.g., “one faculty member noted a lack of support from the dean during the implementation phase . . . ”).
What are the benefits of participating in this study?

The benefit of participating in this study is an opportunity to reflect on how change leadership works in higher education and the experience of leading a transformative change effort. Very little research has investigated change leadership in higher education from the individual leader’s perspective, so there is an opportunity to view this phenomenon differently.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

Only the researchers will have access to the interview recording. The transcripts will be stored on a secure computer and accessed only by the researchers. Results of this study will be included in the student researcher’s dissertation, which will be published in an electronic format. Results may also be used for future articles and/or conference presentations. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and their institutions.

What will happen to my information collected for this research after the study is over?

After information that could identify you has been removed, de-identified information collected for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining additional informed consent from you.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You may choose to stop participating in this study at any time for any reason without consequence or question.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you may contact the primary investigator, Regina Garza Mitchell at 269-387-3540 or regina.garzamitchell@wmich.edu or the student investigator, Kelley Conrad at 231-777-0321 or kelley.l.conrad@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board (269-387-8293) or the Vice President for Research (269-387-8298) if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.
This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner.

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

Please Print Your Name

___________________________________

Participant’s signature                                        Date
Appendix C

Interview #1 Protocol
**Interview #1: designed to explore life history**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who (pseudonym):</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you describe your educational background?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have your work experiences been?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How did you come to work at a community college?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does guided pathways look like at your college?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And how did you come to be involved with guided pathways?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
Interview #2: designed to explore the participants’ contemporary experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who (pseudonym):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think about, or how do you describe, leadership?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe a leadership role you’ve been in?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How do you lead? How would you describe your leadership style?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What are your feelings about guided pathways?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you describe your role with guided pathways?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is/was it like to be involved with the guided pathways initiative in that capacity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are/were the relationships like?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What emotions have you encountered in your work with people on guided pathways?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If they responded about their own feelings: When you think about the people you worked with at your college, what might they have been feeling during the work on guided pathways?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If they responded about feelings of colleagues: What emotions did you experience during the work on guided pathways?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about the challenges you’ve experienced in your work/role related to the guided pathways initiative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about any rewards you’ve experienced in your work/role related to guided pathways?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Interview #3 Protocol
Interview #3: designed to encourage participant’s reflections on the meaning of their experiences

Who (pseudonym):

Could you reflect on your role at your college before the guided pathways initiative began compared to where you are now?

How do you make sense of your work to implement guided pathways?

Follow up: what does the work you did with pathways mean to you? Has it changed the way that you think about the college/your work/others’ work?

Can you tell me about the emotional side of your experience with guided pathways?

What has been the emotional impact on you?

Follow up: Are there things you would change related to decisions you made or actions you took while leading the guided pathway initiative?

Notes
Appendix F

Interview Field Notes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview #1, #2, or #3:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who (coded):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When – date, start and end times:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up needed:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: June 8, 2020

To: Regina Garza Mitchell, Principal Investigator
Kelley Conrad, Student Investigator for dissertation.

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 20-04-17

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Understanding the Experience of Mid-level Community College Change Leaders" has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) June 7, 2021 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at https://wmich.edu/research/forms.

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.