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Sensemaking and New College Presidents: A Conceptual Study of the Transition Process

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This study examines the sensemaking processes of new college presidents to understand how they develop plausible, working descriptions of the campus, come to understand their role in the organization, and generate action alternatives (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). While past research on the college presidency has examined established presidents (Birnbaum, 1992; Cohen & March, 1974), there is little empirical work addressing the entry process and the heavy cognitive demands on newcomers to “get up to speed.” In addition, from a practical perspective, the average age of presidents has been increasing (from 52 years in 1986 to 60 years in 2006) with those aged 61 or older growing from 14% in 1986 to 49% in 2006 (American Council on Education, 2007).

Both this likely increase in turnover of college presidents and the pervasiveness of hiring outsiders—around 80% (Blumenstyk, 2005)—prompt us to better understand the entry process of senior administrators. Organizations

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often spend a year searching for a new president, invest hundreds of thousands of dollars, and endure tumultuous staff turnover and changes in the senior administration. This upheaval happens more frequently than it might; and if one sees a reasonable connection between the quality of administration and the quality of the education and knowledge production of a university, then understanding this process is significant in improving the functioning of our institutions of higher learning. This article helps address the practical problem and the theoretical deficiency in our understanding of newcomer college presidents.

RESEARCH ON THE COLLEGE PRESIDENCY

What we know about the college presidency is largely informed by two major sources: the publications resulting from a longitudinal study of college presidents conducted by Robert Birnbaum and colleagues (Bensimon, 1989; Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Birnbaum 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1992; Neumann, 1995; Neumann & Bensimon, 1990) and memoirs of college presidents (Chace, 2006; Duderstadt, 2007; Gardner, 2005; Vest, 2005). The college presidency is a heavily researched area in the field of higher education, with an assortment of publications ranging from practitioner-oriented (Atwell, Green, & Ross, 2001; Bensimon, 1990; Martin & Samels, 2004; McLaughlin, 1996; Padilla, 2004, Zimpher, 2004) to more theoretical treatments of the college presidency (Cohen & March, 1974). The Institutional Leadership Project (ILP) examined leadership at 32 colleges and universities from 1986 to 1991 and put considerable emphasis on cognition—the ways leaders think, such as their cognitive frames, strategy, and implicit leadership theories—making its findings particularly relevant for this research.

Given this cognitive approach, many of the studies classified the modes of thinking of college presidents. For example, Birnbaum (1989b) explored the implicit leadership theories of college and university presidents by reviewing the proportion of presidents who described their role in five theoretical groups: trait, power and influence, behavioral, contingency, and symbolic (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989). In a similar study, Bensimon (1989) classified the proportion of presidents who described their leadership in the four frames of Bolman and Deal (1997), and found that newer presidents think in fewer frames than longer-tenured presidents, indicating that on-the-job training led to more complex framing of issues. Likewise, in examining strategic frameworks, Neumann (1989) reviewed the proportion of presidents using a linear, adaptive, or interpretive strategy. Neumann found that, among the 32 presidents, those having a tenure of greater than five years primarily described an initial, linear strategic approach when they

began in the position, and moved to a more complex, interpretive strategy later in their tenure.

While these studies offer a conceptual view of the college presidency, the college president as newcomer was a secondary concern in the ILP study compared to understanding success and failure of academic leadership (Birnbaum, 1992). To examine newcomer presidents more specifically, I rely on the sensemaking literature, which examines how individuals make sense of puzzling, unexpected information in stressful environments.

SENSEMAKING

Sensemaking has been articulated in many ways—from the micro-cognitive functions of individuals (Klein, Phillips, Rall, & Peluso, 2007; Louis, 1980; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988) to social, organizational approaches (Weick, 1995). The central focus of sensemaking is the construction of meaning and its consequences. In the study of organizations, its theoretical development is largely attributed to Weick (1979, 1995) with its intellectual roots derived from pragmatism (Dewey, 1910; James, 1890/1950, 1907), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), phenomenology (Schutz, 1967), and social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Several properties of sensemaking serve as a theoretical grounding for the entry process of new presidents. These “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1969) include understanding social context, identity, retrospect, ongoing, and enactment (Weick, 1995).

Social Context

Sensemaking is interested in the social context in which meaning is constructed. Therefore, thinking of sensemaking as only an individual process will induce blind spots (Weick, 1995). The social context can be in face-to-face interactions (Weick, 1993a) or in thinking through other’s perspectives while deliberating individually (Blumer, 1969). Sensemaking is less likely to break down and will lead to more effective action when there is regular face-to-face interaction (Weick, 1993a). In the context of this study, new presidents may be particularly vulnerable in this regard as they mention a sense of isolation and lack of peers to validate their impressions (Kerr & Gade, 1986). The emphasis on the social context is meant to highlight the relational manner in which thinking and behavior occurs.

Identity

Sensemaking is grounded in the multiple identities of individuals and group members, with the need for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency affecting the process (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dutton &

Dukerich, 1991; Weick, 1995). Identity at the individual levels translates to “who am I?” and at the organizational-level to “who are we?” In the case of new presidents, their past influences their sensemaking to remain consistent with previously formed identities as well as with their desired future identity. Sensemaking is also influenced by an organization’s identity, which is constructed through its “organizational saga” (Clark, 1972). Thus, sensemaking occurs within the parameters of individual and organizational identities.

Retrospect

Sensemaking emphasizes retrospect, or how we look back and attribute meaning. The perspective is interested in how individuals reflectively examine their own actions to discover what they have done and the meaning of those actions (Weick, 1977). This aspect can be explained as how people discuss their careers. As Weick (1979) states, “Careers usually turn out to be a set of actions that are career-interpreted after the fact rather than career-planned before the fact. Behavior isn’t goal-directed, it’s goal-interpreted” (p. 195). In this manner, the property of retrospect emphasizes how much of action is informed by highly skillful and complex reasoning, most of which is tacit. Therefore, we act and then discover our preferences, principles, values, and beliefs at the end. With an outcome in hand, we retrospectively construct the values and beliefs that make sense of this outcome.

Ongoing

A sensemaking perspective emphasizes that the nature of things is continually developing, meaning we are always in the middle of events (Mintzberg, 1973). Therefore, “to understand sensemaking is to be sensitive to the ways in which people select moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments” (Weick, 1995, p. 43). Individuals “bracket” or “bound” the ongoing flow of experience (Schutz, 1967). The important point about ongoing is to stress the human condition of constant immersion in the flow of events (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). A sensemaking perspective prioritizes the assumption of fluidity rather than stability—that everything is always in the process of becoming what it is (Hernes, 2008; Thayer, 1988).

Enactment

Sensemaking also emphasizes how individuals enact sensible environments (Weick, 1995). In other words, “order is present, not because extended prior analysis revealed it, but because the manager anticipated sufficient order that she waded into the situation, imposed order among events, and then ‘discovered’ what she had imposed” (Weick, 1983, p. 228). In many instances, we take actions and then justify why those actions were taken. In this manner, enactment is an anti-rationalist concept (Westwood & Clegg, 2003), which posits that actions precede rational planning. Instead, “attitudes are draped supportively around actions that are tough to undo” (Weick, 2003, p. 186).

Importantly, “sensemaking” is used rather than “decision-making” to move analysis from isolated events to more comprehensive, ongoing flows of experience. A sensemaking perspective shifts us to a more interpretive, ongoing worldview from a rational, static picture that delineates actors from an objective reality. A focus on decision-making, with its assumptions of objectified external environments, is more likely to activate a search for blame about who made a “bad” decision relative to an external environment, rather than focus attention on the flow of subjective experience leading to an event (Snook, 2000; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

A further distinction between sensemaking and decision-making is that sensemaking emphasizes action as we *enact* our environment, while decision-making often deemphasizes action in favor of the deliberate, rigorous evaluation of choices (Brunsson, 1982; Chia, 1994). In contrast, a sensemaking perspective views human behavior as an unfolding process and attempts to reverse the traditionally held assumption that decisions are the causal triggers for a particular course of action. In attempting to address this imbalance in organizational theory, sensemaking research stresses how behavior is more indeterminate and less purposeful, downplaying the role of people as rational actors. It posits that much of what we do is verbalized only retrospectively (Weick, 1995). The sensemaking maxim is “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” In other words, we *act* in order to discover our preferences. We are largely in the throes of action that make sense only in retrospect.

METHODS

In 2005, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* found that only 19% of 764 presidents were insiders to the organization (Blumenstyk, 2005). Given this high propensity of colleges and university to hire outsiders as new presidents, this study examines how they make sense of their role and the organization. The research questions of this study include:

1. What is the experience like of being a new college or university president while simultaneously being in charge of a large, complex organization?
2. How do presidents make sense of this experience?
3. How might understanding new presidents’ sensemaking better inform the transition process for administrative leadership?

Study Population

To answer these questions, I interviewed 18 presidents, a number at which sufficient “category saturation” was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The criteria for selection included being a president who (a) had been appointed less than five years earlier, (b) had been an external candidate, and (c) was a first-time president. I selected presidents from three Carnegie classifica-

tions—research universities, master’s colleges and universities, and baccalaureate colleges. I sent invitation letters to 40 presidents with a positive response from 18, for a response rate of 45%. Ten presidents declined to be interviewed due to time constraints (25%), and the remainder did not respond (30%).

Interviews and Data Collection

To capture the sensemaking processes of new college presidents, I interviewed participants using an open-ended, semi-structured interview (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1993). The protocol included: (a) an introductory question about the context in which the presidents were hired and their assessment of the level of turbulence or crisis; (b) how they went about “learning the ropes” of their new position; (c) a retrospective question about what they found surprising, puzzling, or very challenging in their first years (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995); (d) a question prompt about barriers to sensemaking (Weick, 1995), including the commonly expressed view that people “stop telling them the truth”; and (e) their reaction to this quotation from a published interview with a university president: “Whenever you come into a new institution, you have to learn about it and understand it. I think it is a huge mistake to come in with preconceived ideas about where you are going to take an institution to which you are new. . . . It takes you a couple of years to figure it all out. It is like a big puzzle” (Gruber, 2005, p. 342).

Although I followed the structure of the interview protocol, sometimes it was necessary to further explore the sensemaking process; therefore, the research allowed follow-up questions for deeper descriptions of experiences and events (Snow, Zurcher, & Sjöberg 1982). I conducted 14 of the interviews in-person at the president’s office, a 15th in-person at a neutral site, and three by telephone. Using the structure of the interview protocol, I helped presidents “tell stories” (Crandall, Klein, & Hoffman, 2006; Orbuch, 1997). Through the stories I tried to elicit the knowledge and cognitions that the presidents used to make sense of the organization and how they became a “springboard into action” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). In addition to in-person interviews, I collected inaugural speeches, newspaper articles, memoranda to the campus, and other remarks that were published on the college or university’s website.

DATA ANALYSIS

My methods of analysis were informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967)—with the goal of elaborating on the existing conceptual vocabulary (sensemaking) rather than developing new theory as a “blank slate.” In this pursuit, I sought “to achieve a practical middle ground between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism” (Suddaby, 2006).

The first step was open coding of the interview transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To identify sensemaking concepts, I relied on Weick's (1995) seven properties and Louis's (1980) articulation of sensemaking. This process involved line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts to break the interviews, speeches, and documents into small units (Charmaz, 2006).

The next step was to categorize the concepts of open coding into higher-level categories to begin "the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). To do this, I assembled categories with interview quotations. In labeling categories, I sought to phrase them in gerunds, thus preserving the process-orientation of the research (Charmaz, 2006). The process of choosing, discarding, and naming these higher-level categories was largely one of "disciplined imagination," in which interest, plausibility, and category saturation were the criteria for selection (Weick, 1989).

In this manner, the process of choosing categories unfolds much like artificial selection through trial-and-error thinking with the constant process of logical and affective judgment (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Davis, 1971; Fendt & Sachs, 2008; Locke, 2007). Logically, I judged the categories based on their plausibility in answering the research questions; whether they held up to increasing scrutiny, and their correspondence with theory and previous findings. Affectively, I evaluated the categories based on whether they were "interesting rather than obvious, irrelevant or absurd, obvious in novel ways, a source of unexpected connections, high in narrative rationality, aesthetically pleasing, or correspondent with presumed realities" (Weick, 1989, p. 517). When I discarded categories, I removed them to an alternative document, which I occasionally reviewed in light of my continued analysis of transcripts and documents.

In analyzing the interviews, speeches, and newspaper articles, I worked toward moving back and forth from data to abstract concepts. Through this process, my focus was expanding the abstract concepts by filling them with concrete examples. Thus, I grounded ideas in data but also moved toward expanding the conceptual vocabulary through abstraction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and abduction (Reichertz, 2004, 2007; Strübing, 2007). Abduction begins when something unintelligible is discovered in the data and includes a process of constructing an explanation for this surprise. This process of data analysis is more of a cognitive process that allows for a "process of discovery rather than only a logic of validation" (Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007).

FINDINGS

The results of this study suggest several ways in which presidents make sense of the organization, come to understand their role, and formulate plans

about what to do next. First, the findings show that presidents unknowingly used ethnographic methods to understand organizational culture and that the organization's size and complexity led to qualitatively different descriptions of efforts to make sense of the organization. Both of these categories explain presidents seeking to understand "What's the story here?" Second, presidents expressed the need for the collective thinking of their administrative teams; they relied on peers and mentors to reduce uncertainty about how to deal with complex and novel problems; and they used strategic planning sessions as a means of discovering the group's priorities and to reduce equivocality. All of these categories correspond to presidents addressing the question, "What do we do next?" Finally, through their actions, presidents are justifying their choice to take a position. They are in a committed condition, and their actions can be interpreted as a way of answering the question, "Why am I here?" Next, I found several barriers to sensemaking such as isolation and power distance, complications of thinking out loud, and a lack of time for thinking and reflection. Figure 1 offers a visual outline of the findings.

Understanding Localized Meanings as Lay Ethnographers

The interviews showed a universal espousal of the virtue of listening, with every president mentioning some kind of listening tour. In some cases, they actually called it a "listening tour." In others, it was a description of meetings with faculty, deans, vice presidents, alumni, staff, trustees, and community members. In small colleges, the president commonly said that he or she had met with every faculty member. In larger universities, presidents described their meetings with deans and program directors.

In some cases, the president structured very elaborate arrangements to meet with constituents. For example, the president of a state university had 75 "listening sessions" where he met with people based on their longevity of service. Another president met with more than a thousand individuals in 40 sessions, and the president of a large, research university did a "listening tour" that spanned his entire first year. He went to every college and department that invited him. He said, "I took an empty pad and asked them, 'Tell me about the university as you know it. And what do you need from the organization to succeed?'" He also went to the major heads of the corporations in the city and said, "Tell me what people say about the university, when people from [the university] are not in the room."

Concurrently with these formal listening sessions, presidents sought to understand the tacit, localized meanings of the organization. Therefore, they intuitively made an effort to meet people "on their turf" by going to faculty offices or attending department meetings. The knowledge presidents were seeking to obtain was contextually embedded, and therefore the learning they sought needed to be in context. For example, the president of a small, liberal arts college described what it was like to "get my feet on the ground":

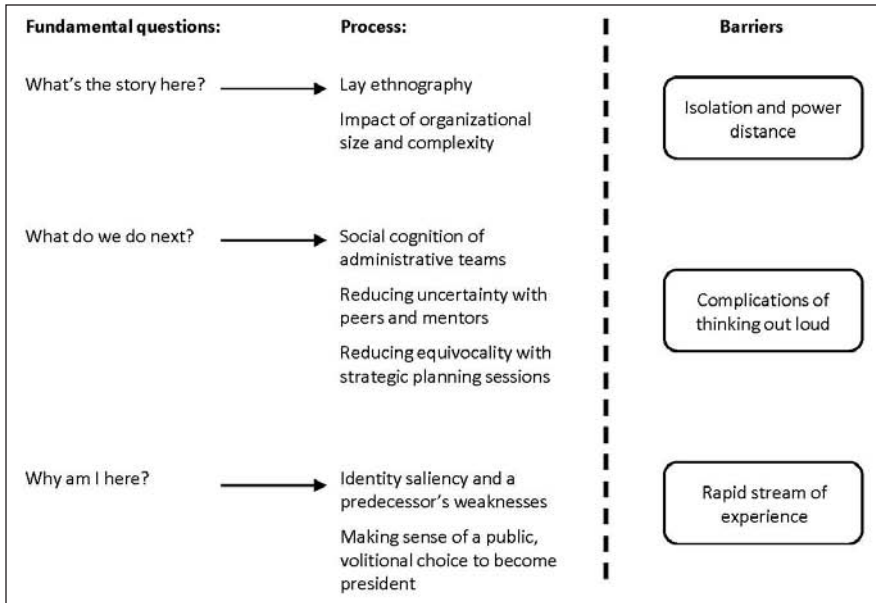


Figure 1. Fundamental Questions Underlying Sensemaking Processes

Total immersion. So . . . and it would be immersion in the sense of walking around campus, I wanted to physically see the different buildings. I wanted to see where faculty were working so I would go into buildings; and if a door was open, I would talk to faculty members or staff members. Tried to attend . . . there was actually a surprising number of events in the summer that take place and so trying to attend any event that was taking place, faculty presentations, student events, and just trying to soak up what the culture was like.

In many ways, presidents were acting as “lay ethnographers” (Louis, 1990). Unknowingly, they adopted the learning methods of ethnography because the knowledge they were seeking was tacit and contextual. Campus members could not articulate this information succinctly in a predefined list. The presidents needed “total immersion,” much as an ethnographer needs total immersion in a research setting. Through this process, they sought to understand the reality of campus members. For example, one president met with individual faculty members in a place of his or her choosing and led off the meeting by saying, “I want to understand your life as a faculty member here, what you like, what you don’t like, your struggles, your glories. Spend time talking to me about your reality. Help me to get into your reality.”

The president of a research university also described several ways he went outside formal channels to come to understand the contextualized and tacit

nature of the culture, including sitting with students at football games and completing a polar bear swim in frigid water during the winter. He said that going to these events helped him frame issues because he gained informal, firsthand knowledge of the institution, which he described as “a whole different perspective on the university.” After these experiences he could refute statements, such as administrators who attacked students for drunkenness at football games. He could now ask, “How do you know that?” This immersion gave him contextualized knowledge to question people’s claims.

Presidents were searching to become conversant in the organization’s shared meanings. To become effective in their role they needed to understand these localized, shared meanings to better interpret what was going on and better manage the uncertainties of their position. This lay ethnography was not only functional but it was also recognized as symbolic. For example, one president commented:

People read a lot into what you do in the first, you know, couple of months. You know, if you don’t meet with the faculty early on, then the faculty say, “Oh, he doesn’t care about us.” You know, if you don’t meet with the staff—so just a lot of meetings with a lot of different groups, just to try and get out there and be visible and let people know that you are here and that things are changing and that the university is moving forward. The timeliness with which you do that is important. I mean, people are watching and they are looking to see . . . who you are meeting with when, and because that says something, I think, about the values and where an individual places importance.

Thus, while there was a functional need to conduct listening sessions (i.e., presidents described them as an explicit way to learn), presidents also understood the symbolic significance of their approach to learning about the organization.

These functional and symbolic listening tours also included alumni. When asked how they came to understand the organization, many of the presidents immediately mentioned that alumni gave them a rich conception of the institution. For example, the first thing the president of a liberal arts college mentioned when asked how he learned about the organization was that he spoke with the alumni on the board of trustees. Some of them had been students at the college going back to the 1960s. He says, “Having 60, 65 years of history, affiliated with this place as student, as board member, really was a very rich set of data for me.”

Likewise, the president of a state university described making sense of the organization through the eyes of alumni, gaining the most new knowledge and understanding from them. When he spoke with alumni, he began to see the university differently. He said he was trying to “figure out what was enduring, what was foundational, and what was the moment, you know,

kind of how do I see past the clutter of the moment and really understand what has made this university special.”

While presidents acted as lay ethnographers, there are many notable differences with practicing strict ethnography. Presidents are not detached observers. In their privileged position, they play a major role in the endless negotiation of the localized meanings of the organization. They are not passively observing and noting the way things are done; rather, they are part of a reciprocal process. They are trying to make sense of the organization, but they were often hired because they would reject common understandings. This was especially true at organizations facing substantial enrollment or budget crises. In these circumstances, the president was more likely to understand the culture but immediately recognize the shift in thinking that needed to take place. They viewed the organization as poorly functioning, a position from which they more directly challenged the assumptions and worldview of institutional members.

Nearly every president described his or her role discretion in coming to understand the culture. For example, the president of a research university mentioned how he viewed everything differently as president because he suddenly could do things to create change. He provided several examples, including changing campus signage that he disliked. Another president of a liberal arts college described the “bizarre academic affairs structure” in which the vice president for academic affairs is always hired from the outside and the dean of faculty is always hired from the inside. With this arrangement, they are always supposed to be in the same place at the same time. He described this arrangement as a “complete redundancy, and we are going to change it but slowly.”

Examples abound of presidents seeing the way things are done but saying they needed to be changed. Organizational outsiders have an inherent ability to see the organization differently than insiders, who often take things for granted. Thus, presidents acted as lay ethnographers, but with the role discretion to reciprocally change the meanings and structures of the institution.

Impact of Organizational Size and Complexity

Throughout the interviews, there was a difference in how presidents of different-size institutions made sense of the organization, with presidents in smaller institutions describing that they looked to understand the core identity, unifying vision, and common purpose of everyone on campus; none of the presidents of the larger organizations mentioned a similar desire to find a core identity or a desire to “get everyone on the same page.” With smaller organizations, a president faces less equivocality or variation in meanings (Weick, 1979). This difference led to qualitatively different descriptions of efforts to understand the organization.

For example, the president of a liberal arts college with an enrollment of 1,900 commented that, in her meetings with campus members:

I am finding . . . this eerie . . . consistency. We are getting similar views, similar perspectives, and I think it's easy for me—I think I have a much, much easier job, in this, as president because of an institution that's been pretty steady going in one direction for 173 years. We're a four-year liberal arts, undergraduate, residential institution, and we're not that complex, and so the views of the future are not that disparate. So, it's pretty easy and it'd be real tough if one were at an institution—I read about some of these undergraduate, master's, doctoral—they don't know if they should be more graduate than undergraduate. Is research the primary reason faculty are here, or is it teaching?—you know, and all those things, and they're debating the size and everything. Should we grow by 5,000/10,000? We don't have to wrestle with that, so I think that's why it is probably unique here because it's so . . . the path is so clear. There is so much consistency about where we are going.

She added that one of the reasons she came to the college was that “it had such a clear, clean focus,” and she did not have to worry about the added complexity of tensions between teaching and research prevalent at larger institutions. This consistency was critical for her because of the change from her previous organization (Louis, 1980). She had been a provost of a large, public university with an enrollment four times the size of her current presidency. Given the objective differences between her current and former campuses, she constructed the presidential experience differently, based on the cues she noticed in her new setting.

Likewise, in an institution with around 2,500 students, the president said she started by announcing that she wanted to meet with all faculty, meeting with over half of them during her first summer. The faculty told her their aspirations for the college and areas for improvement, which “really helped me see the essence of this school, and the way in which—almost the commonality of people's feelings about the culture and what was important.” She said that this process was one of the most important things she did to get to know the college, thus allowing her to articulate what the college was about:

So by the time fall came around I felt as though I really knew this place, and so I could put together a speech for the incoming class that captured the “what we were about” and then start disseminating it back out to various constituencies, and that helped set the stage for my presidency.

As this example shows, presidents in smaller organizations can more easily reach a unified interpretation of what the organization is doing, while larger organizations require the president to come to terms with complexity and ambiguity (Cohen & March, 1974; Pfeffer, 1977). The president of a master's university with an enrollment of 12,000 commented, “You have to embrace

and love complexity and ambiguity to do this job.” Therefore, sensemaking in smaller organizations can more easily reach a clear interpretation of “the core essence” or commonality of the organization while, for larger organizations, it involves embracing or coming to terms with complexity.

Presidents of smaller colleges were also more explicit about “getting everyone on the same page.” For example, the president of a college with an enrollment of approximately 1,500 repeated two metaphors, one of which was “reducing the list in the ship” and the other of which was that “people need to be pointed in the same direction rather than one person rowing this way and another person rowing that way.” None of the presidents in the larger research universities mentioned a similar goal, nor could I imagine them saying it. Achieving such a goal would be fairly difficult, given the presence of multiple professional schools and research institutes.

As previously mentioned, the complexity and size of the institution was more salient when presidents had come from an institution of a different size. Their perception was largely reference dependent, with the perceived attributes of their current environment contrasting with their prior context (Kahneman, 2003). Many of the interviews linked the level of discrepant cues to the size of their previous institution. For example, the president of a research university with an enrollment of 24,000 had come from a much smaller institution with 3,600 students. He observed:

I had worked at large institutions, but I hadn’t been a senior manager there. I was an executive VP at a very small institution. You know, there were about 3,600 students when I left. I knew everybody on that campus by name. I could solve any problem by just . . . walking to their office and saying, “Okay, how are we going to fix this one?” When you come here to [this university] where there are six campuses in the city and seven campuses overseas, nine colleges, you know, suddenly you can’t do that; and if you do that, you freak your vice presidents and deans out because you are stepping on their authority, and so you can’t go to people deep in the organization.

Not only was solving problems in larger organizations noticeable for a president who came from a smaller organization, but being able to communicate in such a large organization was also a challenge. The president of a large, research university mentioned: “I had to learn . . . how do you speak in a way where your vision of what you want to happen can survive the retelling five layers down? And how do you get information from the front lines up to you?” To respond to this challenge, he made numerous short videos about what he saw as central to the university that could get “blasted across the whole organization.” He also spent much of his time giving speeches and writing in ways that could be passed through the whole organization. Communicating in written form was a way that the message can “survive the retelling as it gets directly out there.” He explained:

I have to spend a lot of time just talking with people who are in charge to come to some kind of sense, [that] “Okay, we all have the same understanding when we use these words.” You know, it has been a real challenge for me to try to learn how to lead in a big place.

This president’s experience illustrates not only the equivocality in large organizations and the attempts to overcome variation in meanings, but also the perceived difficulty of this task when coming from a much smaller organization.

In contrast, the president of an institution with an enrollment of around 4,600 had spent his entire career at three major public universities. He described his experience as a “tremendous advantage” and was fairly confident that he was succeeding in understanding the organization:

I had a tremendous amount—probably because of the size of the institutions—a tremendous amount of autonomy at the leadership level whether you are a dean or a vice-president or anything else. . . . There weren’t a lot of people looking over your shoulder. You were responsible for a budget. You were responsible for curriculum. You were responsible for promotion and tenure; and what I said to the people here was, you know, the [school] I was running at [a large, public university] was larger than this college; . . . and for all practical purposes, I was running a school like [this college]. So, I felt pretty confident coming in to that.

Thus, size and complexity made a difference in the qualitative descriptions of sensemaking and were particularly salient for presidents who had come from larger or smaller institutions. Both of these categories—presidents as lay ethnographers and the impact of organizational size—are about the fundamental question: “What’s the story here?” They are about presidents forming plausible, working definitions of the situation and creating the foundation for what to do next.

Social Cognition and Administrative Teams

The degree to which presidents stress the importance of administrative teams cannot be overstated. In large measure, nearly every president mentioned building an administrative team or “getting the right people on the bus” (Collins, 2001). This element highlights the relational or social context in which sensemaking occurs and has been explored with college presidents by Bensimon (1991) and Neumann (1991), among others. When uncertainty is high and contextual knowledge is low, the presidents rely on the thinking of and feedback from their administrative teams.

For example, the president of a research university said there is no substitute for an open and honest discussion with his leadership team:

I can't tell you how many times that people that I have confidence in—you know, the senior leadership team, the vice chancellors—how many times they have helped me identify a particular course of action that has turned out to be the best one. If left to my own devices, I would have jumped off a cliff.

Similarly, the president of a liberal arts college stressed: "I think the dynamics and the chemistry of the senior staff of the cabinet and your relationship with them can't be overestimated. The importance of it can't be overestimated. It is just . . . it is just critical." Not only are administrative teams critically important, but harmony and unity are needed. The president of a liberal arts college described the five administrators who report directly to him: "Unless you are on the same page with them, doing what they're doing, things are really out of whack." Likewise, the president of a master's college mentioned the importance of not having a "divisive cohort" on your senior team:

One of the interesting things to me is—perhaps to use the "Good to Great" analogy now—and that is getting the right team on the bus; and so much of being a president, I think, is looking at the group you have working with you and making sure there isn't a kind of divisive cohort within that, whether it's one individual or group of individuals.

The first thing the president of a liberal arts college mentioned in an open-ended question was that a good administrative team was "critically, critically important." In the beginning of his presidency, he dealt with a member of his team whom other team members thought should be fired. He was unable to focus his attention on important initiatives when he couldn't rely on key individuals in the provost's office or advancement office. He says, "At the end of the day, getting those chess pieces aligned properly is . . . well, it goes to Peter's idea of getting people on the bus—getting the right people on the bus first."

All the presidents, regardless of institutional size or the president's background, mentioned the social property of sensemaking—that a collective group is needed to properly run the organization. These individuals need cohesion and the president relies on their collective expertise. In the interviews, the presidents clearly reflected that a process of collective meaning construction and response generation is far superior to an isolated process and that selecting a team is a crucial first step.

Reducing Uncertainty with Peers and Mentors

Presidents seek to reduce uncertainty by looking to peers at other institutions to see what they should be doing. This process highlights the social nature of sensemaking and the need to overcome the isolation and singularity of the position. For example, the president of a liberal arts college commented, "I actually went and talked to a few other presidents in the area, on the guise

of introducing myself, but really trying to pick their brain about what the hell is going on. What am I supposed to be doing here?" Presidents are also on email lists formed while attending new president seminars, which serve as a means of comparing notes with others. One president mentioned that she was reviewing an email conversation about strategic planning: "What we do on our distribution list from our new presidents' seminar—everybody's doing the same thing, we're all doing strategic planning—so we compare notes about the process."

The role of peers is important for newcomers when tasks are unclear and complex (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979); and that peer group is especially important when the president is facing issues in which standardized, professional knowledge cannot be applied (Schön, 1983). The president of a research university says that, when she became president, she took extensive advantage of opportunities to talk to more experienced presidents, to "bounce things off of them from time to time, and just . . . try to get as much wisdom as I can from them, knowing that I am new, and wanting to learn as much as possible from the experience of other people."

In addition to speaking with peers, presidents frequently discussed the role of mentors. For example, the president of a liberal arts college called having a mentor "extremely helpful, very, very helpful." Having a mentor is valuable because the problems or questions that new presidents face are novel and complex. They are looking for the pattern recognition and perspective that comes from experience (Klein, 1989). For example, the board was trying to decide how the president would be evaluated. The board chair offered Intel Corporation's evaluation process as a model, which the president described as "basically you have every person who has ever met you evaluate you once a year." He knew this was not the process he wanted, but he did not know how to proceed:

So I called Steve [his mentor] and talked to him about it. He not only agreed that that wasn't what I wanted, but he also had a very good suggestion about how to do it instead and this really related to what he had done at [his college], and now I basically have a kind of confidential verbal evaluation after every trustee meeting.

He said this evaluation process has worked very well and was one among several examples of his mentor's giving him excellent advice and proposing options.

Mentors also help new presidents understand how an "experienced president" would interpret and respond to a situation. For example, the president of a master's university said, "I think that having someone that you can talk with who has been an experienced president—[but] probably is not a president now—who you can talk with honestly, directly, and to get unvarnished advice, I think is incredibly useful." Mentors provide social

support and insight into the complexities and lack of clarity around the presidential role. These mentors are particularly helpful because presidents would naturally resist displaying ignorance, confusion, and a need for help to administrators who report to them directly. They also would not wish to display uncertainty with their “bosses,” the board of trustees. In short, just as presidents rely on their senior administrative teams to help them deal with the complexities of their position, they readily turn to peers and mentors as a social means of thinking.

Reducing Equivocality with Strategic Planning Sessions

Presidents often mentioned leading a group process of collectively discovering the organization’s strategy or priorities early in their presidencies. They mentioned the need to hold these sessions to “get everyone on the same page.” The question becomes why did they want to get everyone on the same page? What problem were they trying to overcome? When looked at through the lens of equivocality reduction (Weick, 1979), there were too many meanings of what the organization could be doing. The president was trying to reduce this equivocality by focusing the efforts of the organization. Equivocality is especially present in colleges and universities that have complex and diffuse goals for educating students and creating knowledge. Higher education organizations interact with complex environments, including the disciplinary inquiry of society and the natural world. This complexity creates a multitude of purposes that counteract attempts at equivocality-reduction. Managing a university is not for those seeking clarity. Nevertheless, people try.

This process of reducing equivocality was most clearly demonstrated in strategic planning meetings. Presidents are especially prone to want these meetings because uncertainty collects at the top of the organization. They face many directions the organization could go and need to simplify the options in some way. Two presidents specifically described the same process for discovering the collective priorities of the college. For example, the president of a liberal arts college led a process to develop the school’s strategic plan with a committee of 40 people. Each person wrote action steps on post-it notes. The committee members wrote these notes individually but they also passed along ideas from the campus community. During the primary strategic planning meeting,

we put them all up on this huge wall and then we began to assemble them into similar categories. . . . It’s a time-consuming process where everybody—I mean you can say, “No, this goes over here.” And someone else says, “No, it doesn’t.” And you finally reach a consensus, and then once you have done that . . . all 40 people each got 10 dots. So you got 10 votes and you could put all of your votes on one item. If you said, “This is the most important thing that I think we have to deal with,” you could put all 10 votes there.

From a sensemaking perspective, this scenario is a prototypical case of “How do we know what we think until we see what we say?” How can the committee members know what they think until they see the categories on the wall? They come to know what they value by seeing their votes. They act in order to think. Their knowledge of priorities is largely tacit and becomes explicit by placing dots next to action steps. This process not only reveals the tacit priorities of an individual but also the priorities of the collective. It is also natural selection in microcosm. Participants bracket some portion of the stream of experience by writing action steps on post-it notes. They then intuitively select action steps by placing dots next to the ideas. The strongest, most plausible ideas survive. Finally, ideas are retained in a formalized, written strategic plan. As another president says:

The university-wide planning meeting was like a . . . process . . . like determining together, the priorities of the institution, and so there was lots of talk about how to group those various priorities, so we did some early brainstorming, and then the facilitators and I tried to group these. We created nine areas, and then we put under those nine topical areas, “Now what would be the operational priorities here?” and let people use dots to locate their support, and so, of those nine, we probably developed 60 or 70 operational pieces.

These strategic planning sessions demonstrate how the activities of organizing are directed toward the establishment of a workable level of certainty (Weick, 1979). The president is a facilitator of this process, ostensibly because his or her role in the eyes of the board of trustees is to set the strategic direction of the college. Presidents face too many meanings and need clarity about preferences. Strategic planning sessions offer a means to reduce equivocality and direct action.

Identity Saliency and Predecessor's Weaknesses

The final two categories emerged from the fundamental question of “Why am I here?” Throughout many of the interviews, the presidents identified themselves as the antithesis of their predecessor. In many cases, the president was hired for his or her perceived ability to overcome a predecessor's weaknesses, a finding consistent with the conclusions of other scholars (Kaufman, 1980; Walker, 1977). Therefore, if we are a “parliament of selves,” as Mead says (1934), then the self that becomes most apparent for presidents is often the antithesis of their predecessor.

For example, the president of a liberal arts college repeatedly mentioned that the most challenging thing he faced when he began was a conflict with faculty over the meaning of shared governance. The previous two presidents had been members of the faculty at the college, and they had sided with the faculty on many disputes with the trustees. It became clear throughout the interview that one of the reasons the current president had been hired by

the trustees is that he would bluntly “say no” to the faculty and side with the trustees on contentious issues. In describing his continual conflicts with the faculty, he repeatedly described himself as someone who would “say no” and strongly say, “This is what we are going to do.” For example, he commented:

Depending upon the constituency within the college, there is a very interesting view of what their responsibility is and what your responsibility is, and I have found in more than one instance where I have said, “Well . . . you know, I appreciate your perspective, but no, that isn’t a faculty right and responsibility. You do not dictate when we pay overload pay. You do not dictate when we decide because of budgetary considerations to eliminate under-enrolled classes. That is not a faculty responsibility.” And since this is my first presidency, I have no idea if this is emblematic of an issue that others have faced or not, but it appears to me—sometimes I just think it is the culture of [the college] because there has been a long history here of faculty saying, “This is a right of the faculty” and no one [has been] willing to say, “No, probably not.”

In many ways, the president symbolized the battle between the board and the professional autonomy of the faculty. The board was seeking more control in using its authority to operate the organization while faculty members were asserting their professional autonomy. The president sat in the middle—siding with the board’s desire for authority—and his willingness to “say no” became a prominent factor of who he was as president.

At a large research university that had recently experienced a vote of no confidence in the previous president by the faculty, the new president’s commitment to transparency and to “earning trust” were salient components of her identity. She repeatedly mentioned that she knew how to operate only in a transparent way, a trait she had developed as provost at a public institution. In addition, she mentioned several times that she is very good at “earning trust,” an ability that made her the “right fit at the right time.” She explained, “So much of [the board of trustees’] perception of what is right at this time is driven by the failures of the prior person.” In addition to her predecessor’s lack of transparency and trustworthiness, he had not been considered good at executing plans. In contrast, the current president stated: “In this search, it was all about execution, because they viewed my predecessor as having a big vision, but he couldn’t actually make anything happen and it all fell apart.” In contrast, she commented, as provost at her previous university, she would set three or four priorities every year and would press her subordinates to work on these priorities. Given her predecessor’s perceived faltering on achieving goals, her contrasting effectiveness was a salient feature of her identity as a leader.

The identity that presidents enact through their presidency is heavily shaped by how they describe themselves during the hiring process. This is not surprising given that they are selected for this description which validates

the appropriateness of the beliefs they describe. The subsequent fulfillment of this identity comes through their interactions and negotiations with the campus throughout their tenure. They seek to prove the veracity of their beliefs and remain consistent in the eyes of their bosses, the trustees.

Making Sense of a Public, Volitional Choice to become President

The presidents were also in the process of making sense of their choice to take the position. They are in a “committed condition,” and being committed changes the way they understand events (Weick, 1995). As one president said,

I realize that my commitment to this place—there’s a sense that I don’t have any choice but to be here because I have to go through the bicentennial and the end of the campaign or I will have damaged [the university] instead of moving [the university] forward, and so, even if I wear out and say, “It’s time to just go retire,” I can’t, and that is emotionally difficult.

In most cases, presidents in the study population traveled far distances and agreed, publicly, to be in charge. In the interviews, I did not directly ask presidents why they chose to take the job nor, consequently, what they thought about this choice. However, I did explore the actions they took after arriving on their new campus. In large measure, these actions can be understood as a means of justifying their choice. If presidents travel halfway across the country and give up a great deal of personal time and energy, they are going to believe they can make a difference. Seen from this perspective, the presidency is a “committed condition”; and the goals, attitudes, and actions that presidents articulate are justifications for their past choice of accepting the job (Weick, 1993b).

For example, the president of a master’s university had come from a large, respectable institution in the South to his current position—a low-status school in a state system of higher education in the Midwest. When I asked what his greatest surprise was, he said, “I didn’t know, coming in, that I would conclude that we could be the best in the country.” As a researcher, I found this statement odd because it communicated that he viewed his new university as sub par when he arrived. He then discussed his plan for making the university the “best in the country” in integrating students’ academic and personal development. The university (at the time of the interview) had low status even relative to its peers in the state system of higher education, yet his plan was to make the university one of the best in the country. If we view his actions as those of a person trying to articulate reasons to justify a committed condition, becoming “best in class” is a way of justifying a prior choice.

Likewise, the president of a liberal arts college described several “pleasant surprises” when he began. Being pleasantly surprised suggests that his begin-

ning expectations were relatively low and that he could have had insufficient justification for assuming the presidency. He described his reaction:

I was a little surprised by the—well, maybe even rather surprised—by the quality of the faculty here. . . . I wondered—I knew that we would have good teachers, or I believed that, based on everything that I had heard, but I wondered about the kind of time and, for that matter, even dedication that are required for scholarship; but the quality of scholarship here is much better than I anticipated so that has been a very pleasant surprise.

The presidents in my study population had already made the decision to become president, and their accounts of what was surprising often were ways to buttress their support for that decision. It is unlikely that a president would want to conclude that he or she was heading an inferior group of faculty members at an institution with little ability to improve itself. Driven by post-decision rationalization, the presidents wanted to believe the institution exceeded their expectations.

BARRIERS TO SENSEMAKING

Throughout the interviews, several aspects of the president's role emerged as potential barriers to the sensemaking process. The first barrier was that the president's subordinates were less likely to share information that reflected poorly on the president. In conjunction, subordinates were hesitant to verbally engage or disagree with the president, their boss. The second barrier is one familiar to those in public life—the inability to think out loud. A president's words are often assigned greater weight, and ideas are taken as a *fait accompli*—an accomplished fact. These factors say less about presidents than they do about people in followership positions. It is normal to see those in leadership positions as having rationally and strategically planned every idea. Finally, presidents face a constant flow of meetings, banquets, and interactions, the pace of which hinders their ability to retrospectively construct meaning.

Isolation and Power Distance

Sensemaking stresses the social component of cognition as opposed to the information-processing component of individuals (Weick, 1995). The mind is a complex amalgamation of knowledge structures from society, professions, organizations, and personal histories. Much of this knowledge is tacit and does not rise to the level of explicit perception until the participants collectively discuss it—the sensemaking recipe (Weick, 1979, 1995). Thus, isolation in the presidential role is a significant barrier to making sense of what is going on, particularly when presidents are newcomers and have little knowledge of the organization itself. This isolation is a general, ongoing phenomenon—"I

have few people to talk to”—and an event-based phenomenon—“I am the last to know about a problem.” As mentioned previously, presidents combat this general, ongoing isolation by reaching out to peers at other institutions and finding mentors. For example, the president of a master’s university says he is involved in the national association of state colleges: “There are a number of national organizations that I go to for the contact that I have with my presidential colleagues because the conversations that we have with each other, I can’t have with anybody else on this campus.”

Presidents face isolation because people are unlikely to share gossip or bad news with them or to contradict presidents by presenting their honest opinions. This factor reflects how people relate to those in authority positions, which Hofstede (2001) labels “power distance.” For example, the president of a liberal arts college observed: “It truly is the case; the president is often the last to know about some things that are going on.”

A core issue presidents face is the common tendency for subordinates to not share information that may reflect negatively upon them. Other presidents mentioned that, when you take the position, “people stop telling you the truth.” The president of a research university commented: “There aren’t many people that you can really talk to,” and the president of a master’s university said that, when he began, he was “trying to figure out who the people are who are going to tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear.”

Presidents are hierarchically and socially removed from the informal channels of communication, and much of what they described in learning about the organization was their tactics for escaping deferential treatment or being given the “company line.” For example, the president of a liberal arts college said:

It’s awfully important that you have some of the real—I don’t know if they’re curmudgeons or . . . the institutional eyes and ears out there all the time that you really feel comfortable talking to that do two things. One, they’re giving you honest feedback on what they are hearing, what they are sensing, but—and at the same time and maybe this is where the curmudgeon piece comes in—you want some people that are willing to come in and not be afraid of the office or afraid of the person and tell you like it is from their perspective, so that you truly are getting a good sense of what is the pulse out there.

Complications of Thinking Out Loud

Like most leadership positions, presidents have to be careful what they say publicly. If one takes seriously the sensemaking maxim—“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”—then being excessively cautious in speaking puts limits on a president’s ability to know what he or she thinks. In nearly every interview, presidents mentioned being surprised at how their preliminary ideas were taken as *fait accompli*. As with the isolation and power

distance of the presidency, this aspect is mostly about followership and the assumption of subordinates that leaders have rationally planned every statement. Most people do not see a president's words as provisional and emergent but as finalized facts. For example, the president of a liberal arts college says:

I am really surprised that people take so seriously what I say. I don't agree with myself 99% of the time, and I throw lots of stuff on the wall to get it out there and to see what people's reaction is; but in this context, you put something out there, you say something, and that's it. That's the way, that's what we are going to do. And people don't like that, you know. . . . I am surprised at that. . . . People in other contexts recognize that . . . you are testing, you are probing, you are running up the flag here. Boy, say it and it's a *fait accompli*, and that surprised me.

The president of a research university said he had to learn to censor his speech because he was an external thinker:

I literally put ideas out in the air to see if they are dumb or if they are useful. I think out loud, and I learned, Boy, that can throw an organization into havoc. You know, "The president said this. And the president said that." And all I was doing was brainstorming. So I had to learn not to brainstorm so much in public.

Getting into trouble for thinking out loud or not realizing how people will interpret offhand remarks was a surprise for nearly everyone. The president of a research university said that his key realization over his first six months was that "you can't just think out loud because people will take it very seriously." He recalled several examples where offhand remarks he made led to changes on campus, and he would say, "I was just thinking out loud. I wasn't saying we should do that."

If most people are external thinkers and know what they think by seeing what they say, then this trait is a significant barrier to the process of making sense. Presidents have to censor their speech which limits the richness of conversations and the construction of ideas. Inhibited conversation results in fewer interpretations from which to choose. This barrier to sensemaking also heightens the need for having a leadership team that is cohesive and has rich discussions. Speaking with mentors also is a way of surmounting this barrier. Instead of a public setting, presidents can articulate their thoughts with a smaller subset of individuals, and public dialogue is filled with non-specific generalities and preformed ideas.

The Rapid Stream of Experience

A key tenet in sensemaking is retrospect, which is stepping outside the stream of experience to direct attention onto it (Schutz, 1967; Weick, 1995). Most presidents mentioned that one of their biggest surprises was the rapid

stream of experience. For example, they often gave estimates of the number of ceremonial dinners in which they were engaged. The president of a liberal arts college commented, "I haven't had a dinner where I didn't have an occasion. . . . I think we are coming on eight nights now." Another president described the job as all-consuming. One of his initial surprises was how many evenings and weekends it occupied. He and his wife had eaten meals at home only 20 times during their first year.

The speed and pace of the presidency was a consistent surprise that nearly all interviewees mentioned. They described their first years in office as "like a blur;" they could not get "on top" of their schedule, and they never felt "caught up." These descriptions suggest that the rapid pace of experience hinders their ability to bracket and bound experience. They are constantly in the flow of events and have little time to reflect on their experience. Describing it as "a blur" suggests an inability to parse out and remember discrete events.

In sum, presidents face three significant barriers to sensemaking: isolation from their subordinates and therefore from receiving candid communication, complications from thinking out loud, and a rapid stream of experience that precludes reflection. In most cases, they briefly mentioned these barriers but spent more time describing how they tried to overcome these barriers—such as speaking to mentors and trusted individuals on their leadership teams, parsing their words, and blocking off time in their calendar.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that sensemaking among newcomer presidents is a process of answering three fundamental questions: (a) What's the story here? (b) What do we do next? (c) And why am I here? To construct the story of the college, presidents act as lay ethnographers, meeting people "on their turf," walking around the campus to experience "total immersion," and attending as many events as possible. Through this process, they gain an understanding of the culture that is largely tacit. Second, in their construction of the story, the size and complexity of the organization make a qualitative difference. Presidents at smaller institutions more easily come to a "core essence" or find "an eerie consistency" in understandings about the purpose of their organization.

To answer the next question—what do we do next?—presidents rely on the cognitive complexity and collective understanding of their administrative team. The importance of a cohesive group cannot be overstated. Nearly everyone mentioned it as critically important, especially given that they were newcomers with little contextual knowledge and high uncertainty in taking action. In addition, presidents attempted to reduce uncertainty by speaking with peers and mentors, relying on them for social cues about what to do next, and, in the case of mentors, receiving the perspective of a person with

role experience to help them interpret novel situations and provide guidance (Klein, 1989).

Finally, presidents reduce equivocality—or the number of avenues the university could pursue—by conducting strategic planning sessions. Answering the questions of “what’s the story here?” and “what do we do next?” is hindered by the isolation of the position and the likelihood that subordinates will not be candid with them or mention issues that may reflect poorly on the president. Additionally, presidents cannot discover what they think by seeing what they say. Their words are often taken as *fait accompli*, rather than provisional ideas to be tested and discussed. These restrictions reduces the variety of ideas to choose from and hinders the articulation of tacit knowledge.

Finally, on a personal level, new presidents seek to rationalize their committed condition. They do this by reinforcing their identity as the antithesis of their predecessor and working to confirm the basis on which they perceived they were hired. Many of the surprises they mentioned were ways of validating their prior choice to become president. They constructed a meaningful future for the organization to give meaning to their present efforts.

Another barrier to sensemaking is the rapid stream of experience. With a never-ending spate of banquets, meetings, and events, presidents found themselves with little time for personal reflection.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Besides the findings mentioned in previous sections, this study contributes to a sensemaking perspective by identifying barriers to sensemaking. This finding was unexpected and may be limited to the role of top executives; however, it is a finding not mentioned by previous researchers. In addition, I found the sensemaking maxim—“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”—was less applicable in my study population. While studies have found that we often pursue strategies before we can conceptualize and verbalize them (Bechera, Domasio, Tranel, & Damasio, 1997), once we verbalize them, the automatic restatement of what we think becomes predominant. As the president of one college says, “You have to just keep saying the same things over, and over, and over again, and it gets boring.” Thus, while presidents might initially discover what they think through verbalization, they then automatically restate these key concepts at banquets, dinners, faculty gatherings, and student meetings. For these occasions, they already know what they think before they see what they say.

Second, sensemaking emphasizes enactment and retrospect. In other words, “Action is always just a tiny bit ahead of cognition” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 419). However, this study found that participants had a great desire to think about and plan for the future—to think strategically and be deliberate—to place cognition before action. This characteristic probably

stems from the fact that planning for and imagining a future in which an organization is prestigious and nationally recognized is enjoyable (Gilbert, 2006). The practice gives meaning to present conditions and prods campus constituents toward the future, however incremental the improvements may be. The practice of planning for the future also creates positive expectations that can be motivating (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Thus, one implication for sensemaking is to give more credence to the pattern that cognition occurs before action. In many ways, my findings suggest a deemphasis of enactment, at least among my study population. In this manner, more emphasis should be given to future-oriented thought and how it influences present constructions of reality—how people think before acting. The role of future-oriented thought in sensemaking has been commented on but never developed (Gioia, 2006; Gioia & Mehra, 1996), and this study gives more weight to cognition occurring before action.

The proposition that people act first and interpret later may be true under certain boundary conditions, particularly in emergency situations where there is little time to think. Most sensemaking research has been completed about emergency situations (e.g., Weick, 1993a). In most cases, presidents are not thrown into situations that have an urgent constraint and a specific outcome they need to reach. They are in a high-discretion role and can take time to plan. Thus, the future orientation I encountered among participants is likely a result of my study population. Executives are supposed to be the future-oriented thinkers of the organization. While it is acceptable for line workers to say they have not given much thought about the organization's future, it would be unacceptable (and unthinkable) for a president or CEO to make such a statement. Thus, while some behavior can be explained by people acting and then interpreting those actions, the thoughts of executives are markedly different. If organizations are metaphorically viewed as a collective mind (Morgan, 2006; Weick & Roberts, 1993), then the executive office can be viewed as responsible for the collective foresight of the organization.

The third implication for sensemaking theory that I found is that normative concerns strongly influenced the construction of meaning. How presidents described their entry process—the surprises, puzzles, and actions—was heavily inflected by how they thought they should behave. In this manner, there is a larger role for institutional theory in a sensemaking perspective. In many ways, the institutional logic of the college presidency is being constructed by new presidents' seminars, management bestsellers, and dictates of corporate executives who sit on the board of trustees. All of this content—from seminars, books, and bosses—suggests to presidents what they should be, thus suggesting a stronger link between the micro-logic of sensemaking and the macro-logic of institutional theory (Scott, 2001; Weber & Glynn, 2006).

The dominant view is that institutions serve as cognitive constraints on sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006), even though a sensemaking perspective largely argues that we create the environment to which we must respond (Weick, 1979, 1995). If the latter perspective is more descriptive, I might have seen more variance in how presidents responded to the questions. However, after 18 interviews, a common mentality of the college presidency seemed to emerge, suggesting a unified, macro-logic with less freedom to create the role at will. Thus, one implication of this study is the larger role of the macro-logic of institutional theory on sensemaking.

With an institutional theory perspective, a similar study could be complete about the college presidency. How has this institution shifted and changed over the past 30 years? What are the consequences of these changes? From reading historical accounts (Gray, 1998) and the writings of former presidents, the college presidency today seems to have shifted toward the model of a business chief executive. This is not surprising, given that boards of trustees are mostly business executives, but the booming industry of management bestsellers over the past three or four decades may have created a more cohesive model of what a corporate executive should be. With my interviews, I was discovering the macro-logic of this institution. Corporate executives are strategic and have strategic plans. Corporate executives have a smaller role in academic operations (which many of them expressed) and are concerned with the strategic resource-allocation in the organization. Presidents should be concerned with marketing initiatives and branding the college. The list goes on, but the point remains that the macro-logic of institutional theory was inextricably linked to sensemaking.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In addition to the previously mentioned findings, there are a few additional practical implications. Presidents often mentioned that an early task was searching for trusted individuals to help make sense of the organization and to give them more certainty in their judgments. In many cases, these trusted individuals came from the search committee. This link is reasonable, since search committee members are heavily involved in choosing a president, know the organization well, and want the president to succeed. One president said it was wise to have the search committee “help me through these first months, identify those pressing issues on campus, and also help me not stumble, unknowingly.” She had weekly telephone calls with the committee before she officially started. This group helped her identify the pressing issues and “helped me make sense of what those issues were.” She also used these trusted individuals to interpret people’s motives: “A lot of people have an agenda. A lot of people want to come in and use the honeymoon period—the infancy period of a new president is often an opportunity for moving

ahead on some personal agenda.” Having trusted individuals in a transition team helped her make sense of the personal agendas and motives of others.

Finding trusted individuals highlights the *social* property of the transition process. Learning about the organization is not a process of individual analysis; it is a social construction with others. In situations where an individual has little contextual information and high uncertainty yet must take action, the social nature of thinking is more prominent and adaptive.

Second, even if the campus is in a stable position, a president cannot take a year to listen and learn about the organization. One president said that, despite the college’s relative financial stability and high academic standing,

everybody was pretty frustrated with feeling stagnant, and so, when I got here, my first posture was, “Listen, campus, I am prepared to just listen for a year. We can form our agenda together. You know, we can take our time to figure out where we need to go”; and the answer I got was: “No. We don’t have time for that. We have been standing still. We hired you for direction and vision and leadership. Let’s go.”

Thus, despite presidents’ best attempts to take things slowly and listen, colleges often hire outsiders for new direction and insight. If they wanted continuity, they would have hired an insider. Thus, the desire for bold, initial action is real despite the desire of many new presidents to learn and “get up to speed.”

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that, in my interpretations of the interviews, I sought to appreciate the complexity of leadership processes and not to overestimate the significance of individual leaders, for “any interpretation of leadership proceeds from basic ideas about the centrality, or lack of it, of human beings in the order of things” (March & Weil, 2005, p. 8). Taking heed of this concept, I worked to maintain an appropriate balance in describing the agency and foresight with which presidents operate—never denying their ability to shape events but not thinking events can be shaped at will.

This perspective was a middle ground between two contending theories of how things happen in organizations. The first perspective assigns a major role, sometimes heroic, to great figures in their ability to shape the course of events. The second downplays the significance of administrators in a world of loose coupling, organized anarchy, and “garbage can” decision processes (March, 1984; Pfeffer, 1977). Such a belief may lead to “self-confirming withdrawal from efforts to be effective” (March, 1984, p. 28) and, for the researcher, places one at odds with the managerial bias toward belief in managerial importance. In an attempt to reconcile these competing perspectives, I sought to balance and appreciate the truth of both of them, and to take an appropriate, contextualized middle ground.

Ultimately, this research illuminates the experience of the transition process, helping to decrease the tumult of this event in the lives of organizations. It also helps improve and advance the field's understanding of sensemaking in educational organizations by empirically grounding the concepts and theory in the experiences of new college presidents.

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