Positive Workplace Dynamics: A Qualitative Exploration of Exceptional Performance in Community College Units

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POSITIVE WORKPLACE DYNAMICS:
A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE UNITS

A COMPANION DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By
R. Michael Stapleton

Lexington, Kentucky

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and Jane McEldowney Jensen, Ph.D.
Lexington, Kentucky

2013

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

POSITIVE WORKPLACE DYNAMICS:
A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE UNITS

This companion dissertation reports the findings of applied case study research on four community college organizational units that consistently meet or exceed standard performance measures. In addition, prior ample evidence confirmed that performance extended significantly beyond what might be explained by available tangible resources alone. The case study contexts are common in higher education in general: (a) an external partnership, (b) an ad hoc team, (c) a traditional, cross-divisional service unit, and (d) a grant-funded student service unit.

Emerging positive organizational theory and research shows promise for revealing performance-influencing phenomena and behaviors that are not adequately represented in standard measures. Therefore, this collaborative case study research was designed to explore positive influences on the success of the four community college units.

This companion dissertation consists of three manuscripts. Chapter 2, a technical report, is a collaboratively-written synthesis of findings from the four individual case studies. Key findings across the units suggest the influence on performance of: (a) a people-first culture, (b) authentic, trusting, inclusive leadership, and (c) resource richness beyond constrained tangible resources.

In Chapter 3, the author presents in journal article format one of the case studies that contributed to the findings reported in Chapter 2. The academic library chosen for this research serves an urban community college campus near the geographic center of its city. The research asks how the library consistently performs well despite severe budget and staffing constraints and a series of disruptive events. Key findings in Chapter 3 include the following influences on performance: (a) valuing people and building relationships; (b) a culture of service that shares duties, resources, and expertise; and (c) leadership that effectively translates formal goals into an enabling matrix of behaviors and phenomena.
Practical recommendations are offered. Additional research is needed to explore causal relationships, how to influence greater resource amplification, and how to increase awareness of positive organizational dynamics.

In Chapter 4, a scholarly narrative, the author reflects on transformative aspects of the doctoral experience on learning and life.

KEYWORDS: positive organizational scholarship, academic library performance, organizational development, community college leadership, educational leadership

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July 26, 2013
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POSITIVE WORKPLACE DYNAMICS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE UNITS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family, who believed in me enough to convince me to believe in myself:

- To my wife, who once said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” This doctoral program tested us severely, yet it yielded many wonderful, unexpected transformations for which I am profoundly grateful. This is for you, Elizabeth. I could not have done it without you.

- To my sons, who kept encouraging me to, “Hurry up and finish! We have some camping to do!” This is for you, Colin and Bryan.

- To my daughter, who believes in me because I am her Daddy. Born during my second year of coursework, she has never known me not to spend weekends in the library. That is about to change! She encouraged me through my final edits, saying, “Finish polishing today!” This is for you, Caroline.

- To my mother, whose encouraging words seemed endless. She always told me, “You can do anything.” It took me a long, long, time to see that she was right. This is for you, Mom.

- To my father, who said of his own difficult times, “I do not quit.” He never did. His example carried me through many stretches when quitting seemed reasonable. The longest and bleakest of those began exactly six weeks after Caroline’s birth. On that Thanksgiving Day, having shown us how to live, my father passed gently away. This is for you, Dad. You finished well.

This is also for my team. We walked through fire. It marked us, made us better and stronger, and forged lifetime bonds. We will always have each other’s backs.

Finally, this is for the library folks who graciously shared their stories. They wanted to hear from an outsider that their hard work and ways of being have created something special in their workplace. They trusted me to tell it right. I hope that I have.
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With profound gratitude, I acknowledge the generous help of key faculty in the completion of my program.

The intellectual heart of this companion dissertation I owe to Dr. Neal Hutchens. With rigor, creativity, and good will, he guided the research team to bring our work to fruition. By the time we defended, he had used every tactic at his disposal. Always our ally, he helped my team and me to produce something we can all be proud of.

Dr. Jane Jensen and Dr. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno gave me a second chance mid-way through my coursework. With patience, wisdom, and humor, they created the space I needed to transcend persistent barriers and unlock unrealized potential. In addition, Dr. Browne-Ferrigno contributed valuable corrections to the manuscript, and Dr. Jensen guided my team and me through multiple post-defense revisions to produce our final drafts.

In addition, I thank my supervisor, Paul Fuller, for his consistent support and understanding. His flexibility helped make the timing work out for many a milestone and deadline along the way.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ vi

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. vii

List of Tables ..................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: The Dynamics of Abundance: Exceptional Performance 
in Four Community College Units .................................................................................... 4
   Executive Summary ................................................................................................ 4
   Key Findings ........................................................................................................... 5
   Recommendations ................................................................................................. 6

   Introduction ............................................................................................................. 8
   Background of the Study ...................................................................................... 13
   Research Questions ............................................................................................... 14
   Methods ................................................................................................................. 16
      Tour of the Individual Case Sites .................................................................. 18
      Exploration of Four Cases .............................................................................. 21
   Findings and Discussion ....................................................................................... 23
      People-First Culture ...................................................................................... 23
      Authentic, Trusting, Inclusive Leadership .................................................. 27
      Resource Richness ....................................................................................... 32

   Conclusions ........................................................................................................... 37
   Recommendations ................................................................................................. 39
   Further Study ........................................................................................................ 40
   Appendix ............................................................................................................... 42
   References ............................................................................................................. 43

Chapter 3: Beyond Constraint: Service Excellence and 
Positive Workplace Dynamics in a Community College Library .................. 46

   Background ........................................................................................................... 49
      Academic Libraries and Performance ......................................................... 49
      Organization Studies in Higher Education ................................................ 53

   Conceptual Framework ......................................................................................... 54
      Positive Research Orientation and Organizational Studies ..................... 55
      Community College Performance and the Positive Research Orientation 59

   Research Design .................................................................................................... 60
   Findings and Analysis ........................................................................................... 66
      Valuing People and Relationships ............................................................. 66
      Culture of Service ......................................................................................... 69
      Leadership and Planning ............................................................................. 76

   Conclusions ........................................................................................................... 79
   Implications and Recommendations ..................................................................... 85
   Appendix ............................................................................................................... 88
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: Learning to Learn: Reflections on Personal and Professional Transformations in a Doctoral Program</th>
<th>105</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Challenges</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Fail</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat to Safety</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back to College</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Cohort Experience</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forming the Dissertation Team</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to Lean</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to Leap</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to Lead</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to Learn</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Experiences</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Experience</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Teamwork</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation Beginnings</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Apprehension to Assurance</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing Authenticity</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 5 ......................................................................................................................... 137

Appendices ...................................................................................................................... 139

Appendix A ......................................................................................................... 139

Appendix B ......................................................................................................... 140

Appendix C ......................................................................................................... 149

Bibliography ............................................................................................................ 160

Vita......................................................................................................................... 170
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Positive Organizational Dynamics That Influence Exceptional Unit-Level Performance.................................................................6
Chapter 1

Introduction

This companion dissertation reports the findings of case study research about positive organizational dynamics in successful community college units. Drawing from an emerging body of organizational literature, this report presents helpful perspectives on influences—specifically those that are positive—that support unit-level excellence. Positive-oriented research in the workplace focuses on behaviors and exceptional states of well-being that enable improved performance. The orientation toward positive phenomena stands apart from mass-market motivational and self-help writings. It is committed first to sound theoretical development and methodological practice. In addition, its domain includes the negative through research into the mitigating effects of positive phenomena on negative human experience and emotion. As a result, positive research approaches complement prevalent problem-based approaches and suggest additional means of improving performance through fostering what it best about individuals and the workplace.

A four-member team collaborated to produce a companion dissertation. The faculty of our EdD cohort program developed this collaborative manuscript format as part of their participation in the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) initiative to integrate scholarship with practice. Each member’s dissertation contains three manuscripts briefly described below: two publishable manuscripts from the member’s individual research and a technical report of the team’s cross-case analysis of the four case studies.
My team members and I designed our individual research studies to reflect our mutual interest in how community college units achieve excellence. Each member identified a successful unit to investigate as a qualitative case study. Together we designed a shared conceptual framework based on the positive literature. We then created a common research protocol that each member would use to collect and analyze data. Our individual research questions vary slightly around the central theme of positive influences that contribute to the chosen unit’s success. In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I report the results of my qualitative case study investigation of a community college library.

The team deliberately designed the individual research projects around a common conceptual framework, methods, and protocol. Sharing these would provide the conceptual and methodological support we would need to analyze the individual findings for similar—or unique—influences on the success of the four units. In addition, as our analysis discussions deepened, we realized that we, like our units, were striving for success as a team. We began to explore connections from the case studies to our own experiences as a team of scholar-practitioners. Our joint experience would become an important influence on the recommendations in our team report. Thus, we became participants in the cross-case analysis of the individual research.

The key findings of our group synthesis point to three areas that enable excellence across our community college units: (a) a culture that enables personal and unit-level flourishing; (b) distributed leadership that thinks differently about performance and resources; and (c) a deliberate reliance on intangible resources as the essential lever by
which the units achieve exceptional results. The team presents its findings in a technical report, which I include as Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

The third and final manuscript of this companion dissertation to engages CPED’s purpose to inform practice through scholarly reflection. I use narrative form to describe my experience in this program. I reflect on the experience using positive-oriented leadership literature along with perspectives from organizational and cognitive development. I focus on the influences of working with a certain team (my team) on a certain topic (positive organizational psychology) to produce persistence through difficult personal challenges along with unexpected growth that has been unattainable through previous higher educational experiences. I present these reflections in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.
Chapter 2

The Dynamics of Abundance: Exceptional Performance in Four Community College Units

Susan T. Berry; Lewis Howard Burke, Jr.; R. Michael Stapleton; Alissa L. Young

Executive Summary

In this technical report, the authors synthesize findings from four case studies of factors that influence exceptional performance of community college organizational units. The authors show how the units achieved their successes despite resource constraints, external circumstances, and extreme internal pressures. These units demonstrate that constraints need not hinder achievement of excellence.

Community colleges are responsible to their stakeholders for multiple missions (Dougherty, 1994) as well as for meeting performance and accreditation targets. Economic pressures and significant shifts in students’ expectations have created simultaneous conditions of constraint and opportunity. Traditional approaches to performance enhancement have become insufficient to meet current constraints and to adapt to shifts in stakeholder expectations. Thus, colleges must adopt new approaches and ways of thinking in order to develop the capacity to thrive in a shifting, uncertain environment (Alfred, Shults, Jaquette, & Strickland, 2009).

The cases, selected from four community colleges, represent four types of functional organization: (a) a partnership with an external entity; (b) an ad hoc team; (c) a grant-funded student service unit; and (d) a traditional service unit that crosses divisional boundaries. Data was collected from all four cases using similar methods of collection and a common interview protocol. A constant comparison method of analysis
was used within and between the individual cases to identify common and contrasting findings across the four units.

Key Findings

Analysis of findings from the units revealed numerous positive organizational dynamics that influenced exceptional performance. We assigned these dynamics to three broad themes or categories: culture, leadership, and resources. The ability of each unit to perform well depended on: (a) a people-first culture, (b) authentic, trusting, inclusive leadership, and (c) resource richness. Unit leaders and members fostered these positive dynamics by thinking differently about culture, leadership, and resources. As a unifying influence, unit members shared a compelling vision of the future from which they derived purpose, motivation, and meaning. Unit leaders and members translated these positive dynamics into actions and behaviors through informal mission statements embodied in audacious goals. We summarize these findings in Table 1 on the following page.
Table 2.1
*Positive Organizational Dynamics That Influence Exceptional Unit-Level Performance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Organizational Dynamic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>People-first culture</strong></td>
<td>Units are characterized by a culture that values people as people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit directors and supervisors follow traditional methods of authority, but also introduce and foster a people-first mindset.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit members described a sense of professional community and trust, extending in some cases to a personal, or “extended family” level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authentic, trusting, inclusive leadership</strong></td>
<td>Leaders are found at all levels of the unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaders articulate the formal mission in terms of audacious goals, and the resulting informal mission becomes a strong motivation among unit members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit members share a clear vision that transcends the formal mission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit members expressed a sense of higher purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The units’ formal leaders and members seemed to understand these things implicitly through experience rather than deriving them from formal professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rich resources</strong></td>
<td>Units demonstrated a capacity to build synergistic relationships that allow them to amplify their efforts and make more resources available to the unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit members did not allow resource constraints to be the “ceiling” of ability to perform. Instead, they actively identified and developed their intangible resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The capacity to develop all available resources served as a lever that amplified performance and attracted new resources and people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations**

We compared and contrasted these themes across the four cases to develop a picture of organizational functioning that can be extended to other community college
units. We found unit excellence to depend on broad views of culture, leadership, and resources that move beyond simple cause-and-effect calculations typically used in unit evaluation and assessment. Our highly-contextual findings cannot be condensed into a step-by-step manual for excellence. However, the following suggestions may help community college practitioners learn to broaden views and build capacity in their own contexts.

- Superior performance requires more than hard work—it also requires the ability to build capacity.

- Whether plentiful or not, tangible resources can charm attention away from capacity-building ways of thinking required to produce excellence.

- Intangible resources—culture, leadership, and ability to build capacity—are required to achieve aspirations of excellence.

- Patience is required because ways of thinking and perceiving can take time to change.

- People are much more than units of functional output. Valuing people as people creates supportive contexts for excellence.
Introduction

Higher education is in a people business. It is unique in that we develop longstanding relationships not only with the stakeholders who fund us, study us, or employ our students, but also with the students themselves. We spend vast resources trying to determine the best way to move students through the pipeline so they emerge educated and employable. Rarely do we study our own organizational dynamics (Bastedo, 2012). When we do, we often concentrate on our plans and deficits, and how we will find the money to meet our goals. As Caza and Caza (2008) assert, most research in organizational studies concentrates on solving problems. We report our performance to our stakeholders according to parameters they define. These measures do not effectively capture the range of organizational dynamics that affect performance (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003a).

In contrast, this research study was designed to understand the organizational dynamics of community college units that have performed with excellence that in some cases was unexpected, given the circumstances. The study offers an alternative to a prevalent view of resources that makes superior performance contingent on greater amounts of tangible resources. Consistent with emerging research into organizational and individual dynamics, this study shows that the most powerful drivers of performance are ways of thinking that build organizational capacity and allow for unexpectedly excellent performance despite constraints. To understand this, we analyzed the findings from four case studies on successful community college organizational units to learn how some of our most productive entities have achieved extraordinary levels of functioning and performance.
Our positive research perspective draws from positive psychology research (Peterson, 2006) and its extension to the workplace (Alfred et al., 2009; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003b; Luthans, 2002a; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). We engaged this positive perspective to understand the performance of four successful community college units. Our goal was to identify influences shown in the positive organizational literature to contribute to above-average performance. Each member of this research team chose a community college organizational unit (a) that has performed well (or above average) using standard measures of performance and (b) for which significant aspects of the unit’s successful performance are not adequately represented by standard measures nor easily attributed solely to levels of tangible resources.

Analysis of these four cases reveals how tapping readily-available, but often-underutilized, resources can influence overall performance and even attract additional tangible resources to a unit. It shows how these units achieved their success through the ability to amplify existing resources beyond expectations. Examples of resources in these cases include recognizing the leadership capacity of all members of a unit; the importance of sustaining a simple, shared vision that transcends the formal mission of the unit; and maintaining a positive organizational environment in which people come first.

This research builds on a study by Alfred, Shults, Jaquette, and Strickland (2009) who interviewed community college presidents to better understand and account for college performance. They found the primary determinant of excellence to be the amplification of resources through leveraging. That is, high-performing community colleges have the ability to identify and optimally deploy all available resources. This
ability rests on a central commitment of formal leaders to “building the strategic capabilities in staff” (p. 252) that fosters a capacity to “work differently” (p. 252).

Alfred et al. (2009) conducted their research at the institutional level through the perspective of senior leadership. Their research yielded the Community College Abundance Model (CCAM) that ranks a college’s capacity to achieve abundance, as defined above. They also observed that community college leaders might be easily tempted, when confronted with a barrage of constraints and accountability requirements, to focus on growth and efficiency to meet performance goals. However, they conclude, “Working harder and faster will not get your college to abundance, but investing in people and working differently will” (p. 252).

Existing research on positive organizational functioning in community colleges stops short of explaining exceptional outcomes at the unit level or describing the dynamics that influence excellence. However, the work of community colleges is performed in organizational units collaborating within the institution and with external partners. Thus, our research emerges from an interest in investigating how the CCAM findings apply at the level of the organizational unit—where the actual work of a college takes place.

Based on their findings, Alfred et al. (2009) hold that building the capacity to amplify resources and to work differently requires community colleges, leaders, and staff to “think differently” (p. 252) about four aspects of the organization: performance, resources, the organization itself, and leadership. Our study of each of the cases selected examined the intentional capacity-building achieved in the units in each of the four aspects.
Thinking differently about performance means more than working harder or more efficiently—although those things are essential. In what ways do these community college units enhance performance beyond efficient effort?

Thinking differently about resources means recognizing intangibles as the means by which efforts can be amplified as an organization moves toward purpose-defined outcomes that exceed expectations. Intangibles include valuable traits, knowledge, and behaviors that are not easily measured (e.g., resilience that enables a student to persist and graduate in the midst of a personal crisis). In what ways do these community college units value and build upon intangible resources?

Thinking differently about the organization means living out the belief that people come first. In what ways do these community college units develop relationships, rather than interchangeable parts, and recognize the efforts of many leaders who are empowered with autonomy and support?

Thinking differently about leadership means understanding that there are many leaders in a high-performing organization. Formal and informal leaders with positive characteristics need to be present and, if not, developed and enhanced in those with the decision-making responsibility. In what ways do these community college units control personal resources—ways of thinking and being—that can be changed and developed? These resources are attributes and traits that can contribute to unit-level excellence as easily as they hinder or are merely neutral.

In addition, emerging streams of positive organizational theory and research have shown promise for focusing on what is best about organizations and individuals. These include positive organizational scholarship, positive organizational behavior, and positive
psychology. The positive research orientation presents opportunities to think differently about organizational performance. It augments familiar approaches by expanding the range of desirable outcomes and success indicators to include behaviors and characteristics that foster individual and organizational flourishing (Cameron et al., 2003a; Caza & Caza, 2008) as well as psychological capacities that influence individual and organizational outcomes.

These emerging streams of theory and research reveal new ways of thinking about individual and organizational performance. Scholars and researchers in these areas deliberately adopt a positive framework for understanding success in organizations. Through a focus on phenomena and behaviors that promote flourishing and vitality in the workplace, researchers have begun to discover correspondence between positive organizational scholarship (Cameron et al., 2003b), positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002a, 2002b), positive psychology (Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

Thus, in exploring the exemplary performance of the units described here, we applied the concepts of positive organizational theory to create a lens through which to investigate successful organizational functioning. In this research report, we consider three areas of focus in the positive literature: positive leadership, perspectives on resource development that build organizational capacity through resource amplification, and the presence or enhancement of psychological capital. Collectively, these are shown to promote phenomena and conditions that (a) enable individuals to be at their best (Cameron et al., 2003a; Peterson, 2006), (b) buffer the effects of trauma and uncertainty
(Cameron & Caza, 2004; Weick, 2003), and (c) create workplaces in which people are valued as people and all available resources are maximized (Alfred et al., 2009).

Background of the Study

During our coursework and within our professional roles, our research team was aware of one such positive framework for examining institutional performance—appreciative inquiry (AI). During our doctoral coursework, as members of different research teams, we conducted pilot studies using protocols informed by AI. In addition, as employees of KCTCS, we knew that AI had been integrated to frame ongoing strategic planning cycle discussions in positive ways. AI was also being introduced throughout the colleges as a supportive framework for numerous, significant initiatives planned for the coming years. Thus, when as a team of doctoral candidates we began to design the four case studies that are the subjects of this multiple-case analysis, we decided that an appreciative approach would be a good fit for our own positive research orientation.

A second influence was our experience of the implementation of AI across our colleges and system-office. Four-day workshops, designed around an AI approach to organizational development (Watkins & Mohr, 2001), were held with the intent to produce two certified AI trainers from each college. These would return to their home colleges, train others, and apply appreciative practices college-wide. Appreciative inquiry was thus intended to become the foundation of an organizational culture that would sustain significant, coming organizational changes. Although the training raised awareness of positive approaches to change, cultural changes have not trickled down as hoped—or at least not as quickly as hoped. For the most part, colleges that did not already have an appreciative culture have not changed much. Instead, traditional,
discrete accountability measures still seem to have the strongest influence on planning and processes.

All participants in the trainings received Watkins and Mohr’s (2001) *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* as a suggested framework for developing the Transformation Initiatives mentioned. The authors list six freedoms or essential conditions of AI that echo the positive organizational literature:

1. Freedom to be known as a human being rather than merely for the role performed;
2. Freedom to be heard and not ignored—to voice information, ideas, and innovations;
3. Freedom to dream in community and at all levels in the organization, creating organizations as safe places where large, diverse groups can dream together;
4. Freedom to choose to contribute—an act that liberates power and leads to commitment and a hunger for learning;
5. Freedom to act with support in a climate of positive interdependence, thus feeling safe to experiment, innovate, and learn;
6. Freedom to be positive, to have fun, and to be happy—conditions that are not often the norm.

According to Watkins and Mohr (2001), when these six AI conditions are present, they create a self-perpetuating momentum for positive change. This individual and organizational momentum bears a resemblance to the positive, self-reinforcing *spirals of flourishing* that result from organizational virtuousness (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Froman, 2010).

**Research Questions**

Our interest in the positive, people-focused aims of AI provided an excellent foundation for our curiosity about the positive research orientation. In addition, our experience of the AI trainings within our own workplaces led us to wonder about
organizational units that were already performing at very high levels—before they received the training. To inform the research described in this chapter, we settled on a conceptual lens similar to AI, but more broad in scope. We draw from multiple related positive organizational literatures, described earlier, that focus on positive phenomena, behaviors, and traits in the workplace.

Accordingly, we were interested in how positive influences in the organizational units support extraordinary success. Our research team designed each of the studies to have a positive research orientation, similar research questions, and virtually-identical protocols. As a result, we asked questions of the case study findings from a shared positive research perspective. For example, what happens when an organizational unit leader prioritizes the development of unit members’ psychological capital? How are bold, shared visions of desired unit outcomes related to performance? How do unit leaders influence unit culture? To what do members of successful units attribute their success? Do members of these units value people and intangible resources above tangible resources? If so, how are these values shaped, communicated, and perpetuated? What influences do positive organizational behaviors and psychological capital have on culture and performance in the unit? How do successful units acquire the capacity to perform exceptionally? Are successful units solely dependent on tangible resources, or are other influences at work? In successful units, how are positive behaviors and traits developed and nurtured? In what ways do these affect the performance?

To frame this multiple-case analysis and to connect it to emerging research on positive workplaces, we asked the following research questions:

- What positive organizational dynamics are found in the case studies chosen for this analysis?
• How do these dynamics influence unit performance?
• What outcomes, capabilities, and characteristics do unit members value that are not typically considered as performance measures?
• How is leadership perceived and practiced in the units?
• How are resources identified, prioritized, developed, and deployed? Which resources are valued the most?
• How do perspectives toward the recognition and use of intangible resources influence performance?
• How does psychological capital, or any of its four components, contribute to the successful functioning of these units?

Methods

During our team discussions about our research design, we decided to concentrate on functional or organizational units. Several reasons informed this choice. Small organizational entities seemed a narrow enough focus to be compatible with our research timeframe. More importantly, understanding team and group functioning is important because the everyday work of community colleges is performed in these contexts. However, we found that most positive-oriented research had been conducted at either the individual or the institutional level (Donaldson & Ko, 2010). Few studies existed in the private sector, and the positive literature is virtually silent on higher education groups and teams.

In addition to timeframe and importance of group-level functioning, our decisions were influenced by contextual factors. Each member of our research team works in a community college, and personal and professional knowledge informed each member’s ability to choose organizational units that have already been recognized as successful. To support the group research component of our study, we adopted a common research protocol the four individual case studies (Appendix A). Additional prompts were used to
elicit information about interviewees’ perceptions about positive dynamics such as vision, relationships, trust, leader expectations, and behaviors.

We chose units of different kinds, one for each researcher, judging that the differences could provide a broader data set out of which to synthesize findings across the four cases. The four units represent common organizational structures within community colleges and in higher education generally, potentially extending the applicability of our findings beyond the boundaries of the four individual case studies and the cross-case analysis reported here. We continued to discover the full value of choosing four separate cases at the unit level as this analysis progressed.

We chose case study method for the individual research studies because it is useful for answering questions of how and why when observing a “contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2009, p. 13). A unit of analysis, or case, can be an “individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Case study theorists agree that boundedness is a distinguishing characteristic of a case (Merriam, 1998). Boundedness denotes a clear idea about what is included in the case and what is not. We defined the bounds of each case analyzed for this report by limiting the number of participants interviewed and by restricting the data collection period.

To increase the validity, quality, and trustworthiness of the analysis, we used accepted qualitative research methods. The data collected for the individual studies primarily included participant data supported by documents and on-site observations. In addition to multiple data sources, our team engaged multiple reviewers and member checking (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). For example, as data was gathered
from the individual cases, we continuously discussed the findings to discern themes, account for unexpected findings, and consider rival explanations. The discussions continued during the development of the individual case analyses and throughout the analysis of the four cases together.

The diversity of our research team strengthened the collaborative analysis. Our varied strengths, professional experiences, life stories, roles as community college employees, and interests in our cases assured varying perspectives. The balance and insights in the conclusions reflect our diversity. In addition, our diversity and familiarity with community college functioning informed our thinking as we operationalized our findings into realistic implications and recommendations.

Tour of the Individual Case Sites

The units contributing to the case studies described below belong to four different colleges in the same 16-college state community college system. While governed by the same state and system-wide regulations, each college maintains individual accreditation and status as an independent college. The investigative team chose these community college units based on two criteria: (a) the unit performs well or above average relative to standard measures of performance and (b) the unit appears to demonstrate additional performance criteria that include positive workplace dynamics and desirable organizational outcomes consistent with this study’s positive conceptual framework.

External partnership unit. The first unit studied exists as the result of a partnership between a secondary public school system and a local community college. The secondary school system has a district wide enrollment of over 100,000 students. Its post-secondary partner, a two-year public college located in the same urban community,
enrolls upwards of 15,000 students per semester. The purpose of the partnership is to promote the transition of adult education students into community college by improving mathematics, reading, and writing for students whose college placement scores fall below the minimum requirements.

This unit was chosen for study because of its national recognition as a model partnership. A national report funded by the US Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education highlighted the collaborative approach of this program as a national model of practices to help improve participation and persistence in adult education (Tolbert, 2005). The authors noted, “Partnerships and leveraged resources also have helped programs expand their services and address the needs of specific populations” (Tolbert, 2005, p. 9). Alfred et al. (2009) identify external partnerships as capacity-building levers that amplify tangible resources and lead to improved performance.

Ad hoc committee. The second unit chosen for study was an accreditation preparation team located at a rural, public two-year degree granting institution that serves approximately 7,500 students. This ad hoc team, established for a specific amount of time, was tasked with preparing the institution to complete the accreditation process that includes conducting a self-study of the institution to ensure compliance with the accreditation organization’s principles.

This unit was chosen because the evaluation of their accreditation report yielded zero recommendations for improving this institution. This was one of the first institutions within the state community college system to complete the reaffirmation process with no recommendations for improvement. Given the enormity and complexity
of the reaffirmation process, having received no recommendations for improvement distinguishes this ad hoc team as a high-performing unit. Additional reasons for choosing this unit include the investigator’s knowledge of and experience with the accreditation process having served on accreditation review teams and her acquaintance with members of the chosen unit.

**College-wide service unit.** The third unit chosen for study, a community college library, serves one of the larger community colleges in the state system. The service area includes six campuses and enrolls approximately 12,000 students each semester representing over 100 counties. The library chosen for study resides in the main academic building of the primary college campus. This location is in close proximity to classrooms, administrative and student services offices, and student commons. As many as 1,800 students visit the library on peak days. As a result, many faculty and administrators describe it as the largest classroom on campus. This library was chosen because it consistently accomplishes its mission and goals related to serving students, faculty, and staff as rated by its constituent groups in annual satisfaction surveys. Library surveys and college exit surveys indicate similar high levels of satisfaction with library services across a wide range of services (Stapleton, 2013). In addition, the professional role over several years has acquainted the researcher with the personnel and the environment, observing many of the phenomena, behaviors, and traits that are the subjects of research in the positive literature.

**Grant-supported student service unit.** The fourth unit chosen for study is funded by a federal Student Support Services (SSS) or “TRIO” grant. It serves a mid-sized community college with a large rural service area including a military installation.
The unit assists low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline during their undergraduate study. The unit provides a small number of qualifying students with services similar to those offered to the general student population, such as academic advising and tutoring. Unlike the campus-wide services, this unit provides its student population with a single physical environment for study, socializing, and academic assistance.

This unit was selected because it has consistently ranked within the top 10% of similar programs nation-wide, enabling it to receive continuing grant funding for twelve years. Similar to national and longitudinal measures of persistence, retention, and graduation, the SSS participants in this unit are more likely to: (a) remain enrolled in higher education, (b) accrue more college credits, and (c) earn higher grade point averages when compared to similarly qualified students who do not participate in the program (Chaney, Muraskin, Calahan, & Rak, 1997). The investigator chose this unit because it met the research design requirements and because the investigator, through familiarity with the unit, identified exceptional performance not revealed by performance evaluation. In addition, the investigator understands the purposes and functions of SSS and the demands of meeting grant performance standards for continued funding eligibility.

**Exploration of Four Cases**

The four members of the research team communicated with each other during the collection and analysis phase of their individual case studies. As preliminary data analysis proceeded, the team members used the findings derived from the individual case studies and through conversations, reviews of each other’s writings, and brainstorming
sessions proceeded to shape an overarching analysis. Approaches included comparing findings and developing themes, rearranging the themes in different configurations, and finding contrasts between the unit themes and characteristics. As the analysis deepened, members of the research team found connections that distinguish this study’s findings from studies conducted on larger organizations such as entire community colleges.

We discovered that the unit level reaches into resources often invisible to or ignored by leaders at higher levels of functioning and thus can increase performance capacity in unexpected ways. The variety of units provided us some common ground across units and revealed that some practices often thought to influence success, had little bearing on our units’ success and yet other practices and attitudes often identified as neutral or unimportant had a huge effect on successful performance. The diversity of units who function in community colleges and higher education institutions in general are almost limitless so providing a small snapshot of that diversity proved valuable to this study and future research.

We proposed that discussion and review of each other’s findings would reduce potential negative impacts of researcher bias or assumptions. In addition, collective analysis was broadened and deepened as we—who are community college employees ourselves—shared development of findings. In addition, we considered how our current roles and areas of responsibility as community college employees might influence the analysis of the findings. We each addressed this concern by using triangulation through interviews, observations, and documents.
Findings and Discussion

Review of the case findings shows three significant areas that influence the success of these units: (a) a culture showing commitment to a unified vision that enhances each member’s sense of purpose and appreciates his or her contributions, (b) leadership traits and behaviors including trust-building that enhance and build upon a cohesive culture, and (c) leaders who value and enhance resources including intangible resources.

Although these are major themes from our units, they are not discrete categories. In our units that function successfully, they occur in intricate combinations. For example, culture influences personnel behaviors. Concurrently, leaders and unit members influence the culture through their actions, thereby effecting constant—although mostly minute—shifts in the culture. All unit members, regardless of formal or informal leadership role, learn, think, and grow continuously, thereby affecting how they influence everyone around them. In addition, as leaders receive feedback from the effects of how they use resources, they learn that some things work better than others do in the unit. This learning suggests new ways to leverage what they have.

People-First Culture

Bolman and Deal (2003) observe that “some people argue that organizations have cultures; others insist that organizations are cultures” (p. 243). Behaviors provide clues about the essential natures of cultures. The participants in the four units spoke at length about their behaviors and perceptions. These provided the researchers with clues about the reciprocal influences of behaviors and context. The participants’ actions and characteristics formed the cultures of their units, and the unit cultures influenced the
participants. The members themselves are not cultures but rather have cultures both as culture-builders and as recipients of unit-level culture. Thus, we argue that the essential question about our units’ cultures is not what they are but what the members do, or “the way we do things around here” (1982, p. 4).

Central to our findings in all four units was leadership as a leadership disposition or “organizational state and a mind-set” (Shults, 2008, p. 148) that regards people as the units’ most valuable resource. This disposition results in behaviors that treat people as people rather than as functional units for performing job descriptions. This disposition is an intangible resource that enables behaviors and capacities that in turn become levers for resource amplification and improved performance (Alfred et al., 2009). The members’ behaviors also create a feedback loop that strengthens member commitment to the units’ values and reinforces positive behaviors. In consequence, the units may be described as enabling workplaces (Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Park, 2006).

In each unit, the members were committed to a unified vision and reported that this shared vision provided them with a sense of purpose. In addition to collective vision and individual purpose, participants described a sense of accountability. The influences of vision, purpose, and accountability interactively influenced participants’ determination to achieve the vision and fulfill individual purpose.

Despite many similarities in their ability to achieve high performance, study participants in the four units described their cultures differently. This is not surprising, because a unit’s culture is, among other things, an expression of its purpose and mission. Members of the adult education unit cited trust and collaboration as significant parts of their culture, whereas the accreditation team described a culture of excellence. Library
personnel exhibited pride in their unit’s service and professionalism, whereas student services personnel emphasized commitment to students first. In the adult education external partnership, the importance of sustaining a committed culture based on relationships and trust was particularly interesting. Working together to develop an entirely new model of adult and college developmental education, the leaders of each “side” of the partnership created an innovative design that transformed a culture of competition into a culture of collaboration. These leaders continued their commitment through purposeful engagement and kept their personal commitments for ten years, renewing that commitment annually.

In each unit, unit members who deal directly with students emphasized the importance of relationships within the unit including a culture of care and support. For example, relationships among library staff helped them deal with sudden death of staff family members, and the grant unit’s welcoming atmosphere influenced student success and employee satisfaction. This welcoming atmosphere was the result of a legacy—honored and sustained during the transition from the first unit director and passed down to the next leader, finally evolving into a legacy that she expanded to include students. As with the centerpiece of trust and purposeful engagement found in the adult education culture, the focus of autonomy and support exists among all of our units, even if not described as such.

The accreditation team and the college it represents demonstrated two cultural distinctives: (a) a culture of excellence and (b) a culture of evidence. In other words, superior performance was expected, and decisions were informed with evidence. A team member reported that the “use of gathering and monitoring data is not episodic. It is part
of the culture.” Another team member said, “I don’t know if it was said, but the expectation was always understood in my mind that we would get no recommendations [for change].” This was an essential goal of the team’s charge because no recommendations implied no corrective action and thus represented the team’s shared aims for excellence.

Like most organizational units, each unit in this study has a formal mission that is determined for them. Sometimes the mission reflects that of the college, as in the case of the reaccreditation committee and the library. The accreditation team reflects the college culture of nothing short of excellence and the library’s reflects its longstanding director’s influence. State statute defines the mission of the adult education unit, and federal guidelines define the grant unit’s mission.

Yet each unit also developed an informal mission or set of internal guidelines that define the actual behaviors from day to day that have become an integral part of its culture. Library staff members “serve students” and “take care of each other.” The grant unit personnel similarly take care of “students first and then each other” and exhort students with this directive: “If you succeed, we succeed.” The adult education collaborators dedicated themselves to purposeful engagement taking an active part in meetings that chronicled the progress of the collaboration. The accreditation team strove for excellence through preparedness and developing the expertise of its members.

Each unit developed a set of internal guidelines that defined the actual behaviors from day to day. For example, the informal mission of the library staff is, “We do whatever it takes to get students what they need,” even if the assistance is not specifically library-related. They also function as an “extended family” that “takes care of each
other.” Similarly, the grant unit staff’s informal mission has become part of who they are what they do in addition influence students to adopt their positive behaviors. The adult education collaborators dedicated themselves to purposeful engagement. That is, they actively participated in meetings that chronicled the progress of the collaboration, and they worked to ensure that staff in each partner organization shared the leaders' common vision. The accreditation team—guided by the college president's active mentoring, example, and high expectations—strove for excellence through developing the expertise of its members and by careful preparation.

Data across all four cases suggests the motivation for performing above minimum expectations comes from focusing on a vision. For example, the grant unit envisions every student who is willing to work as graduating. The adult education unit, as a national model, sees itself influencing the success of adult students throughout the nation through constant renewal and improvement of this model program. The accreditation committee sees itself contributing to the prestige and effectiveness of a community college nationally recognized for its excellence. Library staff members shared that "knowing we make a difference in the success of our students” motivates them to serve at all costs. The formal mission is important to the formal unit leaders but for unit members facing crises every day, it is crucial to have a vision and purpose that conveys that they matter, not only to those they serve but also to those they follow.

**Authentic, Trusting, Inclusive Leadership**

The leaders in this investigation demonstrated similar positive characteristics as they facilitated the exceptional functioning of their units. The stories of our unit leaders demonstrated the attributes of realistic optimism, emotional intelligence, confidence to
succeed, and hope (Luthans, Luthans, Hodgetts, & Luthans, 2001). They show that although it might be possible to identify specific actions that appear to stem from a specific trait or behavior, as with other human attributes, they do not occur in isolation. As with all human attributes, these are intangible resources, and research has found these attributes to be more effective when demonstrated in combination (Luthans, 2002b).

For example, in the case of the accreditation team, the college president used most or all of these traits as she prepared for the college reaccreditation process. She knew her goal and the path to follow when early in the process she chose college leaders who would comprise the accreditation team. Her plan included training for those team members to assure they would achieve the goal of no recommendations for improvement. The appointed team members were also given the responsibility of collecting information from personnel in most college departments so their leader provided her executive support if things did not progress as planned.

The formal leaders that facilitated the adult education collaboration between a large community college and a large public school district believed they could create a successful adult education preparation plan for the area they serve. They used collaboration between two large organizations and their leaders as the path to achieve that goal. The executive formal leaders however did not stop there: They pledged their own continued involvement in the project and have kept that promise for over ten years. The will to succeed accompanied the plan to develop trusting relationships and maintain purposeful engagement. Without that leadership attitude, the program may not have received national recognition. Leaders who developed organizational collaboration without the exchange of a single dollar were confident that the team they were building
would succeed, just as the college president was confident that her reaccreditation team would receive no recommendations for correction.

Because the SSS unit and college library units work with students daily, their leaders assist and encourage students, which is important for bolstering student retention. Students feel as if they matter when supported by people at the college. Library staff members use the same emotional intelligence to support each other through grief and the loss of loved ones by showing empathy and support.

Analysis of the data revealed that all leaders were focused and engaged and that leadership attributes and behaviors operate in combination with other attributes helping to explain how units are able to perform above expectations. All leaders in the four case studies were selfless, focused on the mission and vision of their unit, and trusted by their unit members. Although unit members other than the formal leader rarely identified themselves as leaders, the definition used in our study includes them as such. In the grant unit, having many leaders with the power to make decisions about resources created cohesiveness among the members.

Leaders within the four cases are authentic, feeling comfortable with who they are and what they believe and value. They act on their beliefs and values and act transparently with others (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004). This authenticity also includes acting selflessly, although the leaders demonstrated this trait differently. For instance, accreditation team leaders recognize publicly any contributors to the excellent results of the reaccreditation. SSS unit leaders give their members some choice of location for their professional development, whereas accreditation team leaders recognize the talent and tacit knowledge of employees in personal ways. They also
address the needs of all the team members by providing additional professional development and training so team members are prepared to make informed decisions.

Together, the leaders in this study demonstrate a consistent attitude of treating people as people rather than objects or abstract budgetary personnel account strings (Alfred et al., 2009; Shults, 2008). They empower, support, provide a purpose, and create opportunities to make a difference for those they lead. The director of the grant program displays all of these behaviors when she asks staff members to participate in the grant writing process. Each staff member represents her area of expertise as she works “off the clock” to prepare a new grant and willingly contributes to the new grant outcome through this process. Dividing the responsibility among all the unit members and sharing the consequences if the grant is not renewed is an example of shared accountability. In distributing accountability, the leader trusts the unit members to use their abilities and expertise to reach the unit goal. This trust, in turn, provides them with a sense of purpose over and above their daily responsibilities. The work also empowers the staff through involvement in the outcomes that affect their future.

Several similarities and differences were present across the case studies. One similarity was the presence of a supportive, collegial climate among participants in spite of differences in organizational structure and decision-making process. The length of service each person has worked within the unit and organization contributed to unit members’ subjective experiences of feeling supported. One library team member described this as the “ease of long-standing acquaintance” that facilitated the ability to know without speaking how to help other unit members. Across each of the four cases,
no individual has worked fewer than five years in the unit, and leaders recognized through title or responsibility have served in that unit capacity from eight to 20 years.

A noticeable difference across units is the way formal and informal leaders carry out administrative and managerial tasks. Some units were more hierarchal with a team leader or unit director assigning tasks. Other units function with a more distributed leadership whereby both informal and formal leaders share in the input and output of administrative and managerial tasks. This variation did not appear to hinder the high performance of the units. Areas influenced most by formal leadership include leadership style, culture, mission and vision, reputation, and a system of reward and recognition. All of the leaders not only influence the culture of their units, they may have created it as in the case of the SSS unit and the adult education collaboration. In the case of the library, the formal leaders are the driving force behind the existing culture. The SACS unit identified themselves as having a culture of excellence, the library a traditional hierarchy with a service orientation, the SSS unit prides itself on its leadership legacy of autonomy and support, and the culture that developed through the leaders of the adult education collaboration is defined a culture of trust.

Positive leaders trust in the capabilities and possibilities of their members to achieve unit goals, which paves the way for commitment to a shared vision and purpose that enhances a sense of shared accountability for outcomes. Adding to this positive environment are leadership actions that provide autonomy and support for all unit members. Autonomy and trust work together developing an environment where creativity and new ideas can flourish. Personnel trust that if an idea is not successful or if they make a mistake, they have access to whatever support they need to proceed toward
the development of something new or to recover from a mistake. Of equal importance are leaders who appreciate team members as individual people not just positions. These three in combination contributed to the success of all four units. While this is also an example of levering that evolves from the actions of the leaders, this levering may well occur by accident but with similar results as if they were intentional. However, if leaders understood and intentionally levered resources, the result might be even greater.

**Resource Richness**

Resource richness is our adaptation of the CCAM term *abundance*, a term that may be easily misunderstood to mean ample tangible resources (Alfred et al., 2009). We use resource richness to denote the condition that results when all available resources, both tangible and intangible, are optimally engaged. The four units achieved resource richness by looking beyond tangible resources. Their leaders and members did not view tangible resources as the primary constraining factors on their ability to achieve their high goals. Instead, by valuing their intangible resources, they were able to avoid being charmed by ample (or lacking) tangible resources. Adding these considerable intangible resources to available budgets, positions, equipment, and physical spaces created resource richness. From this position, unit leaders and members could create leverage and thereby enhance the effects of their tangible resources.

**Tangible resources.** All four units function under some sort of structured plan, a funding source, and a budget that describes relatively fixed amounts they have to work with. The importance of these tangible resources cannot be overemphasized. When leaders discussed resources and organizational functioning, they identified tangible
resources, especially money as extremely important. However, they also discussed quantifiable resources such as staff positions. Authority over the amount and disbursement of tangible resources varied from unit to unit. The leader of the adult education collaboration, however, indicated with pride that no money changed hands when the two leaders joined their organizations to deliver adult education and community college preparation to a large population of students. Each unit continues to function independently within its own strategic plan and funding source as it meets any legislative mandate that supports its operation. The SACS accreditation team, however, had access to whatever tangible resources they requested. Completing the assignment of sustaining accreditation remains such a high priority that no request was denied.

In all units, their tangible resources can ebb and flow, but in the case of the grant program, their funding can fluctuate annually and more often than not diminish year by year. To manage these changes and maintain their high performance, the team members stay focused on the things they can control and leverage other types of resources to accommodate for any lost funding.

All the units are fiscally responsible and adapt to shrinking tangible resources when needed. In some cases, as in the adult education unit and grant program, asking for community support can result in monetary donations from community organizations or businesses. Yet these are not the only sources available to meet unit needs. Utilizing intangible resources can expand possibilities to achieve unexpected results.

In addition to careful stewardship of tangible resources, the units in our study leveraged tangible resources with careful preparation for the future, including identifying leveraging opportunities, focusing on resources that are within the unit’s control, being
prepared, and providing professional development. Each unit derives benefits from preparation. For example, the accreditation team leaders prioritized up-to-date data collection and credential verification. This advance preparation supported their ability to shepherd the reaccreditation process and complete it successfully with no recommendations for improvement. The administrative assistant for the SSS project developed a notebook containing all up-to-date documentation a site visit team from the department of education would require. The site visit team was so impressed with the notebook that they asked for a copy to use as a model for other sites. Library professionals make certain their committee responsibilities and reports are up to date, and adult education personnel prepare to meet the stringent reporting requirements. We found the more a unit makes a concerted effort to recognize and innovate with the resources, the greater its ability to perform with excellence.

**Intangible resources.** With such a fluctuation in tangible resources, the four units used a variety of resources, not easily quantified, to assist them in reaching their goals. This type of resource amplification is rarely a straight line, cause-and-effect event. Two areas in particular, psychological capital and positive leadership were clearly capitalized in these high-performing units.

Members of the SSS unit, displaying the characteristics of psychological capital, helped to develop and enhance those characteristics in students by modeling and encouraging desired behaviors, thus influencing the success of the unit purely through positive role modeling. Hope develops when a staff member assures a student he can succeed and helps devise a success plan. Accreditation members demonstrate self-efficacy through displays of confidence prior to an accreditation visit because they have
prepared well. Library staff and professionals demonstrate resilience when they work together to manually manage a library printing queue in order to help students. Psychological capital, as an intangible resource, thus becomes a lever that amplifies the capacity of unit members to meet their formal goals, serve their constituents, and respond to external pressures.

Important intangible resources prime for leveraging are the behaviors and traits of all unit members, formal leaders, informal leaders, and students who receive services. Whereas the core constructs of positive attributes of leadership (PAL) include confidence for the group to succeed, psychological capital emphasizes self-efficacy, the ability of an individual to perform a specific task with excellence. The resilience component of psychological capital is the ability of an individual or group to bounce back from adversity (Avey, Luthans, Smith, & Palmer, 2010; Froman, 2010; Luthans et al., 2001), and the emotional intelligence component of positive approaches to leadership is a relationship-focused attribute (Luthans et al., 2001).

Positive leadership can be found at all levels of the units examined because of the inclusive, people-first leadership structure. Behaviors prevalent in our investigation include treating people as people, building relationships, and collaborating with other entities. All the unit leaders value their personnel as individuals and professionals. The library director continued the care he traditionally shows to his staff during the holidays even through the pain of losing his daughter. The SSS unit director and her staff continued to serve students who needed their help, even when they could not count them as members of their program. Library personnel continued to take care of the students and faculty even when their staffing was short.
The library staff and professionals determined that they had not only reached but also surpassed the mark of excellence in student service. Their capacity to serve could have easily been diminished by a series of extremely difficult circumstances. However, their dedication, preparedness, and resilience buoyed their capacity to serve in the midst of pressing—even traumatic—difficulty. For example, their resilience was most evident as they continued delivering excellent service while at the same time supporting the needs of the library director who suffered the loss of two family members. Not only do unit members demonstrate these traits, they model the benefit of these attributes to the students they serve.

This expanded approach to organizational functioning insists that including intangible resources is paramount in the leveraging process in order to attain the best possible outcomes. Failure to develop and deploy intangibles creates slack, the unused set of resources that represent the leeway between what an organization could accomplish and what it does accomplish.

The units place a high value on people, the things that people can do, and the things that people need. The people in the units build relationships, collaborate, influence others, model behavior, learn, teach, grow, improve, nurture, and show concern. They benefit from autonomy and a sense of purpose. They feel valued, respected, and trusted. They have opportunities to learn and improve, make connections, and appreciate being unique. Things within their control include people, relationships with other organizations both inside and outside the college, and the talents of their own students. The previous examples provide evidence of how intangible resources can act as levers that amplify available tangible resources to increase the capacity for excellent performance. Finally,
the influence of positive leadership itself is an intangible resource in the development of
others. For example, a supervisor may encourage development in unexpected areas. A
participant explains, “I was a teaching faculty, and I wanted to do more. My president
and academic dean saw something in me that maybe I never saw in myself, and I was
given the opportunity to do things.”

Regardless of the different organizational structures, all of our unit leaders kept
their followers focused on the unit’s mission from reaccreditation to organizational
collaboration, to direct student service. Providing focus and direction produces stretch,
the vision of results that seem out of reach based on current resources. This unit-level
research confirms Hamel and Prahalad’s (1994) assertion that stretch serves as a powerful
motivation for learning to identify, develop, and deploy slack resources to produce
resource amplification through leverage. Our research also supports the institution-level
findings of Alfred et al. (2009) of the role of leadership and intangible resources in
influencing exceptional performance. Finally, it supports individual- and group-level
research studies that describe positive organizational outcomes enabled by positive
dynamics in a group.

Conclusions

This multiple-case analysis of four community college units reveals the effects of
positive organizational dynamics on unit success. We grouped our findings into three
areas: (a) people-first culture; (b) authentic, trusting, inclusive leadership; and (c)
resource richness. Within these areas, we noted how leaders and members attributed unit
performance to positive characteristics and behaviors that were intentionally developed
and nurtured. We described the importance of positive behaviors and traits in formal and
informal leaders and how these contributed to unit performance. We also discussed the power of shared vision and informal mission for cohesion, motivation, and purpose in the units.

Leaders influence unit cultures in which (a) people are valued holistically and above other resources; (b) authentic leaders provide autonomy and support while organizing the units’ work around strengths, and (c) unit leaders and members maximize all available resources. Formal leaders influence the culture of their unit, develop and depend on shared leadership to focus on the overall mission, and facilitate leveraging all available resources.

The conclusions drawn from this four-case analysis are consistent with results of capacity-building, a component of the CCAM construct of abundance. In each unit, we found leaders skilled at identifying and developing their available tangible and intangible resources. The resulting leverage amplified the units’ performance. At the unit level, there is great opportunity to facilitate leveraging. Unit members are the closest to where resources are actually used, and they are best positioned to identify slack resources—especially the intangible ones. Each person has control over resources—especially those that are unique to themselves. Examples include personal strengths, multiple relationships, interdepartmental collaborations, and the ability to pursue personal and professional development. Leaders beyond immediate supervisors may be too far removed to see opportunities to develop intangible resources at the individual level. Thus, when unit members are given the autonomy and support to develop and deploy those resources as they see fit, they have the potential to influence unit performance exponentially.
Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on innovating toward capacity building, leaders appreciating people as people, and leveraging all resources in the direction of abundance. Leveraging can move an organization toward abundance; but an organization cannot maintain that state without continually using the tools that helped them get there. Resources available to leverage include positive authentic leaders and their attributes, accomplished employees who are encouraged to use all of their strengths including psychological capital, and a culture designed to utilize capacity building. Collectively, this combination of resources can achieve results greater than expected, based on current levels of tangible resources.

Becoming open and knowledgeable takes time, and it can seem risky. Thus, if someone is not ready to understand that process, it could take a long time to learn to think differently about leadership, resources, organizational culture, and performance. The following recommendations reflect the experience of our team members as we moved from acquaintance to understanding, to application, to assimilation of the principles of positive perspectives of unit performance, authentic leadership, and the leveraging of resources. Other teams and units can also experience a similar process:

- Become acquainted with capacity-building and leveraging intangible resources. The literature referenced in this report, the experiences of the units under investigation, and the brief appraisal of unit functioning included in this report can help interested parties become familiar with the positive terminology and processes.

- Understand the concepts through a learning experience facilitated by educators acquainted with the process of unraveling abstract concepts with examples, role-playing, observation, and conversation.

- Assimilate the concepts by looking at and identifying your own examples. Looking at your own daily practice through the new lens constantly reminds you that leveraging is all around us.
• Apply the concepts by choosing an example of a unit that could be improved, preferably your own, and detail a specific plan of action for that unit to learn and apply leveraging for capacity building.

Further recommendations rest on our finding that individuals at all levels of the organizational chart control considerable resources of their own. For example, we have described the importance to team success of formal knowledge, such as one might acquire through training or education. We have also described ways of viewing culture, leadership, and resources that are at the same time familiar, yet difficult to translate into organizational vitality. These different perspectives are forms of tacit knowledge—intangible resources essential for building the capacity to amplify resources. Learning to operate these levers makes it possible to perform with excellence in an environment where resource levels and needs constantly change.

**Further Study**

This exploration of positive influences on unit-level performance leaves many questions unanswered and suggests avenues for further inquiry. For example, can the positive dynamics in successful individual units in higher education influence the performance of an entire college or university? If so, how and to what degree? Shifting the focus from units and institutions to individuals, can individual study of positive psychology and organizational dynamics influence team or organizational functioning? How and to what extent?

Leaders often mistake growth or plentiful tangible resources for high performance (Alfred et al., 2009). In doing so, they may assume that high performance comes from unique circumstances of growth or plentiful tangible resources. Attention is thus diverted from the possibilities for developing intangible resources that are essential for amplifying outputs regardless of available tangible resources. By contrast, the research reported here
shows that when unit leaders add to their metrics of success the ability to identify and deploy intangible resources, they develop the capacity to produce results thought to be impossible. It is tempting to ignore intangible resources, especially when tangible resources are plentiful (as in the case of the reaccreditation team) and even when scarce (as in the case of the library). Yet, consistent with the CCAM and positive literature, this study suggests that the key to outstanding unit performance is full utilization of all available resources achieved through special emphasis on intangible resources and desirable—and new—organizational outcomes. In order to produce a culture that supports this expansive view of organizational performance, we must first recognize that such units already exist and identify what exceptional performance looks like. This multi-case analysis has shown how positive organizational behaviors including attention to intangible resources can influence the ability to perform well in various contexts.
Appendix

Questionnaire for Leadership and Resources Perceptions

1. What are your position responsibilities in this program unit?

2. What is the relationship between your work and this program’s overall performance?

3. In your program unit, what opportunities do staff members have to learn and grow?

4. In what ways are you empowered to carry out your position responsibilities?

5. What qualities of the formal leaders of your unit make them effective? What qualities of the informal leaders of your unit make them effective?

6. Describe techniques used by leadership to make everyone feel like an integral part of the unit?

7. Give an example of how unit members build upon strengths?

8. Give an example of how unit members value personal assets?

9. How does your unit deliver exceptional value to students?
References


Chapter 3

Beyond Constraint: Service Excellence and Positive Workplace Dynamics in a Community College Library

The nature of our work—the tasks we face, the problems embedded in those tasks, and their cognitive demands—is often more determinant of organizational outcomes than the demands placed by the environment. (Bastedo, 2012, p. 8)

An important but unexpected role of leaders is to bring out the very best in people and the organization, irrespective of conditions in the environment. (Alfred, Shults, Jaquette, & Strickland, 2009, p. xiv)

This qualitative case study examines the functioning of a successful community college library. As part of a larger study of high-performing community college units, its purpose is to understand the library’s performance in terms of the emerging body of literature that Donaldson and Ko (2010) have called positive organizational psychology. The study’s conceptual framework draws from aspects of this literature connected with positive workplace contexts (Peterson, 2006) and the mediating role of leadership in building the capacity to perform at high levels despite external constraints (Alfred et al., 2009).

The library chosen for this study compares well with others of its kind on national library quality metrics. It conforms without exception to applicable accreditation standards, having received no recommendations after its most recent review. More interesting is that the library is recognized and respected across its academic community for its consistent, excellent support for teaching and learning, despite many significant constraints. This study’s participants answered a questionnaire and gave interviews about their views on leadership, resources, and mission.

Thematic analysis of the data reveals a strong connection between the library’s success and its core values about people, service, and leadership. The findings suggest
the library’s excellence depends on the shared vision and informal mission of the library faculty and staff. The importance of this vision and informal mission transcends the more formal mission and the need for tangible resources.

This qualitative case study examines positive aspects of the organizational dynamics of a successful community college library. Emerging theory and research supports the mediating role of positive dynamics and behaviors in workplace “goodness” and enhanced performance. In addition, in groundbreaking studies based on this emerging research, Alfred et al. (2009) and Shults (2009) found that how well a community college performs depends on the skill with which its leaders identify, develop, and deploy available resources.

As an organizational unit, this library represents the intersection of academic and student services divisions as it advances the plural mission of the community college (Dougherty, 1994). The research reported here responds to several gaps in existing research as it aspires to inform practices that affect performance in academic libraries and other cross-divisional higher education service units. The study design incorporates a deliberate focus on positive aspects of the library’s organizational functioning that, as this study finds, form the foundation of this library’s consistent ability to delight its academic community.

This case study contributes in several ways to knowledge about successful performance. First, the positive research orientation has shown promise for understanding complex influences on excellence and good performance, but few studies have extended this approach into postsecondary organization research. Second, this study offers a fresh perspective on research about higher education as an organization,
which has declined in favor of a focus on external environmental influences on performance. A third contribution is this study’s level of analysis—the organizational unit—which is not well-represented in the positive organizational literature. This study addresses at the meso level Alfred et al.’s (2009) research on community colleges in which they found a positive correlation between performance and leaders’ ability to develop and deploy intangible resources. Finally, this research speaks to an emergent trend in academic library assessment theory that seeks to describe and demonstrate the value of the library.

The positive orientation engaged by this research draws from recent theory and research about the implications of positive psychology in the workplace. Donaldson and Ko (2010) refer to the various streams of inquiry as positive organizational psychology. This literature pays attention to positive aspects of organizational functioning and seeks to broaden the scope of desirable organizational outcomes to include explicitly positive phenomena and states (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Examples of such outcomes include goodness—“especially positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members” (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 4)—and organizational “dynamics that are typically described by words such as excellence, thriving, flourishing, abundance, resilience, or virtuousness” (p. 4). Cameron, as cited in Bernstein (2003), elaborates that positive organizational scholarship seeks to study “organizations typified by appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality, and meaningfulness” (p. 267). In such organizations “creating abundance and human well-being are key indicators of success” (p. 267).
What do these lists of intrinsic goods and strategic capabilities have to say to community college leaders who are accountable for performance? Alfred et al. (2009) suggest that in “the most troubled economy in three decades” (p. 253), it is not enough to continue to understand performance merely in terms of gain or loss—a “change in numbers that count, like enrollment and revenue” (p. 253). They argue that this narrow focus can lead to a “truncated view of performance that diverts attention from a fundamental strength of abundant organizations—the ability to leverage lean resources into high productivity” (p. 253). This ability, according to Alfred et al. (2009), suggests a number of new success indicators for organizations, consistent with positive organizational scholarship: “Performance is about much more than positive numbers. It is about aspiration and ambition, about stretch and leverage, and about people and value” (p. 253). This qualitative inquiry explores successful library performance through the lens of positive scholarship and the expanded view of desirable outcomes and success indicators it can provide.

Background

This section presents a brief review of two literatures: academic library performance and, more broadly, organization studies in higher education. The reviews are not exhaustive but are intended to highlight aspects of prior research that bear on this case study. Academic Libraries and Performance

Academic libraries sit astride the academic and student supports functions of higher education and therefore embody many of the resource challenges faced by units in both areas. Academic libraries “make a significant difference in the quality of academic
life and the ability of colleges and universities to advance their missions" (Neal, 2011, p. 424). In other words, the library mission must support the academic mission of the parent institution (Oakleaf, Association of College and Research Libraries., & American Library Association., 2010; Pritchard, 1996; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: Commission on Colleges, 2012).

A major objective of academic libraries is to align with the “structures of higher education and the criteria by which those institutions are judged” (Pritchard, 1996). Typical measures of what Orr has called library goodness (Orr, 1973). Yet, increasingly, library success also requires libraries to be "passionately focused on user expectations" (Neal, 2011, p. 426). Meeting user expectations rests on a library’s ability to discover and satisfy stakeholders’ expectations (Neal, 2011; Oakleaf et al., 2010). For example, (Research Information Network & Research Libraries, 2011) describes the complex service culture of a high-performing library unit:

Such a library evolves and responds with enthusiasm to the new opportunities and challenges for higher education, the information society and knowledge economy. Instead of functioning simply as a provider of content, it is actively pursuing new opportunities to build institutional value. One of the library’s most important characteristics is its strong service culture, ingrained in the mindsets of librarians at all levels, in the governance of the library, and in all library processes. Libraries are known for having a strong service culture, and they are rewarded for it through respect for the library, high levels of researcher engagement, and strategic collaboration with other providers of research support (p. 20).

Academic libraries are integral to the mission of the academic community and to student success (American Association of Community Colleges, 2003). Academic supports and services include information literacy and critical thinking, reference and circulation, outreach to faculty, and acquisitions of materials and resources to support curricular needs. Community college libraries—also known as Learning Resource Centers—provide a “full array of educational programs” that are “indispensable to the
teaching/learning mission of the community college” (Association of College and Research Libraries, para. 1). Thus, this library serves as an excellent case example of a post-secondary unit that serves the plural mission of a community college (Dougherty, 1994).

Higher education administrators understand the importance of libraries to their institutions, but they also demand that library deans and directors justify funding requests with evidence that demonstrates effectiveness and value (Fister, 2010; Oakleaf et al., 2010). In libraries, as in higher education as a whole, people (a) deliver services, (b) add value through interaction with students, and (c) determine the resources available for deployment and how to use them. Thus, it is important to understand the workplace and how people function within it.

This study’s interest in academic library performance contributes to an emerging trend in the already-vast literature of academic library performance (Heath, 2011; Pritchard, 1996; Town, 2011). The literature divides between Orr’s (1973) categories of quality of services and the impacts of the total package of services (Brophy, 2006).

For decades, library services have been studied and discussed in terms of inputs, processes, and outputs or outcomes (Matthews, 2011; Pritchard, 1996). However, academic library assessment theorists are only recently beginning to grapple with how to make explicit the implicit, intrinsic value of academic libraries to their institutions (Neal, 2011; Oakleaf et al., 2010; Town, 2011).

Community college libraries present special challenges for demonstrating value because their missions mirror the fundamentally complex, often conflicted, mission of their parent institutions (American Association of Community Colleges, 2003;
Dougherty, 1994). But their primary missions do not typically include support for basic research—often funded by external grants—that their four-year and graduate degree counterparts do, nor do they generate much revenue on their own.

The positive orientation of this case study is well-suited to providing insights into how a community college library has become a respected, valued contributor to its academic community, despite multiple challenges to resources. Matthews (2007) says that Cameron’s research into the domains of organizational effectiveness in colleges and universities can be summarized thus: “Effectiveness is a mental construct inferred from an organizational behavior and not something observed directly” (p. 283). This study, with its qualitative investigation of a library’s “goodness” stands in the tradition of Kim Cameron’s (1981) earlier work in organizational effectiveness. In addition, is solidly within Cameron’s positive organizational scholarship perspectives developed since the field emerged around 2000.

To summarize, this qualitative study augments problem-focused research by exploring the relationship between positive aspects of organizational functioning in a community college library and the library’s success. This library is respected by its academic community for the excellent supports and services it provides and exemplifies a post-secondary unit that serves the plural mission of a community college (Dougherty, 1994). It also exhibits many of the positive phenomena and behaviors that are the subjects of this literature. In addition, positive research at the meso-level of analysis is not common nor has it been applied much in the public sector, including higher education.

This research adds to the knowledge of how postsecondary work contributes to excellence. The research also supports emerging efforts that seek to understand how
library value is created and demonstrated. It also builds on an existing study conducted at
the institution level by extending its concepts into the organizational unit level.

Organization Studies in Higher Education

Bastedo (2012) observes this paradox about the study of organizations: “Modern
organization theory is built upon the study of colleges and universities” (p. 3), yet the
study of higher education as an organization is in “sharp decline” (p. 4). This is due in
part to a “lack of perceived connection between organization theory and major
contemporary concerns in higher education” (p. 5). He also attributes this decline in part
to a concentration of research on external factors that influence the work of higher
education. Although these have been valuable for understanding environmental influence
on higher education they have eclipsed internally-focused research about organizational
culture, loose coupling, and even the understanding of “the nature of work itself” (p. 8).

Yet Bastedo (2012) argues that, “Work itself is an immensely important activity
and crucial to a complete understanding of the organizational dimensions of educational
practice” (p. 8). In addition to his call to study work and the workplace, Bastedo also
calls for research to be conducted by higher education scholars rather than scholars from
other disciplines. In particular, he asks that researchers embrace “higher education as an
applied profession” (p. 10) in order to deepen “our understanding of higher education as
an organization that cannot be duplicated by scholars of other traditions” (p. 10).

Despite the decline in organizational research about higher education, notable
recent examples exist. Kezar (2001, 2006) explored organizational antecedents to
collaborations between academic and student affairs. These studies assert the value of
collaboration, leadership, and staff development as valuable resources that can be
fostered to promote improved student learning. Alfred et al. (2009) and Shults (2009) interviewed community college presidents and linked exceptional community college performance to a spectrum of positive organizational phenomena and behaviors. Flores (2008) studied organizational commitment in community college faculty. Each of these focused on the macro level of analysis, and the three community college studies align with the emerging positive scholarship research orientation.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this case study looks to theory and research that emphasize the study of excellence in human and organizational functioning. The lens will guide exploration of three key dimensions linked in the literature to optimal organizational and individual functioning. These dimensions—positive leadership approaches, positive organizational perspectives on resources, and psychological capital—will be examined in the context of a community college library’s success in meeting or exceeding its mission.

The theory and research that Donaldson and Ko (2010) refer to collectively as positive organizational psychology provides an approach (Cameron et al., 2003) that focuses on “positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). This approach opens the door to ways of understanding organizational phenomena and behaviors that lead to organizational well-being and positive outcomes. Luthans (2002) and Luthans and Avolio (2009) suggest that positive organizational behavior provides ways to understand and develop positive behavior which link to improved performance. Cameron, Dutton,
and Quinn (2003) propose positive organizational scholarship as a perspective that can open up new possibilities for desirable organizational outcomes.

In addition to selected areas of positive organizational psychology, this research looks to the institutional capacity framework and abundance, the central construct of the Community College Abundance Model described and elaborated by Alfred et al. (2009) in their positive-oriented research of community college performance. Abundance is exceptional organizational vitality achieved through intentional, transcendent leveraging of all available resources in a college. These resources include leadership, tangible resources, and intangible resources. Leaders in abundant colleges create an “organizational state and a mind-set” (Shults, 2008, p. 148) that views intangible resources, and people in particular, as the organization’s most valuable resources.

**Positive Research Orientation and Organizational Studies**

The positive research orientation in organization studies is relatively recent, though its theoretical foundations in positive psychology are not new (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Gioia and Pitre (1990) argued that predominant research paradigms could not capture the “multifaceted [and complex] nature of organizational phenomena” (p. 585). In contrast to the “overarching emphasis in the social and management sciences on negative aspects of human endeavor” (Wright & Quick, 2009a, p. 149), the positive orientation directs the focus of inquiry to what is best about individuals and organizations. For example, positive theory and inquiry consider (B. B. Caza & Caza, 2008) excellence, organizational vitality, and exceptional outcomes (Cameron et al., 2003; B. B. Caza & Caza, 2008). The positive research perspective does not ignore negative feelings or circumstances. It takes these into account and can assist
with the sensemaking required to understand even difficult circumstances (Weick, 2003). Thus, when integrated with problem-focused research, positive inquiry methods can provide a more complete account of the influences on organizational success (Cameron et al., 2003; B. B. Caza & Caza, 2008; Peterson, 2006; Wright & Quick, 2009b).

Several ideas from the positive literature inform this case study, beginning with optimal human function, or *flourishing*, that “connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 678). Humans conduct their activities in a variety of institutional contexts such as families, communities, organizations, and societies (Peterson, 2006). Positive, or enabling, contexts promote the “development and display of positive relationships and positive traits, which in turn enable positive subjective experience” (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 85).

Others have described positive organizational contexts as *virtuous* (Cameron, 2003; Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004; A. Caza, Barker, & Cameron, 2004; Peterson, 2006). Organizational virtuousness is “a standard that extends beyond duty to the underlying ideal that motivates ethical rules and obligations” (A. Caza et al., 2004, p. 172). Virtuousness has been found to (a) be a capacity of individuals and organizations; (b) be linked empirically to objective indicators of organizational performance; (c) amplify positive emotions, social capital, and prosocial behavior; and (d) buffer the organization from the negative effects of trauma and distress and to increase the ability to bounce back and recover (Cameron et al., 2004; A. Caza et al., 2004; Weick, 2003).

Losada’s (1999) seminal research on 60 business teams demonstrated empirical connections between team performance and three different dimensions of speech. One of these dimensions—the ratio of positive speech to negative speech—he termed “emotional
space” (p. 181). Of the 60 teams studied, 15 teams were identified as high-performing, and each evidenced “expansive emotional spaces that open possibilities for action” (p. 181). The central constructs of positive organizational behavior research are psychological capital and positive approaches to leadership. Multiple empirical studies link psychological capital to desirable organizational outcomes. Examples include improved team performance (West, Patera, & Carsten, 2009), higher job satisfaction (Youssef & Luthans, 2007), buffering the stressful effects of downsizing (Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2008), healing after organizational tragedy (Powley & Piderit, 2008), lower absenteeism (Avey, Patera, & West, 2006); and employee retention (Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009).

Most positive-oriented research has been conducted at the individual and organizational levels of analysis, but the meso level—organizational units—has not been well-studied (Donaldson & Ko, 2010) nor have factors that influence high performance in the public sector. Research suggests that developing organizational and individual strengths leads to many desirable organizational outcomes, including high team performance, and job satisfaction. In addition, Alfred et al. (2009) showed that exceptional organizational performance depends on emphasizing people and intangible resources as the primary engine for capacity building and is not as sensitive to fluctuations in tangible resources as it is to the development and integration of intangible resources. In fact, positive research provides evidence for the opposite. Positive phenomena, behavior, and traits contribute to the ability of individuals and organizations to thrive and perform well, achieving goals thought to be impossible given current levels of resources.
As an adjunct to traditional research, a positive research orientation can help us understand organizational phenomena that contribute to organizational success but are not identified with typical performance metrics. Higher education represents complex organizational structures (Birnbaum, 1988; Mintzberg, 1979), functions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), and missions (Dougherty, 1994; Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). Complex organizations are difficult to study as whole units (Gioia & Pitre, 1990), and traditional problem-focused approaches are not adequate to understand that complexity (Cameron et al., 2003). New research perspectives are required (Gioia & Pitre, 1990) to adequately account for organizational complexity. The positive orientation shows promise for understanding organizational reality and for improving individual and organizational performance.

Researchers have connected positive phenomena, organizational dynamics, and states such as those mentioned above with improved workplace performance. For example, Alfred et al.’s (2009) study of community colleges, drawing on a positive organizational perspective, found that performance can be improved, even in times of scarcity, when leaders’ primary focus is on developing the intangible resources already at hand as embodied in their people. The same study concluded that the degree to which a community college is able to develop and amplify the three components of capacity—leadership, tangible resources, and intangible resources—predicts its level of performance, through the ability of leaders to create stretch (shared goals that cannot be accomplished with the given amount of tangible resources) and leverage (a focus on developing intangible resources as the means by which the goals will be accomplished).
Community College Performance and the Positive Research Orientation

The multi-faceted mission of the community college is broad and often conflicting (Dougherty, 1994), presenting significant challenges. Policy landscape, accountability, and economic climate influence the context and constraints within which colleges function. Colleges must pay attention to inputs and outcomes, the quantifiable indicators of resources and effectiveness in order to address accountability.

Community colleges must also perform in conditions of frequent—often unpredictable—shifts in revenue, expenses, and regulation. Common responses to decreased revenues include greater efficiency, often called “doing more with less,” and downsizing. These approaches assume a rational approach to organizational planning that includes a close relationship between inputs and outcomes. However, in contrast to these assumptions, this research study proposes that although tangible resources such as budget, staff lines, and facilities can and do influence outcomes, such a connection is not as strong as supposed. Instead, performance increases are much more sensitive to the development and application of intangible resources. Consequently, this study seeks to understand a community college service unit that has consistently met its mission and served its stakeholders well, despite cuts in budget and staffing levels over several years.

The positive-oriented research has focused mostly on individuals and organizations in business and industry, with little emphasis placed on organizational units. Mather (2010) proposed an applied positive psychology framework for student affairs practice at the individual and unit-levels. Kezar (2001) investigated organizational structure and influence on division-level collaborations. There is no doubt that
partnerships at the organization, division, and external levels are desirable—even essential. However, the work of an organization takes place at the unit level.

This qualitative case study was designed to extend the study of this type of resource development into higher education where accountability for achieving performance measures is of paramount importance. The purpose of this research is to examine positive aspects of organizational functioning that enable a community college library to transcend difficult, sustained challenges to meet its mission and provide exceptional value to its stakeholders. In doing so, it is hoped to present a more complete understanding of successful organizational functioning that can be achieved through problem-focused approaches alone.

The focus of this study, therefore, is a successful community college library known for meeting its broad mission and delighting its stakeholders. Despite challenges that might reasonably be expected to hinder an organizational unit’s effectiveness, the library consistently performs well. Challenges included deep budget cuts over successive years, organizational restructuring, unfilled professional positions, and traumatic personal losses. Yet, based on my prior professional knowledge of this library, it has consistently accomplished both. Thus, the study was designed to understand the library’s success in terms of a positive organizational framework. It attempts to answer the question: How do positive phenomena, behaviors, and traits—including perceptions of resources—influence the successful performance of a higher education academic unit?

**Research Design**

On a typical fall-semester weekday, more than 6,000 students and about 500 faculty and staff come to campus that serves as the site for this study, and more than
1,500 of these will enter the library. The library is situated in the administrative building on the main campus of an urban community college adjacent to support and services offices as well as to the building’s commons. Flanking the administrative building are two other buildings that house classrooms, laboratories, a variety of support services, and offices. Thus, as Freeman wrote: "The academic library as place holds a unique position on campus. No other building can so symbolically and physically represent the academic heart of an institution" (p. 9).

The library’s eight full-time faculty and staff—along with several part-time undergraduate and graduate student workers—advance the college’s academic mission by providing an array of services. These include typical library functions such as reference, instructional, and circulation services. In addition, the library has 48 computer workstations, tables for group study, and carrels for individual study.

Data for this investigation include participant interviews, an online questionnaire, documents, and field observation. In addition, this study includes as data my prior knowledge of the library. I chose to limit the pool of potential participants to the library’s full-time faculty and staff, believing that they would have broader perspectives than would part-time employees about operationalizing the library mission in their academic community. Document reviews included data collected for reporting to Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), user satisfaction surveys, and a letter of support written by the college’s academic leadership committee to the administration about their perceptions of the library’s quality, value, and effectiveness. In addition, I conducted field
observations in the library’s public services area and observed a monthly meeting of the full-time library faculty and staff.

When I explained my study to the director and asked for his help, he responded enthusiastically, contingent on the willingness of his full-time staff to participate. Over multiple informal conversations that followed, the director asked many questions and informally confirmed my perceptions about performance, resource constraints, and positive workplace phenomena in his library. He was then able to explain the study to his people, and they likewise showed interest in this study’s positive research orientation as a framework through which to present their experience. Having considered other settings as potential candidates for this research, I judged that this library had the best blend of access and potential for gathering relevant data.

The University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board and the Human Subjects Review Board of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System approved my research design and informed consent. I used Qualtrics Research Suite to (a) recruit participants, (b) administer the informed consent form, and (c) administer a preliminary questionnaire to consenting participants. The library’s nine full-time employees were in the initial recruiting pool, and eight agreed to participate. One preferred not to participate because he had been hired fairly recently and did not feel confident about his ability to contribute meaningfully to this study. Seven of the participants were professional librarians. Six of the librarians held positions as either tenured or tenure-track non-teaching faculty. One librarian was hired into a temporary full-time staff position (i.e., no paid time off or retirement benefits). The eighth participant was a permanent full-time staff member, but not a librarian.
Qualtrics provides a means to track completion of informed consents and questionnaire responses. Participant responses to the questionnaire’s short-answer and essay prompts provided me with preliminary information used to guide subsequent in-person interviews. As soon as a questionnaire was completed, I contacted that participant to schedule an interview. I offered each participant the opportunity to choose the interview site. The only stipulations were that sites afford an acceptable measure of privacy—taking into account participants’ levels of comfort—and that the setting be quiet enough not to interfere with a digital recording of the interview. Interviews were conducted in three library offices, the library employee break room, a classroom near the library, and the kitchen of one participant’s home.

Each participant gave one interview, and I conducted follow-up interviews with two participants. I recorded each interview with a Sony ICD-SX712 digital voice recorder, recommended for use with Dragon NaturallySpeaking. For field notes and backup recorder, I used a Livescribe Echo™ smart pen. The smart pen synchronized the voice recordings with my annotations made on special dot paper. Later, when reviewing my notes, I could tap the pen on any note and hear the voice recording at the time the annotation was made. This called to mind valuable cues about the context of the notes.

In addition to the data above, I have observed many aspects of the way the library staff serve their college. These include various phenomena, behaviors, and traits that are the subjects of research in the positive literature. My training as a professional librarian, my experience with this library, and my knowledge of positive-oriented research informed my decision that this library would be a good data source for answering
questions about the organizational dynamics of a library and their influence on performance.

I hold a master’s degree in library science, and my primary role over the past ten years has been to administer and support library technologies for a statewide system of community colleges. The system is comprised of 16 colleges that serve—in general—their regions. I serve all 16 college libraries, which provide services on over 30 campuses, and I work regularly in an *ex officio* advisory capacity with a team of senior library leadership. Thus, I know the contexts of these libraries and their colleges well, from the perspective of library technology.

Over seven years of supporting technologies for access to this library’s physical and electronic holdings, I have become acquainted with the personnel and the environment. Through semi-annual meetings with the library directors, I have become familiar with data that suggest that this library performs well and is known for consistently meeting accreditation standards, leadership in faculty governance, and ranking at or near the top of campus-wide user satisfaction surveys. Despite deep budget cuts, unfilled professional positions, and several personal losses, the library has continued to perform well and compares favorably with others of its size and kind. Conventional wisdom suggests that such challenges would be expected to diminish an organization’s ability to meet its mission and to satisfy its stakeholders.

Because my professional responsibilities to support library-specific technologies rarely require that I be at this library, I conducted site observations to become familiar with the setting. I focused on how the library was used, how the library workers helped students, and how the library workers interacted with one another. I observed one hour
during a weekday morning. The second hour was the afternoon of the library’s annual celebration of Halloween. In addition, I observed a monthly meeting of the library’s full-time faculty and staff to become familiar with the dynamics of the group during a regular meeting.

Several strategies were used to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the data, including multiple data sources and member checking. Multiple data sources increase reliability and validity, triangulation of participants’ individual perspectives strengthens the evidence in support of the research questions, and member checking after transcription serves as a gauge of the accuracy of the transcription and how well it represents the participants’ responses (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009).

I chose to transcribe the participant interviews. Matheson (2007) lists several advantages of acting as researcher-transcriber. The primary one is multiple opportunities to interact with the data through speech, visual, and auditory means. I adapted Matheson’s (2007) Voice Transcription Technique, a protocol for using speech-to-text software to transcribe voice recordings into Microsoft Word. First, I dictated the original interviews into a second group of recordings. Then I “fed” these to Dragon NaturallySpeaking, which I had already “trained” to recognize my speech patterns. Dragon converted the recordings into text in Microsoft Word. To minimize the possibility of mistakes in speech-to-text transcriptions—what MacLean, Meyer, & Estable (2004) call the “transcriptionist effect” (p. 19)—I compared these rough drafts to the original interview recordings and made corrections as necessary. Finally, I gave each participant a copy of his or her transcript and asked for a review for accuracy. All participants agreed that the transcripts reflected our conversations accurately.
Using a Livescribe smart pen facilitated working with interview field notes. The smart pen uses special dot paper that allows the user to tap the note and replay the voice recording at the time the note was taken. Thus, when reviewing my field notes, I did not have to rely solely on memory to situate the note in the interview context.

When the verbatim, corrected transcripts were ready, I asked each participant to review and comment on his or her own transcript for descriptive accuracy. Later, as I began to analyze the transcripts, I spoke informally with many of the participants to ask more about the interpretations and meanings I had derived from the transcripts. The participants agreed that I had understood what they had told me and that I was interpreting their stories well, an important member check that increases validity and reliability (Sandelowski, 2008).

Findings and Analysis

The excellence with which this library serves its community flows from this vision of the library as a group of people organized to provide a welcoming place in which everyone can feel comfortable and anyone who asks will get an answer. Three themes embody the image of the welcoming library. They are the importance of people, service, and leadership.

Valuing People and Relationships

People are the foundation of the library’s capacity to meet its mission. In the online questionnaire responses, each participant ranked people and their knowledge above all other resources as the most important element to success. The director’s approach to hiring reflects this core value. Obviously, candidates must have certain skill sets, knowledge, and experience. However, these are not disembodied traits. People—as
people—enact responsibilities and duties within the context of the group. Thus, relational considerations are at least as important as the skills a candidate brings to the library. According to the director:

We hire good folks, and the heart comes into that [because they are people]. Which is why I think it's so important to try to get the best hire—to know what you're getting and people who already fit your group.

Most participants described aspects of the library’s supportive workplace environment as important reasons for their ability to perform well. Their care and respect for one another seems to emerge from a shared value: people are intrinsically important and to be valued as such. For example, the office manager described mutual care as a foundation for the group’s good performance:

I think this is the best environment I have ever worked in . . . We all really care about each other. And I think that's what makes us all work well together.

Feelings of mutual, positive support—with a dash of tolerance and understanding—contribute to the library’s success. According to another participant:

I think that the environment is important for the resource of the people. . . . It's a positive atmosphere to work in . . . and that is a big part of our success. It's not that we don't have meltdowns . . . we all get frustrated, but we get through it all together.

Others ascribed their own ability to function in difficult times to the care and encouragement of colleagues and co-workers. A single mom spoke gratefully about the many times she felt supported by colleagues and co-workers; they were there for her through the birth of her child and the death of her grandmother. She also described her relief when as a new staff member she realized that her supervisor acknowledged and valued the differences she brings to her work. As she was learning a new workflow, it was apparent that she and her supervisor took very different approaches. Yet her
supervisor encouraged her to, “Make it yours. As long as you're getting it done, it doesn't matter.”

Another librarian, without knowledge of the director’s statement, added that fit is not exclusively about shared mission and group dynamics but also about new knowledge and perspectives.

I think what's important to us when we hire any new librarian is that they're going to fit with the mission of the college, they're going to fit with us as a group, and that they bring a different perspective that is new and, hopefully, refreshingly different.

The participants celebrate often. Any occasion can provide opportunities for the library to celebrate: birthdays, anniversaries, end-of semester “we made it!” parties, and holidays. One of the participants said, “We look for any excuse to bring food.” During the data collection period, I stopped by unannounced to do some member checking. It was Halloween, and I found the librarians and staff costumed and in a celebratory mood. The director had dressed as nerd. He wore a t-shirt with a head-shot of a geeky-looking fellow printed on it, and he was distributing boxes of Nerds™ candies—even to the college president—with the greeting, “Everyone needs nerds in their life!” Another wore an 8-Ball™ costume displaying the answer, “Outlook good!” She said she wore it because, “[we] gotta be positive!” Of the celebrations, she said, “We do have a good time together. . . . That can be the saving grace of any work organization, when people can laugh about things.” Another participant confirmed the value of celebratory traditions. On the last day of finals each fall semester, they bring holiday movies and food to work. The director famously prepares a special dish each year as part of the tradition. One year, citing various reasons, he announced that he would not be bringing
that dish. However, he relented when his staff persuaded him that the movie-fest tradition would be diminished if such an integral part were omitted.

**Culture of Service**

Service is a central characteristic of academic libraries (Research Information Network & Research Libraries, 2011) and librarians (Williamson, Pemberton, & Lounsbury, 2008). By providing excellent service, academic librarians earn “respect for the library across the institution, high levels of [faculty] engagement, and strategic collaboration with other providers of research support” (Research Information Network & Research Libraries, 2011, p. 20).

The public services librarian said, “I’m the solver,” and “seeing that you make a difference” is her motivation for coming to work every day. She gave this example of how library staff make a difference in students’ lives:

If a student has been to six places (and that happens a lot)...a lot of times, they get here as a last resort. And sometimes we honestly can't help. But I will never...and I think all of us are like this...we don't send that student away. We say, “Okay, I may not be able to solve your total problem, but let's sit here and try to figure out what needs to happen. Let's make a plan. Let's see if we can get you to the right person. Whatever we need to do, let's do it.”

The library staff enter into students’ life experiences, and through conversations, new knowledge emerges (Lankes, 2011). Students appreciate this personal level of service: “I can't tell you how many times students have cried...have said, ‘Thank you, because nobody else does this!’” Several other participants echoed this strong service orientation. The director said that instead of confusing students with directions to other offices, he would walk them there and introduce them to the person who can help.

Unit personnel hold service as their highest priority, and they serve each other and their academic community through sharing their duties, expertise, and resources. The
library views excellent service as its chief means of meeting its mission. As the director said: “We’re known for service. We're the good guys, and you give me a librarian that messes that up, we’re gonna have some issues. And we don't!”

Another librarian framed service as an informal goal of the library: “The first thing—and I don't think this is ever a stated goal—but the underlying philosophy is [that] we are here to help students.” The other participants affirmed this informal goal as a central, shared value and indicated that is contextual to a community college library. According to one librarian, “We all agree on this idea that we are here to serve the students and the faculty in a different way from a university.” Another participant characterized the library’s strong commitment to service as (a) an important influence on the library’s success and (b) a contributor to a reservoir of good will that yields continued stakeholder support when difficulties arise.

I think we’re good library because we all stay, for the most part, very positive and try to meet all of our patrons’ needs. Our main focus is the students, but we try really hard to make all of our faculty and staff happy, too. And I think that keeps them supportive of us, and when things get a little bumpy, they know that we're doing our best.

Sharing duties. The study participants, consistent with their shared belief in the mission, also share duties. One described the general attitude of the library workers: “We don't get a lot of, ‘That’s not my job!’ or ‘Do we have to do this?’” They often look for ways to share duties, because they believe it will make the library better. One of the librarians spoke about how she plans her work according to the ethos of sharing duties:

I'm willing to do pretty much whatever I need to do to help the library get along. . . . I take on those projects that I'm not necessarily asked to take on, because I think it's something the library needs in order to function, or to function at a better level.
There is a certain humility in this kind of sharing. For example, the library director said that when he is helping a student, he does not pretend to know everything:

I help them as best as I can. I'm not afraid to go and say, “I don't have a handle on this, completely, either.” . . . and pull one of my other [experts], and sit there and learn to get through that, too.

Sharing the workload was especially important to the library’s performance during difficult times. There was a long period when two—and briefly three—professional positions were open, but unfilled. This presented an extra burden for keeping the service level high. Sharing duties became essential during that time, as one librarian recalled.

Watching everybody come together and share the load of those positions is part of where I think we're successful. I don't think anybody here has the attitude of, "Everybody else here will take care of it. I'm just going to keep my own little list, and do my job, and go home."

The library staff enacted their shared-workload ethic during other times of difficulty. The implementation of new printing software provides an example of how this unit remains focused on its mission of service despite obstacles. A librarian who served on the implementation committee voiced several concerns to the group that the vendor could have addressed before implementation but did not. The new print management system was deployed at the beginning of the semester. For several weeks afterwards, numerous problems prevented students from printing articles and assignments. (In fact, though things are better now, there are still significant glitches that require the library staff to intervene to help the students with printing.) The result was long lines at the printer and frustrating waits—during a time of the semester when as many as 1,800 students would come to the library in a day.

The library staff worked very hard to reduce the negative impact of the printing issues on students. A great deal of intervention was needed at the printer, because dozens
of students needed to print. Every day, one librarian or public services staff member stood at the printer, full-time, to instruct and to help with the equipment. Several participants praised the library director for continually pressing for a solution and for providing meaningful communication about the vendor’s efforts to resolve the problems. When lines were busiest, the director even recruited back-office employees to help at the circulation and reference desks. Participants who worked in the public services area expressed gratitude that their back-office colleagues would pitch in and help cover essential public services duties while they worked at the printer. They reported that although sharing the workload resulted in many other things being postponed, having the mutual support from co-workers gave them the resilience needed to meet the frustrations of a sustained challenge. The public services librarian summarized the response of the public services staff:

So I either am at the printer helping students, or I’m at the computer, or on the phone, or meeting with people here and people with the company that we went with—trying to solve problems. But that's something that we do. That's one of the roles, and that's one of the ways that I think we’re of service to the college and to our population—our students.

**Sharing expertise.** Participants described how they share their expertise for the benefit of their academic community, their community at large, and their professions. In the academic community, accreditation standards for certain programs require that libraries provide access to the most current resources (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: Commission on Colleges, 2012). The library director and two other participants gave the example of how they aggressively collaborate with nursing faculty to make sure the materials are the most current available. One participant mentioned that providing such aggressive support for one area appeared unfair to some, but she explained that it is justifiable on accreditation grounds and the particular character of the
program. For example, general education materials are not as sensitive to time as allied health curriculum.

However, those areas receive support as well. Several participants described actively working to learn what faculty and students need, then working hard to meet expressed needs. For example, librarians collaborate with arts and humanities faculty to provide materials and displays for new courses, cultural events, “week” or “month” events, and the arts. In another instance, a librarian said that they noticed a faculty member was requesting certain materials via Interlibrary Loan for a new Japanese studies course. She contacted him to report the library’s pro-active effort to support the new course with additional materials: “we [ordered these new materials,] and are you aware that we’ve also gotten in these books on manga and anime? And are you also aware that we have these Japanese films that we had purchased [on] DVD?”

In addition, the library faculty scan literature and trade publications in order that they may share articles and news they know will be of interest to teaching faculty. Librarians share their expertise on key college committees and boards. One of the librarians placed special emphasis on the role of non-teaching library faculty on campus-wide committees.

I think faculty respect us because we do sit on these committees with them; they see us in that capacity. We chair important committees like Promotion, we sit as their representative on the Board of Directors. I think we're out there in the community. They know they can always contact us; we're available when they need us to come to classrooms for a specific project.

The librarians also contribute expertise in state, regional, and national professional organizations. One participant was elected president of the state’s library association, and another was chosen to serve as president of the state chapter of a national library association. A third participant spoke of the extent of service by colleagues:
We've all sat on various committees in the academic section [of the Kentucky Library Association or the American Library Association]... We're not only showing ourselves as active faculty members here but active librarians in the state, at least, if not nationally.

She continued to explain how feelings of gratification from professional service contribute to the library’s success.

I think that's “successful”: Knowing that we not only fulfill our duties here but [pausing] the joy, really, of feeling like a professional in the area of representing yourself in the state. And people see that, and it gets back to the administration with, "Oh, I see that this librarian is serving on a national committee".

**Sharing resources.** In serving the academic community, the library gives priority to students. Perhaps in a research institution, the priorities might be different but not at the community college. Students come to the library to study, to catch up on Internet browsing and social networking, to relax, and to get help. Some of that help is with traditional library programs and services such as reference, information literacy instruction, circulation, and interlibrary loan. Within the library, services are provided in the circulation and reference areas. The library faculty deliberately moved the reference desk near the library’s entrance to signal welcoming availability. The sign on the desk—“Please interrupt me!”—invites students to ask questions and calls attention to the library’s central purpose of service. To be ready to help students with specific assignment requirements, the reference staff actively works with faculty and students to gather syllabi for current courses into a binder that is kept at the ready by the reference desk.

Commitment to adequate staffing for public service area is high, and the reference desk has coverage for most of the hours the library is open. The study participants—even those whose primary duties are not in the public area—said that they pitch in to cover hours for absences resulting from professional development travel or illness.
In addition to academic support, the library also helps students navigate the often-bewildering array of administrative and support services that students require for academic success. Students come to the library asking about all kinds of needs, many of which fall outside the scope of traditional library services. The instructional librarian remarked:

There are days when I sit at the reference desk, and I think, "Oh, there's not much that I trained in library school that I'm using out there at the reference desk at any given hour." But students require help on the computer with word processing, how to print, how to get into Blackboard, how to sometimes find a classroom, how to get in touch with a faculty member.

She described the library as the de facto help center for the campus and as a routine, but central, component of the library’s informal mission.

And again, that's not why I went to library school, but it's a total picture, I think, as far as what purpose the library serves here on campus...how students see us as that help center... It has become a part of our everyday mission to be able to do that.

According to the director, the students know that the library can help them in a variety of ways.

The students need us more here, and I feel like we help the students more. I come from a background of working [in an academic special library] where it's a lot of faculty and graduate students that are fairly self-sufficient... But I feel like we do more good here than I have gotten the feeling of in any other library I've worked in.

Each participant made similar statements about the library. In short, it is a well-known safety net, easily accessible; many participants said that they do whatever it takes to discover and facilitate what each student needs to achieve academic and personal success.

The director indicated that he intentionally fosters this posture of service.

I lived in the library as a kid... and the librarian... was so helpful. And so I felt like that was a safe place to go. That's what I want for folks that walk in here to feel like, because I remember what it felt like.
According to one of the librarians, working at the reference desk often revealed areas where service needed improvement.

I would take a student back to the stacks…to look for books, and roughly half of the stuff I was looking for I wouldn't find. Stuff that should be on the shelf is on the shelf, and if it's not, then it needs to be marked in the catalog as “lost” or “missing”. I know that's not something most people will notice, but it was important for me trying to help the students.

The problem suggested a labor-intensive, time-consuming solution: going through the stacks, shelf-by-shelf, to compare what was there with the “inventory” reflected in the online library catalog. By identifying and correcting problems with more than 600 items in heavily-used sections of the stacks, she improved students’ ability to find resources they needed to use.

**Leadership and Planning**

Several participants noted that the leadership style in the library allowed for individual creativity and judgment in meeting individual and group goals. This statement made during an interview is representative:

The director has hands-off philosophy on a lot of things and lets us work in a lot of ways—gives us some creative freedom . . . and lets people do their own thing. One staff member gave an example. As her supervisor explained an extended procedure, the staff person said that it did not fit her way of working and asked to design a different way to achieve the same outcome. The supervisor was supportive, and the staff person was relieved to be able to re-design her work in a way that fit her strengths and ways of thinking.

The library director, faculty, and staff engage in formal planning processes that sets their annual goals and connects them to the formal goals of the college. In monthly meetings, they monitor progress, discuss responses to difficulties, consider strategic
opportunities, and make decisions about how to allocate scarce budgets for purchasing library materials and licensing online resources. The library director regularly communicates institutional priorities and initiatives derived from his weekly meetings with the college’s senior leadership and with his dean. The library faculty and staff discuss priorities based on knowledge of the institutional goals and the needs of the students and faculty they serve. They then translate these into detailed lists of behaviors and outcomes that become part of each employee’s annual evaluation.

The library director described his philosophy of planning and management plainly: “The simple, easy thing to understand is management by objectives. You have to have good objectives. They have to be true.” Thus, good objectives contribute to the library’s formal mission, and they are “true” by being consistent with the library’s “good heart:”

You can have management by objectives all day long and never accomplish anything. . . . I'm a firm believer in behaviorally-anchored rating scales, because it’s the behaviors you have that either allow you to make those objectives…or fail. [So] we set . . . how you’re going to get there . . . what you do to get there. . . . I like being able to do that, because I can measure it. I can see it. I can feel it.

He explained that he uses the annual employee performance planning and evaluation (PPE) process to set the expected tasks, behaviors, and outcomes for each employee. He said that this formal process is central to the library’s effectiveness because the goals are (a) mutually agreed-upon, (b) specific and detailed, (c) measurable, (d) directly connected to the library’s overarching informal mission and vision of service, and (e) constructed as much as possible around each employee’s strengths and interests. The director said the goals are “shared . . . and we're all in it for the same mission.” He said he does not think of this detailed approach as a “stick” to keep people from “misbehaving.” Rather, it
translates the shared values of people and service in to tangible, measurable actions and outcomes. In other words, it makes the vision real.

The library’s personnel evaluation model has proven so successful at documenting professional growth that it has become the model across campus for teaching faculty promotion. Many participants said that the planning process gave them both structure and motivation, especially because the actions often include outlets for expressions of personal interests. For example, librarians collaborate with campus and community organizations in areas of personal and academic interest. As one explained:

We do a planning and evaluation instrument every year, where I—with consultation with [the library director], decide what I need to do this year. What do I want to do? What percentage do I need to give to different things? And obviously the majority of my job is going to be this…right in here…doing the things with the students and working on those problem-solving techniques and all those things that need to happen.

But I also give a percentage to my professional development, to my leadership, to my community service. We are a community and technical college, so we need to be engaged in the community. And that's one of the things that helps keep us excited about what we do. It's a way for us to have an outlet to do other things. And I think it's great that that's not only encouraged, but actually required of us to do that. Because it gives that legitimacy to that.

Other participants agreed on the value of the planning process, although a few, including the director, acknowledged that it could also be a source of tension. One briefly mentioned discomfort with the reporting structure in which library faculty report directly to a faculty peer, unlike teaching faculty who are not evaluated by faculty peers. The director explained the difficulties—and sometimes tears—that accompany the rare times when conflicts arise.
Conclusions

The data show that this library, as an organizational unit, exhibits many positive organizational dynamics. It is an enabling workplace (Peterson, 2006) that, despite resource constraints (Guarria & Wang, 2011), is characterized by:

- individual and group virtuousness (Manz, Cameron, Manz, & Marx, 2008),
- “thinking differently” (Alfred et al., 2009, p. 263) about leadership and resources,
- unusual resilience (Manz et al., 2008; Stephens, Heaphy, Carmeli, Spreitzer, & Dutton, 2013; Weick, 2003; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Youssef & Luthans, 2007), and
- excellence in service (Weiner, 2005).

In addition, each participant indicated in various ways that he or she holds to the intrinsic value of people. From that primary value flows the library’s workplace culture as well as its leadership—distributed throughout the unit Raubenheimer, 2006 #1786)—that “begins and ends with people” (Alfred et al., 2009, p. 263).

Each person’s individual commitment to people demonstrates individual priorities that are also shared. The librarians devote considerable effort to developing, allocating, and documenting the use of tangible resources. As one of the librarians said, they often feel “helpless in the face of economic pressures” because they “do not control department and division budgets.” However, she continued, because are the first, the culture and knowledge of the people become the source of their solutions for delivering services.

We take that into account and say, “Here's the amount we have to work with. How can we be most efficient, how can we provide the very best service we can?” And if we can't provide the same level of service . . . or the same exact services or resources we were offering two years ago . . . we ask, “What's essential?” to make informed decisions—as a group and individually—about what we’re going to do and how we’re going to provide the service.
So I think the morale is better because we feel that we’re able to say, “This is essential. This is what we’re going to provide. And this is the level at which were going to provide reference service or hours that we’ll be open or anything else. . . . So it’s the feeling that we can control what we’re going to offer.

In their research on influence of organizational success, Andreou, Green, and Stankosky (2007) discuss four knowledge-management domains that include building capacity through a focus on intangible resources. Their findings support the importance of a people-oriented workplace.

Although strategy, leadership and other tangible factors of production (i.e. monetary and physical assets) have and will always proclaim their contribution to business performance and organizational success, the people factor has become the dominant driver for organizational success.” (p. 69)

In addition, ample interview data suggest that the participants exhibit characteristics of authenticity as well (Sparrowe, 2005). In short, this library’s excellence and resilience rest on a foundation of traditional management activities that set a baseline for acceptable performance. However, the positive dynamics in the library, as intangible resources, act as levers to amplify the effects of traditional management and available tangible resources. They motivate and sustain the participants such that their efforts—though often fatiguing—enable them to easily meet formal mission expectations.

Inclusive, welcoming environments are important for student success (Brazzell & Reisser, 1999; Schlossberg, 1989). However, despite the expectation of service implicit in a library’s existence, Barefoot (2006) asserts that “some freshmen are afraid of the library, while other see it as a sort of museum—a place that belongs to the past, not the present” (p. 16). This library works to involve students in several ways prescribed by Barefoot. The faculty (a) provide information literacy as a general education component, (b) participate as peers with the teaching faculty in instruction and campus activities, (c) provide leadership and participation in campus-wide discussions of student supports, (d)
form the heart of the academic community, (e) and create a collective expectation that the library will help students become “savvy consumers of information” (Barefoot, p. 16).

This library’s people have deliberately worked to create a supportive, welcoming physical and psychological space (Freeman & Council on Library Information Resources, 2005; Jackson & Hahn, 2011) for students and for each other. The college’s formal mission suggests the kinds of professional standards and activities that the library might engage to meet the mission. However, it says nothing about the individual and group dynamics that can either hinder or propel a group as it performs its formal tasks and duties. In other words, the participants create their own workplace dynamics, either actively or passively, within the framework of the formal mission. However, the formal mission does not propel them to excellence. Instead, this library’s people find their motivation in serving with professionalism.

However, envisioning themselves as professionals is not enough to support service with excellence, nor to sustain them through difficulties. Their daily behaviors truthfully demonstrate the central value of people (Alfred et al., 2009). The participants enact this in the high level of personal service they give to students, and as noted, students feel appreciated and valued. Participants, in general, also feel valued and appreciated for their work. The importance and contributions of people in expressing their human capacities cannot be overstated. Library personnel also carry out their duties on the shared vision of the respect, engagement, and collaboration they experience because of the service they provide.

The library staff view service as the centerpiece of their culture. They enact service through sharing duties, expertise, and resources (both tangible and intangible).
Service is not just doing transactions, but they do that if it is necessary. However, none of that would happen if they did not have the direction and resources necessary to work toward their vision. The director provides structure to the activities of the individuals and groups through his use of the annual performance planning and evaluation process (PPE). The PPE represents the framework through which objectives and behaviors are detailed in advance. Working with the director, the library faculty and staff list goals for individual behaviors and accomplishments. These detailed lists provide the blueprint for individual and group accomplishment and evaluation. In short, the PPE process creates and operationalizes the audacious informal mission of the library. It is beyond what could be accomplished with the given level of tangible resources, and as documented earlier, the informal mission is shared by the participants. This study’s themes intertwine to pull unit members toward their vision and to give them the means to achieve what may appear to be impossible.

Librarians work as a group to plan carefully in order to meet formal performance goals and to use scarce resources wisely. The director coordinates strategic planning according to rational, data-informed methods (Goho & Webb, 2003). He administers the library’s personnel planning and evaluation using traditional approaches (Latham & Wexley, 1993). He meets regularly with administrators to promote the library’s services and to advocate for budget, people, and facilities needed to provide equivalent services to campus-based and distance learners. These activities provide the structure and direction that are essential for meeting traditional library quality measures such as those described by Pritchard (1996) and Weiner (2005).
However, this study finds that traditional activities alone are not sufficient to explain the exceptional enthusiasm and resilience with which the library staff serve their academic community; nor can such methods fully account for the tremendous respect and recognition accorded the library for its exceptional service to the academic community. These desirable organizational outcomes fall outside the range of traditional library performance measures. Rather they are achieved through intentional development of virtuousness in the workplace (Peterson, 2006).

Each theme used to categorize the data contains evidence of participants’ subjective experience of the workplace. Each participant, in one way or another, related aspects of positive subjective experience in their workplace (Peterson, 2006). They used positive descriptors like caring, big-hearted, excited, happy, and joy. They spoke of times when they felt relief, support, encouragement, empathy, respect, satisfaction, challenge, and well-being.

In addition, most participants spoke about difficulties and frustrations such as fatigue, difficult circumstances imposed from outside the unit (such as organizational restructuring and the print management decision), and catastrophic, traumatic personal losses. However, in almost each of these cases—and every extreme example—participants strongly emphasized their experience of the buffering effects supplied by feelings of mutual support (Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011; A. Caza et al., 2004; French & Holden, 2012; Hall, Dollard, Winefield, Dormann, & Bakker, 2012; Kiffin-Petersen, Murphy, & Soutar, 2012; Roberts, Scherer, & Bowyer, 2011). As one participant said, “We get through it all together.”
In every example collected, the participant attributed positive feelings to one or more specific prosocial behaviors (J. B. Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2006; Grant, 2008) that have been found to bolster unit-level virtuousness. They occasionally spoke of their own, but they mostly emphasized the behaviors of others such as reassuring words, a comforting touch on the arm (B. Fuller et al., 2011), meals, sharing work duties, humor (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Wood, Beckmann, & Rossiter, 2011), and frequent celebrations (Deal & Peterson, 2007).

Care, empathy, working for the benefit of others, emphasizing strengths, and working to be an intentionally positive place are characteristics of an enabling workplace characterized by virtuousness (Bateman & Porath, 2003; Cameron, 2003; A. Caza et al., 2004; Stephens et al., 2013; Vallett, 2010) and whose dynamics enable individual flourishing (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2003; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). Such a workplace may only be a vision or like abundance exist on a continuum but the effort to create it can only make it better.

This study revealed the influence of a positive workplace and the role of leadership for (a) developing and fostering a focused, shared vision of the future; (b) prioritizing and developing intangible resources as the primary levers of performance; and (c) building and propagating a supportive workplace that enables flourishing and goodness in the workplace as indicators of success. This research found that the value of people as people is central to the organizational dynamics of this unit. This organizational virtue permeates what the library does every day, as evidenced in the data presented for communication, reputation, and respect for ability to develop strong relationships and vigorous outreach.
Everything the library does builds on that, from hiring, to direct supports for students, to engaging in the academic community. The data support that both internally and externally, this library values people as people and directs its activities accordingly.

I believe the director intentionally uses the PPE to create stretch—the gap between the unit’s goals and what could easily be accomplished with the given levels of tangible resources. In addition, it provides a detailed means to track progress toward the vision. There is no expectation that the vision will be perfectly realized, because stretch implies something that cannot be achieved with current tangible resources alone (Alfred et al., 2009). However, participants said the planning process actually motivates their high effort and achievement while allowing leeway to develop and use professional knowledge and skills. The multitude of specific goals they write are directed at achieving the formal mission, but that is not the central animator. Instead, the informal mission animates the participants and contributes to their reasons for coming to work every day. In other words, as the librarians achieve their shared informal mission, they also accomplish—as a by-product and almost incidentally—the formal mission of the college.

**Implications and Recommendations**

As this study finds, traditional measures of library quality—the NCES comparative data and SACS accreditation standards—cannot reflect the value of this library’s intangible resources. This research also found that the exceptional qualities of this library derive from its central values: people and their knowledge as the library’s most valuable resource. Traditional methods alone could have taken this library a long way. However, without the buffering effects of an enabling workplace that develops and values prosocial traits and behaviors, the library could not have maintained its
exceptional levels of service. In short, the library is successful because of the additive contributions of its capabilities in developing people (and resources in general), culture, and leadership.

The implications for practice depend on combining this expanded understanding of resources with the definition of leadership applied for this study: a leader is anyone in the unit who makes decisions about resources. Every one of the participants spoke at length about leadership. Their language indicated that they think of “leader” in terms of positions, that is, who supervises whom. Thus, supervisors are leaders. Only four of the participants are supervisors, and the rest did not think of themselves as formal leaders in the library. Yet every participant can decide about intangible resources that are their own: psychological capital, gratitude, positive speech, trust that yields safety to take risks, transcendent sharing based on strengths and flow, virtuous behaviors, and many other phenomena and behaviors evidenced in the interviews and questionnaires.

These are the levers of exceptional unit-level performance in this library, and most are within the control of each individual. It follows that recommendations should center on individual and group resolve to continuously nurture and build the intangible levers of people, culture, and leadership already evident in this unit:

- Positive speech (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Marcial Losada & Heaphy, 2004) and gratitude (Bateman & Porath, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) that buffer negative affect and increase the sense of being valued (Schlossberg, 1989).
- Seligman’s gratitude exercise (Seligman, 2011) integrated in to daily unit performance expectations (formalized in the PPE, and consistent with PPE as capacity-builder).
- Develop awareness of psychological capital and how it can be developed. Luthans and Youssef’s (2004) *Psychological capital: Developing the human competitive edge* is a suggested resource.
• Structure the unit for transcendent collaboration based on distributing strengths across formal position boundaries. This recommendation seeks to build on the idea that flow and performance is best when people are working in areas of strength. The goal is to re-arrange duties and responsibilities in such a way that supports the abilities of the library people to contribute at their best most of the time.
Appendix

Consent to Participate in a Research Study and Questionnaire for Leadership and Resources Perceptions

[NOTE: Administered online via Qualtrics.]

Questions? Contact:
Michael Stapleton
859-256-3361
Michael.stapleton@kctcs.edu

Informed Consent and Research Study Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study.

This questionnaire begins with a consent document. It contains information about the study and its purpose. It also contains information about risks to participants (none known) and your rights as a participant.

At the end of the document, you will be given the opportunity to indicate whether or not you choose to participate.

If "yes", then the questionnaire will begin. If "no", the questionnaire will end, and no further action will be needed.
Thank you!
Consent to Participate in a Research Study

“Organizational Functioning of a Community College Library: An Alternative-Perspective Case Study”

Invitation to participate in a research study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is about excellence in community college organizational units.

Why are you being invited to take part in this research?
Your library is perceived to function with excellence. As a member of the full-time faculty or staff in the library, you know something of the challenges your library faces in meeting its mission and goals, as well as how your library meets those challenges.

About 12 people at your institution are being invited to participate in this study.

Who is conducting the research?
Michael Stapleton, of University of Kentucky Department of Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation (EPE), is responsible for designing and conducting the study. Michael is working under the guidance of his faculty advisor, Neal Hutchens, Ph.D., J.D.

Michael’s study is part of a collaborative dissertation research project. This study will join others of similar design to extend the study’s reach to other units in community colleges. Michael and the other researchers will share data from the individual studies to broaden our understanding of excellence in community college organizational units.

What is the purpose of this study?
Research studies typically seek to learn about problems. Problem-focused research looks for what is not working well and how to fix it. It is sometimes called a disease model or a deficit model, because it concentrates on lack of health or other desirable states or conditions.

This study takes a different approach. It breaks from tradition by adopting a perspective designed to look for signs of excellence, vitality, and flourishing in individuals and organizations.

The study has two purposes. The first purpose is to test the use of a focus on positive things to understand excellence in individual and organizational functioning. In other words, it seeks to learn how a positive research orientation can help us understand excellence in ways that problem-focused perhaps cannot.
This study’s secondary purpose is to look for certain positive phenomena and characteristics that have been associated—in studies of other kinds of organizations—with superior individual and organizational functioning.

This approach is relatively new. Only a handful of previous studies have used it to understand excellence within community college units. Thus, it will contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the application, promise, limits of a positive research orientation. It will also contribute to understanding of excellence in community colleges.

**Are there reasons you should not take part in this study?**

None are known or foreseen by the researcher.

**Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?**

The research will be conducted at Bluegrass Community and Technical College Library during the months of September and October of 2011.

If you are library faculty or staff, the total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer is estimated to be three to four hours.

If you do not work for the BCTC library, your time commitment will be about 45 minutes.

**What will you be asked to do?**

Your participation involves three kinds of activities:

- Completing an online questionnaire (library faculty/staff only; 15-45 minutes),
- Having one or more individual conversations with the researcher (about 45 minutes each),
- Reviewing outlines or transcripts of these conversations to make sure your point of view has been represented accurately (15-30 minutes per transcript).

The researcher may also observe library activities in the public area for about an hour and attend a staff meeting as an observer.

**If you don’t want to take part in the study, are there other choices?**

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

**What are the possible risks?**

To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.
Will you benefit from taking part in this study?

You will not get any direct, personal benefit from taking part in this study. You may derive personal satisfaction from helping bring the story of your library’s success to a wider audience. You will be helping community college units to understand positive factors that are present in organizations that function in an exceptional manner.

Do you have to take part in the study?

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You may decline to participate for any reason. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

What will it cost you to participate?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

Will you receive any rewards for taking part in this study?

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

Who will see the information that you give?

Every reasonable effort will be made to keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. All data will remain in the possession of the researchers or will be kept in a locked cabinet or in a password-protected system at the researchers’ offices.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the information collected may be shared with faculty advisers at the University of Kentucky to make sure we have done the research correctly.
Can you stop taking part in the study early?

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, or if they find that your being in the study presents unforeseen risks that are more than you would experience in daily life.

What if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now.

Questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints:
- Contact the investigator, Michael Stapleton, at 859-256-3361 or michael.stapleton@kctcs.edu.

Questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research:
- Contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study                        Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Michael Stapleton, Principal Investigator                                             Date

I have read and understood the consent form and indicate my choice below:

☒ Yes, I consent to participate in this research study. I will provide the investigator with a signed copy of the form.
☒ No, thank you. I prefer not to participate in this research study.
Instructions

You are participating in a research study about successful community college organizational units. Your library is successful based on the respect it has earned for advancing BCTC’s academic mission. This questionnaire asks your views about two broad areas—leadership and perceptions of resources—and how they contribute to the library’s ability to serve BCTC’s students and faculty.

Please answer each question as completely and honestly as possible. Your responses will provide valuable context and serve as a beginning for our later in-person conversation.

How long it will take you to complete the questionnaire depends on your schedule and your approach to writing. Expect to spend a minimum of 15-20 minutes.

While taking the questionnaire, you may stop and return later to pick up where you left off. Make sure your browser allows cookies for “www.qualtrics.com”.

Also, you may find it helpful to compose your answers in Word using the questionnaire document attached to your invitation. You can then paste your responses into the Web form.

Click the >> arrow below to continue.

General Information Questions

The next few questions are about your role in the library.

What is your current position?

What are your primary duties?

How long have you been affiliated with the library in your current role?

... in an earlier role?
Leadership Questions

The next few questions are about your perceptions of leadership in the library.

Who are the leaders in your library, whether in formal or informal roles?

What about them causes you to identify them as leaders?

What benefits does their leadership provide?

Do you consider yourself a leader?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Would you say you are a formal or informal leader, and how is that determined?

If no, why do you not consider yourself a leader?

Do you think others consider you a leader?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, what leadership qualities of yours do you think are important to them?

If no, why do you think others do not consider you a leader?

In what ways do the leadership behaviors and approaches you observe affect the functioning of your library?

If your library faced a drastic cut in funding, what would be the most important things that would help you maintain your effectiveness to accomplish your program’s mission? How would you go about maintaining high performance? (If you have experienced this, please also relate how your library responded.)
True/False: I would be willing to try something ambitious to deliver greater value to students and other stakeholders, even if I were not sure it could be accomplished with currently available resources.

☐ True
☐ False

True/False: Others in the library would be willing to try something ambitious to deliver greater value to students and other stakeholders, even if they were not sure it could be accomplished with currently available resources.

☐ True
☐ False

**Perceptions of Resources Questions**

The next few questions are about resources available to the library for carrying out its mission and goals.

Which of the following resource categories do you think are most important to the library's leadership?

☐ Equipment
☐ Workplace climate
☐ Technology
☐ Library employees' knowledge
☐ Facilities
☐ Finances
☐ Personnel lines
☐ Organizational culture
☐ Workplace processes and systems
☐ Staff capabilities
☐ Other __________________________

Why do you consider those choices the most important?
Which of the following categories of resources do you consider most important for your library's success?

- Equipment
- Workplace climate
- Technology
- Library employees' knowledge
- Facilities
- Finances
- Personnel lines
- Organizational culture
- Workplace processes and systems
- Staff capabilities
- Other ____________________

Why did you select those?
References


97


Decatur, Ga.: Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.


Chapter 4

Learning to Learn: Reflections on Personal and Professional Transformations in a Doctoral Program

Constructing the self is not about discarding all other factors, but “crafting a distinctive plot through which one’s own character takes shape. It involves experimentation with provisional story lines, counterfactual pasts, and hypothetical futures” (Sparrowe, 2005, p. 433).

The narrative self is not a constant self, identical through time, but the subject that experiences change, reversal, and surprise. -- Sparrowe (p. 426)

In the fall of 2007, I began a doctoral program designed by the College of Education (CoE) of the University of Kentucky (UK). The CoE is one of 25 original participants in the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), a collaborative effort to strengthen the EdD and increase its relevance for preparing educators to address problems of practice. Faculty from the departments of Educational Policy and Evaluation and Educational Leadership Studies created a program to be delivered on an executive model to a cohort of administrators, faculty, and staff in Kentucky’s community and technical college system. 28 students began the program, meeting five weekends per semester for discussions, workshops, and class presentations facilitated by program faculty. Between face-to-face meetings, we contributed to online discussions, conducted peer reviews of written assignments, and completed team-based assignments. In the readings and written products, faculty gave special attention to leadership and team development to support the collaborative nature of work in the colleges.

The acceptance letter promised a “formative intellectual experience,” and I felt enthusiastic about engaging its possibilities. In addition—and not a little pridefully—I wondered, “What else would a doctoral program be?” As I held the letter in my hand, I
could not have imagined how the actual experience would transcend the intellectual boundaries promised in the letter.

In the narrative that follows, I present and reflect upon the surprising what else of my experience. I have chosen a narrative framework because Sparrowe and Meacham (2007) show possibilities for life-story reflections as formative influences on authenticity and leadership. I look to Argyris (1991) and Dweck (1999, 2006) for their conceptualizations of cognitive positions, a la Perry (1999), that influence the ability to learn and grow. Finally, I look to Quinn (1996), Alfred et al. (2009), and Berry et al. (2013) for their explorations of how ways of thinking can make the difference between acceptable performance and exceptional performance.

As I moved through the program, I faced uncomfortable challenges to my personal status quo. The context of these deep personal changes occurred through (a) working with a group of individuals to (b) produce a companion dissertation with (c) a particular topic (d) resting on the emerging literature of positive organizational psychology. These changes have resulted in a growth of personal mastery (Senge, 1990) and authenticity (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004). I have developed an appreciation for the large picture provided by applying rigors of a program that have challenged some of my lifelong beliefs and assumptions. They have brought me face to face with uncomfortable realities about my character and abilities. In addition, acute personal crises at home formed the backdrop for the beginnings of my work with my team. Yet I began to thrive as my transformation moved from static to growing (Dweck, 1999, 2006) and from uncertain to authentic (Avolio et al., 2004; Evans, 2007). My experience confirms the truth and value of the research reported in Chapters 2 as well
as the transformative lessons of Alfred, Shults, Jaquette, and Strickland (2009). My story is not so different from those of other individuals. My sincere hope is that the reader will find points of common ground and gain a sense of possibility for further success.

**Learning Challenges**

I am a first-born, and like many firstborns, I am a perfectionist (Leman, 2009). From first grade through high school, I had a reputation for being one of the smart kids. I usually knew the answers in class, and when I did not, I could at least fake it. By the time I entered high school, I had become accustomed to making good grades without much effort. I earned the rank of Eagle Scout at 17, won the tryouts for drum major of my high school band two years in a row, and made National Honor Society. My scores on standardized academic diagnostic tests and college admission tests put me in a very high percentile. Scores on a vocational aptitude tests revealed that I could take my pick from the whole range of vocations represented.

I was smart and capable, but that is not to say that everything came easily. Writing essays, doing physics homework, and learning new piano pieces were especially challenging. Yet I worked hard at those, and people said I was doing great. Shortly before graduation, my classmates voted me “Most Likely to Succeed,” although I preferred to have been recognized as “Mr. Something-or-other” with overtones of popularity. I graduated eighth in my class of about 200, and I was proud of that for how little effort it seemed to take.

My academic and extracurricular accomplishments, along with standardized test scores, seemed to promise a bright future. Bolstered by all these indicators and with a substantial academic scholarship in hand from a private, hometown foundation, I
believed my future academic success was a foregone conclusion. Up to this point, success had been the natural result of having a bit of innate intelligence and showing up for class.

These success indicators contained no hint of the deep irony my classmates’ award of confidence would soon come to symbolize. At some level, I already knew this: I was a fake. I knew that many things did not come easily and believed therefore that I was not as smart as I may have seemed. I also knew that many things came quite easily. When I was recognized for achievement in areas where little effort was required, I felt that the positive recognition and awards were somehow wrongly accorded. I felt that my veneer of success was paper-thin and would not withstand close observation. But almost certainly, no one else—not even those who knew me best—would have guessed that very soon, Mr. “Most Likely to Succeed” would become one of the first in his graduating class to flame out.

First-Year Fail

I enrolled in a private four-year university near home. Based on my transcript and application portfolio, my academic advisor suggested that I enroll in the honors program for my major—pre-med. That seemed reasonable, and I felt proud to have earned a slot there. However, behind that pride was a measure of fear. This would be the first real test of my intelligence. I had breezed through my earlier studies, and although I looked forward to similar results in the university, I worried that I would be revealed as a fraud and a poseur—the dumb kid who was lucky enough to seem smart.

Within the first week or two, my gut feelings began to seem plausible. The academic workload began to feel overwhelming, and I could not keep up. I seemed to
study all the time, yet when the quiz and exam grades began to come in, the news was not
good. All the hours of study, the sessions with tutors, and the conferences with
professors were not be enough to keep my GPA in the “A” territory that I had believed
was my birthright. For the first time, I struggled to maintain Bs, and it felt like failure.
In addition, despite tutoring and extra work, I withdrew from honors calculus just before
the drop window closed so that my D would not be counted in my GPA.

I had met with what felt like academic failure barely halfway into my first term.
How could such a smart, diligent student do all the right things and still do so poorly?
When Like Han Solo of Star Wars, I reasoned, “It’s not my fault,” when my best
strategies failed. I began to blame my academic advisor for “forcing” me into the honors
program, and I never consulted him again. I blamed my small high school for not
preparing me for this level of work. I blamed my parents, teachers, classmates, and
standardized test scores for getting it wrong. All of them had falsely led me to the
delusional belief that I was smart. Nevertheless, a genuinely smart college student would
not have had to drop honors calculus with a D.

My parents expressed helpful concern, but I felt that I had disappointed them. My
classmates did not know yet of my struggles with grades, but I knew was letting them
down and that no amount of effort could seem to change things. With winter break
approaching, I could imagine conversations with friends. I did not have a category that
could help me give account for what was happening. How could I explain how one they
believed to be so smart was dropping classes and struggling so? Indeed, how could I
explain it to myself?
By mid-term exams, I had fallen from great confidence into hopelessness, and I could not see a way out. I had entered a “doom loop” (Argyris, 1991, p. 103)—a spiral of despondency precipitated when high aspirations come into tension with the guilt and shame of self-perceived failure. Argyris documented the doom loop phenomenon while researching elite-echelon business consultants. His study participants used the term to describe the rapid plunge into despair that occurred when they perceived that their behaviors or competence fell short of self-imposed, unrealistically high norms. Argyris (1991) found that sensitivity to imperfection, or “brittleness” (1991, p. 104), was quite common in individuals accustomed to easy, sustained success. He was surprised by the rapidity with which brilliant consultants with superior academic credentials could “zoom” (p. 104) into despair. Argyris explains:

Because many professionals are almost always successful at what they do, they rarely experience failure. And because they have rarely failed, they have never learned how to learn from failure. So whenever their…learning strategies go wrong, they become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the "blame" on anyone and everyone but themselves. In short, their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it the most. (p. 100)

Argyris describes my experience perfectly. Learning strategies that had served so well in high school were wrong for when I needed them most as a struggling first-year student. Avoiding what seemed difficult and faking it wherever possible simply did not work. As I had feared, my grades had exposed me as a fraud. My Bs, Cs, and a W (for withdrawn) seemed to prove conclusively that I had lived a lie.

To avoid this uncomfortable thought, I pulled back, as Argyris’s (1991) brittle consultants did, and I adopted a protective posture. Attempting to dial back my commitments to a more comfortable level, I decided not to take a spring-semester lab and did not attempt to re-take calculus in a regular section. My spring semester course load
was just enough to maintain my financial aid status. Even so, keeping a B average took all my concentration and most of my time. My doom loop persisted, and I felt depressed. My girlfriend from high school dumped me . . . or so I felt for a long time. It is more accurate to say that I shed friends by ignoring them and everything else that was not related to study. Social life vaporized. Had my roommate and our next-door neighbor not stuck with me, I would have despaired completely.

After finals, I went home exhausted and discouraged. I had arranged for two summer jobs that claimed about 60 hours a week. I had little time to spend what I earned, and the work helped me forget for a while that I could no longer aspire to any work that required a rigorous academic credential. I reconnected with a couple of high school friends, both of whom were struggling. There was some comfort in knowing I was not alone, but I could not shake the fear that the litany of the past year’s failures would be renewed when classes resumed in the fall.

I tried to hold on to the belief that I was innately intelligent, but it was fiction. After all, smart people never have to work as hard as I did to achieve average grades. The tension of that supposed reality became oppressive, and I could see no way out. Two weeks before returning for my second year, I did the only thing I could think of that was completely within my control: I resigned my academic scholarship and quit the university.

**Retreat to Safety**

Over the next few years, I continued to nurse a strong aversion to risk of failure in areas that I believed I could not perform easily or “perfectly. To restore some of my earlier confidence, I enrolled part-time in community college courses and kept a 4.0
average. Still smarting from my honors calculus fiasco, I took a semester of college algebra to re-live earlier success in high school algebra, but I determined to go no further with mathematics.

In a further effort to re-connect with earlier successes, I enrolled in a composition course at a community college. The algebra had come easily, but not so with writing. The course forced me to face the struggle with writing that had dogged me through high school. I could produce a good sentence, but I struggled to maintain focus and coherence. Every thought competed with a throng of other thoughts. My writing coaches had always said, “Just get your thoughts out. Organize and polish through later revisions,” but a rough draft seemed to me like a worthless jumble of rubbish. When I envisioned what I wanted to write, I could see the ideas all at once—orderly and organized. However, when I attempted to commit my thoughts to words, the visualized coherence would vanish. Thus, every written assignment was an ordeal, no matter how simple.

The experience reminded me of the time when the Channel 8 reporter came to our high school seeking opinions about one of the “hot” topics of the moment. My principal selected 15 students or so to give an on-camera response. We were given five minutes to compose two sentences that we would then repeat on-camera to the reporter. At the end of the five minutes, I had filled my note pad with crossed-off sentences. I seemed to hold all opinions at once, and none that felt like my own.

When it was my turn to face the camera, it felt wrong to say something that I did not believe, so I mumbled an ad-lib. I felt embarrassed and somehow inadequate because
one of the school’s supposed brightest and best had failed to articulate a brief opinion. Fortunately, my statement was not used. I felt relieved and frustrated at the same time.

High school essays and term papers were likewise time-consuming. It took weeks to compose a term paper. Later, in my university composition course, I spent over 40 hours producing the rough draft of an eight-page term paper. In my community college composition course, the first assignment was to write a paragraph. I spent three hours composing it, and when it was complete, nothing matched the thoughts I believed I wanted to express. In writing assignments for my doctoral program, I found that nothing had changed. Comparing times with a number of my cohort colleagues, I was astonished to hear that some could produce ten pages of rough draft in a matter of hours. My rate was over three hours per page.

Even as a strong introvert, I tried hard to align with a cultural value of extraversion (Cain, 2012), but it was exhausting. With my short attention span and tendency to pay attention to all external stimuli simultaneously, it takes little to saturate my senses and send me into full retreat. When this happens, I become nervous, frustrated, irritated, or even angry. I feel a powerful impulse to leave the room; I have left abruptly in the middle of family game time. Moreover, during my ten years or so as a professional house painter, I felt extremely frustrated by the demands of supervising a crew. Keeping focused seemed too overwhelming, so I worked alone or with one other painter. I had found a niche that provided some income along with some flexibility to pursue what I enjoyed. This established me as a “slacker” for 10 years or so. I worked long hours and often on weekends and holidays to meet deadlines. However, when I was
not working, I did only what was enjoyable, comfortable, and was not likely to remind me of my learning challenges.

**Back to College**

During my slacker years, despite having dropped out of higher education, I never gave up the desire to complete my bachelor’s degree. I am drawn to ideas, and I love the interaction between ideas from multiple disciplines. Eventually, I enrolled in a private liberal arts college to complete my undergraduate degree. I studied hard, enjoyed my coursework, and when I graduated, my GPA was just within the “A” range. At age 34, I had achieved an important milestone. In addition, I realized the importance of the *flow* that can come when doing things one loves. I was not concerned that a liberal arts degree would yield a good job. Soon after I received my diploma, I married an English major I had dated when we were students. We moved back to north Texas, and I resumed my painting business.

While working as a painting contractor, I began to realize that I was not content. I could not grow my business because I would not hire a crew. My wife, who was working toward a second bachelor’s degree in nursing, encouraged me to consider graduate school. I only knew that I did not want to teach or do research as a career. After discussing a number of other options, my wife suggested library science because I loved to use libraries for tracking down information. A visit to the university and a conversation with a faculty member convinced me that this would be a good choice. The following fall, I enrolled as a part-time student. While working full-time in my painting business, I attended classes mostly at night and on weekends. I discovered an affinity for working with library technologies that support post-secondary learning and research. In
1996, three years after enrolling, I completed my Master of Science (Library Science) degree

**Doctoral Cohort Experience**

The challenges of doctoral coursework created pressures at work and at home. My wife and I had agreed before classes began that she would shoulder many of my responsibilities to free me as much as possible to concentrate on my studies. We thought that was a reasonable plan, because we were confident that her organizational skills would be equal to the new workload. They were, but the plan was not. Within a few weeks, I began to feel overloaded and pressed for time. In short, it was a repeat of my experience as a first-semester undergraduate. However, this time, I had a wife, two sons, a full-time professional position, and a home to maintain.

My daily study schedule began immediately after supper. Four or more nights a week, I studied, wrote, and participated in online class discussions. Each weekend, for the three years of my coursework, I studied between 12 and 20 hours at the library. I reserved two weekends per semester for Boy Scout activities with my sons and a few days during the summer for family vacation. Trying to balance full-time work, doctoral studies, and family responsibilities became increasingly difficult. My usual coping mechanisms failed under the strain, and all my efforts at balance went completely out of kilter.

The strain was evident in my wife. We spoke about household management issues, but we grew emotionally distant. Whenever she asked me for help, I dithered. Usually, I declined, and she came to know that she could not count on me for any meaningful help with transportation or household responsibilities.
Pressures mounted in the second semester when we learned that we would be having a third child in the fall. This placed enormous extra burdens on my wife, but true to our agreement, I was unavailable. For me, any extra task, no matter how small, took on huge proportions. I had lost perspective.

In the fall of 2008, our beautiful baby daughter was born. Six weeks later, on Thanksgiving Day, my father passed away after a long illness. That semester, I earned my first B as a graduate student and took my first incomplete. The following semester—spring of the second year of coursework—I struggled to survive. In addition to the usual two doctoral courses, I also needed to complete assignments that amounted to seventy percent of the grade for the prior incomplete course. I finished with Bs, if I recall correctly without checking my transcript.

I had salvaged my grades, but the wheels on my academic wagon were wobbly. Comprehensive exams loomed within a month. I was confident in what I had learned, but I feared that my difficulty getting ideas onto paper would cause trouble. I was correct. The “comps” were designed as a timed writing exercise. We were to complete three essays over three consecutive days. I sequestered myself in a conference room at work and wrote for 12-15 hours a day for two days and eight hours on the third. When the clock ran out, I had completed a very rough draft for one essay, half a draft of the second essay, and a sentence outline for the third.

I had spoken well in advance with two key faculty members about my history with writing and my concerns about the timed essays. When they asked me to meet with them to discuss my attempts, I did not know what to expect. Provisions had been made for oral exams to defend weak papers, but they had not imagined that someone would
turn in barely half of the assignment. I remembered the five-minute opinion assignment from high school and the three-hour paragraph in the community college composition course. Déjà vu.

I was advised that accommodations had not been granted because I had not undergone the required assessments. The faculty members were pleased with the quality of thinking that the drafts displayed. My work thus far had shown promise for eventual success. Rather than lose an otherwise good student, they gave me second chance.

After handing in the completed essays, I met again with program faculty. They were pleased with my work, but they admonished me that this would be a good time to consider pursuing my degree independently rather than as part of a companion dissertation research team. Writing slowly would impose an unfair limitation on dissertation team performance. The faculty members advised me that if I were to continue with plans to work as part of a team, I must find a way to get text on the page more quickly so as not to jeopardize the success of my future dissertation team.

A key moment came during the first conference. I said, in effect, “I told you so.” The program director quickly responded that that was a bogus claim. She had documented my response times to asynchronous writing and discussion prompts in our online course management system. This was the moment I had feared. The poseur had been exposed. The disappointment of my first-year college experience three decades before roared in my mind. I felt this to be further evidence that my aspirations to academic success were destined for failure. This time, though, I determined not to quit. I would redouble my efforts to prove that I was in fact that good, smart student that I
seemed to be. My faculty members believed in me, and for the first time, I trusted that
they what they saw was more true than what I believed about myself.

Later, my committee chair advised me to get help with discovering how to write
more quickly. My wife agreed and suggested that I be tested for attention deficit disorder
(ADD). She and her mother were well acquainted personally and professionally with the
manifestations of ADD and had seen many of them in me, not the least of which was
underachievement. I agreed to seek help, but it would be another year before I followed
through.

I had been given hope, but I was crumbling inside. Shortly after I was granted a
reprieve, a dear friend from earliest childhood decided to end her own life. Depression
and a sense of desperation set in. I withdrew even further from my wife, and by fall, our
marriage was in crisis. Again, coping mechanisms had failed, and success seemed less
sure than ever.

**Forming the Dissertation Team**

We were the leftovers—the only ones in our cohort who had not self-affiliated
with others of similar interests. We are also the most diverse team, too, on gender, age,
race, positions, academic interests, and StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) profiles. For a
long time, we struggled to find common ground concerning a research topic, method, and
purpose. Looking for a possible topic, we considered our course readings, each other’s
professional interests, and items related to our personal interests.

After a few weeks of discussion, Susan discovered a report of a study of
community college performance, the Community College Abundance Model (CCAM)
(Alfred et al., 2009). The model explained performance in terms of how leaders think
about resources. Leaders of poorer-performing colleges invariably focused on tangible resources. In contrast, the leaders of exceptional colleges developed all available resources but prioritized the development of intangible resources. This approach piqued our interest more than anything we had already rejected, because our own community college system had been hit hard by resource challenges created by the 2008 financial meltdown. Accordingly, we set off to design a study based on positive psychology, the conceptual heart of the CCAM. We knew very little about this literature. Our only conceptual connection was an intuition about the study’s central leadership value: “Leadership [in high-performing colleges] begins and ends with people” (Alfred et al., 2009, p. 263). I shared with my team, using vague terms, my challenges at home. I feared that a sustained, intense focus on completing studies would be detrimental to my family, and I feared the possibility of losing my wife and kids. Susan responded, “We will get through this together. No one will lose their family. We will do it by distributing the workload according to our strengths, and it will not be burdensome. That is the only way.”

How would I respond to these assuring words? I had two choices: quit the program and be satisfied with earning master’s degree or trust that Susan was correct. Success was already assured with the first choice, but the second option was risky. I wanted to believe Susan, but I did not know her well enough yet to be sure how her promise would become reality. The stakes were huge, and I was tempted to choose the safe route. Yet, the possibility of leaning into the strengths of others seemed more rewarding, despite the risk. I decided to trust my three new team members, and this
decision marked the beginning of movement away from the fixed mindset to that of growth.

**Learning to Lean**

Finally, in July of 2010, I received a clinical diagnosis of ADD based on scores on a diagnostic instrument. Lack of mental focus and an inability to shut out external stimuli were dominant themes. Everything in my awareness seemed to have the same level of urgency. I seemed to perceive everything, all the time. My doctor encouraged me about the effectiveness of medication. He told me of another graduate student patient whose academic performance and concentration improved with medication and other supports.

He said the results after starting medication would immediately confirm or discredit his initial diagnosis of ADD. The first day I started on Ritalin, the noise in my head—sensory perceptions that all seemed to claim my immediate attention—began to subside. I journaled, “I am somehow tuning out the random office noises better than usual. Had a conversation with two EdD colleagues in the hall.” That is significant, because group conversations exhausted me, and I avoided them whenever I could. A few days later I wrote, “Worked quickly and accurately under time pressure.” In the same entry, I continued: “Fatigue, I have learned, plays a big role. The more tired I am, the less I can concentrate.”

Shortly after starting medication, I joined a graduate student support group facilitated by faculty in the counseling office on campus. Hearing the struggles and victories of others encouraged me. As I shared my own difficulties, I gained strength from the group.
The medication reduced the array of sensory distractions and created space for me to begin to learn valuable skills. For example, I have become more able to manage tasks without becoming overwhelmed. For the first time, I did not have to “hyperfocus” on a task to complete it, and when I start something, I am more likely to finish it than before. At home, I have gradually became less irritable and more able to tolerate the noisy activity in a busy household. During the dissertation phase of my doctoral program, I began to plan small home maintenance projects, fit them into my schedule, and complete them without feeling that it placed an undue burden on my research and writing.

Key to these successes has been a new ability to ask for help with learning these basic skills. My wife and my team provided consistent support, coaching, and feedback. There have been plenty of stumbles, but I am learning to perceive them as chances to learn and grow rather than as evidence of a destiny to fail.

Learning to Leap

Another important lesson that contributed to my transformation is that my explanations are often likely to be excuses. The rigors of the program have revealed many barriers. My view that intelligence and ability are static taught me that hard work was not enough to overcome some barriers, so I learned to make excuses for times when I felt I underperformed. I often hid behind my areas of strength to avoid admitting responsibility for poor performance in areas of weakness. I have learned that most of my barriers are self-chosen and not innate, as the fixed mindset would believe. More importantly, I have learned about what it takes to break through personal barriers, or to go around them by collaborating.
I have come to realize that I cannot do this by myself. I need to engage the help of others... my team, my advisors, and my family. I found that my standards for acceptable work far exceeds what is required. I learned that in some areas of difficulty, despite diligent effort, I have not been able to improve my performance, and I have had to accept that time spent improving those things is better spent on areas of strength. When I can become open enough to trust others and collaborate, I can trade things that come easily for help with things that do not, and may never. Experience with my team has shown that we can accomplish much more together than we could have as individuals.

As an example, Susan suggested that I try writing this dissertation chapter in an Internet messaging chat with her. She asked me questions, and I responded in choppy, informal style. In two hours, the basic text for this chapter was in place. That evening, as she watched the NCAA basketball tournament, Susan cut up and rearranged the chat transcript then sent it back to me with suggestions. The draft was more than 20 pages, and it was produced in fewer than six hours. This was a huge leap in writing output, especially given my prior history. It confirmed what my program director had said earlier about my documented output in online, asynchronous discussion assignments with cohort members.

The next day, after some edits, I sent it to my committee chair. That day was the informal deadline he had set for having all four team members’ completed dissertation drafts ready for review. He told me later that he laughed out loud, because when he read it, he knew for sure that our team would be ready to defend in the spring of 2013.
As far as how I fit into leadership, I learned that I have an affinity for servant leadership in Bolman and Deal’s (2003) symbolic leadership frame and that when I engage my StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) strengths, things flow. When I do not, things ball up, and I become stuck. I procrastinate when I try doing something that I do not understand and consider it a fault or failure. I learned that it is OK to be weak with checklists and sequencing. As a global thinker, I tend to see things as all together at the same time. ADD often complicates this strength by making the mass of information overwhelming and without differentiation.

**Learning to Lead**

Another unexpected personal finding emerged. I have always lacked confidence about leading. I feared that I would be wrong or make a mistake and be found to be a poseur. (Another cohort colleague and I frequently joked about being poseurs). I often wonder what will happen when my supervisor wakes up and finds that I am not all that smart!

For the past five years, I have served on the committee of my sons’ Boy Scout troop. The committee administers the troop’s business and provides logistical support for the troop’s activities. The committee also provides a final, big-picture review of our Scouts’ qualifications for rank advancement before submitting the official advancement paperwork to our local Council office. My interests and strengths are aligned toward broad, conceptual thinking more than operational details, so I sat on lots of Boards of Review over several years. In meetings, I assumed a limited role as the committee discussed the behind-the-scenes logistics required to make the troop’s monthly activities function smoothly.
During that time, I had become frustrated with the functioning of the troop. Scouting is unique among youth activities in that Scoutmasters and Assistant Scoutmasters are not supposed to be authority figures. Instead, they are to coach, guide, and mentor the boys, who plan and conduct the activities of the troop. In addition, adults help the Scouts reflect on their learning experiences and to model the high ideals of Scouting. When standards for safety or behavior are not met, adults provide corrective guidance.

However, in our troop, the adult leaders were doing too much. They planned meetings and troop activities, and they did not delegate responsibilities to the boys. Boys who received advanced leadership training returned to the troop expecting to assume the primary role for planning and leading troop activities. Yet they were given little responsibility, and many of them found outlets for their skills elsewhere in our District and Council. For example, they staffed during the Council’s National Youth Leadership Training weeks and representing our Council at the National Advanced Youth Leadership Experience at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico.

I began discussing my concerns with other committee members and some of the Scoutmaster corps. Citing the extensive materials about successful troop operation provided by the national organization, I began asking adult leaders about why our group seemed to be more adult-led than boy-led. A key influencer among the Scoutmaster corps told me that he does not trust the boys to shoulder that kind of responsibility. A seasoned committee member told me, “We have wasted the talents of so many of our boys over the years. We do not know how to direct them for the benefit of our troop.”
The troop’s committee had focused on operational matters, ask they should, but it seemed that no one was paying attention to higher-level things like alignment with national standards for troop functioning. We had abundant slack resources in the knowledge and skills of our Scouts, but we were seemingly not able to provide the structure—already designed and ready to employ—that could engage those skills.

In the fall of 2012, the troop committee chair indicated that he would be stepping down so that he could attend to other responsibilities. He was also frustrated with the inability to make much progress on our mutual concerns about troop functioning. He resigned at the October meeting, and I was appointed as the new committee chair. For the prior four years or so, I had felt completely inadequate for the role. I believed that a committee chair had to be highly organized and detail-oriented (as our outgoing chair had been). However, I now knew that others on the committee could perform those administrative roles, so at my first meeting I outlined a bold vision for what the troop would look like at its best. I based it on what I had learned from the other committee members and some within the Scoutmaster corps. The vision emphasized training for the boys and adults, strengthening the relationship between our troop and its sponsoring organization, and beefing up the logistical and administrative support the committee provides for the troop.

The committee seemed energized by having a new vision, so we set an accelerated meeting schedule, meeting twice a month over the next five months. We received committee member training, facilitated two introductory leadership trainings for our Scouts, and engaged more actively in supporting the troop’s activities. We also entered discussions with the leadership of the church that sponsors the troop.
strengthening the relationship that had been allowed to dissipate over several years. As a result, the church is forming a new body charged with active oversight and support of the Boy Scout troop, Cub Scout Pack, and American Heritage Girls troop it sponsors. We are now opening discussions about formulating an organization-specific vision and mission for our troop to reflect its individual character. The Scoutmasters and committee have participated willingly, and there is general agreement that this new direction is both encouraging and productive.

**Learning to Learn**

My experience shows how the change occurred for me. As a first-year undergraduate, when I failed, I bailed out and went into a long doom loop. Consistent with the *fixed mindset* researched and described by Dweck (1999, 2006), I believed that I was doomed to a certain, lower level of achievement. My self-esteem was bound up in performance and perfection. According to Dweck (2006), when someone with a fixed mindset fails, he or she begins to take steps to avoid failure. My response was to quit school and to do only things that I could succeed at comfortably.

Years later, as a doctoral student facing failure to complete my comprehensive exams, my faculty gave me options for completion, and I chose to persist. What was the difference? Through a variety of means, I learned that failure was not fated. Instead, I learned how to transform it into a teacher.

**Early Experiences**

Like other people with solid academic records, I had rarely experienced the threat of actual failure and the embarrassment that comes with it (Argyris, 1991). To me, failure occurred whenever I seemed to be somewhat less than excellent. In those times,
as described, I resorted to defensive reasoning expressed as blame, whining, “unilateral control,” (Argyris, 1991, p. 103) suppression of negative feelings, and any number of other protective measures. In short, I was only as successful as my most recent failure.

I demonstrated what Dweck (1999) terms a fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe the wrong things about hard work and failure. They feel only as good or as smart as their most recent success. Smart, talented people do not have to work hard, nor do they fail often. Difficulty or failure indicates lack of intelligence or ability, so people with a fixed mindset conclude, irrationally, that having to work hard demonstrates a lack of ability or intelligence. In addition, they believe that intelligence and ability are immutable and not open to development. Thus, consistent with these beliefs, people with the fixed mindset stay within their comfort zones so that they may keep uncomfortable “facts” from disturbing their senses of intelligence, ability, and self-worth.

By contrast, people with a growth mindset believe that intelligence and ability can be developed (Dweck, 1999). Recent setbacks are unreliable indicators of the upper boundaries of achievement. Instead, they become aids to learning. The growth mindset creates an openness to the possibility that diligence and effort can improve intelligence and abilities. Fortunately, people with a fixed mindset can change (Dweck, 1999), but I did not realize that for many years.

The challenges I faced were the result of the failure of familiar structures and methods to produce my definition of success. I know now that my version of success was far more stringent than is needed. As I have reflected on what I needed to change, I learned that my definitions of success and failure were unreasonable. However, despite that knowledge, I continued to be overwhelmed by demands of home, work, and doctoral
program. ADD made it very difficult for me to properly assign levels of importance to things and attend only to those that were relevant for the moment.

**Cohort Experience**

Evans (2007) holds that authentic leadership is innate and therefore cannot be developed. This trait-based view is similar to the fixed mindset view of intelligence—that it is hard-wired and cannot be changed. Like personality, it can be influenced, but not permanently changed. Either you have it, or you do not. This summary reflects the kind of thinking I brought to the doctoral program in 2009. I have since learned that other scholars say otherwise. For example, Argyris (1991) holds that one’s espoused theory or *master program* that contain one’s core set of guiding beliefs is malleable. The master program, ideally, is lived out as a set of behaviors that Argyris calls *theory in action*. When espoused theory and theory in action come into conflict, defensive reasoning is the result. This condition is similar to the protective posture of a person with Dweck’s fixed mindset.

Beliefs can be changed through cognitive therapy, but cognitive therapy stops short of changing one’s mindsets or beliefs (Dweck, 1999, 2006). Argyris suggests that (1991) facilitated, methodical awareness training is effective for moving a person from a defensive mindset to a productive, growth-oriented one.

**Learning Teamwork**

Trust has played a key role in changing my thought patterns with new ones. I have come to trust that what my team, my faculty, and my family thinks of me is not dependent on my strengths alone. They accept my weaknesses, and everyone has
allowed me to fail repeatedly—even terribly. Each time, they have picked me up, dusted me off, and encouraged me to learn from the experience and keep moving.

Our team always agreed to divide our work according to our strengths. We functioned fairly well on that level, but our committee chair repeatedly expressed frustration that despite our research on high-performing teams, we did not behave as one ourselves. The key lesson for me was that one of my coping strategies was to hide behind my strengths. When I felt weakness encroaching, I paraded my strengths to my team like a prize. Over time, however, I learned to open up and disclose my fears and my areas of weakness. They rewarded me with greater acceptance and a willingness to offer their strengths in my weak areas. As we slowly grew in trust, our performance as a team increased.

**Transformation Beginnings**

The payoff of this program for me has been learning to learn (Argyris, 1991). This might seem strange. After all, I have learned enough to manage pretty well before this degree program. However, Argyris (1991) found that certain cognitive dispositions can block the kind of learning needed for developing resilience and flexibility. When that kind of learning is blocked, personal and group productivity suffers.

Learning to learn requires a shift of thinking (Argyris, 1991; Senge, 1990), and it is a prerequisite for what Senge (Senge, 1990) calls the discipline of personal mastery. Dweck (2006) found that personal and professional growth depend on developing a *growth mindset*. Alfred et al. (2009) report that organizational vitality depends on the ability of people throughout a community college to think differently about leadership, resources, and performance. Through the process of completing this doctoral program,
my ways of thinking have shifted from an individualistic, defensive posture to productive reasoning that is much more collaborative.

This shift in thinking required a strong challenge to my espoused theory of action. Argyris (1991) explains that an espoused theory of action is what one would tell others about the rules that govern behavior. My espoused theory of action has been: “I am smart. Smart people study hard, and hard work produces academic success. I can do most of what I need to without help from others.”

**From Apprehension to Assurance**

Change is difficult and fraught with challenges. Argyris (1991) roots fear of change in defensive reasoning, a kind of cognitive “master program” (1991, p. 100) that blocks learning. Similarly, on an organizational level, Schein (1992)—a student of Argyris in graduate school—asserts that leaders and followers become frustrated when the words do not match up to the actions. The dissonance comes from misreading assumptions that are thought to be shared assumptions. If there is a mismatch between shared assumptions the core mission, vision, and strategy suffer

My reluctance to lead has been mostly because of personal factors (Yukl, 2002) including the focus problems that negatively affected my ability to organize and execute tasks to completion. However, I have always believed that I have a capacity for thinking strategically. Strategic thinking is needed throughout organizations, yet the primary focus is often on sequencing and evaluating a series of actions rather than the cognitive work of thinking strategically (Hughes & Beatty, 2005).

The work of redirecting ways of thinking, whether personal or organizational, is both difficult and disruptive (Goldman & Casey, 2010). Several events helped to disrupt
my fixed mindset and its attendant defensive reasoning. The first was the near-collapse of my marriage late in 2009. In order to rebuild it, my wife and I decided to abolish our earlier agreement that had her shouldering so much responsibility. I would make myself available to her in every way that I could. In addition, I would spend at least fifteen minutes per day with her after the kids were in bed and come to bed when she did rather than staying up late to study or—as had become my habit—interact on social media sites.

We read and discussed some helpful books about strengthening marriages, and our fifteen minutes grew so that it often exceeded one hour. Over many months, as I made myself available to her, she came to trust that I was not a grudging helper but an ally.

In 2010, I read Dweck’s (2006) *Mindset*, and it planted the seed for decoupling my self-esteem from performance and behavior. It helped me to understand the cognitive assumptions that prevented learning. As time passed, I became more open to asking for help from my doctor, my wife, my team, and a support group. While experimenting with different approaches, frequent reflective conversations with my wife and my team have checked my impulses whenever I started to revert to prior, unhelpful coping strategies.

These conversations helped me sift the things that work from the things that do not. In 2012, Seligman’s (2011) *Flourish* helped me to understand that the experience of what I perceived as failure did not signal the end of the world. With a new openness, I began to lean into difficult experiences rather than to recoil from them. I began to seeing evidence of growth here and there, and my resilience began to increase. Sensing the progress achieved in collaboration with others, I had begun to see new possibilities for working in a team rather than as what Argyris (1991) called an individual contributor or
“productive loner” (p. 104). This combination of influences introduced the beginnings of resilience that enabled me to avoid the doom loop and begin to experiment with different approaches to thinking and writing.

**Revealing Authenticity**

Although Argyris does not mention authenticity, the process of aligning espoused theory of action with the actual ground rules for one’s behavior is part and parcel of what it is to be authentic. Integrity implies integration of the elements or core of one’s self. Dweck and Argyris say that it is important to find out why people hold onto a fixed mindset or defensive reasoning. A mindset gives one a narrative about who one is and the available parameters for behavior. Changing the belief requires replacing that unhelpful structure or narrative with a new one, and the possibilities for growth expand significantly.

Goldman and Casey (2010) hold that changing thinking is a cultural exercise conducted in a context rather than in isolation. Cognitive change is also a “messy process of informal learning” (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 108) in which the individual learns iteratively, being shaped by individual experience and organizational factors. Such learning involves examining personal habits and practices as well as exploring learning styles and strengths.

My growth has been toward authenticity. Even more, it has been in the direction of learning how to think differently, as Alfred et al. (2009) suggest. Learning how to change one’s default master program (Argyris, 1991) or mindset (Dweck, 2006) from defensive to productive, opening the possibility of learning to learn in ways that support personal mastery (Senge, 1990).
Engaging this learning required a set of circumstances that were powerful enough to dislodge my previous closed, defensive, individualistic approaches. Having worked on this change for several years, I have more resilience. I am much less brittle, and the doom loop seems more an artifact of history rather than a frequent occurrence.

Through medical intervention and reflective conversations, I have gained an ability--literally for the first time--to choose what I attend to. I prioritize and categorize with greater confidence, and I have learned how to assess tasks realistically. At home, I can for the first time devote an hour or two to a small task that I would previously have declined to do because of coursework.

I have learned to appreciate the benefits of working with an encouraging team. As we have supported each other, trust has grown, and I have moved from fear of failure to open inquiry about what works and learning from what does not. I am less defensive and more open to being coached, to share, and to have my assumptions challenged. I am learning to integrate my home, work, and scholar “selves.” Reasoning productively (Argyris, 1991) about my behavior and performance has become possible. In addition, I am also learning to delight in giving credit for successes to others, an attribute that Collins (2001) found in leaders of high-performing organizations.

**Conclusion**

Through sharing my experience, I hope to demonstrate the central importance of one’s mental models to personal accomplishment. Change is possible (1991; 2006; 1990). When freed from the constraints of fear, personal resources grow, and out of that new capacity can emerge the amplification of personal resources through collaboration.
Deep personal challenges could have cut this process short at any point. The rigors of the doctoral program have constantly forced me to take the measure of my abilities. In the beginning, I usually found them wanting. I often felt discouraged, because I believed that success depended on developing skills I had never been able to muster with much success. However, as my perspectives have shifted toward productive reasoning and personal mastery, minor mistakes no longer seem like failures. Instead, through active collaboration—for example on this dissertation project—I have begun to experience the kinds of resource amplification and flourishing that the positive literature predict.

Learning to learn has been both difficult and rewarding. The circumstances that precipitated this formative experience have been difficult and often excruciating. They would likely have caused an earlier version of myself to spiral into hopelessness. But that did not happen, thanks to the steady help of my family, team, and program faculty that did not happen. We accomplished this together.

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References


Chapter 5

Conclusion

This chapter concludes the capstone project of what has been a difficult, yet surprising, process of transformations. From the beginning, the designers of this doctoral program intended the program to develop scholar-practitioners who know how to work as members of high-performing teams. The curriculum was demanding, and I often felt that resources required to meet them were not enough. This is the definition of *stretch*. I had to learn that my success was interdependent with the success of others. Our success was not about me, alone. It was about my team members. For them to succeed, I must succeed; and the same for each member.

The key has been learning to think differently about the meaning of success and the resources needed to bring it to pass. In order to succeed, I had to learn to depend on others for things that I could not do. In turn, I found that others consider abilities that I take for granted in myself to be valuable—even extraordinary. In order to succeed, I had to change my beliefs about barriers and my approaches to overcoming them. In doing so, I found that my limits are mostly self-imposed. In order to succeed, I had to learn to shift my views from what is not—what I do not have or “cannot” do—to what is, what I do have and can do. To succeed required that I bring my best to the shared team effort. In order to do that, I had to learn to stop trying to be good at everything and to rest in the abilities of others.

I moved from knower to learner, observer to participant, and from independent lone wolf to mutually-dependent team participant. The changes that I have experienced are not confined to just a single person. We see this same progression weave its way
through our high performing units, and the colleges we studied through the Community College Abundance Model demonstrating these effects on larger organizations.
Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire for Leadership and Resources Perceptions

1. What are your position responsibilities in this program unit?

2. What is the relationship between your work and this program’s overall performance?

3. In your program unit, what opportunities do staff members have to learn and grow?

4. In what ways are you empowered to carry out your position responsibilities?

5. What qualities of the formal leaders of your unit make them effective? What qualities of the informal leaders of your unit make them effective?

6. Describe techniques used by leadership to make everyone feel like an integral part of the unit?

7. Give an example of how unit members build upon strengths?

8. Give an example of how unit members value personal assets?

9. How does your unit deliver exceptional value to students?
Appendix B

Consent to Participate in a Research Study and Questionnaire for Leadership and Resources Perceptions

[NOTE: Administered online via Qualtrics.]

Questions? Contact:
Michael Stapleton
859-256-3361
Michael.stapleton@kctcs.edu

Informed Consent and Research Study Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study.

This questionnaire begins with a consent document. It contains information about the study and its purpose. It also contains information about risks to participants (none known) and your rights as a participant.

At the end of the document, you will be given the opportunity to indicate whether or not you choose to participate.

If "yes", then the questionnaire will begin. If "no", the questionnaire will end, and no further action will be needed.

Thank you!

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

“Organizational Functioning of a Community College Library: An Alternative-Perspective Case Study”

Invitation to participate in a research study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is about excellence in community college organizational units.

Why are you being invited to take part in this research?
Your library is perceived to function with excellence. As a member of the full-time faculty or staff in the library, you know something of the challenges your library faces in meeting its mission and goals, as well as how your library meets those challenges.
About 12 people at your institution are being invited to participate in this study.

**Who is conducting the research?**

Michael Stapleton, of University of Kentucky Department of Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation (EPE), is responsible for designing and conducting the study. Michael is working under the guidance of his faculty advisor, Neal Hutchens, Ph.D., J.D.

Michael’s study is part of a collaborative dissertation research project. This study will join others of similar design to extend the study’s reach to other units in community colleges. Michael and the other researchers will share data from the individual studies to broaden our understanding of excellence in community college organizational units.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

Research studies typically seek to learn about problems. Problem-focused research looks for what is not working well and how to fix it. It is sometimes called a *disease model* or a *deficit model*, because it concentrates on lack of health or other desirable states or conditions.

This study takes a different approach. It breaks from tradition by adopting a perspective designed to look for signs of excellence, vitality, and flourishing in individuals and organizations.

The study has two purposes. The first purpose is to test the use of a focus on positive things to understand excellence in individual and organizational functioning. In other words, it seeks to learn how a positive research orientation can help us understand excellence in ways that problem-focused perhaps cannot.

This study’s secondary purpose is to look for certain positive phenomena and characteristics that have been associated—in studies of other kinds of organizations—with superior individual and organizational functioning.

This approach is relatively new. Only a handful of previous studies have used it to understand excellence within community college units. Thus, it will contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the application, promise, limits of a positive research orientation. It will also contribute to understanding of excellence in community colleges.

**Are there reasons you should not take part in this study?**

None are known or foreseen by the researcher.

**Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?**
The research will be conducted at Bluegrass Community and Technical College Library during the months of September and October of 2011.

If you are library faculty or staff, the total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer is estimated to be three to four hours.

If you do not work for the BCTC library, your time commitment will be about 45 minutes.

**What will you be asked to do?**

Your participation involves three kinds of activities:

- Completing an online questionnaire (library faculty/staff only; 15-45 minutes),
- Having one or more individual conversations with the researcher (about 45 minutes each),
- Reviewing outlines or transcripts of these conversations to make sure your point of view has been represented accurately (15-30 minutes per transcript).

The researcher may also observe library activities in the public area for about an hour and attend a staff meeting as an observer.

**If you don’t want to take part in the study, are there other choices?**

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

**What are the possible risks?**

To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

**Will you benefit from taking part in this study?**

You will not get any direct, personal benefit from taking part in this study. You may derive personal satisfaction from helping bring the story of your library’s success to a wider audience. You will be helping community college units to understand positive factors that are present in organizations that function in an exceptional manner.

**Do you have to take part in the study?**

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You may decline to participate for any reason. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.
What will it cost you to participate?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

Will you receive any rewards for taking part in this study?

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

Who will see the information that you give?

Every reasonable effort will be made to keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. All data will remain in the possession of the researchers or will be kept in a locked cabinet or in a password-protected system at the researchers’ offices.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the information collected may be shared with faculty advisers at the University of Kentucky to make sure we have done the research correctly.

Can you stop taking part in the study early?

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, or if they find that your being in the study presents unforeseen risks that are more than you would experience in daily life.

What if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now.
Questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints:
• Contact the investigator, Michael Stapleton, at 859-256-3361 or michael.stapleton@kctcs.edu.

Questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research:
• Contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

______________________________          ___________
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study                        Date

______________________________
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____________________________             ___________
Michael Stapleton, Principal Investigator                                             Date

I have read and understood the consent form and indicate my choice below:
☐ Yes, I consent to participate in this research study. I will provide the investigator
  with a signed copy of the form.
☐ No, thank you. I prefer not to participate in this research study.
Instructions

You are participating in a research study about successful community college organizational units. Your library is successful based on the respect it has earned for advancing BCTC’s academic mission. This questionnaire asks your views about two broad areas—leadership and perceptions of resources—and how they contribute to the library’s ability to serve BCTC’s students and faculty.

Please answer each question as completely and honestly as possible. Your responses will provide valuable context and serve as a beginning for our later in-person conversation.

How long it will take you to complete the questionnaire depends on your schedule and your approach to writing. Expect to spend a minimum of 15-20 minutes.

While taking the questionnaire, you may stop and return later to pick up where you left off. Make sure your browser allows cookies for “www.qualtrics.com”.

Also, you may find it helpful to compose your answers in Word using the questionnaire document attached to your invitation. You can then paste your responses into the Web form.

Click the >> arrow below to continue.

General Information Questions

The next few questions are about your role in the library.

What is your current position?

What are your primary duties?

How long have you been affiliated with the library in your current role?

... in an earlier role?
Leadership Questions

The next few questions are about your perceptions of leadership in the library.

Who are the leaders in your library, whether in formal or informal roles?

What about them causes you to identify them as leaders?

What benefits does their leadership provide?

Do you consider yourself a leader?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Would you say you are a formal or informal leader, and how is that determined?

If no, why do you not consider yourself a leader?

Do you think others consider you a leader?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, what leadership qualities of yours do you think are important to them?

If no, why do you think others do not consider you a leader?

In what ways do the leadership behaviors and approaches you observe affect the functioning of your library?

If your library faced a drastic cut in funding, what would be the most important things that would help you maintain your effectiveness to accomplish your program’s mission? How would you go about maintaining high performance? (If you have experienced this, please also relate how your library responded.)
True/False: I would be willing to try something ambitious to deliver greater value to students and other stakeholders, even if I were not sure it could be accomplished with currently available resources.

- True
- False

True/False: Others in the library would be willing to try something ambitious to deliver greater value to students and other stakeholders, even if they were not sure it could be accomplished with currently available resources.

- True
- False

**Perceptions of Resources Questions**

The next few questions are about resources available to the library for carrying out its mission and goals.

Which of the following resource categories do you think are most important to the library's leadership?

- Equipment
- Workplace climate
- Technology
- Library employees' knowledge
- Facilities
- Finances
- Personnel lines
- Organizational culture
- Workplace processes and systems
- Staff capabilities
- Other ____________________

Why do you consider those choices the most important?
Which of the following categories of resources do you consider most important for your library's success?

- [ ] Equipment
- [ ] Workplace climate
- [ ] Technology
- [ ] Library employees' knowledge
- [ ] Facilities
- [ ] Finances
- [ ] Personnel lines
- [ ] Organizational culture
- [ ] Workplace processes and systems
- [ ] Staff capabilities
- [ ] Other ______________________

Why did you select those?
Appendix C

Literature Review: Positive Organizational Psychology

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions,” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5) that uses “scientific methodology to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals, groups, organizations, and communities to thrive and prosper” (Luthans, 2002b, p. 58). The basic assumption of positive psychology is that “human goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder, and distress” (Peterson & Park, 2003, p. 144). This approach presents a deliberate counterpoint to the disease model that has dominated the study of psychology since the mid-20th century (Luthans, 2002a; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). When combined with traditional research approaches, it offers a more complete account of human vitality and thriving.

As a theoretical framework, positive psychology attempts to articulate an overarching position from which to investigate positive psychological states (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Donaldson and Ko (2010), noting the expansive domain of inquiry, observe that “Positive Psychology seems to have become an umbrella term used to stimulate and organize research, application, and scholarship on strengths, virtues, excellence, thriving, flourishing, resilience, flow, and optimal functioning in general” (p. 177).

Humans function in numerous institutional contexts such as families, communities, organizations, and societies. Optimal human function, or flourishing, “connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005,
Park and Peterson (2008) articulate the important role institutions play in creating environments that enable flourishing: “Positive groups and institutions enable the development and display of positive relationships and positive traits, which in turn enable positive subjective experience” (2008, Positive Psychology, para. 2). Although this formulation presents a directional influence from institution to individual, it also assumes a feedback loop in which the positive subjective experience of individuals supports the flourishing of the group.

Institutional contexts that enable individuals to flourish have been described in the literature as virtuous (Cameron, 2003; Caza, Barker, & Cameron, 2004; Peterson, 2006). Organizational virtuousness is “a standard that extends beyond duty to the underlying ideal that motivates ethical rules and obligations” (Caza et al., 2004, p. 172). Virtuousness has been linked empirically to objective indicators of organizational performance (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004). Additionally, empirical evidence suggests that virtuousness buffers the negative effects of traumas and setbacks by improving the ability to endure and recover (Caza et al., 2004; Weick, 2003).

Positive Organizational Scholarship

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) “focuses on…life-building, capability-enhancing, capacity-creating . . . dynamics in organizations that contribute to human strengths and virtues, resilience and healing, vitality and thriving, and the cultivation of extraordinary states in individuals, groups and organizations” (Dutton, Glynn, & Spreitzer, 2006, para. 1). As new “key indicators of success” (2003, p. 267), these qualities exemplify a broadening of desirable organizational outcomes beyond the
familiar list of success indicators such as growth, high scores for academic or job performance, and efficiency.

In addition to psychology and organizational theory, POS draws its theoretical perspective from sociology, anthropology, and social work. The domains of this discipline are contained in its name (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton et al., 2006): *positive* in its choice to investigate the affirmative states and dynamics, *organizational* in its examination of expressions of those dynamics in organizations, and *scholarship* in its commitment to theory and research that “suggest implications for organizational functioning, practice and teaching” (Dutton et al., 2006, para. 2).

Four core assumptions underlie POS (Dutton et al., 2006, Core Assumptions of POS section, paras. 1-4). First, POS assumes a difference between factors that bring about problems and factors that facilitate extraordinary states like vitality and thriving. Thus, the theoretical lenses typically applied to understanding organizational problems are not necessarily well-suited to understanding *positive deviance* (that is, “extraordinary states that are good, honorable or virtuous”) (2006, Core Assumptions of POS section, para. 1). Second, POS enlarges the domain of success indicators to include desirable conditions and outcomes such as “resilience, vitality, thriving, fulfillment, transcendence, courage, flourishing, integrity, wisdom, as well as other individual and collective virtues and strengths”. In addition to instrumental interest in how these valued conditions are related to organizational performance, POS seeks to understand these conditions “as ends worthy of explanation on their own” (2006, Core Assumptions of POS section, para. 2). In other words, although POS assigns extrinsic value to positive states and conditions for their contributions to improved organizational performance, it also assigns intrinsic value
to positive states and conditions. Thus, the POS domain considers these worthy of study on their own merits, without the necessity of connecting them to the instrumental concerns of performance.

Third, POS assumes the contextual nature of positive individual and organizational states and the mutual influence they exert on one another. For example, studies in “various research domains in organizational studies” (2006, Core Assumptions of POS section, para. 3) have examined positive emotions, positive meaning, and positive connections independently as possible contributors to individual and organizational thriving. A POS approach would seek to extend the research on these isolated areas to understand their collective contributions to thriving in individuals and organizations.

Finally, POS assumes a moral imperative for building affirmative individual and organizational states. The moral imperative derives from studies documenting the effects of feelings and attitudes on performance. Losada and Heaphy (2004) found that the ratio of positive to negative (P/N) interactions among team members reliably predicts team performance. In their study, teams with higher P/N ratios outperformed those with lower P/N. Frederickson and Losada (2005) reported that for individuals to flourish, they must experience approximately three positive emotions for every negative emotion. Other studies have confirmed the power and benefits of positive emotions. Bono and Ilies (2006) found that leader emotions affect follower mood, and positive leader emotions contribute to effective change management. Positive emotions also moderate the effects of difficult events (Glynn & Dowd, 2008).
Positive Organizational Behavior

Positive Organizational Behavior is “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace” (Luthans, 2002b, p. 59). Capacities that meet these criteria include—but are not limited to—hope, optimism, efficacy, and resilience (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). In the psychology literature, these four capacities are independent conceptually and with respect to validity. Yet within positive organizational behavior, they are collectively termed psychological capital—a “higher order core construct…representing one’s positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success based on motivated effort and perseverance” (Luthans & Youssef, 2007, p. 550, italics in original). Psychological capital is a resource that, similar to other resources like human, social, and financial capital, can be leveraged to lift organizations to higher levels of functioning than thought possible (Larson & Luthans, 2006).

The components of psychological capital, hope, optimism, efficacy, and resilience have been found to be consistent with Luthans’ (2002a) three criteria for inclusion in the domain of positive organizational behavior because they are measurable, and they have been shown to be open to development (Luthans, Norman, Avolio, & Avey, 2008; Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006). In addition, multiple empirical studies link them individually and in various groupings to positive organizational outcomes. Examples of such outcomes include improved team performance (West, Patera, & Carsten, 2009); higher job satisfaction (Youssef & Luthans, 2007); buffering the stressful effects of downsizing (Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2008); healing after organizational tragedy.
lower absenteeism (Avey, Patera, & West, 2006); and employee retention (Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009). Collectively, these findings link desirable organizational outcomes and enhanced organizational functioning with the four elements of Psychological capital.

Practical implications of positive organizational behaviors have been researched in the area of leadership. Positive approaches to leadership is a proactive approach to leadership proposed for today’s turbulent environment (Luthans, Luthans, Hodgetts, & Luthans, 2001). The components of such approaches include realistic optimism, intelligence, especially emotional, confidence, and hope. They meet the definitional criteria for positive organizational behavior because they are positive, measurable, adaptable to development, and effectively managed for performance improvement (Luthans et al., 2001).

Previous theories have touched on positive themes. These include Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs; Neill’s (1960) utopian vision of education; and Gardner’s (1983) multiple intelligences. However, these fall short of articulating a comprehensive framework for understanding optimal human function because they do not meet the stringent requirements of POB (i.e., that they must be measurable, adaptable to development, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace). Positive themes are also common in popular motivational literature that promotes positive attitudes and conveys feel-good messages. But these works lack theoretical and empirical support (Shults, 2009).

Other scholars have attempted to understand the impact of individuals and their interactions with the organization. Studies range from the effects of overconfidence on
subsequent performance (Vancouver, Thompson, & Williams, 2001) to understanding how unrealistic optimism can lead to evasion of responsibility (Peterson, 2000).

The components of psychological capital, hope, optimism, efficacy, and resilience have been found to be consistent with Luthans’ (2002a) three criteria for inclusion in the domain of positive organizational behavior because they are measurable; they have been shown to be open to development (Luthans, Norman, et al., 2008; Luthans et al., 2006); and they influence positive organizational outcomes including performance. Empirical examples of such outcomes include improved team performance (West et al., 2009); higher job satisfaction (Youssef & Luthans, 2007); buffering the stressful effects of downsizing (Armstrong-Stassen & Schlosser, 2008); healing after organizational tragedy (Powley & Piderit, 2008); lower absenteeism (Avey et al., 2006); and employee retention (Avey et al., 2009). Collectively, these findings link desirable organizational outcomes and enhanced organizational functioning with the four elements of psychological capital.

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comprehensive framework for understanding optimal human function because they do not meet the stringent requirements of the POB concept in that they must be measurable, adaptable to development, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace. These stringent requirements reject the popular professional books that promote positive attitudes and convey feel-good messages, but lack theoretical and empirical support (Shults, 2009). Other scholars have attempted to understand the impact of individuals and their interactions with the organization. Studies range from the effects of overconfidence on subsequent performance (Vancouver et al., 2001) to understanding how unrealistic optimism can lead to evasion of responsibility (Peterson, 2000).

The encouraging aspect of understanding psychological capital is the knowledge that the four state-like attributes of efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience are not fixed. These attributes can be supported, encouraged, and developed in the members of an organization. Scholarly quantitative research has determined that these attributes support a positive organizational climate and are positively related to performance, satisfaction, and commitment of employees (Luthans, Norman, et al., 2008). In addition, it has been determined that psychological capital can be developed through various training interventions (Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008). Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2007) provide a comprehensive definition:

...an individual’s positive state of development that is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success. (2007, p. 3)
References


Bibliography


Vita

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Educational Institutions Attended and Degrees Awarded

University of Kentucky: Doctoral Candidate, Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation

University of North Texas Master of Science, Library Science

Messiah College: Bachelor of Arts, Humanities

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Professional Positions

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March 2002 - Present Systems Librarian / Technology Coordinator

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