

ABSTRACT

MAHLE, AMY JANE. Making the Case for Building Trust through Strengthening Communication Efforts by Community College Leaders During a Landscape Crisis. (Under the direction of Dr. Carrol Warren).

Leaders must be prepared to communicate during times of crisis in a manner that ensures trust and enables the community college to continue its mission. Community colleges underwent tremendous turmoil during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is considered a landscape crisis. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover the crisis communication methods selected and utilized by North Carolina community college presidents with their employees during the prolonged crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and to ascertain their own perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication. Two theories and one model borrowed from literature in communication and organizational culture formed the theoretical underpinning used to conduct the research. A purposeful sampling and two-tier maximum variation approach were utilized to select participants. The first tier included all sitting North Carolina community college presidents who also served in the role as of January 1, 2020, and all who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate. The second tier utilized personal presidential demographics and college characteristics to ensure a broad selection and representation. Participants included 10 North Carolina Community College presidents. Interviews were conducted in-person on the participants' campus, which provided the data for this research. Constant comparative analysis and three levels of coding, In Vivo, axial categorical, and thematic, were used to analyze the data. The findings from the qualitative case study revealed that communication with employees that was strategic, timely, consistent, disseminated in a variety of methods and formats, which was strongly influenced by emotional intelligence, fostered trust within this sample.

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Making the Case for Building Trust through Strengthening Communication Efforts by Community College
Leaders During a Landscape Crisis

by
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DEDICATION

For my extraordinary husband Scott, my forever “banks” while I “run like the river”.

For my three grands, Zachary, Matthias, and Evelyn Sofia – your Pop and I will never cease loving you and teaching you the art of communication, which will impact all your relationships. And yes, we will have more sleepovers, very soon.

BIOGRAPHY

Amy Jane Mahle was born and raised in a rural New Jersey community to parents who attended trade school, worked hard, and dabbled in entrepreneurial pursuits. She is the younger sibling of a brother, Jim, whom she greatly admires and who has continually urged her to be her best. Amy has always valued and experienced joy by investing in people, uniting others, and inspiring them to take action towards meaningful projects and issues. Her first college experience was at Houghton University in rural, western NY, where she formed lifetime friendships, met her husband Scott, and earned a bachelor's in psychology. Shortly after graduating and getting married, North Carolina became her true home.

After working in social services, starting a family with a natural born daughter, Emily, and an adopted son, Jeremy, Amy partnered with her brother and co-founded and co-owned a small local business. Being a business owner was integral in the development of skills and mindsets that have served her well throughout life. Amy felt the call to pursue healthcare and earned an associate degree in occupational therapy assistant from Cabarrus College of Health Sciences. She enjoyed working clinically to help clients regain function and achieve their goals, then transitioned to academia to train students for a role in healthcare, knowing that was where she could have a greater impact. She earned a master's in healthcare administration from Pfeiffer University, with the goal of becoming a program chair. In 2013 an idea was formulated to create a better resource for students, so she co-authored and co-edited a comprehensive textbook, *Adult Physical Conditions: Intervention Strategies for Occupational Therapy Assistants* (2018 1st ed., 2022 2nd ed.) with colleague and friend, Amber Ward. In the meantime, she was hired to be the founding program chair of the occupational therapy assistant program at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, which is where she discovered that the mission of the community college deeply resonates with her core values. Concurrently, Amy has served the profession of occupational therapy in multiple leadership positions, including President of the North Carolina Occupational Therapy

Association and a Board Director of the American Occupational Therapy Association. Desiring to learn more and expand her lens, she pursued her doctorate in community college leadership from NC State University. As a first-generation college student, and the first in her family to earn a masters or doctorate degree, she is incredibly grateful for the opportunity to earn these degrees and is eager to continue to fulfill her purpose.

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I am beholden to my daughter, Emily Rheinbolt, for her graphic design skills to convey information beautifully and professionally via figures in this dissertation. I am also grateful to Dr. Wendy Barnhardt, my supervisor, for the visual reminders of my goal and your sincere interest in my research; my daily work team, Carolyn, Sherry, & Cathy, and others, who provided advice, meals, and consistent encouragement; several cohorts of my occupational therapy assistant students, who cheered me on literally from the beginning of my degree to the final defense; and my cohort members of the Charlotte Pack 2020, whose collective experiences and perspectives have positively shaped my lens.

I had the joy of interviewing numerous North Carolina community college presidents as participants, and I appreciate your eagerness to contribute and your candor. I am in awe of what you each accomplished during the most challenging times, and your words will resonate in my mind and impact my own leadership.

A personal support system is critical when undertaking any major achievement, as I tell my own students, and I have the finest cadre. I could not have embarked on this journey without the enduring love and care of my family and dearest friends, near and far, who have remained faithful to me despite my inability to spend the time together that I desired, through two editions of a major textbook and a doctoral degree. My husband Scott, you are my rock, my best listener (even if I put you to sleep

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Community college presidents balance many crucial responsibilities, including communicating with employees (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2018; Aspen Institute & Achieving the Dream, 2013; Johnson & Jones, 2018; Tarker, 2021), which became even more challenging during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Floyd, 2020; Forster et al., 2020; Tarker, 2021; Witmer & Hopkins, 2022). While there is literature describing how leaders in higher education communicate during times of crises such as acts of nature, human threats on campus, and infrastructure failures (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Tarker, 2021), little research has been undertaken to examine crisis communication from community college presidents to employees during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Leadership in times of crisis is imperative not only to operational efforts, but also to create or sustain a culture of trust with employees forming the foundation enabling attainment of each community colleges' mission (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Dirani et al., 2020; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Johnson & Jones, 2018; Mazzei et al., 2012, 2022; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Stratone et al., 2022). This study will explore the strategies North Carolina community college presidents used to communicate with employees during the unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic and their own perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication. The research intends to provide insight for new and aspiring community college presidents regarding communication strategies with employees during a crisis.

Nature of the Problem

If community college presidents do not have a strategy to effectively communicate with their employees during times of crisis, they may lose the trust of faculty and staff. Mistrust can lead to uncertainty and low morale (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017; Hoppes & Holley, 2014; Osburn & Gocial, 2020), which ultimately hinders the mission of the institution (Diers-Lawson & Collins, 2022; Kim, 2021). North Carolina boasts 58 community colleges;

presidents are the top leaders of these open-door access institutions that serve students in their communities (State Board of Community Colleges, 2022; Thomas & McClellan, 2022). Presidents must deliberately consider the challenging task of communicating effectively under normal circumstances (Aspen Institute & Achieving the Dream, 2013; Valeau, 2021), but even more so during a crisis (Brennan & Stern, 2017). Their listeners include external stakeholders, such as the public, donors, legislators, and news media, and internal stakeholders, including the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, and students (Aspen Institute & Achieving the Dream, 2013; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Diers-Lawson, 2020; Johnson & Jones, 2018; Tarker, 2021). The two audiences are distinct; at times the communication is similar for each, yet other times divergent (Cancel et al., 1997; Mazzei et al., 2022; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016).

Exceptional efforts have been made in North Carolina to ensure that two million North Carolinians ages 25 - 44 obtain a “high-quality credential or a postsecondary degree” from an institution of higher education (IHE) by 2030 (MyFuture NC, 2022), which aligns with the national call “of increasing the numbers of Americans who earn a postsecondary credential with value in the labor market” (McKlenney, 2015). Additionally, trending data show that half of the community college presidents in North Carolina are expected to retire by 2026 (Urquhart, 2021). In fact, since 2019, 25 presidents—a staggering 43%—have left the system, with the majority leaving due to retirement (Pogarcic, 2022; State Board of Community Colleges, 2022). Nationwide, college presidents are leaving their jobs, with some citing the convergence of crises in recent years (Kelderman, 2022). The drain on the “Great 58” — nomenclature referring to the number of North Carolina community colleges—of a high number of retirees and others exiting the presidential role equates to a large percentage of new presidents who will take the helm who can benefit from insights on crisis communication. Additionally, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) has experienced significant turbulence in leadership, with a series of seven system presidents or interim presidents in the past seven years and the exit of nine senior staff members in 2021-2022 (State Board of Community Colleges, 2022; Villemain, 2022). The

need for education is critical, as is the urgency for ongoing effective leadership in community colleges to ensure community colleges meet their student-centered missions.

Leaders must be prepared to communicate during times of crisis in a manner that ensures trust and enables the community college to continue its mission, and yet the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in terms of continual upheaval, crisis, and changing methods of communication (Dirani et al., 2020; Hahn, 2021; Mazzei et al., 2022). Furthermore, the type of communication, at least in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, was primarily virtual, which is a shift in how employers and employees typically communicate in a time of crisis (Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021; Levasseur, 2012; Tarker, 2021; Witmer & Hopkins, 2022). An understanding of the presidents' reflections on the methods, frequency, and perceptions of the effectiveness of the communication strategies used can serve as foundational for the changing environment in community colleges and disseminate critical information to all leaders in higher education.

All community college presidents pioneered through unprecedented times during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, a prolonged and uncertain crisis of great magnitude (Hahn, 2021; Nicola et al., 2020), which is expected to result in an endemic as time progresses (Fishman & Nguyen, 2021; Gostin, 2022; Lee & Morling, 2022). The fundamental missions of community colleges were initially at risk due to widespread uncertainty and steep enrollment declines (Fishman & Nguyen, 2021; Lake Research Partners, 2021; North Carolina Community Colleges, 2022a, 2022b; Thomas & McClellan, 2022). Employees of community colleges, including part-time and full-time faculty and staff, are the frontline workers serving students, and they look to leadership to communicate in times of crisis and to provide stability and garner trust (AACC, 2018; Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021; Brennan & Stern, 2017). The relationship of the community college president with employees prior to the COVID-19 crisis likely influenced the method and frequency of communication that presidents used with their employees during the crisis (Cancel et al., 1997; Diers-Lawson, 2020; Kim & Lim, 2020; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016).

Furthermore, miscommunication or lack of communication when leading during a crisis can erode existing trust or create mistrust (Brennan & Stern, 2017; D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Diers-Lawson, 2020; Hoppes & Holley, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover the crisis communication methods selected and utilized by North Carolina community college presidents with their employees during the prolonged crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and to ascertain their own perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust between the President and employees before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theoretical Framework

There are two relevant theories and one model that form the framework for this research. Berger and Calabrese (1975) offer the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, which explains that individuals seek knowledge to reduce uncertainty and build trust, especially in times of crisis. The Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) Model focuses on the interaction between stakeholders and organizational leadership (Diers-Lawson, 2020). According to SRM, stakeholders will respond to a crisis based on preexisting “attitudes, experience with the organization, perceptions of susceptibility, efficacy, and reaction to the issue or risk” (Diers-Lawson, 2020, p. 35). Diers-Lawson (2019; 2020) suggests that the ability of an organization to successfully manage a crisis depends upon how it manages stakeholder

relationships, including building trust, and should consider the reactions of the stakeholders when making strategic decisions, such as crisis communication.

Contingency Theory of Conflict Management (Cancel et al., 1997) suggests that organizations should communicate with specific strategies when in a crisis situation, based on a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. The basic theory suggests “the idea that an organization's or corporation's stance with outside publics is generally a mixture of advocacy and accommodation. What mix of advocacy and accommodation is potentially contingent upon a variety of internal and external variables” (Cancel et al., 1997, p. 60). Cancel et al. (1997) argue that the existing frameworks for communication are lacking due to a limited consideration of the complexities of organizations and the environments in which they operate. Important to note is that the research is established in the public relations field, and predominantly refers to external publics (Cancel et al., 1997). However, Cancel et al. (1997) include factors to consider regarding internal characteristics, such as the organization itself, internal stakeholder groups such as the public relations department and the dominant coalition (top level management), and individual behaviors and traits of the dominant coalition, public relations team, and managers (Cancel et al., 1997). They further acknowledge that communication to one specific public can simultaneously include multiple points on the advocacy-accommodation continuum. Although Cancel et al. (1997) theorize a continuum when communicating with external publics, their research acknowledges that internal factors are important considerations for selecting communication strategies.

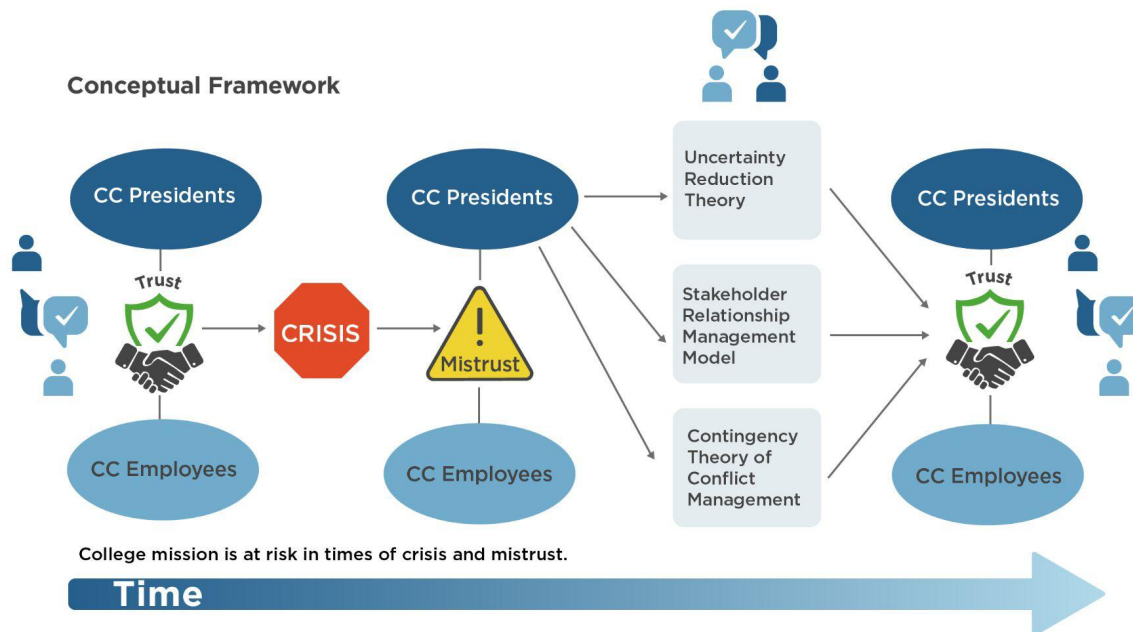
The framework of the two theories and one model build upon each other and direct research to explore the tools and methods used to facilitate communication between presidents and employees during crisis situations and the ensuing factor of trust. Clear communication, including perspective-seeking, understanding what employees need, as well as awareness of a culture of trust, will help guide this research with community college presidents to understand their approach to crisis communication and their own perceptions of their communication with employees.

Conceptual Framework

The research of community college presidents regarding communication during the COVID-19 crisis can be understood through the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework represents the theoretical framework that grounds this research, wherein the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger and Calabrese, 1975), Stakeholder Relationship Management Model (Diers-Lawson, 2020), and Contingency Theory of Conflict Management (Cancel et al., 1997) are lenses that facilitate the research approach to study crisis communication and trust between the president and employees. In times of crisis, effective communication between the president and employees is important as employees seek to make sense of uncertainty, and there is a risk of miscommunication and mistrust, leading to the subsequent threat of not meeting the mission of the community college. Communication and trust can be restored over time through using the principles of the Stakeholder Relationship Management Model (Diers-Lawson, 2020) and the Contingency Theory of Conflict Management (Cancel et al., 1997).

Significance of the Study

There has been very little research on community college presidents regarding their communication with employees during a crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all community colleges and presents a unique opportunity to study the topic across various community colleges, with differences in location, size, years of experience in the presidency, and other factors. The results can inform current and aspiring leaders as to the crisis communication approaches that have been taken and the perceptions of the effectiveness of communication. Community colleges are certain to face future crises of many types, whether short or long-term (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Tarker, 2021), and increased focus on communication from the position of the executive leader can bring attention to the importance of strategically communicating with employees and building trust. This research proposes to add to the body of literature on how crisis communication of community college presidents with faculty and staff can influence trust and better prepare colleges to face future crises and still meet their missions, which are critical to students and the communities where they live. The focus of presidents' communication with employees as one set of internal stakeholders at community colleges will also expand the use of the SRM model and Contingency Theory of Conflict Management.

Key Terms

The following terms and definitions are relevant to this study:

Accommodation. Communication strategies that are purely in the interest of the stakeholders (Cancel et al., 1997; Mazzei et al., 2022).

Advocacy. Communication strategies that are purely in the interest of the organization (Cancel et al., 1997; Mazzei et al., 2022).

Crisis. "An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of

resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60).

Crisis leadership. “Crisis leadership comprises six distinct but related tasks: preparing, sense-making, decision-making, meaning-making, terminating and learning (Brennan & Stern, 2017, p. 120).

Crisis management. “[Internal] crisis management involves the coordination of complex technical and relational systems and the design of organizational structures to prevent the occurrence, reduce the impact, and learn from a crisis” (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 1664).

Emotional intelligence. “The subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189).

Internal crisis communication. “The dynamic and continuous communication process that involves all organizational members as receivers, senders, and sense makers, before, during and after a crisis has occurred” (Mazzei et al., 2022, pg. 2).

Landscape crisis. “A crisis of enormous scale that spreads exceedingly quickly, leading to a feeling of loss of control, disorientation, and severe emotional disturbance” (Forster et al., 2020, p. 421) and a multi-level crisis affecting individuals and systems (Stratone et al., 2022).

Transformational leadership. “The process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. This type of leader is attentive to the needs and motives of followers and tries to help followers reach their fullest potential” (Northouse, 2019, p. 164-165).

Trust. “Psychological state of willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of a leader that derive in part from trustworthiness perceptions (Fulmer & Ostoff, 2017, p. 649), and “Trust is an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another

party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 189).

Two-way communication. Leaders and stakeholders communicate with each other. Leaders provide opportunities to listen to the stakeholders versus only disseminating messages (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Kim, 2021; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011).

Chapter Summary

Community college presidents have led through unprecedented times during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Floyd, 2020; Forster et al., 2020; Tarker, 2021; Witmer & Hopkins, 2022). There is scant literature on how community college presidents communicated during the crisis with one important subset of internal stakeholders: employees. Borrowing from organizational and communication theories and a model, there are links to crisis communication and trust within the organization (Berger and Calabrese, 1975; Cancel et al., 1997, Diers-Lawson, 2019). The research study will explore the strategies presidents used to communicate with employees during the global pandemic and their own perceptions of its effectiveness.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The study of crisis communication with internal stakeholders is relatively new (Bundy et al., 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011) with growth of research in this area just in the past decade or so (Diers-Lawson, 2019; Diers-Lawson & Collins, 2022; Kim, 2021). The majority of prior research on crisis communication has focused on external stakeholders (Cancel et al., 1997; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Few studies have addressed crisis communication in institutions of higher education (IHE), with the majority focused on 4-year universities (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019). Meager literature exists on crisis communication in community colleges (Murray & Kishur, 2008; Osburn & Gocial, 2020; Tarker, 2019). Scholars have recently begun to publish work on the COVID-19 global pandemic related to leadership and employee relations in organizations (Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021; Dirani et al., 2020; Mazzei et al., 2022; Mendy et al., 2020; Orangefirey, 2020; Stratone et al., 2022; Tao et al., 2022; Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022), 4-year universities (Fernandez & Shaw, 2022; Shaya et al., 2022) and community colleges (Tarker, 2021; McLean & Warren, 2022). Literature on crisis communication, the role of an organizational leader and community college president, employees as internal stakeholders, effects of communication on trust, and theories that undergird this research study will be explored.

COVID-19 Pandemic to Endemic - Phases of a Crisis

A crisis is an unexpected event with uncertain circumstances that poses a threat to an organization (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Bundy et al., 2016) and the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007; Diers-Lawson, 2019). A crisis is "characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly" (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60). Crises typically present with issues that are not already addressed in current policies (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Pearson & Clair, 1998), especially the challenges and potential outcomes from uncommon types of threat, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic (Dirani et al., 2020; Mendy et al., 2022; Tarker, 2021).

COVID-19 has been classified as a “landscape” scale crisis, meaning “a crisis of enormous scale that spreads exceedingly quickly, leading to a feeling of loss of control, disorientation, and severe emotional disturbance” (Forster et al., 2020, p. 421) and a multi-level crisis affecting individuals and systems (Stratone et al., 2022). Considering the widespread upheaval in organizations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including IHEs, crisis communication regarding COVID-19 and its effect on community colleges is substantially critical to explore and seek to understand.

Some scholars suggest using a perspective of crisis communication wherein the crisis is viewed in the phases of precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis, each with porous boundaries (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Mazzei et al., 2022). Historically, researchers who have studied crises have suggested other, but similar, frameworks for understanding crisis in stages (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007; Sturges, 1994), and most included multiple stages that roughly fit into before, during, and after crisis. Still other experts dismiss the concept of phases in a crisis due to the uncertain nature of crises and the prescribed view of boundaries (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). This research will utilize a phased crisis approach when considering crisis communication.

Crisis Leadership Versus Crisis Management

Literature on crisis and crisis communication is replete with examples of crisis management, which takes an operational viewpoint towards identifying and mitigating the crisis using a team of experts who are trained to deal with the immediate issues by implementing a pre-formulated plan (Baer et al., 2008; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Diers-Lawson (2020) suggests focusing on both the crisis and the people involved, stating “crisis management is a learned behavior that focuses on mitigation and control of the internal and external dynamics of the crisis itself; yet it is not like being a mechanic that finds a problem in the car and fixes it - it is still about engaging with people’s expectations and their decision-making process” (p. 20). Examples of crisis management in IHE’s include active shooter, inclement weather, or other events, where the incident command system is enacted and

security, fire, or other experts lead (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Tarker, 2021). Brennan & Stern (2017) suggest shifting the perspective to crisis leadership, where the chief officer in higher education responds to crisis with “normative leadership” (p. 123). In a community college, the crisis leadership approach allows the president to maintain authority over the crisis, delegate portions to individuals in key positions who specialize in the issues, and communicate effectively to all stakeholders, but especially internal stakeholders: the employees. A common phrase used globally during the pandemic has been, “We are in this together”; although the expression may have become clichéd, it illustrates the importance of leadership, teamwork, and connectivity.

Leadership Styles for Crisis Communication

The majority of research on crisis communication has been conducted on organizations and not IHE's; however, organizational research lends salient insight. Organizational stakeholders receive information regarding a crisis faced by the institution from various sources, including CEOs, presidents, managers, colleagues (Boggs & McPhail, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Diers-Lawson, 2020), as well as external sources such as news reports or other individuals (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Coombs, 2007; Diers-Lawson, 2020) and in the past decade or so, social media (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Organization for Economic Development Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015; Sung & Hwang, 2014).

Normative leadership has been recently suggested as the premier method to guide IHE's through crisis, resulting in better overall outcomes (Bateh & Heyliger, 2014; Brennan & Stern, 2017). Normative leadership is considered a type of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2019; Tarker, 2021), and underscores the role of the leader in providing essential functions in a time of crisis, such as strategic direction, governance, finances, decision making, and reinforcing the values of the organization (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017). A prepandemic study of community college leaders in Texas found that anticipatory leadership used during times of challenge coupled with communication were more likely to successfully facilitate change and help others adjust to change (Johnson & Jones,

2018). Considering leadership approaches and stages of a crisis, Tarker (2021) found in his research with community college presidents that they led with transformational and adaptive styles after the initial crisis response. Bateh & Heyliger (2014) discovered that university faculty had increased job satisfaction when the administrators demonstrated transformational or transactional leadership styles, and passive/avoidant leadership led to decreased job satisfaction (p. 34).

Creating a culture of collaboration can facilitate a shared sense of empowerment to overcome challenges (McLean & Warren, 2022; Miller, 2019; Mokher et al., 2020; Petriglieri, 2020; Thwaite, 2020) as can transparency in leadership (Miller, 2019). Research regarding major shifts in a state-wide college system indicated that collaboration was found as a strength in preparing for changes; during major change, the institutions utilized a variety of approaches for sensemaking and learning during the reform, and that the nature of collaboration led to positive institution-wide transformational change (Mokher et al., 2020). Collectively, the literature points to leaders adapting their leadership style based on the needs of the situation, maintaining awareness of the needs of followers, building trust, and providing vision.

Communication Methods and Cadence Used by Organizational Leaders

Leaders who are experiencing a crisis in their organization may seek the most effective methods of communication and the rate at which they should connect with stakeholders, or possibly default to their natural tendencies or a predetermined crisis plan or strategy (Baer et al., 2008; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Pearson & Clair, 1998). The following sections will explore specific evidence-based communication strategies, the importance of the leader's voice, communication type and content, and the timing and frequency of communication.

Communication Strategies for Leaders

Leaders have the power to frame communication and thus, the entire culture of an organization (Meyer et al., 2016). There is no perfect solution for communication strategies with employees during a crisis, however, leaders should not underestimate the importance of direct, thoughtful, and timely

communication with their employees (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; Garcia, 2006; Mendy et al., 2020). Leaders may be apt to turn to popular crisis management books, primarily written by consultants, and although these books are not research-based, they do hold some merit for leaders due to the insider perspectives of the crisis consultant authors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

Literature reveals several suggested key communication principles for leaders during any crisis, including the pandemic, that span the what, how, when, and who: frequent and timely communication (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Coombs, 2007; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Garcia, 2006; Mazzei et al., 2012; Osburn & Gocial, 2020), honesty and transparency (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021; Brassey & Kruyt, 2020; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Edmondson, 2020; Hoppes & Holley, 2014; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Koehn, 2020; Mazzei et al., 2012; Miller, 2019; Orangefirey, 2020), being clear and direct (Bogusky-Halper, 2020, Brennan & Stern, 2017; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Gallop, 2020; Mendy et al., 2020), being factual (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021; Forster et al., 2020; Mendy et al., 2020; Orangefirey, 2020), staying calm and leading by example (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Forster et al., 2020; Orangefiery, 2020), helping employees stay safe and healthy (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; Coombs, 2007; Mendy et al., 2020; Orangefirey, 2020), checking in, caring, and empathy (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021; D'Auria et al., 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Forster, et al., 2020; Konig et al., 2020; McLean & Warren, 2022; Mendy et al., 2020; Orangefirey, 2020), and "bounded optimism" (Brassey & Kruyt, 2020, p. 2; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020, p. 4), a term that means being optimistic but also realistic within the context of the situation.

With so many principles recommended by literature, a leader may need a construct to assist with selecting the most effective strategies to implement at the optimal time. Communication scholars have developed various practical models for leading and communicating during a crisis (Brennan & Stern 2017; Coombs, 2007; Sturges, 1994). One pragmatic tool for leaders is the recent work of Mendy et al.,

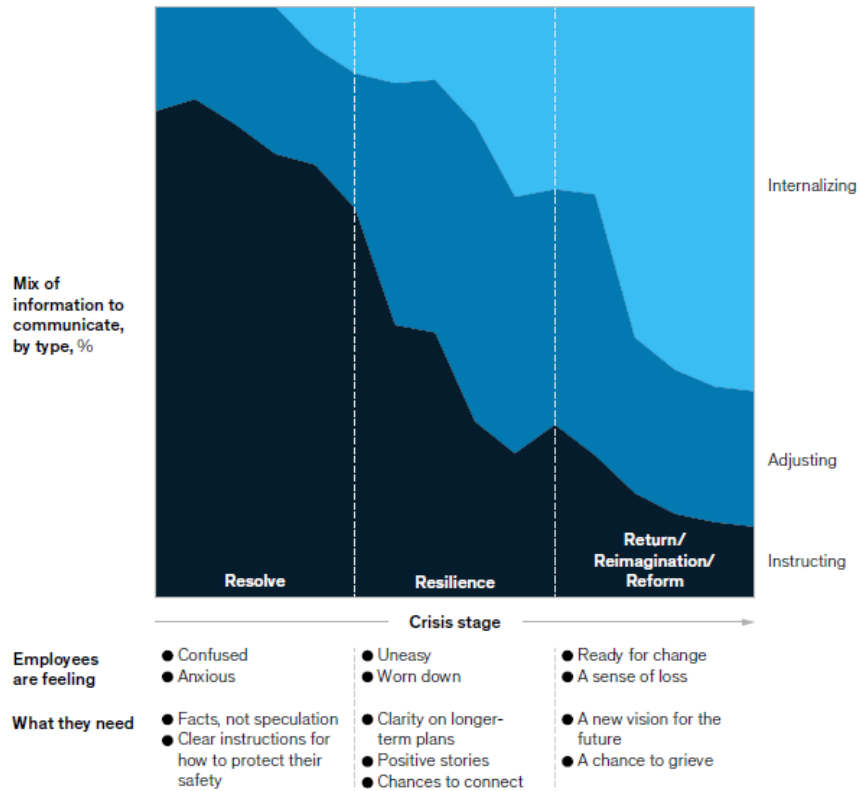
(2020) who adapted Sturges' (1994) groundbreaking crisis communication strategies regarding employee-centered communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The derived framework (Mendy et al., 2020) uses a crisis-stage approach, which is the middle phase of the precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis structure suggested by Sturges (1994) and others (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Mazzei et al., 2022). The crisis-stage approach (Mendy et al., 2020) includes "resolve, resilience, and return/reimagination/reform" with a blended communication approach of "instructing, adjusting, and internalizing" (p. 2) as suggestions for what type of messaging employees need based on their expected cognitive and emotional states during each stage of a crisis. At the beginning of the crisis, employees primarily need facts, with safety being a primary concern, so leaders should use a clear approach that also assures the employees that the organization is concerned about their well-being (Mendy et al., 2020). As the crisis progresses to the resilience stage, the model (Mendy et al., 2020) suggests that employees are apprehensive and fatigued, so leaders should provide messaging that focuses on the future and offer opportunities for "positive stories" and interpersonal connections (p. 2). As the crisis progresses to the final stage, employees are said to be reflective of the loss experienced, yet ready for change; leaders should align their messaging accordingly with "a new vision and a chance to grieve" (Mendy et al., 2020, p. 2). The model resonates with many of the key strategies discussed earlier but provides a structure to follow. See Figure 2.1.

The use of accommodative internal communication strategies by leaders, based on the Stakeholder Relationship Management (SMR) model (Diers-Lawson, 2019, 2020; Diers-Lawson & Collins, 2022) has recently been proven to sustain employee engagement in times of crisis (Mazzei et al., 2022) and increase positive employee voice and problem-solving in times of crisis (Kim & Lim, 2020). The research aligns with the Warren and McLean Model of solution focused outcomes (McLean & Warren, 2022), where the voices of employees can assist in making changes to carry an organization through crisis and chaos (p. 242). Accommodative strategies are employee-focused, which coincides with the

literature on key principles of crisis communication and the crisis communication life cycle proposed by Mendy et al. (2020).

Figure 2.1

Crisis Communication Life Cycle



Note: From “A Leader’s Guide: Communicating with Teams, Stakeholders, and Communities During COVID-19,” by A. Mendy, M. L. Stewart, and K. VanAkin, 2020, *McKinsey & Company*, p. 4.

Leader’s Role and Voice

Leaders face the persistently challenging and vital task of continuously communicating during a crisis (Brennan & Stake, 2017) especially a long-term, slow-moving crisis such as COVID-19 (Tarker, 2021) that is also distinguished by repeated pivoting (Fishman & Nguyen, 2021). During a crisis, leaders must “continuously process large amounts of complex information, contradictory views, and strong emotions” (Brassey & Kruyt, 2020, p. 2), which is mentally, psychologically, and physically demanding. While under this type of stress, leaders select and adopt mindsets about their role and how they will

communicate with stakeholders (Brennan & Weaver, 2018; Valeau, 2021), which will affect their employees and the culture of the organization. Their leadership style influences their communication methods (Bateh & Heyliger, 2014; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Valeau, 2021). Additionally, leaders are consistently assessed by stakeholders on their verbal and non-verbal communication (Forster et al., 2020), so leaders should be mindful of style, substance, and timing in their pursuit of effective communication.

Crisis communication research shows that leaders should first demonstrate empathy during any crisis that includes human tragedy (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Konig et al., 2020; Mazzei et al., 2022; Orangefirey, 2020), or risk seeming cold-hearted and detached from the reality of the emotional and psychological toll on humankind. A common mishandling of communication by leaders is to communicate too much confidence at the beginning that is not balanced with reality, when not enough is known about the crisis; the overconfidence can result in stakeholders losing trust in the leader's abilities (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). To communicate more effectively with stakeholders and address their concerns during a crisis, leaders should seek to understand their employees' perspectives and what distresses them (Diers-Lawson, 2019; Kim & Lim, 2020). Leaders may seek information about the crisis and the employees' responses from crisis response teams for details and direct information (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020), human resource professionals (Dirani et al., 2020), other managers, or direct messages from employees to understand employee challenges firsthand (Kim & Lim, 2020; Olsson, 2014).

There is considerable evidence that the executive leader, whether CEO or college president, should communicate directly and in their own voice with employees to build trust and authenticity during a crisis (Brennan & Stern, 2017; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Tarker, 2021; Valeau, 2021). During the COVID-19 crisis, experienced leaders encouraged other leaders with the triple aim to use their voice to "be mindful, and also be realistic, but optimistic whenever possible" (Forster et al., 2020, p. 421), which

aligns with the call for “brutal honesty...and credible hope” (Koehn, 2020, para. 6). “Optimism that springs from authentic values and trust in people’s capabilities can be the source of energy for everyone in the organization to move forward” (Brassey & Kruyt, 2020, p. 3). Thus, evidence points to the leader demonstrating personal connection with employees and concern for their wellbeing to foster trust and confidence, which is cardinal in times of crisis to maintain focus and ultimately meet the mission of the organization.

Communication Type and Content

Crisis communication experts advise that leaders craft the content of the communication to meet the stage of the crisis, the information needed by the receiver, and intended results (Coombs, 2007; Mendy et al., 2020; Sturges, 1994). Sturges (1994) places an emphasis on “maximizing communication’s effectiveness in creating positive opinions among publics important to the organization” (p. 297), where publics can mean internal or external stakeholders. Research suggests the importance of using various methods to communicate during a crisis (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Mazzei et al., 2012; McNaughtan et al., 2019). Evidence indicates that when managers communicate their expectations clearly, workers are more likely to be engaged and less likely to experience burnout (Gallop, 2020). Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that communication by leaders to their employees is best in terms of efficiency, clarity, and building trust if done in-person (Stratone et al., 2022), while others found that both leaders and employees adjusted well to virtual communication due to safety concerns (Bojadjev & Vaneva, 2021). There is also evidence that suggests leaders should cultivate gratitude (Koehn, 2020) and share inspiring stories to encourage employees in times of crisis (Mendy et al., 2020; Nichols et al., 2020).

Some evidence suggests using social media to strategically communicate during a crisis (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Cheng, 2018; OECD, 2015). There are three distinct uses of social media for leaders: a monitor for situational awareness (Brennan & Stern, 2017; OECD, 2015), top-down communication to

stakeholders as “official communication” (Brennan & Stern, 2017, p. 130), and to facilitate two-way dialogue (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Cheng, 2018). Other sources note that social media is an effective and cost-efficient tool that can foster ongoing communication with stakeholders and that various types of social media outlets (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram) can have a different purpose and outcome (OECD, 2017). Alternately, less positive findings regarding social media are that stakeholders have an expectation of a faster response time to crisis communication (Cheng, 2018) and advice from a former university president who cautions that social media is an “environment in which any incident can explode into a public relations firestorm” (Hatch, 2021, para 12).

Timing and Frequency of Communication

Experts recommend that leaders should respond quickly and effectively to a crisis and implement the actions that will result in the best outcomes for the organization (Baer & Duin, 2020; D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Edmondson, 2020; Garcia, 2006). Garcia (2006) emphasizes the “timing and effectiveness” (p. 4) of the leaders’ response in a crisis are foundational to the determination of other major factors, such as reputation, finance, and operations. Leaders should communicate frequently and clearly (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Coombs, 2007; D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Garcia, 2006; Mazzei et al., 2012; Osburn & Gocial, 2020), including thoughtful messages that convey the current situation, what is known, what is not known, and what is being done (D’Auria & De Smet, 2020). Delayed communication due to not having enough information is detrimental to the employees’ perceptions of a leader (D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Koehn, 2020). Direct and thoughtful communication can dissipate immediate alarm (Brennan & Stern, 2017) and build trust (Koehn, 2020).

Relevant Leadership Competencies & the Role of Community College President

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) prepared an aspirational list of competencies for leaders and faculty of community colleges titled *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* (AACC, 2018). Within this framework, crisis communication is listed for every level in the

organization, with increasing levels of responsibility in successive leadership roles. For Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), which in North Carolina community colleges equates to the role of president, the competency for crisis communications relates to the expected actions of, “Continue to seek ways to create a safe campus environment. Be prepared to address crises in accordance with the college’s plans. Ensure that all units within the college understand their roles in responding to a crisis” (AACC, 2018, p. 87). While the competencies and corresponding behaviors are accurate and necessary skill sets, the AACC approach is stated in a crisis management structure rather than crisis leadership (Brennan & Stern, 2017) and falls short of a comprehensive perspective of crisis communication.

There is abundant literature extolling effective communication as a requisite skill for being an efficacious community college President (AACC, 2018; The Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream, 2013; Dirani et al., 2020; Valeau, 2021). A recent study on presidents of excellence in the California Community College system recognizes that communication strategies “ground all leadership decisions and were listed among the most important in dealing with challenges” (Valeau, 2021, p. 101). Trustees who hold roles on Boards also expect community college presidents to be excellent communicators (Aspen Institute & Achieving the Dream, 2013).

Three main themes emerged in the literature relevant to the role of community college president regarding crisis communication: sensemaking and meaning-making, risk-taking and reputation, and emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-care.

Sensemaking and Meaning-Making

Leaders have a role to be sensemakers (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Dirani et al., 2020; Eddy, 2003; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). Sensemaking is simply defined as, “the process by which individuals interpret changes around them and adjust their thinking and understanding of events accordingly” (Eddy, 2003, p. 453). Frandsen & Johansen (2011) explain that sensemaking, along with “handling the crisis”, is one of the most important aspects of a leaders’ role in an organizational

crisis (p. 355). Brennan and Stern (2017) include “sense-making and meaning-making” (p. 120) in the top six list of “core leadership tasks” (p. 124) that support a crisis leadership approach rather than operational roles to manage the crisis itself.

The role of sensemaking cannot be underestimated, and includes understanding the context of the crisis, the implications of the crisis and potential actions, and the effects on the organization and all stakeholders (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Petriglieri, 2020). Meaning-making is closely related to sense-making but differs in that it includes understanding the many ways stakeholders may perceive and understand the effects of a crisis, especially since crises include emotional responses (Brennan & Stern, 2017). In meaning-making, leaders set examples for stakeholders of how to respond and consider alternative perspectives to a crisis (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Konig et al., 2020). Meaning-making is similar to Eddy’s (2003) explanation of “framing” (p. 454), or choosing how to view and understand issues. Collective sensemaking, where leaders and stakeholders collaborate to embark on sensemaking, is threatened in organizations wherein the crisis has eroded the relationship between them (Diers-Lawson & Collins, 2022).

Risk-Taking and Reputation

Effective leaders are expected to take risks to advance the mission of their institution and achieve student success (AACC, 2018; Aspen Institute & Achieving the Dream, 2013). Organizational change also requires risk-taking (Tarker, 2019). During a crisis, “making mistakes and taking risks...is inevitable” (Thwaite, 2020, p. 205). Another type of risk-taking involves one’s reputation; individuals in leadership positions in IHE’s are vulnerable to reputational threats (Brennan & Stern, 2017) due to the often-inescapable nature of crises. In times of crisis, courageous leadership demands taking risks as part of sustaining the culture (Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021).

Another way that leaders take risks is by being vulnerable, which is the foundation for trust (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Meyer et al., 2016). Coinciding with trust, Diers-Lawson (2020) connects the

Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) Model with “risk communication” (p. 14), proposing that by understanding the relationships and perceptions in an organization, leaders are more apt to understand the risks and how to communicate with stakeholders.

Emotional Intelligence, Empathy, and Self-Care

Emotional intelligence has been a popular topic in current culture, but it was first developed decades ago by psychologists Salovey and Mayer (1990), who defined it as “a set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one's' life” (p. 185). Given that organizational crises give rise to emotions (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Mazzei et al., 2012), there is a natural and salient connection between crisis communication and emotional intelligence (Konig et al., 2020). Despite that emotional intelligence is a topic stemming from psychology, crisis literature notes it as imperative for leaders (Konig et al, 2020; Whittmer & Hopkins, 2022) and flagship leadership organizations, such as the AACC (2018), acknowledge emotional intelligence as an important “personality trait or ability required for the role” of president (p. 89).

There is some debate about the usefulness of emotional intelligence in leaders (Konig et al, 2020). The current measures of emotional intelligence are based on self-report, which may not be as reliable as other measures such as third-party assessments (Konig et al., 2020). Interestingly, some evidence suggests that emotional intelligence in a leader can both be helpful and harmful; for example, leaders who have high emotional intelligence may be better able to sense the environment to determine that a crisis may be ensuing but are also prone to have difficulty making unbiased decisions and may react to false alarms (Konig et al., 2020). Emotional intelligence includes interpersonal and intrapersonal elements (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), which lends credence to the topics of empathy and self-care in this discussion.

Empathy is defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as “the ability to comprehend another’s feelings and reexperience them oneself” (p. 195) and is noted to be a one of the key components of emotional intelligence. Empathy comprises cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components in response to the distress of others (Konig et al., 2020, p. 133), and involves being able to view others' perspectives. It also leaves an individual susceptible to taking on the emotions of others and showing warmth to individuals in distress (Konig et al., 2020, p. 133). Crisis literature frequently identifies empathy as a trait that leaders should show towards employees during crisis situations (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Forster et al., 2020; Konig et al., 2020; Mazzei et al., 2022; McLean & Warren, 2022; Orangefiery, 2020). Emotional intelligence, and the subset empathy, have been found to be especially relevant to overcome communication barriers and foster trust in remote work environments (Levasseur, 2012). The downside of empathy, much like emotional intelligence, is that it may culminate in leaders being too focused on emotions and encounter difficulty in making unbiased decisions (Konig et al., 2020).

The concept of self-care for leaders is prevalent in the literature regarding crisis and leadership, especially since the pandemic (Forster et al., 2020; Gallup, 2020; Koehn, 2020; Nichols et al., 2020; Thwaite, 2022). The mindset around leadership has shifted to realizing that the institution is more vulnerable when the leader is not performing optimally due to imbalance in self (Koehn, 2020). Therefore, leaders are advised to be aware of their own emotions and engage in self-care, which also serves as a model to their team (Koehn, 2020; Forster et al., 2020) and to value their own wellbeing with the same rigor as one’s employees (Gallup, 2020; Robison & Hickman, 2021). Self-care is not a task to complete, but instead, should become part of a leader’s routine (D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Nichols et al., 2020; Thwaite, 2022) so that the leader may “reliably deliver” when managing crises (Nichols et al., 2020, para. 9).

Employees as Internal Stakeholders

Employees differ from external stakeholders because they have individual stakes or investments in the organization; they earn a paycheck, have a sense of community and belonging and honor in their work and workplace, and an interest in the success of the organization (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Employees have a contractual relationship with their employer, which differs from the relationship an organization has with external stakeholders (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Research suggests that internal stakeholders respond both cognitively and emotionally to a crisis (Diers-Lawson, 2019; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Koehn, 2020), but that their responses to the organization and how it handles the crisis are influenced by aspects of their prior relationship with the organization (Diers-Lawson, 2019; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Kim, 2021; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016; Sturges, 1994) as well as their own unique perspectives of the crisis itself (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Furthermore, employees may have different stakeholder roles in an organization and the organization may classify employees according to the attributes of “power, legitimacy, or urgency” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

Employee responses to the crisis may be negative or difficult to mitigate, conjuring feelings of “insecurity, uncertainty, chaos, stress, betrayal, fear, grief, or anger” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, p. 354). Leaders should be aware of how their employees are processing a crisis, the subsequent information they are providing to employees, and allow employees opportunities to share with leaders their perspectives regarding the crisis (AACC, 2018; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Kim & Lim, 2020; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). It is critical for leaders to create intentional opportunities to listen and provide support (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020).

Employees as Senders and Receivers

Employees, as internal agents of the organization, are characterized as both “senders and receivers” of communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, p. 355; Mazzei et al., 2012). Researchers have highlighted the importance of two-way communication during a crisis, where leaders receive

information from employees (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Dhanesh & Picherit-Duthler, 2021; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Orangefirey, 2020), and employees receive information from employers (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Orangefirey, 2020) that is not filtered first by the news media (Brennan & Stern, 2017). Recent research has shown that the efforts undertaken prior to a crisis to engage in two-way symmetrical communication and develop positive relationships with employees is a key factor in organizational resiliency during a crisis (Kim, 2021) and effective internal crisis management (Kim & Lim, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis is an unprecedented crisis affecting individuals and systems (Stratone et al, 2022), which lends more credence to utilizing two-way communication between leaders and internal stakeholders (Baer & Duin, 2020).

As senders, employees communicate internally with peers, direct managers, and top-level managers, such as CEOs or presidents (AACC, 2018; Mazzei et al., 2022; Olsson, 2014; Sturges, 1994). However, employees also communicate with external stakeholders, media, family and friends, or others (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Mazzei et al., 2022; Mazzei, et al., 2012; Sturges, 1994). Communication from an employee as sender may be positive or negative; the message they share and how they subsequently act also depends on the level of trust and how the organization communicated to them (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Negative messages can adversely impact the culture within the organization and risk the external reputation of the organization (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Coombs, 2007; Diers-Lawson, 2019). The Warren and McLean Model of solution focused outcomes suggests that the organization will have better outcomes if leadership seeks communication and is receptive to the ideas of stakeholders during a crisis (McLean & Warren, 2022, p. 242).

Trust with Employees

Trust is a fundamental component of a healthy organization (Edmondson, 2020; Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017; Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Osburn & Gocial, 2020), yet the construct of trust within organizations is complex. The researcher has adopted the following definitions of trust:

“Psychological state of willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of a leader that derive in part from trustworthiness perceptions (Fulmer & Ostoff, 2017, p. 649), and “trust is an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 189).

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) offer a paradigm of trust that includes the “five faces” or factors of trust, “benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness” (p. 186). Each “face” is further defined by the Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) as follows: benevolence is “the confidence that one's well-being or something one cares about will be protected by the trusted person or group” (p. 187); reliability is the “extent to which one can count on another to come through with what is needed” (p. 187); competence means “some level of skill is involved in fulfilling an expectation” (p. 188); “honesty speaks to character, integrity, and authenticity” (p. 188); and openness is “the extent to which relevant information is not withheld; it is a process by which individuals make themselves vulnerable by sharing information with others” (p. 188).

Trust is developed at multiple levels, and research suggests that immediate leaders, or midlevel managers, play a role in how higher-level leaders are perceived through a “trickle-up” model (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017, p. 649), illustrating the importance of two-way communication (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Orangefiery, 2020). Boggs and McPhail emphasize the importance of the role, “midlevel leaders are the people who make everything happen” (2020, p. 11). Actions by organizations and the perceived expertise of leaders, their expected competencies, and their role impact the capability or desire of employees to trust (Hoppes & Holley, 2014).

Transparency is a product of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2020) and internal stakeholders seek transparency in communication (Mazzei et al., 2012) and clear vision from leaders (Wiard et al., 2022). Honesty and openness, which are essential elements of transparency and two of the “faces of

trust” (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999), align with leaders choosing to model vulnerability, which results in relationships characterized by trust (Meyer et al., 2016).

Trust in Times of Crisis

Trust within an organization begins prior to a crisis and continues with opportunities for dialogue during the crisis (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). Due to the chaotic nature of crises, trust becomes endangered during a crisis, and organizations should focus on protecting or restoring trust with employees (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Transparency from leaders is critical when an organization is experiencing a crisis, and leaders are tasked with clearly communicating pertinent information to employees, such as “what you know, what you don’t, and what you’re doing to learn more” (Edmondson, 2020, para. 1). But trust is more than top-down communication to employees; leaders should foster a climate of openness, where employees have “psychological safety” to share concerns and ideas and ask questions “without fear of personal repercussion” (Edmondson, 2020, para. 8). Leaders will be more empowered to assess and predict risks and identify issues in an organization and how to communicate with employees if they comprehend the impact of the culture they create (Diers-Lawson, 2020).

Internal stakeholders search, interpret, and share information about a crisis (Diers-Lawson, 2020; Mazzei et al., 2012) and embody a “stronger and more complex psychological [interaction] than most other stakeholders” because of their role in the organization (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011, p. 353). “Lack of sharing information leads to uncertainty, but the opposite can stabilize trust levels” (Osburn & Gocial, 2020, p. 899). Change during a crisis is expected, and leaders must intentionally seek to enhance trust in times of a crisis (Mendy et al., 2020; Wiard et al., 2022). Leaders are obliged to seek understanding and appropriately respond to the energy and emotions of internal stakeholders, which is utilizing emotional intelligence (Koehn, 2020) to build or maintain trust (Valeau, 2021).

Lack of communication or miscommunication when leading during a crisis can erode existing trust or create mistrust (Brennan & Stern, 2017; D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Hoppes & Holley, 2013). Furthermore, low levels of trust in administrators can result in issues in retention and performance of employees (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017).

Trust within Community Colleges

Hoppes and Holley (2014) suggest that the decentralized nature of higher education can lead to a negative impact on trust. Literature is sparse on the topic of community college faculty and trust or relationship-building with administration, but recent research that is primary to this study shows that effective communication is imperative to developing trust between administrators and community college faculty (Burlison, 2019; Osburn & Gocial, 2020). Interestingly, faculty have decreased perceptions of trust with higher administration than they do with midlevel managers or deans (Osborn & Gocial, 2020). This phenomenon may be due to less frequent communication or interaction with higher-level administrators (Osborn & Gocial, 2020). However, faculty are apt to have more trust in presidents who interact with faculty or have been prior faculty, are visible, respond to requests in a timely manner, are open, honest, and follow through (Osburn & Gocial, 2020). Many of these traits align with the five faces of trust (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Regarding immediate supervisors, such as program chairs and deans, research shows that faculty place more trust in their immediate supervisors who have been in the role more than five years versus those with less experience (Osburn & Gocial, 2020). “When people in an educational institution communicate poorly—whether incompetently, innocently forgetting, or intentionally avoiding communicating—that can cause problems in their own right or add fuel to the fire” (Osburn & Gocial, 2020, p. 900).

One method to assess communication and trust in community colleges is by administering a climate survey (Mazzei et al., 2012); a leader must be willing to accept the results of this type of survey, as it can lead to improving the culture of the organization. The Belk Center of Community College

Leadership and Research offers the PACE Climate Survey, a tool available to community college leaders to assess and understand aspects of the culture and increase communication to generate data-informed changes (Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2022).

Theoretical Frameworks and Supportive Model

The current study was guided by the convergence of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), the Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) model (Diers-Lawson, 2020), and the Contingency Theory of Conflict Management (Cancel et al., 1997). The two theories and one model are logical to support the direction of this study because they address the relationships between leaders and stakeholders regarding uncertainty, trust, and communication strategies to use in a crisis. Clear communication, including perspective-seeking, understanding what employees need, as well as awareness of a culture of trust, helped guide this research with community college presidents to understand their approach to crisis communication and their own perceptions of their communication with employees.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Berger and Calabrese (1975) offer the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, which is categorized as an interpersonal relationship theory. Uncertainty Reduction Theory explains that individuals seek knowledge during times of elevated uncertainty to mitigate tension (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Furthermore, increasing knowledge through communication builds trust during unpredictable times (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Berger and Calabrese's (1975) theory can be applied to the chaos and crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced by community college presidents and employees, especially when internal stakeholders sought information from administrators to reduce some of the uncertainty regarding work, remote teaching, and safety for individuals whose jobs could not be performed remotely.

Stakeholder Relationship Management Model

Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) Model (as described in Diers-Lawson, 2020) focuses on two-way relationships between stakeholders, issues, and the organization. Stakeholders will respond to a crisis based on “existing attitudes, experience with the organization, perceptions of susceptibility, efficacy, and reaction to the issue or risk” (Diers-Lawson, 2020, p. 35). Diers-Lawson (2020) suggests that the ability of an organization to successfully manage a crisis depends upon how it manages stakeholder relationships, including building trust, and should consider the reactions of the stakeholders when making strategic decisions, such as crisis communication. Application of the SRM to crisis communication with employees has been strengthened by recent research with private and public sector organizations (Diers-Lawson & Collins, 2022), and is foundational to this study to understand the tenets of communication and trust between community college presidents and employees during a crisis.

Contingency Theory of Conflict Management

The Contingency Theory of Conflict Management (Cancel et al., 1997) suggests that organizations should communicate with specific strategies when in a crisis situation. The basic theory suggests “the idea that an organization's or corporation's stance with outside publics is generally a mixture of advocacy and accommodation. What mix of advocacy and accommodation is potentially contingent upon a variety of internal and external variables” (Cancel et al., 1997, p. 60). Cancel et al. (1997) argues that the existing frameworks for communication are lacking due to a limited consideration of the complexities of organizations and the environments in which they operate. Cancel et al. (1997) includes factors to consider regarding internal characteristics, such as the organization itself, internal stakeholder groups such as the public relations department and the dominant coalition (top level management), and individual behaviors and traits of the dominant coalition, public relations team, and managers (Cancel et al., 1997). They further acknowledge that communication to one specific public can

simultaneously include multiple points on the advocacy-accommodation continuum. Although Cancel et al. (1997) theorize a continuum when communicating with external publics, their research acknowledges that internal factors are important considerations for selecting communication strategies. In this research study, the president represents the dominant coalition, and the employees are the stakeholders; the president determined what mix of crisis communication strategies to use on the advocacy-accommodation continuum and at what point in the crisis to use each approach.

Chapter Summary

Community colleges experienced a crisis of astounding magnitude during the global pandemic causing unprecedented challenges for community college presidents (Dirani et al., 2020; Mendy et al., 2022; Tarker, 2021). Effective communication, especially during a crisis, is critical to the operations and culture of a community college (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Garcia, 2006; Mazzei et al., 2022; Mendy et al., 2020). The literature review illustrates the connection between leadership traits, such as empathy, vulnerability, and emotional intelligence (Wittmer & Hopkins, 2022) along with intentional actions such as sensemaking, meaning-making, and clear, timely, frequent employee-centered communication to create or sustain an organizational culture of trust in community colleges (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Johnson & Jones, 2018; Konig et al., 2020; Mazzei et al., 2022). Two theories and a model lend structure to this research study to qualitatively discover how North Carolina community college presidents communicated with their employees during the pandemic and the self-perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication efforts.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research problem, purpose of the study, and research questions guiding the work. The chapter continues with the rationale for using a qualitative research design and how the interviews satisfied the research questions. The chapter will then explain participant selection and the role of researcher and subjectiveness, as well as the process and rationale for data collection and analysis. Next, the chapter will describe the safeguards of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and informed consent. Finally, the chapter will conclude with limitations and delimitations, and trustworthiness of the study.

All community college presidents pioneered through unprecedented times during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the fundamental missions of community colleges were initially at risk due to widespread uncertainty and steep enrollment declines (Fishman & Nguyen, 2021; Hahn, 2021; Nicola et al., 2020; North Carolina Community Colleges, 2022). Employees of community colleges, including part-time and full-time faculty and staff, look to leadership to communicate in times of crisis and to provide stability and build trust (AACC, 2018; Bojadjiev & Vaneva, 2021; Brennan & Stern, 2017). The relationship of the community college president with employees prior to the COVID-19 crisis may have influenced the method and frequency of communication that presidents used with their employees during the crisis (Cancel et al., 1997; Diers-Lawson, 2020). Furthermore, lack of communication or miscommunication when leading during a crisis can erode existing trust or create mistrust (Brennan & Stern, 2017; D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Hoppes & Holley, 2013). The purpose of this study was to understand the communication methods selected and utilized by North Carolina community college presidents with their employees during the prolonged crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and to ascertain their own perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The methodological approach for this research was a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) using face-to-face interviews as a source of evidence (Yin, 2009). A qualitative case study is defined by Merriam (1998) as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). The underlying philosophy of the methodologist Merriam’s qualitative research approach is the ongoing construction of knowledge and ascribed meaning by humans, or constructivism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constructivist approach as described further by Merriam & Tisdell (2016) lends itself to gathering data to understand the collective experiences and create meaning, such as interviewing community college presidents’ leadership experiences with crisis communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Description of Research Design

The purpose of this research was to understand the methods of communication used by community college presidents during the long crisis of COVID-19 and their own perceptions of the effectiveness of that communication. The researcher followed Merriam’s (1998) five steps in the research design: conduct a literature review, construct a theoretical framework, identify a research problem, craft and hone research questions, and select the sample using purposeful sampling. The purposeful sampling method required the researcher to identify the essential selection criteria that best aligned with the design based on the research questions (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The

researcher was the primary tool for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, the researcher was reflective and responsive; the researcher viewed the data through one's lenses and adjusted and adapted as needed when interacting with interviewees and the data (Merriam, 1998).

Rationale of Qualitative Research

A qualitative case study approach was used to understand and synthesize a broad set of perspectives and experiences and the meaning ascribed to them, which was not possible with a quantitative design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative case study research was the most appropriate method because the researcher was seeking to explore the experiences of community college presidents about something that has happened in the past and utilize it to create meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative case study research “is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 36); in this case, the North Carolina community college presidents’ and their communication during COVID-19 was the bounded system. Yin (2009) suggests that research designs utilizing “‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are more explanatory” and that “focus on contemporary events” (p. 9) leads to using the case study approach. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at the campus of each president, in their office suite, which aligned with the best practice for a participant to be in their “natural setting” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 181). Another key aspect of qualitative research is that the researcher is a research instrument and will conduct the interviews to collect data and then analyze the transcripts rather than use a tool created by someone else (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analysis occurred in inductive and deductive methods, which is a prominent feature of qualitative research, wherein the researcher used coding to identify themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016).

Role of the Researcher and Subjectiveness

The researcher engaged in journaling throughout to capture thoughts and connections while engaging in data collection and analysis (Amankwaa, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Journaling is said to improve the trustworthiness of the research (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To remain unbiased, the researcher refrained from asking leading questions and did not prompt the participant to answer in a predetermined way (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher maintained a neutral tone to avoid judgmental responses towards the participant (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Positionality Statement

The researcher is a female, white, mid-level leader and faculty member working in a large North Carolina community college, who has been employed for seven years at a singular community college. Thus, the researcher has the experience of working at a community college prior to and during the pandemic and was the recipient of communication from the president and president's cabinet members. As a doctoral student in a community college leadership program, the researcher has a vested interest in leadership and aspires to obtain higher administration roles within the community college system. Assumptions of the researcher, based on professional experiences, are that community college presidents have a personal and professional stake in communicating with faculty and staff, value two-way communication with faculty and staff, are aware of the culture of their college, and intentionally endeavor to foster a culture of trust within the organization. Another assumption is that the unprecedented crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the effectiveness of communication and may have initially distracted community college presidents from their normal communication patterns and methods. Finally, the researcher assumes the community college presidents will desire to participate and engage in honest reflection and share freely regarding a challenging topic. One bias of the researcher is the expectation that leaders communicate effectively with their employees, especially

in times of crisis, so that the employees sense connection to the leader and organization and achieve the mission of the institution. Another bias is that women may engage more in empathy than males. The researcher is aware of the power position of interviewees as community college presidents and the power differential between a community college president and doctoral student (McClure & McNaughtan, 2021). To aspire to mitigate bias, the researcher journaled, avoided leading questions, did not prompt the interviewees, maintained a neutral tone and body language, and engaged in member checking (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Institutional Review Board

After receiving approval from the committee, the researcher submitted the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application using the NCSU E-IRB portal. Approval was obtained from NC State University IRB (Appendix D). It was important for participants to maintain the ability to speak freely without concern for data to be identifiable. One way this researcher did this is through the use of pseudonyms. The researcher asked each participant to select a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality, since the population is small, and the sample is a limited number of community college presidents.

Data Security

All data was securely stored in the researcher's NCSU Google drive, which is password protected, utilizes 2-factor authentication, and was only accessible by the researcher. Data was accessed on a password protected computer, and all data was backed up in the cloud. Once research has been completed, all data with identifiers will be destroyed.

Informed Consent

Participants were informed in writing of the purpose of the study and their rights to participate in or not participate in the research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher also communicated that participants may withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason, and

without penalty (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants acknowledged receiving this information through email and provided their verbal consent prior to the interview.

Confidentiality

Participants were notified that their name and college name will be kept confidential throughout the research. Individuals who agreed to participate selected their own pseudonym for use in the study. However, to ensure a higher level of confidentiality, the researcher assigned pseudonyms based on the names of mountains in North Carolina. The researcher de-identified transcripts by removing names and locations and only used pseudonyms. All data was stored in the NCSU student Google drive, which is secure and only accessible through 2-factor authentication.

Participant Selection

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling with maximum variation and a two-tier approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling is selecting participants from whom a broad scope of information is gleaned to “learn about the issues of central importance” (Patton, 2015, p. 53) and used when the researcher seeks to “discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The researcher obtained a list of the 58 community college presidents from the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges and eliminated vacancies, interim presidents, and those who were newly appointed after January 1, 2020, to obtain participants for the case criteria. Presidents needed to have been in the role of sitting president at a North Carolina community college prior to the start of the pandemic to have time to gauge the culture of the college and to share experiences of communication with employees from prepandemic to present day.

The researcher sent an invitation (see Appendix A) using an NCSU student email account to those remaining on the list. Follow-up emails were planned, if needed, for reminders. If responses were not received within one week, the researcher would have engaged a gatekeeper at the institution and

may have contacted potential participants or a gatekeeper by email or phone. Selection was made from positive respondents to the invitation using a maximum variation approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to ensure access and a broad selection of presidents from geographic regions, representatives from urban and rural, large and small, as well as other demographics, such as race, gender, and time in the presidency (less than five years or over five years). The selected criteria are congruent with the research questions, in that the research will take place only in North Carolina due to the structure of the North Carolina Community College System, wherein each college is independent but all belong to the same system, and ease of access to the researcher. The researcher communicated the process for confirming and scheduling each interview.

Data Collection

The researcher utilized semi-structured face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions, as this was the best method to gather data on the personal experiences to answer the reason and manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of community college presidents' crisis communication with employees, their perception of trust within the organization, and their self-perception of the effectiveness of their communication. All interviewees were notified that the interview was going to be audio recorded using Otter.ai, and that only the researcher would have access to the Otter.ai audio recordings and transcriptions. Additionally, participants were advised that they may exercise their right to remove their consent at any time. The interview protocol included main questions, follow-up questions, and probes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) (see Appendix B). The interview began with general questions to gain trust and build rapport with the interviewee (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) such as years in the presidency and rationale for becoming a community college president. The researcher progressed to questions about the crisis communication policies or procedures, who assisted and how they selected those individuals, explored the crisis communication used by the president pre-pandemic and pandemic and the rationale for their selection, inquired about the culture of trust at the college

prepandemic and currently, and opportunities provided for two-way communication with employees. Additionally, the researcher ensured a connection between each research question and the interview protocol (see Appendix C).

The researcher began with one pilot interview with a colleague who was in the role of vice president in community college administration before conducting eight to twelve semi-structured interviews in a face-to-face format, with strong preference given to in-person interviews (Davies et al., 2021; Oliffe et al., 2021; Yin, 2009). If in-person interviews were not possible, the researcher planned to utilize the video platform Zoom through NCSU. Recent research has shown mixed reviews of synchronous virtual video interviews, with some challenges identified as connectivity issues, unexpected interruptions, location issues (e.g., joining a Zoom call via phone while driving), and distracting and incongruent backgrounds (Oliffe et al., 2021). Surprisingly and disparate from some prior research on virtual interview technology, interview participants shared freely, even regarding sensitive topics and were not put-off by participating in the virtual video platform (Jenner & Meyers, 2019; Oliffe et al., 2021). Some research suggests that observing nuances in body language or facial expressions can be more difficult in virtual platforms (Oliffe et al., 2021) and building rapport, which yields better information, can be diminished (Davies et al., 2021).

The researcher expected to conduct between eight to twelve interviews; the exact number was determined by the point of saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher audio recorded the in-person with Otter.ai on a password protected personal computer or passcode protected mobile device that were both connected to the internet, and then transcribed as suggested so that “everything said is preserved for analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 131). Transcription was completed using Otter.ai software and maintained in the researcher’s secure NCSU Google drive that is password protected and uses 2-factor authentication. The interviews and field notes included descriptive notations including pseudonym and date, as well as schematic information such as location, rural or urban, and number of

years in presidency to prepare for coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A separate electronic back-up copy of raw data and schematic information was maintained for preservation of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The researcher engaged in member checking for accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher uploaded the transcript of each interview to the researcher's NCSU Google drive as a Google doc and sent a private link via email to each corresponding participant for them to engage in member checking, with a timeframe of one-week for requested return. Participants were asked to use suggesting mode in the Google document to correct any errors and then notify the researcher when the review was complete. The researcher took field notes to capture observable data, such as body language, environment, etc., for interviews, due to the inability to capture non-audible components of an interview through audio recording (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Memoing, also termed journaling, was used to capture initial and ongoing thoughts and possible themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Instructions were provided to those who agreed to participate, along with a timeline and timeframe for the interview process. The estimated time for each interview was 45-90 minutes with an estimated additional 30-45 minutes for member checking. To avoid exploitation of participants, they will each receive access to the final research report (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Site Setting

Interviews were conducted in-person and efforts were made to meet in the participant's office on their campus (Davies et al., 2021; Oliffe et al., 2021; Yin, 2009). Participants selected their interview time to ensure no conflicts or interruptions. The researcher utilized "do not disturb" settings on the mobile device that records with the Otter.ai software to eliminate distractions. Conducting in-person interviews in the participant's office offered privacy for participants that could not be as readily assured in a virtual interview setting.

Data Analysis

Data consisted of transcribed interviews and field notes documented by the researcher. Constant comparative analysis was utilized (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016), which means data analysis began with the first interview and continued throughout the subsequent interviews, guiding any necessary changes to interview questions, and providing context for emerging themes. As cautioned by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the researcher was careful to include all data rather than only including data that has positive results and avoided the pitfall of using the data that only shows the participants in a complimentary manner. Data analysis began by using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to organize the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher utilized Dedoose cloud-based software for CAQDAS, which boasts “systems that meet the highest data security and compliance standards” (Dedoose, 2022).

Due to the inductive and comparative nature of qualitative data analysis, constant comparative analysis was the primary method that was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first cycle of coding was “In Vivo” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4) meaning in the participant’s own words, which allowed the researcher to reflect the perspectives and stated behaviors of the participants. The second cycle of coding employed categorization, using axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which is synthesizing the In Vivo codes into fewer and more comprehensive categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Next, the researcher employed thematic analysis, where the resultant categories were further analyzed into more abstract themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Once all data was collected, data was reviewed in its entirety for consistency with the preliminary findings, and the findings were updated as needed for the final analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). All data was securely stored in the researcher’s NCSU Google drive, which was password protected and utilized 2-factor authentication.

Process for Accessing Participants

- Step 1: IRB Approval
- Step 2: Identify potential participants
- Step 3: Invite participants
- Step 4: Provide instructions
- Step 5: Schedule interviews with participants
- Step 6: Interview participants

Process for Data Analysis

- Step 1: Transcribe interviews
- Step 2: Read transcriptions
- Step 3: Member checking
- Step 4: Update transcripts, if needed
- Step 5: Read transcripts again & review notes made during interviews
- Step 6: Code transcripts (In Vivo, categories, themes)
- Step 7: Record findings

Limitations

The research data only included interviews of a select number of North Carolina community college presidents and the field notes penned by the researcher. All interviews were planned to be conducted in person, if possible; however virtual video conferencing methods were planned to be utilized as a contingency due to circumstances such as COVID-19 health concerns or other scheduling challenges. Virtual video conferencing limits the researcher from observing body language outside of the view of the camera and obscures the environmental surroundings. As typical in qualitative research, the sample size is small and not generalizable. If a quantitative approach were used, such as a survey

instrument, the research could broaden the type of information gleaned, expand the geographic scope, and provide a greater opportunity for generalizability.

Delimitations

The study was limited to sitting North Carolina community college presidents who were in the role of president of a North Carolina community college as of January 1, 2020. Those serving as an interim president were excluded. The communication conducted by other administrators was not explored, nor were the perspectives of employees who received communication during the crisis. Additionally, the perspectives of students were not explored, as the roles of college employee and college student are disparate. Furthermore, it would have been difficult to identify and locate students who were enrolled at corresponding community colleges as early as January 2020.

Trustworthiness

Morse et al. (2002) aptly stated, “Without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility” (p. 14); thus, the researcher engaged in multiple methods to address rigor. The researcher invited participants to engage in member checking of transcripts for accuracy and clarification (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As suggested by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), a sufficient quantity of interviews were conducted to achieve saturation. The researcher used “rich, thick descriptions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257), including quotes from the participants and field notes to provide the potential for transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, by using a maximum variation approach to the participant sample, the researcher hoped to achieve greater possible application of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher endeavored to carry out the research in an ethical manner by acknowledging bias with self-reflection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), protecting the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) and using “rigorous thinking” (Patton, 2015, p. 703). Patton defends qualitative research’s rigor by extolling the use of rigorous thinking, which “combines (a) critical thinking, (b) creative thinking, (c) evaluative thinking, (d) inferential thinking, and

(e) practical thinking” (p. 702). These various types of thinking can be summarized as the researcher used multiple lenses during the research process to ensure every aspect was contemplated, analyzed, synthesized, and evaluated (Patton, 2015). Reliability and validity were captured in this study through “audit trails” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 366) and trustworthiness protocols (Amankwaa, 2016), such as reviewing transcripts and field notes and reviewing feedback from member checking with participants.

Chapter Summary

The researcher used a qualitative case study design with one-on-one face-to-face interviews with sitting North Carolina community college presidents. The qualitative research design aligned with the research questions and enabled the researcher to collect the experiences and thoughts of the presidents as they reflected on their communication strategies and self-perceptions of the effectiveness of such. Data analysis began with the first interview and continued throughout the subsequent interviews. Limitations included only using interviews and field notes as data. Delimitations for this study were that only North Carolina community college presidents who have been sitting presidents January 1, 2020 or before were included. The researcher focused on trustworthiness, reliability, and validity by using member checks, rich, thick descriptions, journaling, and audit trails. By using maximum variation in sampling, and rich, thick descriptions, there may be a greater opportunity for application of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to discover the crisis communication methods selected and utilized by North Carolina community college presidents with their employees during the prolonged crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and to ascertain their own perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication. This chapter presents findings based on the face-to-face, in-person interviews conducted with community college president participants across North Carolina regarding their communication with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Overview of Findings

Five themes and four subthemes emerged using the constructivist lens (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) during data analysis to answer the three research questions:

Theme 1: Presidents used Multimedia, Multi-channel Approaches for Communication

- a. Typical Communication Mixed with New Methods
- b. Presidents and Employees as Senders and Receivers
- c. Content and Frequency Varied but “Safety was Always Part of the Message”
- d. President's Designated Others to Help Convey Information

Theme 2: Presidents were Tenacious, “I Never Left”

Theme 3: Trust is Complex

Theme 4: Emotional Intelligence and Empathy are Essential to Trust

Theme 5: Perceived Effective Communication Despite Persistent Challenges

Data Collection

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at North Carolina State University, the researcher sent email invitations (Appendix A) to the 42 North Carolina Community College presidents who met the inclusion criteria for the research study based on purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The inclusion criteria established for this study was that president participants must have served in the role of sitting president at a North Carolina community college on January 1, 2020 or before, which was prior to the start of the pandemic so that the time to gauge the culture of the college and to share experiences of communication with employees from pre-pandemic to present day could have been acquired. Nineteen presidents responded to the invitation and 23 did not respond. Forty-three percent (n=18) of the 42 invitees agreed to participate and one declined. Of the 18 who responded affirmatively, the researcher used purposeful, maximum variation sampling to select participants to ensure a broad selection of presidents from geographic regions, representatives from both urban and rural settings, over 10,000 or under 10,000 student population at their institution, as well as other demographics, such as race, gender, and time served in the presidency (less than 5 years or more than 5 years). Thirteen presidents were selected and scheduled for in-person, one-on-one interviews. Three of the presidents included additional college personnel at the time of the interview, and to adhere to the research protocol of one-on-one interviews and rigor of the study to ensure consistent findings, those three transcripts were disregarded and not included in the data analysis. The remaining 10 participants' transcripts were included in the data analysis.

Face-to-face interviews (Yin, 2009) were conducted on the community college campus of each participant between October and December 2022. At the beginning of each interview, the participant received a hard copy of the informed consent form and gave verbal consent to participate and be audio

recorded. Interviews lasted from 35 to 120 minutes, with an average length of 65 minutes, and were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B). Otter.ai was utilized to record and transcribe the interviews. While pseudonyms were initially collected from participants, they are excluded in reporting the findings to further de-identify data and protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Research Participants

Participants were selected using a purposeful, maximum variation sampling approach (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participant demographics in the study are listed in Table 1, and include gender, race, and years of service in their community college presidency role. The percentage in Table 4.1 represents the percentage of the research participants, according to each demographic. Regarding gender, female presidents are overrepresented in the sample at 40% (n=4) female and 60% (n=6) male, whereas the population of North Carolina Community presidents in 2022 was 24% female and 76% male.

Table 4.1

Demographics of North Carolina Community College President Participants

Demographic	Category	<i>n</i>	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	4	40
	Male	6	60
Race	Black	1	10
	White	9	90
Years in Presidency	Less than 5 years	5	50
	More than 5 years	5	50

Note. *n* = 10. *n* = sample; percentage = percentage in the sample

The demographics of the institutions represented in the sample are listed in Table 4.2. The participant sample is comparable to the population of North Carolina community college presidents who

met the inclusion criteria for this study in terms of college size in headcount (14% over 10,000, 86% under 10,000), college setting (86% rural, 14% urban), race (10% Black, 90% White), and years in presidency (45% less than 5 years, 55% more than 5 years) (NCCCS, 2022a; State Board of Community Colleges, 2022). All regions of the state are represented.

Table 4.2

Demographics of Community Colleges Represented in the Sample

Demographic	Category	<i>n</i>	Percentage (%)
College headcount	Over 10,000	1	10
	Under 10,000	9	90
College setting	Rural	9	90
	Urban	1	10
Region	North Central	2	20
	Northwest	1	10
	Piedmont Triad	1	10
	Sandhills	1	10
	Southwest	3	30
	Western	2	20

Note. $n=10$. n = sample; percentage = percentage in the sample.

Description of Research Design

The purpose of this research was to understand the methods of communication used by community college presidents during the long crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and their own perceptions of the effectiveness of that communication. The researcher followed Merriam's (1998) five steps in the research design: conduct a literature review, construct a theoretical framework, identify a research problem, craft and hone research questions, and select the sample using purposeful sampling. The purposeful sampling method required the researcher to identify the essential selection criteria that

will best align with the design based on the research questions (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher was the primary tool for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, the researcher was reflective and responsive; the researcher viewed the data through one's lenses and adjusted and adapted as needed when interacting with interviewees and the data (Merriam, 1998).

Rationale of Qualitative Research

A qualitative case study approach was used to understand and synthesize a broad set of perspectives and experiences and the meaning ascribed to them, which is not possible with a quantitative design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative case study research was the most appropriate method because the researcher was seeking to explore the experiences of community college presidents about something that has happened in the past and utilized it to create meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative case study research “is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 36); in this case, the North Carolina community college presidents’ and their communication during the COVID-19 pandemic is the bounded system. Yin (2009) suggests that research designs utilizing “‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are more explanatory” and questions that “focus on contemporary events” (p. 9) lead to using the case study approach. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at the campus of each president, either in their office or the Board of Trustees conference room, which aligned with the best practice for a participant to be in their “natural setting” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 181). Another key aspect of qualitative research is that the researcher serves as a research instrument and conducts interviews to collect data and analyze the transcripts rather than using a tool created by someone else (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analysis occurred using inductive and deductive methods, which is a prominent feature of

qualitative research, wherein the researcher used coding to identify themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016).

Data Analysis

After data collection, the analysis included transcribing interviews and field notes taken by the researcher. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose software, a cloud-based software that boasts robust security (Dedoose, 2022). Constant comparative analysis was utilized (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016); data analysis began with the first interview and continued throughout the subsequent interviews, guiding any necessary changes to interview questions, and providing context for emerging themes. The researcher used member checking with all participants to ensure accurate transcription and intention of meaning. As cautioned by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the researcher included all data rather than only including data that had positive results and avoided the pitfall of using the data that only showed the participants in a complimentary manner.

Due to the inductive and comparative nature of qualitative data analysis, constant comparative analysis was the primary method used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first cycle of coding was “In Vivo” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4) meaning in the participant’s own words, which allowed the researcher to reflect the perspectives and stated behaviors of the participants. A total of 91 “In Vivo” codes were identified. The second cycle of coding employed categorization, using axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which synthesized the In Vivo codes into fewer and more comprehensive categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016) with a lens of considering answering the study’s research questions. Next, the researcher employed thematic analysis, where the resultant categories were further analyzed into more abstract themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016) to answer the research questions. All data was securely stored in the researcher’s NCSU Google drive, which is password protected and utilizes two-factor authentication.

Data Analysis Steps

The researcher conducted the following steps during data analysis:

Step 1: Transcribed interviews

Step 2: Read interviews, made corrections from any errors on transcript from Otter.ai

Step 3: Conducted member checking

Step 4: Updated transcripts, as needed

Step 5: Read transcripts again, made initial notes

Step 6: Coded transcripts (In Vivo)

Step 7: Documented ongoing memos, reviewed field notes

Step 8: Coded transcripts (In Vivo) a second time for constant comparative analysis

Step 9: Reviewed all In Vivo codes and formed categories using axial coding

Step 10: Thematic analysis of categories

Step 11: Record findings

Findings

Through qualitative data analysis, the researcher identified five themes and four subthemes that provide insight regarding the experiences and perceptions of community college president participants and their communication with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on the conversations with each participant, every college was at a different starting point when the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted their college operations. The Great 58 are diverse. Some were on an enrollment high or had a declining enrollment, others were emerging from culture shifts, had recent changes in leadership, or were seizing new, exciting opportunities. Depending upon the situations participants were experiencing at their college when the pandemic hit, communication, culture, and trust varied from college to college. One participant, Gibbes, summed up the overall experience:

Well, during the pandemic, it was you know, just as well as anyone, it was challenging. Pivoting from face-to-face to online. Trying to figure out how you're going to continue to operate while facing what was a deadly threat to each employee, our students, the communities, and loved ones. Trying to understand that, I mean, we all worked lots of hours, and trying to make the best decisions we could.

Even though each participant came into the COVID-19 pandemic from a differing vantage point, they all experienced the same pandemic, thus the case study approach was used to capture broad perspectives in the “bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 36) of the North Carolina community college presidents’ communication with employees during the pandemic. Table 4.3 provides a visual summary of the five themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

Table 4.3

Themes and Subthemes

Five Themes with Corresponding Subthemes	
1	Presidents used Multimedia, Multi-channel Approaches for Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Typical Communication Mixed with New Methods B. Presidents and Employees as Senders and Receivers C. Content and Frequency Varied but “Safety was Always Part of the Message” D. President's Designated Others to Help Convey Information
2	Presidents were Tenacious, “I Never Left”
3	Trust is Complex
4	Emotional Intelligence and Empathy are Essential to Trust
5	Perceived Effective Communication Despite Persistent Challenges

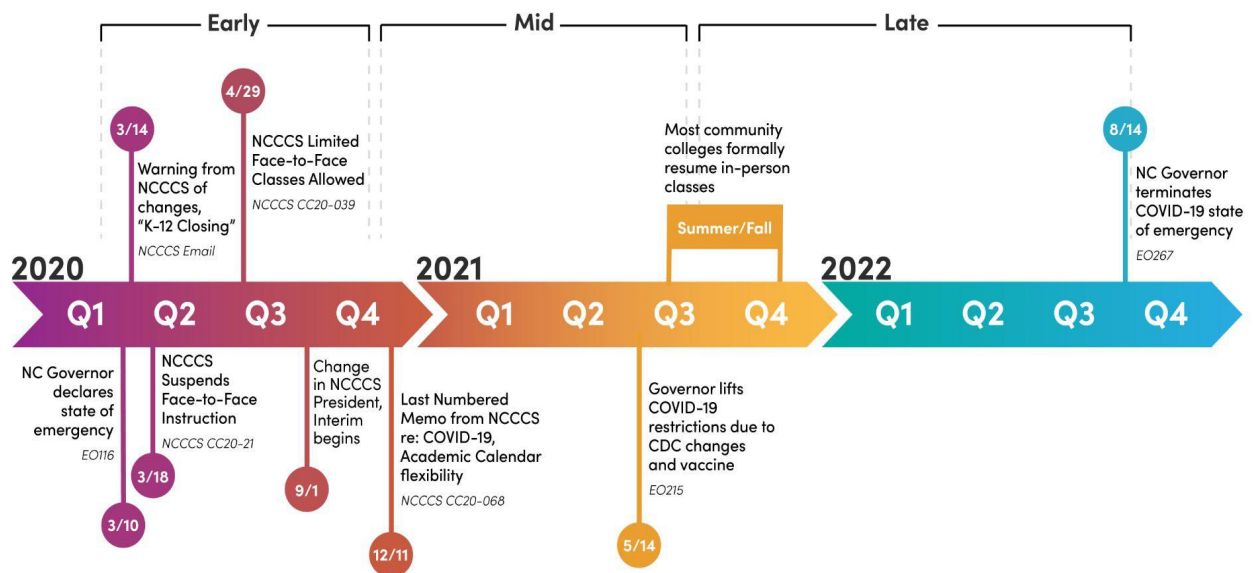
Timeline and Phases of the Crisis of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized as a long, slow-moving crisis (Tarker, 2021) and a multi-level crisis, affecting individuals and systems (Stratone et al., 2022). Literature suggests understanding a crisis in phases, including precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis, with porous boundaries

between the phases (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Mazzei et al., 2022). Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, or crisis, there appear to be subphases within the “crisis” phase that are evident in interview data. A review of state-level related official documents, such as Executive Orders from the Governor of North Carolina (State of North Carolina, 2023) and COVID Numbered Memos published by the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS, 2023), to better understand the words of the participants, support the subphase view of early, middle, and late phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect on NC community colleges. Figure 4.3 provides a visual overview of the key events that affected participants’ colleges and crisis communication.

Figure 4.1

Timeline of the COVID-19 Pandemic’s Influence on North Carolina Community Colleges



Note: EO refers to Executive Orders (State of North Carolina, 2023); NCCCS refers to Numbered Memos (NCCCS, 2023). Subphases of the Crisis: Early (March 2020 - December 2020), Phase 2: Mid (January 2021 - August 2021), and Phase 3: Late (September 2021 - August 2022)

Early Crisis Subphase, March 2020 - December 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic was officially recognized by the North Carolina Governor on March 10, 2020 when he declared a state of emergency (State of North Carolina, 2023), which began the early crisis subphase of the pandemic. Four days later, on March 14, 2020, NCCCS sent an email to all NC community college presidents to alert them that the Governor would be announcing the closure of K-12 school systems and a recommendation to prepare to make decisions about remote teaching and learning, but noted that 32 community colleges had already made plans to shift to remote instruction (J. Haygood, personal communication, March 14, 2020). On March 18, 2020, NCCCS issued its first COVID-19 numbered memo to all NC community colleges, suspending face-to-face instruction within 5 days by March 23, 2020 (NCCCS, 2023). However, there were some exceptions made, including training for the workforce that would be crucial for handling the pandemic, such as law enforcement, emergency response teams, and healthcare, with stringent guidelines for safety and providing options for students to continue or delay their education (NCCCS, 2023). The next major change occurred on April 29, 2020, when NCCCS allowed additional coursework to be held face-to-face with the same caveats for safety, expanding the scope of training to workers who would be crucial to responding to the effects of the pandemic, such as programs for transportation and facility infrastructure (NCCCS, 2023). On September 1, 2020, an interim NCCCS president was appointed, and only four more COVID numbered memos were issued by NCCCS. The last numbered memo was dated December 11, 2020, regarding flexibility for the spring and summer 2021 academic calendars. Simultaneously, the first COVID vaccine became available on the same date – December 11, 2020 (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2021). No further memos regarding COVID-19 have been issued by NCCCS (NCCCS, 2023).

Mid-Crisis Subphase, January 2021 - August 2021

The mid-crisis subphase of the slow-moving COVID-19 pandemic seems to be marked by when the COVID-19 vaccine became available, coupled with a lack of information from NCCCS regarding the

crisis. During this phase, on May 14, 2021, the NC Governor lifted some of the prior COVID-19 restrictions, including wearing masks indoors (State of North Carolina, 2023). Most participants in the study noted that they resumed in-person classes either in the 2021 summer or fall semesters, which created another wave of crisis communication to employees, ensuring their safety and explaining protocols for returning to face-to-face instruction. On August 23, 2021, the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approved the first COVID-19 vaccine (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2021), which marks the end of the mid-crisis subphase. The NCCCS did not issue any numbered memos regarding returning to normal operations related to COVID-19 (NCCCS, 2023).

Late Crisis Subphase - September 2021 - August 2022

The late crisis subphase of the COVID-19 pandemic entails most community colleges returning to near normal operations, without mandatory masking, allowing full capacity classrooms, and no social distancing requirements. On August 14, 2022, the NC Governor terminated the COVID-19 state of emergency (State of North Carolina, 2023), signifying the endemic stage.

Many participants noted that they still collect COVID-19 reports from employees and students, but it is no longer their top priority. One participant, Winter Star, shared concerns about employees, “They're a little bit more fragile than they were before. And they experienced death in their families, divorce, they experienced health crises. They're a lot more fragile, I think, even now”. Collins shared, “The energy is not quite the same”. Regarding shifting to the endemic, Winter Star said, “I also think we're in a different kind of crisis now. I think we're in a political, divisive crisis. And so, pandemic, right, and we're out and we're endemic, but now we're in a situation where we're dealing with a different kind of crisis, daily”. Participants and community college personnel, as well as the operational aspects of the IHEs, are recovering from the emotional, financial, and social effects of the long, slow-moving crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they move into the postcrisis phase.

The findings of this research study are organized and presented by each research question (RQ) along with the associated themes and subthemes. Table 4.4 provides direct quotes from the ten participants organized by themes.

Table 4.4

Quotes from Participants by Themes

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, “I never left”	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
Mitchell	<p>“Developing new ways to communicate with each other.”</p> <p>“I started recording video messages, and that whole [first] summer I did a message every couple of weeks.”</p>	<p>“We were definitely building the plane as we were taking off.”</p> <p>“There was never a day that someone wasn’t here. I was here the entire time.”</p>	<p>“So I’ve always tried to convey an open door...but compared to today, with the pandemic, it gave us an opportunity to really amplify our communication across campus. And we had to.”</p>	<p>“It’s a foundation, you know, a core...I’ve learned it’s all about building relationships, and so you just get to know folks, and you sense what their issues, concerns, and passions are.”</p>	<p>“I think it was quite effective. I think we tried to be forthright and transparent, timely, persistent, proactive.”</p>
Marks	<p>“We used all of our communication mechanisms then that we had in place, the text messaging, emails, we put it on the website.”</p> <p>“We did videoconference and taped them and put</p>	<p>“I was always here...my door is open.”</p> <p>“I did have employees that would email me and say, I’m not comfortable in this and this. And so, I’d say, ‘Well,</p>	<p>“We came out strong than ever”.</p> <p>“So that’s how I build trust... communicate, communicate, communicate.”</p> <p>“I feel like I have the trust of the majority of the campus all the time.”</p>	<p>“In today’s world, it [emotional intelligence] is a must...you can be in danger as a president when you start making decisions about yourself.”</p>	<p>“I wouldn’t change a single thing we did. I think we made all the right decisions because we do communication . We had the right people at the table.”</p> <p>“From my perspective, I think it was</p>

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, “I never left”	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
	them out there.”	let's talk about it'.”			very, very effective.”
Craig	“Email, chat, text, website, social media...the website is our official record.” “We use Teams...early on that was the predominant one we used...we have a monthly employee meeting where I speak to all employees.”	“I heard from them [employees] more. Because everyone was in such a crisis mode.”	“I think the sense of trust between me and the employees is above average, it was before, it is now during COVID. There may have been an interim that it went down some. I think that they trust, and I try to build an atmosphere of understanding that I will always make my decisions in the best interest of the student.” “I like to walk around and talk to people.”	“Emotional intelligence is an extremely important skill in leadership.” “I think empathy is critical. I tend to focus on empathy more from the student perspective than the employee perspective... we empathize with our staff.”	“Above average. Nothing perfect. Certainly misstepped, certain things we had to deal with.”
Guyot	“And then once we realize, okay, this is gonna take longer, that summer is where, the summer 2020, is	“I was trying to engineer, how are we going to work safely while still being on campus? And	“Because I want them to know, I'm genuinely interested and concerned about them as people. And not	“Yeah, well, I think it is very, very important to understand, appreciate and	“I think it was highly effective to be quite honest.” “And, you know, just the

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, "I never left"	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
	where I think I started to improve on the more consistent, more informative communication with people, as often as they needed to."	how am I going to satisfy the psychological needs of employees by spacing them out, giving, you know, limiting or requesting that people don't have meetings in their offices... I was trying to think about how are we going to keep people here, but yet keep people safe."	just them being here working."	incorporate emotional intelligence, thinking, and action within our work"	whole angst and anxiety of the unknown. And how deadly is this thing?"
Celo	<p>"In the early days, it was very stressful...we used a multimedia, multi-channel approach...in the beginning, we used a lot of video because we wanted it to be personal."</p> <p>"This could not be a communication</p>	<p>"It was complicated. It took a lot of energy."</p> <p>"In the end, I was weary."</p> <p>"So, it is a changing message along the way, and you have to be very strategic about them."</p>	<p>"I would say that the pandemic, given the circumstances of how we worked, and we lived, gave us all more time to pay attention to those things that made us question the trustworthiness of one another, entities, and</p>	<p>"I'm not sure you could do an executive job in community colleges anymore if you don't have a high sense of emotional intelligence, because we're in the people business and you know, I</p>	<p>"I want to believe that we did it at the right cadence throughout the arc. Probably give us a four and a half."</p>

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, "I never left"	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
Gibbes	<p>just from the top because we do have a very collaborative environment, very empowered environment."</p> <p>"So, you communicate what information is needed as quickly as possible. And then as it evolved, then, what we ended up doing was sending out a lot of emails. And then of course, once we realized we weren't going to be back, then started having those Zoom meetings and the conversations were taking place on Zoom."</p>	<p>"During the pandemic...it was challenging, Pivoting from face-to-face to online. Trying to figure out how you're going to continue to operate while facing what was a deadly threat to each employee, but our students and the communities and loved ones. Trying to understand that I mean</p>	<p>complexities in our communities."</p> <p>"And I think the bottom line is we really do trust one another as people."</p> <p>"And then as we started coming out of the pandemic, of course, it took a hit. Individuals started forming their individual opinions about what work should look like after the pandemic."</p>	<p>think how you go about your work both behaviorally, community, and how you communicate to people, just kind of that sense of culture of care."</p> <p>"I think it's [emotional intelligence and empathy] becoming more important now than ever."</p>	<p>"So, it was me and the leadership team saying, Okay, how are we going to communicate this?"</p> <p>"I think we attempted to over communicate early on. And I think we did that, not so much that people were tired of hearing, but there was so much that was changing so frequently, we were communicating almost daily,</p>

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, "I never left"	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
Roan	<p>"So, when I felt like they needed to know exactly how I was supporting them, or going to lead the college, I think it needed to come from my office."</p> <p>"So, we did try to do all of that and change but what was I think just as important was we were just trying to make sure people still felt like they were a part of what we were doing."</p>	<p>we all work lots of hours and trying to make the best decisions we could."</p> <p>"I came in every day...I felt like people needed to know I was here."</p>	<p>"The pandemic exacerbated it. I think our polarized world and the bombardment of consistent negative information has caused people to trust everybody less."</p>	<p>"They're incredibly important. I think some people are more comfortable with allowing those traits to be a part of their decision making than other individuals are. I will say, personally, when I pay less attention to empathy is when I sometimes feel like I stumbled."</p>	<p>about what was happening. And then as we settled into what became that new normal, the communication became more routine."</p> <p>"But those, so it wasn't just all the ways we tried, it was what we were trying to do, because we did have to keep talking about, what you know, what are the safety protocols? What are they now? What is what has changed from the CDC, because we were trying to follow that. What's happening in our community? What are we hearing from the governor's office?"</p>

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, “I never left”	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
Winter Star	<p>“When an institution is in the middle of a crisis, they want to hear from the CEO.”</p> <p>“Crisis communication ...you need to be as transparent as possible with everyone, but there are some things that you don't necessarily need to share. And timing is everything, is when you share it...I mean, I think it needs to be shared, but it needs to be</p>	<p>“So how can we support students, but yet keep our faculty and our staff safe, but yet continue to operate the college?”</p> <p>“Every day, day in and day out, it was 12 or 15 hours of crisis management, right? Information coming at us from all different directions, everywhere. It was just coming at us</p>	<p>“So, I trust that everybody, and I always start out with that, I trust that they're doing their job and unless somebody tells me different, I have really no reason to believe that they're not.”</p> <p>“And I think that they did, and they look to me as the leader...so I think during the pandemic, I think they really trusted.”</p>	<p>“It's probably one of the most important skills that you could possibly have. Because at the end of the day, regardless of the position of the institution, or the role, it's really about the person.”</p>	<p>“And so, I think that, I think early on, we were more effective. Because both parties were trying so hard. I think during the pandemic people got weary.”</p> <p>“We really, really did a good job.”</p> <p>“It was hard to decipher what's fact and during the pandemic, the information was changing so rapidly, that as soon as you put something out or you shared something out, it was changed. It was changed by the CDC. It was changed by DHHS, or it was changed by your local health department and the</p>

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, "I never left"	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
	shared in the appropriate way. In the right format for the time and context for everybody involved."	as fast as possible."	"I feel like they trust, but you know, there's always going to be people in your institution that are always going to be skeptical, and that's okay."		guidance was different. That crisis was very, very different than most other crises that we deal with."
Collins	<p>"So, we communicate by your telephone, by your computer screen, text, emails just about every kind of way."</p> <p>"I would say that we shifted that based on what was happening at the time. We were kind of responding to and reacting to whatever was going on at the time."</p> <p>"We did some Zoom sessions. We did -- that is something that changed our lives."</p>	<p>"We get through it, and just continue to cheer them on and push through it while I'm behind the scenes going, this is hard, it is real. It is a struggle. But what would I have done differently? I can't think of anything. I really, it was such a bizarre time."</p>	<p>"I don't feel like the pandemic has changed that at all. I mean, I think I felt like they, there was a high sense of trust prior, and I feel the same way today."</p> <p>"I think just be upfront with people, be honest with people to tell them as much information as you can. And I think people know that I am, I have their best interest at heart."</p>	<p>"I think it's important for your team to know you care."</p>	<p>"And then the reality kind of sank in and with what the immediate future was going to look like with you know, so much confusion coming from the CDC. All the guidance we were getting from the State Health, CDC, your local health departments. We had lots and lots of meetings."</p> <p>"So, I think we gauged it pretty well. I mean, I don't I don't know of anything we</p>

Participant	Theme 1: Presidents used multimedia, multi-channel approaches for communication	Theme 2: Presidents were tenacious, “I never left”	Theme 3: Trust is complex	Theme 4: Emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to trust	Theme 5: Perceived effective communication despite persistent challenges
					would have done differently. I felt like we were pretty level with how we responded to the crisis.”
Chapman	<p>“I think, first of all, they prefer to hear it from me directly. You know, I think it means more, when the upper-level leader takes the time to, you know, talk directly with the employees as opposed to, you know, try to put stuff in email.”</p> <p>“Website, email and those other, the regular update meetings, you know, we had those on a fairly regular basis.”</p>	<p>“First of all, I never left. I was here every day...so I think people knew that and, you know, we tried to let them know that, you know, we're keeping on. This college is continuing to move forward.”</p>	<p>“I think trust was gained and strengthened during the pandemic. I think people felt like we were very open and honest with them.”</p> <p>“If they feel like they can trust the President and the President's communicating and sharing information...I think that changes the culture of the institution. You know, they think—people react differently.”</p>	<p>“You know, it's all about people. Everything's about people. Everything's about relationships... I'm very, I guess empathetic to our employees and making sure that we take care of our people. They're our greatest asset.”</p>	<p>“I think it was effective, very effective, and the feedback we got said, because we asked...through surveys and those kinds of things, and again, I go back to people who will tell you, especially in a survey what they think...we received tremendous positive feedback about the level of communication and transparency... so, I feel really good about it.”</p>

Note. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher based on the names of North Carolina mountains.

Findings for Research Question 1

RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic? Six of the semi-structured interview questions were linked to RQ1 (Appendix C). Seven categories emerged and were further synthesized into two themes and four subthemes.

Theme 1: Presidents Used Multimedia, Multi-channel Approaches for Communication

President participants commonly conveyed that communication with employees was transparent, timely, and person-centered. They described themselves as leaders who are available and collaborative who strive to empower others. They predominantly used the typical methods of communication (e.g., email, meetings) but adopted some new approaches. The methods, message, and timing shifted as the pandemic progressed, but participants affirmed, “it was driven by safety the whole time”. They communicated to and with employees, creating opportunities for two-way communication. Furthermore, they relied on others (e.g., public information officer, human resources director, unit supervisors) to assist them with communication to employees.

Subtheme A: Typical Communication Mixed with New Methods. Participants explained that they used communication tools during the pandemic that are similar to those used in daily operations and/or other crisis situations, with the exception of video conferencing tools that were broadly adopted at the beginning of the pandemic. Participants used email and the college website to quickly disseminate information and provide a record for employees. The majority stated that “email is our official communication” and indicated sending weekly emails or emails as often as needed. One said they used email as the official method but preferred to deliver messages personally via video conferencing during the pandemic. A few indicated using social media to share information.

Methods of communication cited by participants that provided “personal [connection]”, as one Chapman noted (i.e., where one or more communicators could be seen and heard) were in-person meetings, video conference meetings, recorded question and answer (Q & A) sessions, pre-recorded

videos, and real-time connections via closed social media groups. One method that was not able to be used with as much frequency was walking around campus to talk with individuals or groups, especially early in the pandemic due to the majority of employees working remotely, or for those on campus, due to health and safety concerns.

Participants were all willing to embrace new forms of communication, such as using Zoom or Teams for video conferencing, so that they could connect more effectively with varying sizes of groups during times when meeting in-person was not possible due to health and safety concerns. Some even found video conferencing to be “more convenient” and have maintained at least some meetings in that synchronous video format once operations returned to normal, and/or have offered a hybrid meeting format for employees.

Subtheme B: Presidents and Employees as Senders and Receivers. Many participants made comments that aligned with one specific reflection by Marks, “[employees] wanted to hear from me...I understood that power of the relationship of the office.” Communication directly from the president, or top-down communication, was done via email, newsletters, meetings, phone calls, texting, video conferencing, pre-recorded videos, social media, and postal mail. Collins stated, “It all came out under my signature”. Craig stated, “If it’s a safety concern, it’s gonna come from me”.

Some types of communication facilitated two-way dialogue (e.g., meetings, phone calls). Participants provided a variety of connection points for dialogue to ensure employees heard from leaders and connected with peers in the organization. Two-way communication included live Q & A sessions in person or via video conference, meetings (i.e., typically in-person meetings were with cabinet members or workers whose job duties required them to be on campus), phone calls, and live events through closed social media groups. One participant, Roan, said, “I would go on for an hour and just kind of chat [with the employees]”. Winter Star said,

We made it where they could join via Zoom and I had a facilitator. So I shared out -- we did this multiple times, this was really successful...I was able to answer the questions, and if I wasn't able to answer the questions, my team was there to be able to say okay, let's talk about that. And here's what we're doing. And here's how that's working and, you know, keep communicating with us about how it's going out there and with your students. And that way we could have actual live Q & A without being in the room together. It worked beautifully.

Two-way communication via dialogue provided real-time opportunities for employees to interact with participants, share perspectives and needs, ask questions and receive answers, and increase connection to the college, leaders, and peers.

Participants also relied on one-way communication from employees, or bottom-up communication, for employees to share their needs and perspectives. Several participants disseminated employee surveys during the pandemic regarding culture or captured varying types of needs of the employees (e.g., personal/financial resources, human resources regarding leave or disability status, or technology) during the pandemic via an electronic form available to employees. One shared an idea of using a crowdsourced Google spreadsheet to collect comments and questions to ensure they were addressing the concerns of all employees during Q & A sessions. The Google spreadsheet was widely used and provided leaders at that community college a way to sort and organize content to address employee concerns more effectively.

Subtheme C: Content and Frequency Varied but “Safety was Always Part of the Message”.

Participants shared that they followed existing protocols for crisis communication, especially in the early subphase of the crisis, when the North Carolina Governor and NCCCS were initially transmitting executive orders and numbered memos (Figure 4.3) (NCCCS, 2023; State of North Carolina, 2023). They noted that earlier communication to employees was more focused on safety and concern and shifted over time to more operational aspects. However, they were also clear that the safety message was

always part of their communication. Celo said, “over time, it became a little bit more written, a little bit more who, what, when, where, and why, a little more tactical”. Frequency of the direct communication from the participant also differed depending on the role the employee held at the college, where executive leadership teams may have met as often as daily, even in-person, and other types of employees may have received written communication via email or attended a video conference meeting and had less individual connection with the participant.

Some participants noted increased waves of communication were necessary at certain times; those seemed to be at the beginning of the pandemic and then again when they asked the majority of employees to return to campus in 2021 (see Figure 4.3). Collins was concerned about compounding fear by communicating too frequently regarding safety, “I did not want to create fear. And so I think providing information is one thing, but beating it to death can create fear when some people were already afraid”. Gibbes explained “I told the employees I wouldn’t communicate with them until I had new information”, but then regretted that decision due to a lack of no new information. The result was less frequent communication to their employees. The timeline provided in Figure 4.3 illustrates that NCCCS sent the last numbered memo regarding the pandemic in December 2020, and there were very few sent after the appointment of an interim NCCCS president who assumed the role on September 1, 2020 (NCCCS, 2023).

Overall, communication with employees was more frequent during the pandemic than prior to the pandemic, peaked again around the time the Governor lifted the COVID-19 restrictions and when most colleges were preparing to resume in-person classes, and then slowly declined after the successful return to campus until the Governor terminated the state of emergency (see Figure 4.3).

Subtheme D: President's Designated Others to Help Convey Information. Another component of communication is who delivers the message, apart from or along with the president. Many participants utilized executive level leaders in the organization or community, such as the public

information officer, human resources director, communication team, other leaders within the institution, and directors of local health departments to assist the participant or to produce content and communicate with employees. Mitchell stated, “It doesn’t always come from me, it just depends on the messaging”. Mitchell further shared that they used others to assist for speed, effectiveness, or specific content, such as to “match what the CDC, DHHS, and local health department [communicated]” or being aware of regulatory requirements for communication of using Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funds. Winter Star and Mitchell noted that they frequently invited the director of the local health department to video conference meetings with the employees for Q & A. Celo that they delegated communication responsibilities after the initial crisis waned, moving into the mid-crisis subphase, “as we got moved along, [I] passed the torch”.

The first theme explored the methods used by participants in communicating with employees, as well as discussed the handpicked individuals the participants called upon to assist. Subthemes included the typical and novel methods of communication used, presidents and employees all engaged in the roles sending and receiving communication, the content and frequency of communication varied, but always included safety, and presidents called upon others in the organization to assist with communication. The next theme moves beyond the operational aspects of communication and explores the paradox of the significant burden participants experienced and the enduring resolve they demonstrated while leading during the crisis.

Theme 2: Presidents Were Tenacious, “I Never Left”

Overwhelmingly, the commitment to the employees and the institution was illustrated by the consistent messaging and heroic efforts to keep everyone safe and the college operational. Participants faced complex issues, found the work “Hard”, “Exhausting”, and continuously navigated “A lot of unknowns”. They frequently solved problems. Winter Star stated, “Every day, day in and day out, it was

12 or 15 hours of crisis management”. They did not give up, which demonstrated resolve, resourcefulness, care for employees, and dedication to the mission of the institution.

A strong and compelling message from many participants was “I never left”, meaning they were physically present working from their office on campus, as well as psychologically and mentally present. Participants clearly communicated that they “Did not shut down” or “The college never closed”, even if most learning shifted to remote teaching and remote provision of student services. The participants interpreted “Not shut down” as the college was functional, delivering learning and providing student support, even if doing so remotely. They also noted that “Someone has to be here” [to take care of the buildings and grounds]. The institution was open for business, even if the majority of buildings were closed and very few employees were physically present. The participants’ continued presence and actions communicated trust to their employees.

Participants also articulated the weight and responsibility of the role of president. Gibbes noted that in the early subphase of the pandemic they, “Tried to have communication directly from me as much as possible, so that everybody understood these decisions are being made by me. If you don’t like them, they’re on me”. Others had similar sentiments, indicating they were taking full responsibility for decisions and actions.

Several participants mentioned the support they received from other NC community college presidents, whether individually or collectively through the North Carolina Association of Community College Presidents (NCACCP). Methods of communication included phone calls, emails, and group virtual meetings. Some stated they talked individually with other presidents on a frequent basis. Participants stated they engaged in either regional or statewide NCACCP virtual meetings to share general and specific information about how each was handling the COVID-19 crisis, return to campus issues, concerns common across colleges, and to listen. The mission of the NCACCP is, “Fostering and promoting growth, progress and general welfare of North Carolina’s Community Colleges through the

unified efforts of the presidents” (NCACCP, 2023). Participants relying on others in the same role of president was an unexpected finding.

The research findings regarding communication, from participants to employees, show that participants used all available methods of communication, adopted some that were novel, and provided at least some opportunities to hear directly from employees. Despite persistent challenges, personal exhaustion, and a long, slow-moving crisis with varying amounts of guidance from officials (e.g., NCCCS), participants were present and engaged leaders. The next section relays the findings of the analysis of the culture of trust as related to communication.

Findings for Research Question 2

RQ 2: How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? Two of the semi-structured interview questions were linked to RQ2 (Appendix C). Upon analysis, two themes emerged.

Theme 3: Trust is Complex

A common thread throughout participants' interviews was, “Trust that I'm showing up as president...I'm not just here to do the work. I'm here because I am all in”. Trust is defined as a “Psychological state of willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of a leader that derive in part from trustworthiness perceptions (Fulmer & Ostoff, 2017, p. 649), and “An individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 189). Thus, effective communication is one crucial element of trust. Gibbes reflected on transparency:

Be transparent...where there's an information void, people...make assumptions. And if you're not sharing information, they assume there's a reason that information isn't being shared. And it must be for some nefarious reason. So it builds the seeds of distrust, and that's the last thing that we need is distrust between any employee and the administration of the institution.

Most participants indicated an “above average” culture of trust within their community college overall, presumably as compared with their perceptions of other colleges or what they had heard in personal conversations with other presidents or in meetings within the NCACCP. Common descriptions regarding institutional culture included, “Family”, “I trust them [employees]”, “Culture of care”, and “We really are here for the community”. Regarding changes in trust from prepandemic to the COVID-19 pandemic, a few stated that trust increased during the pandemic, some reflected that trust declined during the pandemic, one shared that trust remained high with no changes, and two could not explicitly provide their assessment of trust. Of those two, one was new to the college, but acknowledged a culture of “family” and “care” at the college, which often underlies trust. Winter Star suggested employees would be the best source to determine the level of trust in the president stating, “I can’t sit back and say whether they trust me”. Winter Star and Roan both acknowledged that “There is always a group who will not trust any administration”, and regarding the non-trusting group, Roan said, “I have not figured out exactly how to help people see that they can trust”.

Trust also stems from congruence between words and actions as well as positive regard and how misinterpretation or fear can inhibit trust. The three participants who noted a decline in their perception of trust, as gauged by their conversations with employees, were three who rated trust as above average prepandemic. The decline in trust, moving towards mistrust, of the participants and their leadership during the pandemic was attributed to different causes by each of the three participants. Craig said, “One of my weaknesses is I am very matter of fact”, and shared that they focus on students more than employees in terms of empathy. Winter Star made decisions for the college and community that the employees were fearful of, and thus trust declined in the interim. Gibbes stated, “During the pandemic, culture took a hit because of everything that was happening, the unknown”, and shared that the lack of communication from the NCCCS office after the System president resigned attributed to sending less communication to their employees. The void of information from NCCCS compounded with

the “fatigue” felt by the participant resulted in Gibbes reflecting, “I think that’s where we lost some of that effectiveness.”

An example of building trust was shared by a participant who exhibited transparency and sensemaking through communication, such as disseminating information in the early subphase of the pandemic from the NCCCS office or the North Carolina Governor and “Helping employees make sense of it”. Others cited building trust as part of “Building relationships”, achieving high outcomes, or being exceptional at communication.

A common sentiment among participants was, “The pandemic was more than just a disease”, which is illustrated further by Roan explaining, “I think our polarized world and the bombardment of consistent negative information has caused people to trust everybody less.”

Participants desired to create a culture of trust by communicating consistently and transparently, and helping employees make sense of the changes and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on everyday work. Trust is difficult to objectively measure, yet participants trusted that their employees would put their trust in them to make the right decisions as they led the organization through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 4: Emotional Intelligence and Empathy are Essential to Trust

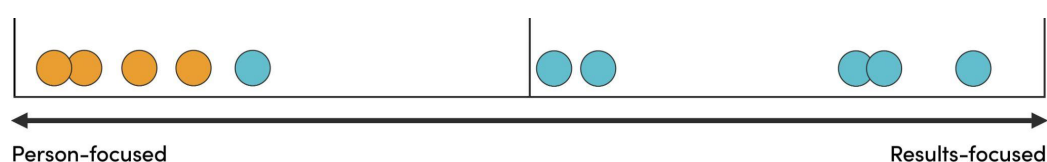
Nearly all participants’ responses included acknowledging that, “Emotional intelligence is a foundation, a core” to their role as the top leader of their IHE. Another strong sentiment, voiced by Celo, was, “You can't really be in the people-business and do what we do if you don't [have empathy]”. Alternatively, there were three participants who had difficulty answering the questions regarding emotional intelligence and empathy; one confused empathy with sympathy, and two were less aware of the concept of emotional intelligence and the connection to their role.

In analyzing the data surrounding emotional intelligence and empathy as related to the culture of trust, a pattern emerged within the case. There seems to be a continuum of person-focused to

results-focused regarding the culture as represented by the participants (see Figure 4.2). Upon further examination, this is the only theme with a recognizable gender differentiation. Statements regarding culture, emotional intelligence, and empathy made by all four women (n=4) and one male (n=1) are decidedly more person-focused. The other five males (n=5) fall in various places on the continuum, from midpoint to almost the far side of results-focused.

Figure 4.2

Continuum of Person-Focused Culture to Results-Focused Culture



Note. This figure illustrates the continuum from person-focused to results-focused leadership of the president and the culture fostered by their leadership. Based on In Vivo analysis, yellow represents the approximate place on the continuum of female presidents and blue represents male presidents.

A common element was, “show empathy of uncertainty”, meaning showing additional empathy when employees experienced unpredictable times. The increased empathy was demonstrated through methods of communication, such as using video because, “They needed someone they trusted, a voice, a person, a face that they knew could communicate”, Celo said. Winter Star stated, “Talking about it [COVID-19] early on, it had the ability to actually take lives”, thus they infused empathy in their communication with employees. Roan reflected on empathy and decision making, stating, “I will say, personally, when I pay less attention to empathy is when I sometimes feel like I stumbled.”

Also related to emotional intelligence, empathy, and trust is the statement, “People feel supported”, which was commonly expressed. Examples of support are illustrated by Gibbes, “We were really concerned about [employees] wellbeing and tried to remind them of all of the support services available, despite working remotely.” Roan reflected on a decline in the effectiveness of communication but illustrated how improving communication and connection created support:

I think during the pandemic people got weary. And so, I think both parties didn't try quite as hard. We went through, I think we sort of started going through the motions more, but because we cared so much, and this is a great college, great employees, and I told you like a family they were [coming together to support each other].

Participants acknowledged that “you can’t over communicate” and that at times, communication methods and timing were not always optimal. All concurred that communication is a tool that creates connections and illustrates support to employees.

An important part of building or maintaining trust is interpersonal communication with employees. Collectively, participants voiced the importance of emotional intelligence as a skill in leadership and that having and communicating empathy for employees are crucial factors that create trust within the institution. A key finding was that women participants were more likely to engage in person-focused aspects of communication and culture than their male counterparts, and conversely, male participants were more likely to communicate in terms of a results-focused culture than their female peers. The final research question explored the self-perceived effectiveness of participant’s communication with employees.

Findings for Research Question 3

RQ3: How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic? Three of the semi-structured interview questions were linked to RQ3 (Appendix C). Data analysis yielded one theme.

Theme 5: Perceived Effective Communication Despite Persistent Challenges

Despite the persistent and ever-changing challenges of the role, the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as a slow-moving crisis, and subsequent effects on employee and student safety and operations of the colleges, overall, participants had positive responses regarding their communication with employees. When asked to reflect on their perception of their communication with

employees over the entire crisis, many noted, “I don’t know of anything we would have done differently”, and used terms such as “Effective”, “Very effective” or “Highly effective”, without using a formal assessment or a prescriptive scale of effectiveness. Most seemed to rate their effectiveness on subjective measures and their own sense of communication of what “felt right”. Some noted annual employee surveys or having conversations with employees or the leadership team to gauge effectiveness and guide future communication. Celo shared that “employees appreciated the multi-channel [communication] approaches”. Some reflected on their successes; Winter Star and Guyot both mentioned, “I sent weekly publications”, and Roan shared, “I engaged in open chats [with employees].” They also honestly acknowledged the distress during this time, with statements such as, “It was complicated...it took a lot of energy”, “You get worn out”, and “It’s a hard role to be in”. Some noted that they faltered a bit and should have communicated more with employees at different subphases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many echoed a statement made by Chapman, “I was here the entire time. I never left”, which illustrated commitment to the people and the organization despite the persistent pressures and role demands.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of the research regarding North Carolina community college presidents’ communication with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, as related to the three research questions. The 10 participants shared their own experiences and perspectives, but collectively, they used multimedia, multi-channel approaches to communicate with employees, they demonstrated tenacity in being present and solving problems, focused simultaneously on people and outcomes, and facilitated trust through interpersonal communication using emotional intelligence and empathy as guiding factors.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

While there is literature describing how leaders in higher education communicate during times of crises such as acts of nature, human threats on campus, and infrastructure failures (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Tarker, 2021), little research has been undertaken to examine crisis communication from community college presidents to employees during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Leadership in times of crisis is imperative, not only to operational efforts, but also to create or sustain a culture of trust with employees forming the foundation enabling attainment of each community colleges' mission (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Dirani et al., 2020; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Johnson & Jones, 2018; Mazzei et al., 2012, 2022; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Stratone et al., 2022). This research study is one step towards filling the gap in literature.

If community college presidents do not have a strategy to effectively communicate with their employees during times of crisis, they may lose the trust of faculty and staff. Mistrust can lead to uncertainty and low morale (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017; Hoppes & Holley, 2014; Osburn & Gocial, 2020), which ultimately hinders the mission of the institution (Diers-Lawson & Collins, 2022; Kim, 2021).

The research study discovered the crisis communication methods selected and utilized by North Carolina community college presidents with their employees during the prolonged crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and ascertained their own perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication. Three research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Positionality

The researcher has an insider perspective considering the context of working at a community college, but an outsider perspective regarding the role of community college president (Holmes, 2020). The researcher has worked in higher education for 14 years; seven of those years have most recently been at a singular North Carolina community college as a mid-level leader/faculty of a faculty team that trains healthcare students. Therefore, the researcher experienced the employee perspective in receiving communication from a community college president during the pandemic as well as being a midlevel leader with the desire to keep faculty and students safe coupled with moving students forward to enable progress in their competitive entry healthcare program. After the initial shift to remote instruction, the researcher also experienced an earlier return to campus than the majority of the community college employees due to training healthcare students. The researcher witnessed the communication regarding the full return to campus and the operational aspects from a different perspective having already grown accustomed to the safety protocols and risks of teaching face-to-face courses and working on campus in the early subphase of COVID-19 pandemic.

The educational background of the researcher includes prior degrees in psychology, occupational therapy assistant, and healthcare administration; professional positions in social services, small business ownership, and a career in occupational therapy, both clinically and in academia, as well as volunteer executive leadership roles in the occupational therapy profession at state and national levels. The blend of experiences contribute to the lens of the researcher as a manager, leader, and

educator, aware of the delicate balance of results-focused to person-focused communication and actions.

The researcher's bias of women demonstrating more empathy than males was confirmed in this study, as was the assumption that community college presidents have a personal and professional stake in communicating with faculty and staff.

Summary of Key Findings

Five themes and four subthemes emerged as findings that answered the three research questions in this qualitative study regarding community college presidents' communication with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Theme 1: Presidents used Multimedia, Multi-channel Approaches for Communication

Participants used a variety of methods that allowed them to respond quickly and effectively (Garcia, 2006) such as email, text messaging, and the college website to immediately share urgent information with employees. Meetings were held throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but most were held online using video conferencing tools. Transparency (Edmondson, 2020) in communication was a priority for most participants.

Subtheme A: Typical Communication Mixed with New Methods

The majority of participants used communication methods that they were accustomed to, such as email, the college website, and meetings. Pre-recorded videos embedded in emails were noted as useful by some participants. However, meeting methods were modified to include the use of video conferencing that provided live chat features. New methods were utilized to receive information from employees including crowdsourced documents, and online forms, and the video conferencing.

Subtheme B: Presidents and Employees as Senders and Receivers

Communication was primarily top-down with some bottom-up approaches, but all participants offered at least one type of two-way communication option, such as live Q & A via video conferencing.

Subtheme C: Content and Frequency Varied, but “Safety was Always Part of the Message”

Communication content varied by subphase of the crisis, with a noted decrease in frequency at times that seemed less urgent and an increase during times of major shifts, such as the initial move to remote instruction and the later return to campus. Safety was a constant topic across methods and over time.

Subtheme D: Presidents Designated Others to Help Convey Information

Participants did not lead or communicate singly; they relied on select individuals on their team to help convey operational information as well as help provide the personal connection with employees to show care and concern.

Theme 2: Presidents were Tenacious, “I Never Left”

Despite persistent challenges, personal exhaustion, and a long, slow-moving crisis with varying levels of guidance from national, state, and local officials, participants were present and engaged leaders.

Theme 3: Trust is Complex

Trust, communication, and relationship building are tightly interconnected. Participants desired to create a culture of trust with employees by communicating consistently, transparently, and in a way helped employees make sense of the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some participants utilized climate surveys to assess trust. Even though most participants noted an “above average” culture of trust at the end of the pandemic, they perceived various levels of trust during the pandemic, some due to under communicating or other factors causing temporary mistrust.

Theme 4: Emotional Intelligence and Empathy are Essential to Trust

Collectively, participants acknowledged the importance of emotional intelligence as a leadership skill and having empathy for employees (e.g., safety, wellbeing) as crucial factors that created trust

within a community college. Female participants were found to be more people-focused as compared to males, who were found to be more results-focused in terms of culture and communication.

Theme 5: Perceived Effective Communication Despite Persistent Challenges

Participants all agreed that their communication over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic was effective or very effective. As they reflected on their efforts, they acknowledged that there were constant problems to solve, and the duration of the pandemic made them weary.

The findings of this study filled a gap in the literature by exploring the communication methods used by North Carolina community college presidents with employees and their perceptions of their own effectiveness in communication with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study discovered that in this sample, communication that was strategic, timely, consistent, and disseminated in a variety of methods and formats, which is strongly influenced by emotional intelligence and empathy, fostered trust.

Discussion of Findings

The researcher used a constructivist approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to gather data and create meaning. The theoretical underpinning of this research included two theories and a model that provided a lens to analyze the data and generate findings. The following section explores a discussion of the findings of this study as related to literature and is organized by the themes identified within this research, where applicable.

Theme 1: Presidents used Multimedia, Multi-channel Approaches for Communication

Findings of this research study align with literature that shows employees are internal stakeholders of an organization (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011) and will process the crisis depending on their role, prior experiences with the organization, and unique perspectives of the crisis itself (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Participants' use of various methods to send communication to employees, engage in two-way communication (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Dhanesh & Picherit-Duthler, 2021;

Diers-Lawson, 2019; Orangeirey, 2020), and receive communication from employees illustrates that participants and employees were both receivers and senders (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Mazzei et al., 2012), with participants most often acting as senders.

Subtheme C: Content and Frequency Varied, but “Safety was Always Part of the Message”

The frequency of participants’ communication included daily meetings with cabinet level employees, weekly newsletters or emails, and as frequent as monthly college-wide Q & A sessions with employees, which supports the literature that leaders should communicate frequently (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Coombs, 2007; D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Garcia, 2006; Mazzei et al., 2012; Osburn & Gocial, 2020). The clarity of communication was not specifically explored in this research study but is also emphasized as a crucial part of communication (Baer & Duin, 2020; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Coombs, 2007; D’Auria & De Smet, 2020; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Garcia, 2006; Mazzei et al., 2012; Osburn & Gocial, 2020). When leaders delay communication, they are at risk for mistrust (D’Auria & De Smet, 2020), as illustrated by the participant who noted they did not communicate when there was a void from the NCCCS office, and it had a negative effect on the culture of trust at their college.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a long, slow-moving crisis, and as suggested in this study, there were three subphases of the COVID-19 crisis, early, mid, and late. Within the three subphases, two waves or peaks have been identified in the crisis through this research; the initial shift to remote instruction and then the switch back to face-to-face instruction on campus, which is reportedly a time when participants communicated more frequently with employees. Additionally, due to the psychological distress caused by serious health concerns regarding COVID-19, safety and wellbeing was a consideration throughout the entire duration of the pandemic. Therefore, the messaging about safety was a higher percentage of the mix in the overall communication to employees, as evidenced by

participant's comments "Safety was always part of the message", as opposed to the estimated mix as described in the Crisis Communication Life Cycle (Figure 2) (Mendy et al., 2020).

Using the crisis-stage approach of communication (Mendy et al., 2020), leaders communicate with employees based on two aspects: the stage of the crisis and the expected cognitive and emotional states of employees during each stage. Similar experts advise that leaders craft content and timing with the stage of the crisis and the intended results (Coombs, 2019; Sturges, 1994). Furthermore, Mendy et al. (2020) suggests all crisis communication includes the steps of, "Resolve, resilience, and return/reimagination/reform" with the strategic approach of "Instructing, adjusting, and internalizing" (p. 2). Using the crisis communication life cycle (Mendy et al., 2020), leaders can match the content and delivery of communication by understanding the clearly defined stages of a crisis. They should also seek to understand their employees' perspectives and what distresses them (Diers-Lawson, 2019; Kim & Lim, 2020). The model provides an approach to the mix of types of communication directed to employees based on the stage of the cycle and simultaneously addressing employees' needs. Due to the unique nature of the COVID-19 crisis and two peaks of intensity of communication, there is an opportunity for leadership in IHEs to be more strategic in the type of communication that occurs at various phases or subphases of a crisis, by borrowing tenets of the crisis communication life cycle.

Subtheme D: Presidents Designated Others to Help Convey Information

Participants relied on trusted delegates to help disseminate information during the pandemic. Literature shows that leaders should communicate directly and in their own voice to build trust and authenticity during a crisis (Brennan & Sten, 2017; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Tarker, 2020; Valeau, 2021). All participants did communicate directly with employees and in their own voice at some point, but some relied more on others to assist. There may be opportunities for presidents to ensure their voice is being conveyed when they are not personally communicating.

Theme 2: Presidents were Tenacious, “I Never Left”

Participants in the study engaged in crisis leadership (Brennan & Stern, 2017), which aligns with the participants’ commonly stated leadership styles of “situational”, “participatory” and “collaborative”. Crisis leadership was identified when participants recounted communication and activities that illustrated sensemaking (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Dirani et al, 2020; Eddy, 2003, Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). The research questions did not lend themselves to explore meaning-making (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Konig et al., 2020), which is another aspect of crisis leadership. Tenacity was also demonstrated in part by staying calm and leading by example (Bogusky-Halper, 2020; D’Auria & DeSmet, 2020; Forester et al., 2020; Orangefiery, 2020), which was evidenced by participant’s commitment to the institution and overall communication with employees.

The other compounding factor regarding communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was the fatigue noted by participants who are the leaders of the IHE’s. As noted in literature, during a crisis, leaders are responsible to analyze and evaluate a plethora of information (Brassey & Kruyt, 2020), which is mentally, physically, and psychologically onerous. The theme of leadership exhaustion is not addressed by the crisis communication life cycle, as it was written one month into the COVID-19 pandemic and it only addressed employees feeling “worn down” (Mendy et al., 2020, p. 2) and not leaders. COVID-19 was a much longer crisis than anyone anticipated, which contributes to the exhaustion experienced by leaders. This study did not specifically explore self-care with participants, but literature has confirmed that self-care for leaders is imperative to lead effectively as the institution is more vulnerable when the leader is not performing optimally due to an imbalance in self (Koehn, 2020). Perhaps that is even more relevant during the long COVID-19 pandemic, which was characterized by constant problem solving due to “a lot of unknowns” and high levels of exhaustion reported by participants.

Theme 3: Trust is Complex

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) indicates that communication is crucial to trust in times of crisis. One definition of trust used in this research is that “Trust is an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 189). Trust is rooted in vulnerability (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Meyer et al., 2016). Therefore, trust in the participants by their employees is established by open, honest communication and actions that are competent and convey goodwill.

Evidence also points to the leader demonstrating personal connection with employees and concern for their wellbeing to foster trust and confidence (Brennan & Sten, 2017; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Tarker, 2020; Valeau, 2021). Three participants recounted a decrease in trust during the pandemic. The first one noted that trust decreased when they communicated less frequently with employees due to a lack of communication from NCCCS, but it was restored to “above average”—as perceived by the participant—through increased communication, including virtual meetings with an opportunity for two-way communication. The second participant noted they tend to be “more matter of fact” and verbalized that they have more empathy for students than employees. The second participant perceived trust as “above average” at the end of the pandemic, but also noted they have had a lot of newer employees recently. The third participant shared that other events led to an increase in fear that resulted in a temporary decrease in trust, and explained that once the fear subsided and actions proved to be safe and advantageous to the college and community, the high level of trust returned.

These findings confirm the conceptual framework that supported this research; a crisis without sufficient or appropriate communication to meet the needs of employees may result in decreased trust or mistrust. The mistrust or decreased trust is resolved through providing clarity around unknowns, communicating in a manner that considers the perspectives of employees, and increasing

communication when there is a lapse. Similarly, it can be said that timely, effective, and person-centered communication may support an IHE through a crisis so there is no loss of trust due to miscommunication or lack of communication.

Theme 4: Emotional Intelligence and Empathy are Essential to Trust

Crisis literature is clear that empathy is a vital attribute that leaders should demonstrate towards employees during crisis situations (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Forster et al., 2020; Konig et al., 2020; Mazzei et al., 2022; McLean & Warren, 2022; Orangefirey, 2020). Empathy is a critical sub-component of emotional intelligence. Participants demonstrated emotional intelligence and empathy when seeking input from employees as to their personal and work-related needs, having an “open door”, and fostering two-way communication with employees as points of connection.

The leadership of an IHE is responsible for the culture of the institution, and the climate is a measure of the employees’ perceptions of the culture (Belk Center for Community College Leadership & Research, 2023). This study only focused on the leadership’s perception of culture, and they had various types of input to assess the culture, such as the PACE Climate survey, online forms, Q & A sessions, and their own subjective thoughts and feelings. Since leadership sets the culture, it was intriguing that the findings of this research indicated gender differences in the participant’s focus of the institutional culture, based on the discovery of a continuum from person-focused to results-focused (Figure 4). Females were found to align more with person-focused results, and males aligned more towards results-focused. Furthermore, the participants in this study who led with a person-centered approach were apt to be more attuned to emotional intelligence and empathy.

To follow the strategic communication framework suggested by Mendy et al. (2020), leaders need to embody emotional intelligence and empathy to recognize the cognitive and emotional states of their employees. For example, when leaders recognize apprehension or fatigue, there is an opportunity

to communicate with narratives that convey hope and create interpersonal connections to mitigate the negative effects and build resilience during the crisis (Mendy et al., 2020).

Theme 5: Perceived Effective Communication Despite Persistent Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis of epic proportions, fraught with multi-level impacts and global turmoil (Stratone et al., 2022). One pertinent consideration is the retrospective nature of this research study; the researcher queried participants to recall details about their communication with employees that occurred during a long, slow-moving crisis, which began approximately 32 months prior to the interviews. There is a possibility that participants were not able to accurately recall some details of communication or the sequence of events, thus their perspective of the effectiveness of their communication could be skewed. However, participants overwhelmingly assessed their communication as “effective”, “very effective”, or “highly effective”, and that they “wouldn’t do anything differently”. Perhaps they communicated with employees to the best of their ability at that time, given the circumstances and resources available, thus their high self-ratings.

Using the conceptual framework for this research, employees will seek information to decrease uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and if leadership doesn’t intentionally manage relationships during crisis, trust will decrease (Diers-Lawson, 2020). Communication to ensure trust requires a mix of accommodation and advocacy, with a higher focus of communication on accommodative strategies (Cancel et al., 1997). Communication during a long, slow-moving crisis that is strategic, timely, consistent, disseminated in a variety of methods and formats, which is strongly influenced by emotional intelligence and empathy, will foster trust.

Implications for Policy

Findings indicate that although communication was perceived as effective by participants, the load was exceedingly difficult on the role of president. There were challenges that may have been more easily overcome if there were existing policies to guide actions and communication in a time of crisis.

Theme 2: Presidents were Tenacious, “I Never Left”***Recommendation 1: Create a Leadership Contingency Plan***

With the high level of stress experienced by participants and the fatigue noted by all participants regarding the COVID-19 pandemic as a landscape crisis, there should be a contingency plan for communication, in case the president is overburdened or unable to engage in effective communication with employees. It was unclear from all the participants if this existed at their colleges, however some noted having an administrator on call procedure. The landscape crisis was unique from other types of crises experienced at colleges due to the widespread impacts, as well as the input and mandates from local, state, and federal regulatory bodies, community college systems, as well as the ongoing interactions with K-12 school systems, health departments, clinical sites for health programs, local employers, and so on. These “voices” had impact on what the president could or could not do, which exacerbated the effects of the pandemic. Kanter et al. (2020) offers a compilation of resources for COVID-19 that may be beneficial to advise leaders on communication for future crises.

Recommendation 2: Review and Revise Communication Policies

College and system leaders should consider reviewing current policies with foresight to determine the potential threats to college operations with a focus on communication with employees. There is an opportunity for community college systems to refine their communication policies regarding crises and for institutions to connect their policies with those of the system. The policies should be correlated for consistency, efficiency, and clarity.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the desire for continued remote work, and some participants noted creating remote work policies for their institutions. Communication with employees during a crisis depends on available technology and employee location (e.g., remote, on-campus, or blended). Due to the nature of the NCCCS, each college makes its own policies; subsequently, there is great variation in remote work policies within the Great 58. Colleges should consider debriefing with

employees, as suggested by the Stakeholder Relationship Management Model (Diers-Lawson, 2020), near the end of a crisis (Mendy et al., 2020) to learn what was effective and what was ineffective, to build on strengths and identify gaps so they are more prepared for the next crisis. Borrowing from the Contingency Model of Conflict Management (Cancel et al., 1997), communication with stakeholders should accommodate their perspectives and needs. Ideally, representation from all employee groups and/or departments should be sought and considered using multiple formats, which is supported by the Warren and McLean model of solution focused outcomes (McLean & Warren, 2022).

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study indicate opportunities to strengthen community colleges regarding communication. The importance of effective communication with employees cannot be overstated as related to the culture of trust within an organization, which is primarily the responsibility of the president. Being aware of methods to facilitate trust via appropriate and effective communication during the unique phases of a crisis will assist leaders in meeting the mission of the community college.

Theme 1. Presidents used Multimedia, Multi-channel Approaches for Communication

Recommendation 1: Strategic Communication Planning Based on a Crisis Phase Approach

Community colleges should consider creating strategic communication plans that integrate multimedia, multi-channel approaches within a phased-crisis approach. Crisis communication plans should include messaging beyond the tactical; they should also focus efforts on the emotional wellbeing of employees. Presidents and their leadership teams may benefit from professional development on crisis communication to ensure they are enacting the most appropriate and effective communication with employees.

By using the crisis communication life cycle (Mendy et al., 2020), the president would strategically communicate throughout the phases of a crisis, using the most appropriate blend of communication methods and messages, and ultimately sustain trust within the college. To enact this,

presidents could develop a routine during a crisis of daily and/or weekly reflecting on the past, present, and future by asking, “where we have been, what’s happening now, and what is coming next?” to help maintain clarity of the stage of the crisis (Coombs, 2007; Mendy et al., 2020) and to prepare communication for the future. In the case of COVID-19 pandemic, being cognizant of the multiple waves of the crisis would inform the style and frequency of communication required to sustain trust, as suggested by the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and the Stakeholder Relationship Management model (Diers-Lawson, 2020). Additionally, the top-down approach would help set cultural expectations for other leaders within the college to communicate to their direct reports by using the phased-crisis approach, since leaders have the power to frame communication and affect the entire organizational culture (Meyer et al., 2016).

There are many aspects requiring the attention of the president during a crisis; the wellbeing of employees and trust within an organization is paramount, which supports utilizing the crisis leadership model versus crisis management (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Diers-Lawson, 2020; Tarker, 2021). Communication through email is not enough to sustain a culture of trust in times of crisis. Leaders must actively seek the perspectives of employees. Consideration should be taken to create opportunities for increasing two-way communication and personal connections for employees with leadership, thus cultivating a sense of community during the crisis. Additionally, research shows that creating a culture of collaboration can facilitate a shared sense of empowerment to overcome challenges (McLean & Warren, 2022; Miller, 2019; Mokher et al., 2020; Petriglieri, 2020; Thwaite, 2020). The crisis communication life cycle approach suggests purposefully including stories of hope and opportunities for connecting during the resilience phase, and looking ahead with an opportunity to acknowledge loss during the “return/reimagination/reform” stages (Mendy et al., 2020); all are ways to create connections with employees, which were gaps in the findings from the interviews conducted in this study.

Theme 2. Presidents were Tenacious, “I Never Left”

Recommendation 2: Utilize Support Systems

As noted by several participants, the NCACCP formally and informally provided support throughout the crisis. “It’s lonely at the top”, stated Chapman, and tapping into a support system is important for the president and the entire organization. Gibbes confided, “So being president, what they say is true. It’s lonely. Best job in the world. But it’s lonely” and “the other presidents really are the best support network there is”. It is recommended that presidents identify more than one source of support, such as other presidents or trusted and experienced leaders, a formal structure such as an association or regional group, and a personal mentor. Due to the critical nature of the role, each source of support should ensure confidentiality.

Recommendation 3: Leaders Should Engage in Self-Care

Presidents should engage in regular self-care, especially during a crisis. Self-care may seem counterintuitive to a president due to the perceived time involved for self-care when presidents already have very busy schedules. However, literature has shown that leaders are not as effective in their roles if they are not engaging in some type of self-care to remain balanced and decrease stress (Forster et al., 2020; Gallup, 2020; Koehn, 2020; Nichols et al., 2020; Thwaite, 2022).

Self-care is highly individualized; what may appeal to one person would not be considered self-care to another individual. Some examples that were shared by participants included creating and maintaining routines of exercise, reading fiction, or disconnecting from media during designated times. Common self-care practices in current society include meditation, prayer, spending time in nature, exercise (in various forms), massage or manicure, enjoying a meal with friends, and leisure pursuits such as artwork, crafts, or games.

The key to engaging in self-care is to create a consistent, fulfilling routine of partaking in personally meaningful and restful activities, even if it is for a short duration each time. The profession of

occupational therapy suggests that occupational balance, which is a blend of work, restorative, and leisure pursuits, leads to optimal performance (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020). Self-care activities can perhaps be best understood as those that lead to “restorative rest” (AOTA, 2020, p. 32). Occupational therapy offers a helpful definition of rest, “reducing involvement in taxing physical, mental, or social activities, resulting in a relaxed state; engaging in relaxation or other endeavors that restore energy and calm and renew interest in engagement” (AOTA, 2020, p. 32). Since self-care activities are individualized, what is perceived as restful and restorative will vary between individuals.

Theme 3. Trust is Complex

Recommendation 4: Leaders Must be Cognizant of the Culture of Trust

Leaders should be cognizant of the culture of trust within their organizations and be intentional about maintaining and building trust. Based on the research findings of this study and literature that revealed that due to the chaotic nature of crises, trust becomes endangered during a crisis, and colleges should specifically focus on protecting or restoring trust (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Since trust is directly related to communication, leaders should consider a formal method to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of communication with employees. One method may be to utilize the PACE Climate Survey or other culture surveys, with a subsection on trust. However, a survey is not enough to inform the leader; it’s recommended that leaders spend time with their employees across all levels of the organization; they should be present to build relationships that form the foundation of trust.

Theme 4. Emotional Intelligence and Empathy are Essential to Trust

Recommendation 5: Update AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders

The *AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders* (AACC, 2018) could be updated to illustrate the complexity of the relationship of trust, communication, and emotional intelligence in leaders. The AACC could expand crisis communication for CEOs to go beyond operational aspects to

include a crisis leadership perspective. The AACC (2018) acknowledges emotional intelligence is an important personality trait or ability required for the role, but it states the behavior in a self-focused manner, “Always maintain control of your emotions. Be level-headed even when situations escalate. Keep your overall goals in the forefront of discussions or situations that can cause tempers to flare.” The behaviors should be updated to reflect the original literature on emotional intelligence, which requires a person to, “Monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). The shift from individual-centered leadership to person-centered leadership is critical to effective communication that promotes trust within the organization and between president and employees.

Recommendation 6: Personal Messages from the President

Communication in times of crisis should always include personal messages from the president, delivered in their voice (Brennan & Stern, 2017; McNaughtan et al., 2019; Tarker, 2021; Valeau, 2021); that delivery format creates a personal connection with employees. The choice of delivery method will likely depend on the size of the college and nature of the crisis, as it may be impossible or impractical for large or very large colleges to have in person meetings, and small colleges may not have the budgetary resources to produce high-quality video. Leaders should be cognizant that closing the perceived or real gap from employee to president can help build trust. Real-time, in-person messages are optimal, especially paired with an opportunity for Q & A. These messages should also be delivered throughout the duration of the crisis, but especially during the times of great uncertainty, fear, and the unknown.

Theme 5. Perceived Effective Communication Despite Persistent Challenges

Recommendation 7: Conduct Regular Climate Surveys with a Focus on Trust and Communication

One such survey is the PACE Climate Survey, and based on the findings, the researcher recommends using the optional subsets of information/communication, leadership, and trust (Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2023) to measure the climate of the institution

on a regular basis. The PACE Climate Survey is based on 30 years of research and supports the work of the community college. The Belk Center emphasizes, “The quality of various aspects of an institution’s climate has been shown to be related to individual-level and institution-level performance outcomes” (Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2023, para 2). It would behoove college leadership to utilize the PACE Climate Survey (or another research-based climate survey) to formally assess the culture as a crucial component of meeting the mission and obtaining positive outcomes for students. As noted by Roan regarding administering climate surveys:

The intent is to see if we can continue to improve it, to learn something and do something with it. So you know, one of the things we talked a lot about is if we are not going to do anything with it, we are not going to do it. And everybody thinks, oh yeah, of course...there's a lot of us that still are not following that advice...but I think you have to constantly try. You have to be comfortable with hearing what needs to be improved without taking it personally.

Leaders should consider how to effectively evaluate or assess the effectiveness of communication.

There seems to be an opportunity beyond the PACE Climate Survey to assess more specific information regarding trust and communication within the institution to target effort towards solutions beyond recognizing that there is a problem.

Two of the open-ended questions at the end of the PACE Climate Survey may help leaders identify more specifics. The questions are:

- 1) Considering the questions you have answered on the climate survey, please expand on the areas you find most favorable about your institution. You may give examples, but please refrain from identifying specific individuals. This is a confidential survey.
- 2) Considering the questions you have answered on the climate survey, please expand on the areas you find least favorable about your institution. You may give examples, but please refrain

from identifying specific individuals. This is a confidential survey. (Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, 2022).

These open-ended questions might evoke information regarding communication and trust, if respondents identified those areas as most or least pleasing, and if they choose to share details.

Advice for Leaders

One of the open-ended interview questions was designed to help participants summarize the most important aspects of communication with employees (Appendix B). The following is a compilation of a few pieces of advice and at least one quote from each participant that is intended to assist new or aspiring community college presidents or other leaders:

- Several participants noted having pre-planned communication for many types of crises, so that when a crisis arises, they are able to rapidly send out communication.
- Be transparent, communicate clearly and frequently.
- Celo shared, "If you don't have somebody to tell the story... if you don't have a well-oiled machine, and you don't have a great communications team to tell your story, then when you are in [a] crisis, your story will get told."
- Gibbes advised, "Don't be afraid to communicate with all of your stakeholders. And don't be afraid to speak directly to all employees."
- Guyot said, "Do not ever consider all communication [coming]...through your office. You need to empower others."
- Collins stated, "You have to make sure that whoever you're talking to understands what you are saying. And you have to say things differently to different groups".
- Craig indicated, "It's frustrating when you feel like you're a president that really works overtime to communicate and to get the word out about things. And so, even though

you think you're doing it, people feel like you're not. So you almost have to remind people of how you're communicating to them.”

- Roan cautioned, “Never think you have it [communication] completely right. Or never believe that it is as effective as you think it is, but don't get bent out of shape hearing people tell you, it's as ineffective as they say it is.”
- Chapman shared, “The thing that we've gotten the most positive feedback on or for me, as the leader, has been communicating my regular updates to the campus, and I think they feel like that keeps them informed, that keeps them aware of what's going on.”
- Winter Star advised, “Just because it's clear to you what you want to...articulate, does not mean it is received with the same context. So, you need to make sure that you provide context for everything that you are explaining, because their lens is very different from your lens.”
- Craig guided, “You really can't have too much communication, and I can guarantee to you as president, no matter how much you give, communication will always be identified as an issue.”
- Marks advocated, “Be transparent and communicate the good, the bad, and the ugly.”
- Mitchell reflected, “I think what I've learned is that the more [communication] the better...I've heard from employees that they also like to see me, they like to see the other administrators, and so...yes, send out email communication or whatnot...[but] stop by and see”.

Recommendations for Future Research

One of the natural outcomes of research is identifying other opportunities to fill gaps in literature. The following list comprises future research recommendations that stem from this current work:

- Similar research to this study could be undertaken but be narrowed to include one or two colleges and include employees as participants, in addition to presidents. Including employees would provide a connection to the sense of trust voiced by the president with those of their employees, similar to the study by Hoppes & Holley (2014) that explored organizational trust between faculty and administrators in times of challenge.
- A finding in this research was that female participants were more person-centered regarding the culture than their male counterparts, who were more results-focused. The suggested continuum could be explored more broadly with a larger sample.
- A quantitative study could measure the methods and frequency of communication and be administered to a broader sample of presidents within North Carolina or across the United States.
- Identify the outcomes directly related to the actions taken by presidents who effectively communicated during the landscape crisis of COVID-19.
- A trust assessment could be developed to measure trust between employees and the president, based on the Higher Education Faculty Trust Inventory (HEFTI) (Smith & Shoho, 2007) and the revised version of the HEFTI that explored trust between faculty and their chairs, deans, and vice presidents (Osburn & Gocial, 2020).
- Employees' perspectives from different levels within the organization could be explored, especially a comparison of perspectives between top-level leaders and full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, full-time staff, and part-time staff. Research already illustrates how internal stakeholders have different roles in an organization in terms of "power, legitimacy, or urgency" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Additional research could lend more perspectives of methods and frequency of communication related to trust, emotional intelligence, and empathy.

- A similar study to this one could be conducted, but include document analysis, which would provide more objective details regarding methods, content, and frequency. That could have implications for a new crisis communication life cycle for a long, slow-moving crisis.
- The emotional intelligence of community college presidents could be formally assessed along with measures of trust within the organization, such as using the PACE Climate Survey, to capture the relationship between emotional intelligence and culture.
- Self-care was not explored within this research, and there is little in the literature on self-care practices of community college presidents.

Conclusion

Community colleges are integral to their local, regional, and state economies (AACC, 2022) and provide post-secondary educational opportunities regarding access and equity for all students (North Carolina Student Success Center, 2021). As such, their success has wide-reaching impacts for students, colleges, and the communities they serve. This qualitative research study adds to the scant body of literature on internal crisis communication within community colleges. If community college leaders do not have a strategy to effectively communicate with their employees during times of crisis, they may lose the trust of faculty and staff (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017; Hoppes & Holley, 2014; Osburn & Gocial, 2020). Mistrust can lead to uncertainty and low morale, placing the college at risk of not meeting its mission (Diers-Lawson & Collins, 2022; Kim, 2021). The findings from the qualitative case study with ten North Carolina community college president participants indicate that communication with employees that was strategic, timely, consistent, disseminated in a variety of methods and formats, which was strongly influenced by emotional intelligence, fostered trust within this sample.

One assumption in this study was that colleges were positioned prepandemic in a culture of trust. However, that prompts the consideration that a culture of trust may not permeate a college at the

time a crisis strikes. A compelling case can be made for a heightened focus on efficacious communication strategies by the leadership of community colleges using the two theories and one model that form the basis of this research. The Uncertainty Reduction Theory ascertains that individuals seek information in times of crisis to decrease feelings of unpredictability (Berger & Calabrese, 1975); the Stakeholder Relationship Model that frames one's lens to view employees' response to a crisis as based on pre-existing factors within the institution (Diers-Lawson, 2020) and that leaders can navigate a crisis more successfully when they manage the relationships of their stakeholders (Diers-Lawson, 2019; 2020); and the Contingency Theory of Conflict Management (Cancel et al., 1997) that directs leaders to communicate with a blend of advocacy and accommodation towards employees.

Effective communication skills are not only essential for presidents, but indispensable for all leaders within IHEs. The president should exemplify these skills and set the behavioral expectation for infusing these communication principles throughout the organization as best practice and be mindful that midlevel managers contribute to how higher-level leaders are perceived through a bottom-up model of trust (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017). Communication and trust are tightly integrated.

Although a specific organizational crisis is an unexpected event requiring rapid decision making and communication (Pearson & Clair, 1998), future crises are undeniable. Are community colleges prepared for the next crisis? Could they withstand the nonexistence of electronic communication or resources? Are there contingency plans in place, and are those plans actionable? Applying the approaches suggested in prior literature that are affirmed in this current research will enhance communication with employees to sustain, repair, or garner trust with the ultimate goal of meeting the mission of the community college during any crisis but will also build resilience now for withstanding future crises.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A**Invitation to Participate in Research Study - Sample Email**

Date _____

Dear President _____:

I am a doctoral candidate in the North Carolina State University Community College Leadership Charlotte 2020 Cohort and am working on my dissertation research.

My research will explore the crisis communication strategies used by North Carolina community college presidents with their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a sitting North Carolina Community college president, I value your experiences and would appreciate your contribution to this research project.

I plan to conduct in-person, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, and will travel to your college campus to meet with you at a time that is convenient for you. I anticipate 45-90 minutes for the interview. The interviews will be audio recorded and following the interview, you will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript to check for accuracy.

If you would like to participate in this research study, simply reply to this email. I will follow up with an email that includes the Informed Consent Form and instructions to schedule an interview date, time, and location, and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research study as I endeavor to help prepare new and aspiring community college presidents.

Best regards,

Amy Mahle

980-722-0369 (mobile)

amahle@ncsu.edu

Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Basic information about the interview

Introduction

Opening Questions to Build Rapport

1. How long have you served as President at this community college?
2. In a few sentences, can you share with me why you became a community college president?
3. Approximately how many employees do you have at this community college?

Content Questions

4. Tell me about your leadership style.
 - a. Follow-up question: What are your thoughts surrounding emotional intelligence or empathy as traits for leadership?
5. How would you describe the culture of your community college prior to the pandemic?
 - a. Probing question: What was the culture of trust prior to the pandemic? During the pandemic/now?
6. What is the communications structure at your community college during a crisis?

Follow-up: Do you have a specific policy or procedure?

7. How do you determine who to engage, if anyone, in assisting you with crisis communication to employees?
8. What type of communication did you use with your employees during COVID?
 - a. Follow-up: Did it change over the course of the crisis? If so, why and how?
9. What was your rationale for selecting that type/those types of communication?
10. Do you have any advice for new or aspiring presidents regarding communication?
11. Can you tell me about any opportunities there were for you to hear from employees during the crisis, other than your immediate cabinet members?
12. In hindsight, how effective do you think your communication was with employees?
 - a. Follow-up: What factors contributed to your perception?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding communication during the pandemic?

Closing Instructions

Thank the interviewee for his or her time.

Respond to any final questions.

Assure the interviewee about confidentiality of the interview.

Remind the interviewee of the member checking process.

Appendix C

Interview Question Alignment with Research Questions

Interview Question	Research Question
<i>Opening Questions</i>	
How long have you served as President at this community college?	Build rapport
In a few sentences, can you share with me why you became a community college president?	Build rapport
Approximately how many employees do you have at this community college?	Build rapport
<i>Content Questions</i>	
<p>Tell me about your leadership style.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Follow-up: What are your thoughts surrounding emotional intelligence or empathy as traits for leadership?</p>	<p>RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>RQ 2: How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>
How would you describe the culture of your community college prior to the pandemic?	RQ 2: How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
<p>What is the communications structure at your community college during a crisis?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Follow-up: Do you have a specific policy or procedure?</p>	RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?
How do you determine who to engage, if anyone, in assisting you with crisis communication to employees?	RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Interview Question	Research Question
<p>What type of communication did you use with your employees during COVID?</p> <p>Follow-up: Did it change over the course of the crisis? If so, why and how?</p>	<p>RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>
<p>What was your rationale for selecting that type/those types of communication?</p>	<p>RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>
<p>Do you have any advice for new or aspiring presidents regarding communication?</p>	<p>RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>RQ 3: How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>
<p>Can you tell me about any opportunities there were for you to hear from employees during the crisis, other than your immediate cabinet members?</p>	<p>RQ 3: How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>
<p>In hindsight, how effective do you think your communication was with employees?</p> <p>Follow-up: What factors contributed to your perception?</p>	<p>RQ 3: How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p>
<p>Is there anything else you would like to add regarding communication during the pandemic?</p>	<p>RQ 1: How did community college presidents communicate with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>RQ 2: How do community college presidents describe the culture of the community college in terms of trust before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>RQ 3: How did community college presidents perceive the effectiveness of</p>

Interview Question	Research Question
	their own communication to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

From: IRB Administrative Office <pins_notifications@ncsu.edu>
Date: Thu, Sep 29, 2022 at 3:12 PM
Subject: Adams Warren - 25350 - IRB Protocol approved
To: <clwarren@ncsu.edu>

Dear Carrol Adams Warren:

IRB Protocol 25350 has been approved

Title: Fatima - Exploring Community College Presidents' Communication with Employees During a Global Pandemic

PI: Adams Warren, Carrol Lynn

The project listed above has been reviewed by the NC State Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, and is approved for one year. This protocol will expire on 09/28/2023 and will need continuing review approval before that date.

NOTE:

1. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. You must use the approved consent forms which are listed as "approved" in the eIRB protocol.
3. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date in this letter and listed on the "Title" page of the eIRB. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review approval from the IRB.
4. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
5. If any unanticipated problems or adverse events occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days by completing and submitting the unanticipated problem form on the IRB website: <https://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs/compliance/irb/submission-guidance/>.
6. Any unapproved departure from your approved IRB protocol results in non-compliance. Please find information regarding how to avoid non-compliance on our [website](#).

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us.

NCSU IRB Office

Please contact ncsuirboffice@ncsu.edu if an official PDF approval letter with signature is required by your funding source.

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

The logo for NC State University, featuring the text "NC STATE UNIVERSITY" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters centered within a solid red rectangular background.**Informed Consent for Participation in Research
Consent Form**

Title of Study: Exploring Community College Presidents' Communication with Employees During a Global Pandemic (**eIRB # 25350**)

Principal Investigator(s): Amy Mahle, amahle@ncsu.edu, 980-722-0369

Funding Source: None

NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Dr. Carrol Warren, clwarren@ncsu.edu, 910-379-8035

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of how community college presidents' communicated with their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will do this through one-on-one interviews.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because your experiences may benefit aspiring and new community college presidents or it may help you to reflect on your communication used with employees during COVID-19 pandemic. You may not want to participate in this research because you may not want to reflect on the challenging times of leading a community college during the pandemic.

Specific details about the research in which you are invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the *What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?* section of this form.

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of the study is to explore the communication used by community college presidents with employees during the pandemic and their own perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication.

How many people will be in the study?

There will be approximately eight to twelve participants in this study.

Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and be the sitting president of a North Carolina community college and be in the role as of January 1, 2020 or before.

You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet the inclusion criteria or are serving as an interim president or started your presidency on January 2, 2020 or after.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

1. Arrange a time with the researcher for an in-person interview.
2. The interview will take place on your college campus, in an agreed upon location, preferably the president's office.
3. Participate in a one-on-one interview.
4. Answer questions during the interview.
5. The interview will take approximately 45-90 minutes.
6. The interview will be audio recorded.
7. An interview transcript will be sent to you to verify for accuracy, which may take approximately 15-30 minutes.
8. You will confirm the final transcript with the researcher.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is approximately 60-120 minutes.

Recording

As a part of this research, I would like your consent to audio record you. Your verbal consent can be provided at the beginning of the interview.

Risks and benefits

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. The risks to you as a result of this research include emotional or psychological discomfort when discussing communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are the opportunity to reflect on your own communication with employees and to read the summary of the findings of the research. You may also experience an intrinsic

benefit by participating in research that endeavors to assist new and aspiring community college presidents.

Right to withdraw your participation

You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. To do so, just stop any research activity that you are doing or contact the student researcher, Amy Mahle at amahle@ncsu.edu and 980-722-0369. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Carrol Warren at clwarren@ncsu.edu and 910-379-8035. If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher(s) will redact your data from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your data for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in some, but not all, cases.

Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management

Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that I have described to you in this form. The information that you share with me will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to me. There are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where I may have to share information about you. Your information collected in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, for purposes such as quality control or safety. In other cases, I must report instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

How I manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that I protect your personal privacy. Data that will be shared with others about you will be:

De-identified. De-identified data is information that at one time can directly identify you, but that I will record this data so that your identity will be separated from the data. I do not have a master list with your code and real name that connects your information to the research data. When the research concludes, there will be no way your real identity will be linked to the data I publish.

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Re-identifiable. Re-identifiable data is information that I can identify you indirectly because of my access to information, role, skills, combination of information, and/or use of technology. This may also mean that in published reports others could identify you from what is reported, for example, if a story you tell us is very specific. If your data is re-identifiable, I will report it in such a way that you are not directly identified in reports. Based on how I need to share the data, I cannot remove details from the report that would protect your identity from ever being figured out. This means that others may be able to re-identify from the information reported from this research. You will have an opportunity to review your transcript and eliminate any potentially re-identifiable information or data.

Future use of your research data

To help maximize the benefits of your participation in this project, by further contributing to the field and our community, your de-identified information will be stored for future research.

Compensation

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Emergency medical treatment

If you are hurt or injured during the study session(s), the researcher will call 911 for necessary care. There is no provision for compensation or free medical care for you if you are injured as a result of this study.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the student researcher, Amy Mahle, at amahle@ncsu.edu and 980-722-0369. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Carrol Warren at clwarren@ncsu.edu and 910.379.8035.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State University IRB office at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or [fill out a confidential form online](https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/) at <https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/>

Consent to participate

To acknowledge this consent form, you will have the opportunity to verbally consent at the beginning of the interview. By verbally consenting, you are affirming that you have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that you had about this research have been answered. You have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that you may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You are aware that you may revoke your consent at any time.