

A Phenomenological Study of Chief Academic Officers at Texas Public Rural-Serving
Community Colleges: Decision-Making Skills During Times of Financial Crises

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	vii
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Significance of the Study.....	7
Research Questions.....	8
Summary of Theoretical Framework.....	9
Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions to the Study.....	9
Limitation.....	9
Delimitations.....	9
Assumptions.....	10
Definition of Key Terms.....	10
Summary.....	11
Organization of the Remainder of the Study.....	12
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	13
Overview of Public Community Colleges.....	13
Texas Public Community Colleges.....	16
Effects of Financial Crisis on Public Community Colleges.....	18
Financial Crisis and Effects on Texas Community Colleges.....	23
Community College Chief Academic Officers (CAO's).....	26
Conceptual Framework.....	28

Summary	32
III. METHODOLOGY	33
Research Questions	33
Research Design.....	33
Type of Study.....	34
Instrumentation	34
Pilot Study.....	35
Participants and Sampling.....	37
Data Collection.....	38
Data Analysis	40
Trustworthiness.....	44
Context of the Researcher.....	46
Summary	47
IV. RESULTS.....	48
Summary of Research Design.....	48
Data Collection Process.....	48
Data Analysis.....	51
Participant Profiles.....	52
Findings.....	54
Decision-Making Skills of Chief Academic Officers.....	54
Tenacity/Perseverance.....	55
Open Communication.....	58
Strategic Planning and Operations.....	63
Perceptions of Critical Decision Making Skills	66
Mastery of Budget Analysis and Resource Management.....	66
People Skills.....	67

Intricate Knowledge of the Community College Mission and Functions.....	69
Summary.....	70
V. DISCUSSION	72
Overview of Study.....	72
Discussion of Findings.....	73
Decision-Making Skills of Chief Academic Officers.....	75
Critical Decision-Making Skills of Chief Academic Officers.....	82
Implications and Recommendations for Higher Education.....	88
Recommendations for Future Research.....	91
Conclusion.....	92
REFERENCES	95
APPENDICES	112
A. Texas Tech University Human Subject Approval.....	112
B. Interview Questionnaire Guide for Chief Academic Officers (Original) ...	113
C. Interview Questionnaire Guide for Chief Academic Officers (Revised)....	115
D. Description of the Project.....	117
E. Participant Recruitment Email.....	119

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the decision-making approaches utilized by Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) at Texas public rural-serving community colleges, during a time of unexpected financial crises that required drastically reducing expenditures in the middle of a fiscal period (mid-year budget cut), during 2010. This study sought to explore and describe the critical reactionary skills and approaches employed by these CAO's to address the financial crises at their institutions.

The five participants were purposefully selected based on their experience with the 2008 economic downturn and mid-year reductions at their institutions in 2010. A semi-structured interview protocol was used for data collection, and the phenomenological data analysis process, utilizing constant comparative analysis methods, was used to analyze the data collected.

The conceptual framework that guided this study was based on the attributes of leadership and crisis theories, and the concept that decision-making during times of uncertainty can lead to a sense of urgency in making decisions. This can often result in a decision-making environment where quick decisions are perceived as necessary, which can be detrimental in a crisis situation. The findings of this study indicated that CAO's exhibited tenacity and perseverance, open communication, and strategic planning and operations skills when making decisions related to the instructional mission of their institutions, during the 2010 reductions in state appropriations. Furthermore, the CAO's perceived that there were critical skills that guided their decision-making in times of financial uncertainty. These included: mastery of budget analysis and resource management, people skills, and intricate knowledge of the community college mission

and functions. All of the skills and approaches identified by the study participants did not support hasty decision-making during times of financial crises.

The implications of this study for higher education are that there are critical skills needed to make decisions in order to lead institutions through times of financial crises. Institutions need to ensure that their leadership has these skills or that they provide opportunities for their leaders to obtain them through on the job training or professional development. In addition, many of the participants noted that they learned many of their skills from prior work experiences, and not necessarily from their positions in higher education. This highlights the need for hiring managers at institutions to be cognizant of what skills are necessary in their leadership, and to ensure they hire individuals with these skills or that they provide training and mentorship opportunities to acquire them.

The results of this study will contribute to the higher education knowledge base on the critical skills needed by higher education leadership to lead their institutions through times of financial difficulties. This is one of few empirical studies that examines the decision-making skills of leadership during times of crises in a higher education context. Additional research should be conducted to further expand this research into other types of community college environments such as urban and suburban. Institution size and geographic location may have a direct impact on the decisions an institution is forced to make in times of financial uncertainty. In addition, a quantitative study on the decision-making skills utilized by CAO's would also expand the empirical research on decision-making skills used during times of crises, and could result in the findings of the study being more generalizable to the broader context of higher education.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Financial crisis in higher education is neither a new or sporadic issue for community colleges (Burstein, 1996; Cohen, 1993; Lombardi, 1972; “The Education Commission,” 2002). In fact, it has been noted that publicly-supported community colleges in the United States (U.S.) are regularly faced with shrinking budget reimbursements due to appropriations reductions from state legislatures. To make matters worse, the severe economic woes beginning in 2008 have not only affected community college budget planning and forecasting, but resulting state mandated mid-year budget cuts have only served to exacerbate the matter (Johnson, Oliff, & Koulish, 2008). To add to the funding tumult is the legislative mandate that community colleges maintain their open access mission as enrollments increase (Hardy, Katsinas, & Bush, 2007; Katsinas, Alexander, & Opp, 2003). Sitting squarely in the role of budgeting, planning and funding for the instructional function of the community college is the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) who must maintain congruence between adequate resources and the academic mission of the institution.

Statement of the Problem

Funding Texas public community colleges is a political process. Fluctuations in state government appropriations for the past 25 years has resulted in a decline from 61% funding of community college operating budgets in fiscal year (FY) 1985 to 24% in FY 2009 (Texas Association of Community Colleges [TACC], 2011a). Competition for already scarce revenues become exacerbated when facing economic strains, such as the 2008 economic crisis in the U.S., which resulted in major bank and business failures, high unemployment rates, unprecedented mortgage foreclosures, and a tightening of

lending markets (Borbely, 2009; Paulson, 2008; Zumeta, 2009). Community college administrators watched, as in past downturns, state appropriations decrease, and in many cases experienced budget cuts in the middle of a funding cycle (Potter, 2003; “States’ Budget Crises,” 2008; Trombley, 2003; Zumeta, 2009). To find a comparative scenario reflective of current issues of financial emergency for higher education, one only has to look back to the lesser recession of the early 2000s to find like circumstances of state budget deficits and associated funding reductions at a time of increasing community college enrollments (Callan, 2002).

To illustrate, the headline for the September 2002 newsletter of the Texas Community College Teachers Association (TCCTA) suggested that the Texas legislature would face a possible projected budget shortfall (“Legislature Faces Projected,” 2002, p. 1). Relatively unnoticed by the candidates for the 2002 state elected offices (including Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Comptroller), many programs were offered to the electorate that provided for increasing student enrollments at community and technical colleges. However, this was all occurring just as “the tax cut of the last (legislative) session, burgeoning Medicaid rolls, and a prior commitment to subsidized health insurance for public school teachers” were all on the table for consideration (“Legislature Faces Projected,” 2002, p. 1).

On January 17, 2003, Governor Rick Perry of Texas delivered a letter to the 78th Legislature that stated, “the situation we face is clear: Texas government spending has outpaced the performance of our economy” (Perry, 2003, p. 1). The follow-up letter from the Governor’s office, addressed to the leaders of institutions of higher education (among others), included a directive to “immediately reduce FY [funding year] 03 spending by an

amount equal to at least 7 percent of your FY 03 general revenue appropriation in all programs...” (Perry, Dewhurst, & Craddick, 2003, p. 1). Interestingly, as noted by the TACC, all of this occurred as contact hours for Texas public community colleges continued to climb, with FY 2004-2005 seeing an increase of almost 15% from the previous funding biennium (TACC, 2003).

Fast-forward to January 15, 2010, when a letter from the Texas Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Speaker of the House was delivered to state agencies (including chancellors and presidents of higher education institutions) respectfully requesting, “that each state agency submit a plan to identify savings in priority increments totaling 5 percent of the general revenue and general revenue-dedicated appropriations for the 2010-2011 biennium” (Perry, Dewhurst, & Straus, 2010a, p. 1). This was followed up with a request on December 6, 2010, for an additional 2.5% cut for the 2010-2011 biennium (Perry, Dewhurst, & Straus, 2010b, p. 1). Additionally, a May 27, 2010 letter from the Texas Legislative Budget Board and Governor’s office requested detailed plans from Texas higher education institutions as to how they would trim an additional 10% for the 2012-2013 biennium appropriations (O’Brien & Stout, 2010). All of this was requested as Texas community college enrollments increased by almost 69,000 statewide for the fall 2009 semester compared to fall 2008 (TACC, 2010).

Even without the sudden mandate from the state chief executive that appropriated funds needed to become drastically reduced five months into the fiscal period, formula funding appropriations for public community colleges in Texas have had a rather ominous history. Established in 1973 by the 63rd Texas legislature, the formula used to determine funding for public community colleges, which incorporates the number of

contact hours produced (in 26 instructional areas) to capture enrollment by an institution, has never been fully funded (Hudson, 2008). The 81st legislature appropriated funds amounting to only 48% of the full formula for the 2010-2011 biennium (TACC, 2009). Waller et al. (2007) noted that, “this alarming trend may serve to reclassify the state’s public community colleges from state-supported to state-assisted institutions of higher education” (p. 564). Kapp (2009) suggested “state affiliated” as a more appropriate term to describe the decrease in state higher education funding (p. 35).

Ignoring the problem of funding shortfalls from the state, or hoping they just disappear, is simply not an option for higher education institutions. Legislative allocations help ensure the codified mission of the Texas public community college is being met. Texas public community colleges are mandated through legislation to provide:

1. Technical programs up to two years in length leading to associate degrees or certificates;
2. Vocational programs leading directly to employment in semiskilled and skilled occupations;
3. Freshman and sophomore courses in arts and sciences;
4. Continuing adult education programs for occupational or cultural upgrading;
5. Compensatory education programs designed to fulfill the commitment of an admissions policy allowing the enrollment of disadvantaged students;
6. A continuing program of counseling and guidance designed to assist students in achieving their individual educational goals;
7. Workforce development programs designed to meet local and statewide needs;

8. Adult literacy and other basic skills programs for adults; and
9. Such other purposes as may be prescribed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board or local governing boards in the best interest of post-secondary education in Texas. (TACC, n.d., pp. 7-8)

Trustees, presidents, deans, faculty, and other employee groups at Texas public community colleges are faced with the overwhelming task of adjusting to the mandates of an immediate mid-year budget reduction, while trying to maintain continuity in the mission of their institutions. They also must prepare for probable reductions in appropriations, for which they will have to cope. Within the mix of the stakeholders for fiscal accountability, the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) emerges as the person at the community college who perhaps has the most daunting task when it comes to slashing budgets to address funding reductions by the state. The CAO typically works closely with faculty, mid-level managers and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the institution on a daily basis (Ferren & Stanton, 2004). Unlike trustees or the CEO who may rely upon lower layers of management as a buffer zone from criticism, the CAO rarely has this protection. In addition to his or her place on the organizational chart, the CAO is usually responsible for managing the instructional/academic budget (Ferren & Stanton, 2004), which according to 2009 data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and Smith (1995), is typically the largest expenditure for a community college.

Of the major revenue sources available to Texas public community colleges, tuition and fees, local ad valorem taxes, state appropriations (through contact hour funding), and sales from auxiliary services, contracts, grants, and so forth; only state appropriations are restricted to support administrative and instructional costs (Hudson,

2008; TACC, n.d.). With this in mind, it becomes more apparent why the CAO, charged with maintaining the instructional/academic budget to sustain the solvency of the legislatively mandated programs listed above for community colleges, is affected adversely when appropriations are not funded to formula or when mid-year reductions are implemented by state government.

CAO's who are proactive and capable of making decisions at times when mid-year budget cuts are implemented, exemplify attributes of leaders who recognize the needs of internal and external stakeholders, but also the importance of operating within the stated mission of their institutions. Watba and Farmer (2006) profoundly advocated that, "it seems appropriate to suggest that community college leaders should be sufficiently informed of potential changes that might otherwise change the course of educational programs and mission" (p. 245). While there is no official handbook for CAO's concerning how to cope with mid-year reductions, identifying experiences linked to approaches taken in previous situations exhibiting similarity may be a helpful learning tool when the inevitable occurs.

Purpose of the Study

In 2010, the Texas government mandated public higher education institutions to cut expenditures, mid-fiscal year, which constituted a financial crisis at the respective institutions. The mandate to cut expenditures was a corrective measure to a projected \$11-18 billion state of Texas budget shortfall (TCCTA, 2010). The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making approaches utilized by Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) at Texas public community colleges, during a time of unexpected financial crises that required drastically reducing expenditures in the middle of a fiscal period

(mid-year budget cut). This study sought to explore and describe the critical reactionary skills and approaches employed by these CAO's to address the financial implications at their institutions. The results of the study will increase the knowledge base in the practice of higher education as well as the research literature, related to decision-making during times of financial uncertainty.

Significance of the Study

The body of literature surrounding the position of the community college CAO lacks in comparison to the significance of the position (Edington, 2006). The research seems to be closely related to several general areas of interest: identifying career paths, growth, and professional development of the CAO (Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown, 2002; Cejda & McKenney, 2000; Damico, Gmelch, Hopkins, & Mitchell, 2003); the role of the CAO, and in some instances introducing role ambiguity or role conflict (Anderson, Murray, & Olivarez, 2002; Moden, Miller, & Williford, 1987; Murray, Murray, & Summar, 2000; Walters & Keim, 2003; Wolverton, Wolverton, & Gmelch, 1999); and identifying issues and challenges in working with the community college CAO (Cejda & Leist, 2006; Vaughan, 1990; Watba & Farmer, 2006). The variety above indicates the stressful nature of the position (Andrews, 2000; Findlen, 2000b). However, while there is acknowledgement and examples of financial crises (including mid-year mandatory budget reductions) affecting community colleges nationwide, there is limited empirical research on understanding how such a vital leader-administrator in the instructional budgeting process successfully approaches sudden, drastic, and unexpected changes in an already financially induced stressful environment, to meet constituent needs and expectations.

As a dire economic climate does little to instill confidence that community colleges will see significant state funding support in the near future, this study was timely. While the recession of the early 2000s was less in duration and scope nationally (National Bureau of Economic Research [NBER], 2010), when compared to the 2008 economic recession, the facets of the predicament and its damaging effects to the healthy functioning of the two-year institution may have some transferrable attributes. Katsinas and Tollefson (2009) sent up a red flag regarding lessons experienced during the 2003 recession and forecasted troubling times ahead for state-supported community colleges. It is not enough to concede tough times on the horizon, but offering data-supported recommendations to those having to react and endure in challenging economic times may provide a sense of direction and calm navigation as they strive to move forward. In addition, the results of this study will provide practices used by experienced CAO's to address financial reduction implications.

Research Questions

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What decision-making skills are utilized by Chief Academic Officers to address mid-year budget cuts precipitated by a reduction in state appropriations?
2. What decision-making skills are perceived as most critical for Chief Academic Officers when faced with unexpected mid-year budget cuts precipitated by reductions in state appropriations?

Summary of Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework that guided this study combined attributes noted in the literature on leadership theory and crisis theory, as well as the findings from prior research that decision-making by academic administrators during a time of crisis may take place in an environment surrounded by uncertainty, stressors, and pressure (Christensen & Kohls, 2003; Das, 1980; Keinan, 1987). This environment leads to a sense of immediacy for resolution, creating a decision-making environment where quick decisions are perceived as necessary, when in reality quick decision-making could be detrimental to an institution.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions to the Study

Limitation

This study utilized participants serving in the role of CAO's at Texas public rural-serving community colleges only, at the time of the 2008 recession and the resulting 2010-2011 mid-year budget cuts. The transferability of the findings of this study is at the discretion of the reader.

Delimitations

There were two delimitations for this study. First, the study did not explore financial crises at four-year colleges or universities, who may have also experienced mid-year budget cuts during the time frame evaluated in this study. Second, although higher education institutions in 43 states experienced budget cuts for the FY-2010 time period (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2010), this study focused solely on Texas public rural-serving community colleges.

Assumptions

This study was approached with the following assumptions:

1. Participants would be truthful when sharing their in-depth experiences of occurrences at their institution and the decisions that were made in response to unanticipated mid-year budget cuts.
2. Participants may have had guarded their perceptions of their decision-making capabilities and judgment.
3. Participants were qualified to add substantive experiential insight due to their administrative position within the hierarchy of their respective institutions.
4. Institutional size, educational offerings, and location may have differing impacts on appropriation reductions and the experiences of the participants.
5. Participants' experiences, and budget management and crisis management styles are assumed to impact the possible experiences and the decisions made by them during times of financial crises.

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions guided this study:

Ad Valorem Tax: An ad valorem tax, such as property tax, is calculated as a percent of the value of the item (Texas Legislative Council, 1999). The ad valorem tax is a revenue stream for public community colleges.

Biennium: "The two-year budget period used by Texas state government. A biennium begins on September 1 of an odd-numbered year and ends on August 31 of the next odd-numbered year. Each biennium contains two state fiscal years" (THECB, 2007, p. 9).

Chief Academic Officer: The individual at a college primarily responsible for its instructional integrity and curriculum development. Primary accountability is for instruction (Erwin, 2000).

Formula Funding: A mathematical basis for estimating the amount of resources needed and/or allocating dollars to institutions of higher education (Stinson, 2003).

Funding Year (FY): In Texas, this is the 12-month period beginning on September 1 and ending on August 31, which coincides with the state of Texas' fiscal year (THECB, 2007).

State Appropriations: Revenues allocated to community colleges for instructional purposes as decided by the Texas Legislature through the process of formula funding.

Texas Public Community College: An institution of higher education deriving financial resources from local, state, and federal sources, and providing postsecondary education primarily for persons above the 12th grade age level.

Summary

In 2010, the Texas government mandated public higher education institutions to cut expenditures, mid-fiscal year, which constituted a financial crisis at the respective institutions. The mandate to cut expenditures was a corrective measure to a projected \$11-18 billion state of Texas budget shortfall (TCCTA, 2010). Chapter I provided an introduction to the problem of funding of public community colleges in the state of Texas, and the implications to these institutions when the state government demands a mid-year budget reduction. The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making approaches utilized by Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) at Texas public community colleges, during a time of unexpected financial crises that required drastically reducing

expenditures in the middle of a fiscal period (mid-year budget cut). This study sought to explore and describe the critical reactionary skills and approaches employed by these CAO's to address the financial implications at their institutions.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter II will present an overview of the literature on public community colleges and their funding structures, as well as the role of the CAO, in managing the instructional budget for these institutions. Chapter III details the methodology and research design for this phenomenological study. Chapter IV provides the findings of the study, and Chapter V concludes with a discussion of the findings of the study, implications and recommendations for higher education, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter II presents a review of the literature surrounding public community college funding and the role of Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) in managing the instructional budget. The following areas will be discussed: 1) overview of public community colleges nationally and within Texas; 2) the effects of state funding decreases on public community colleges both nationally and within Texas; 3) the role of the community college Chief Academic Officer; and 4) the conceptual framework used to guide this study. The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making approaches utilized by CAO's at Texas public community colleges, during a time of unexpected financial crises that required drastically reducing expenditures in the middle of a fiscal period (mid-year budget cut). This study sought to explore and describe the critical reactionary skills and approaches employed by these CAO's to address the financial crises at their institutions caused by the mid-year budget cuts.

Overview of Public Community Colleges

The community college environment throughout the United States (U.S.) is ever-changing. According to Levin (1998), "the multiple functions and broad mission of the community college have no doubt made the institution susceptible to change as well as a receptacle of education trends, from learning paradigms to assessment movements" (para. 9). Typically, community colleges are being asked to do more and to be adaptable to change, with fewer resources. In Texas, for example, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) embarked on an ambitious *Closing the Gaps* initiative that seeks to add 630,000 students to the higher education system by 2015 (THECB, 2010a).

This particular plan is relying, in large part, on community colleges to fulfill a substantial role, while funding issues continue to place more burdens on the individual institutions (Katsinas, Alexander, & Opp, 2003).

The development of the two-year institution known as the junior college is generally credited to the ideas and concepts of William Rainey Harper (Cruz, 2002). As the first president of the University of Chicago in 1890, Harper is forever linked with the distinction of being instrumental in creating the first junior college in Joliet, Illinois, the birthplace of the *junior college* movement (Hudson, 2008). Even the 2013-2014 catalog for Joliet Junior College proudly proclaims:

Joliet Junior College is the nation's first public community college. J. Stanley Brown, superintendent of Joliet Township High School, and William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, founded JJC in 1901 as an experimental postgraduate high school program... Brown and Harper's innovation created a junior college that academically paralleled the first two years of a four-year college or university. Within a few years, the concept of "community" had grown to include students outside the existing high school district. (2013, para. 12)

The publicly-supported community college known today emerged from the fragile ideal known as the junior college that was merely trying to emerge in some rough form at the turn of the twentieth century.

By 1905, of the 32 junior colleges in existence, only one was a public institution. The number of overall institutions rose to 55 in 1910, with only three classified as public (Erdman & Ogden, 2000). California was the first state to develop a statewide

community college system and a system for its funding (Hudson, 2008). Several researchers (e.g., Cohen, & Brawer, 2008; Diener, 1986; Eaton, 1994; Vaughan, 1983) noted the expansion of the junior college role and scope in the 1940's. The Truman Commission (President's Commission on Higher Education) released a powerful report in 1947 entitled *Higher Education for American Democracy*. Vaughan (1983) eloquently described the impact and importance of the report as the impetus for the development of the contemporary community college by noting:

The Truman Commission Report placed such significance on the role the two-year college should play in broadening the base of higher education that the report might be viewed, in retrospect, as the community college manifesto... The Truman Commission called for the opening of doors of higher education to members of society who, throughout American history, had lingered on the periphery of the American dream of equality for all... These colleges were to be so closely tied and committed to serving their communities that the Commission labeled them *community colleges*... For the first time in history, the two-year college was viewed by a presidential commission as an important means for the democratization of higher education. (p. 21)

While the traditional role of the junior college at the time was primarily preparatory education for transfer to a college or university, the mission of the new two-year college would expand to meet greater needs of the community (Vaughan, 1983). The community college also ended the argument that the two-year college was simply an extension of high school (grades 13 and 14) (Vaughan, 1983). The institution was now on its way to becoming a vital part of higher education.

Clowes and Levin (1989) summed up the place of the community college in the higher education landscape:

The generally accepted niche of the community college within American higher education has been to provide low-cost, degree-credit and non-credit programs in hometown settings for low-ability, part-time, minority-group, and low income students who probably would not have otherwise participated in higher education. (p. 351)

Today, the American community college is perhaps the most utilized point to access higher education. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) estimated that in 2013, there were 1,132 community colleges in the U.S., enrolling 13 million students, and accounting for 45% of all undergraduates (AACC, 2013a). To fund such a large segment of higher education, community colleges generally receive revenue primarily from a combination of local taxes, state government, and student tuition and fees (Hudson, 2008).

Texas Public Community Colleges

The first junior college in the state of Texas is generally credited to the church-sponsored Decatur Baptist College (now Dallas Baptist University), sometime in the early 1890s. The first publicly-supported junior college was opened in Wichita Falls, Texas in 1922 as an extension of high school (Tuttle, n.d.). Funding for junior colleges in Texas was provided through taxing by local school districts, with formal recognition through legislation in 1929. Funding through appropriations for junior colleges in Texas was first proposed in 1939 by Senate Bill 116 for the existing 20 junior colleges (and one

university offering lower level courses). While Senate Bill 116 did not pass, subsequent funding was established the following biennium (Hudson, 2008; Tuttle, n.d.).

Early community colleges in Texas were usually rurally located, provided transfer credit to four-year institutions and agricultural training (Cruz, 2002). By 1964, there were 34 community/junior college districts in Texas. During the late 1960s and through the 1970s, 16 new districts were added (TACC, n.d.). It was during this time that the term “junior college” was replaced with “community college” (Dove, 2007, p. 102).

In 1965, community colleges in Texas were placed under the control of the Coordinating Board, Texas College and University System (now known as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB]), “to provide leadership and coordination for the Texas higher education system to achieve excellence for the college education of Texas students” (THECB, 2010b, p. 1). One of the obligations of the THECB is to review funding levels and recommend to the Texas state legislature and Governor changes to the funding formula for allocation of state funds for colleges and universities (THECB, 2010b). The funding formula for community colleges is limited by the legislature to include administrative costs and instruction. Interestingly, funding formulas are based on projected costs using data from previous funding cycles (TACC, n.d.). Since FY 1985 when the state funded 61% of the formula, it has declined to 24% in FY 2009. The decline in state support has come on the heels of large increases in community college enrollments (TACC, 2011b).

Currently, there are 50 community college districts within the state of Texas (TACC, 2010). Each district may include multiple campuses. Today, the stated purpose of public two-year colleges, as defined by the Texas Administrative code is:

Each public community college... shall primarily serve its local taxing district and service area, offering career technical/workforce, and academic courses for certificates or associate degrees. Continuing education, remedial and compensatory education consistent with open admission policies, and a program of counseling and guidance shall also be provided. (Texas Administrative Code, 2009, para. 2)

The implementation and growth of community colleges in Texas (Hudson, 2008) can be credited to the appeal of this evolving institution to include:

1. The ability to keep students close to home and community;
2. Offering parents an attractive alternative to sending a child to a university town where morals could be jeopardized;
3. Financially, the community college is less expensive than university tuition, including the savings for housing;
4. Many communities find the community college enhances the local economy;
5. The community college is seen as a cultural enhancement to the local area. From the arts, to a more educated citizenry, the cultural opportunities are enticing; and
6. Civic pride provides a motivation to elevate a community above its surroundings.

Effects of Financial Crises on Public Community Colleges

A review of the literature indicated that funding issues for community colleges is a continual contention between the growing needs and demands of these front-line institutions and lean state legislatures (e.g., Callan, 2002; Cvancara, 1997; Edirisooriya,

& Sevier, 2001; Roueche, Roueche, & Johnson, 2002; Sheldon, 2003). In 2002, at the policy summit for the Education Commission of the States Center for Community College Policy, it was determined that with 44 states facing budget shortfalls, the ensuing effect on community colleges was expected budget cuts. A warning went out to community college leaders that particular awareness was required for the “biggest policy issue, which is funding” (“The Education Commission,” 2002).

The funding concern has been conspicuously predicted, noted, and studied for decades. Ample warning has been sounded to indicate dire consequences if budgeting was not given serious consideration as more reliance is placed on the two-year institution. Lombardi (1972) acknowledged the strong financial support community colleges received from the time of the Truman Commission of the 1940s until the 1960s. However, the tide changed at the beginning of the 1970s looking forward as, “enrollment continues to increase and new colleges continue to be established, adequate financial support becomes more difficult to obtain” (Lombardi, 1972, p. 6).

The inadequacy of necessary spending for community colleges continued through the decades of the 1980s and 1990s; each decade with its own economic difficulties that served to exacerbate the funding dilemma (Burstein, 1996). Thus, community colleges moved into the troubled economic crises of the new millennium without a vibrant, healthy, less burdensome funding scheme that could ensure productive continuity and growth (Cejda & Leist, 2006) .

Sensing that the future community college would be asked to expand its scope of duty and accountability, Wattenbarger (1971) offered the following cautionary note:

These increasing responsibilities will not result in successful education unless there is greater acceptance of public responsibility for financing higher education than current trends would seem to indicate...however, one might express hope that the current trend toward continuing (tuition) increases will be reversed or at least stabilized before it even more seriously interferes with the predictions discussed above in reference to the target population and the universal opportunity. (p. 311)

Moving forward, the decade of the 1990s found little funding relief for the role-expanding community college. Between 1990 and 1991, Burstein (1996) noted a drop in state support for higher education ranging from 9.5% to 30% in many states. The result was a consolidation of student services, larger class sizes, greater teaching loads, and higher ratios of teachers to students at a time when enrollment demands increased (Burstein, 1996). In an analysis of the recession of the early 1990s, Callan (2002) found five significant generalizations of how higher education was affected by adverse economic conditions:

- A national recession affects each state differently -- in the early 1990s, the recession was very severe in the northeast and in California, but it had relatively little impact in many other states.
- Although a national recession may be short, individual states may face financial stress for much longer periods.
- During a national recession, individual states may face financial stress for a number of other reasons. Among such factors in the early 1990s were rising

Medicaid costs, new federal mandates, higher public school enrollments, court rulings, voter initiatives, inelastic tax systems, and corrections policy.

- When states face fiscal constraints, the impacts on state services vary across states, within states, and among service sectors.
- When revenue shortfalls are allocated among state services, higher education is likely to be required to absorb proportionately larger cuts than other sectors.

When this happens, the state and higher education institutions are likely to shift shortfalls to students and their families by raising tuition. (Callan, 2002, p. 8)

The above generalizations may serve as a warning to a higher education climate in a time of significant economic recession, such as that seen in 2008 (Katsinas, 2009).

Community colleges, in the face of scarce state revenues, look at less aggressive expansion and reengage in creative ways of seeking new avenues of income (Cohen, 1993) or restructuring to produce efficiencies of limited resources (Kapp, 2009).

Moving forward, the economic woes of the early 2000s resulted in yet another assault on funding for America's community colleges. Rampant state budget deficits of 2002 and 2003 were followed by profound cuts in community college appropriations, with many states suffering mid-year cuts. Trombley (2003) described this period as "the worst fiscal news for public higher education institutions and their students in at least a decade, as the economic recession struck almost every state" (para. 2). In 2003, California saw a targeted mid-year budget cut of 3.3 % for community colleges. The cuts resulted in layoffs, course reductions, and classes not being offered ("Governor Approves," 2003). Perhaps this strengthens the tie of drastic mid-year budget cuts to periods of economic strife. As noted previously, this era was noted by the cycle of

reduced funding at a time of increased student enrollment (Sheldon, 2003; “The Education Commission,” 2002).

Hebel (2003) highlighted the position that community colleges are almost universally vulnerable when it comes to reductions in higher education spending; four-year institutions have the luxury of competing for research grants, greater flexibility in tuition pricing, and more sophisticated avenues in acquiring alumni donations. Community colleges, whose missions are weighted on the exclusivity of teaching and not research, are left with competing against like institutions and other state agencies fighting for a piece of the appropriations pie (Hebel, 2003). Competition for state funding of higher education with other state agencies (e.g., prisons, welfare, social services, health care, as well as others) may be a principal factor in the noted decline in stature of priority of community colleges (Cohen, 1993; Lombardi, 1972). State directors of community colleges surveyed in 2004, not only agreed that, “higher education is the largest discretionary item in the entire state budget,” but found consensus in Medicaid being the principal force driving state budgets (Katsinas, Palmer, & Tollefson, 2004, p. ii). Potter (2003) described the budget cuts to higher education during tough economic times as “disproportionate” (p. A22). Irrespective of the reasons for appropriations reductions, students and families ultimately increase their financial burdens through tuition and fee increases (Hardy, Katsinas, & Bush, 2007).

With the full formula not being funded by states and a corresponding expansion of scope of the nation’s community colleges being traced through the decades, it could be argued that the crisis climate of disproportionate appointment and unfulfilled expectations is continual, and contingency planning should be anticipated (Buller, 2007).

Unfortunately, there does seem to be a time where doing “more with less” becomes the normal operating procedure (Tight, 1994). Ferren and Stanton (2004) suggested that, “state budget deficits are so severe that continued reductions are likely” (p. 116). If difficulty exists in defining what truly constitutes financial crises, budget cuts that are assessed during the current relied-upon budget cycle could help define it.

Walters and Keim (2003) surveyed 300 Deans of Instruction at publicly-supported community colleges who identified their top challenges as “money and resources” (p. 270). Very telling of the impact of economic events on the community college landscape are evidenced by the outcomes of the study conducted by Cejda and Leist (2006) who surveyed community college CAO’s in a nine-state region. The participants identified “fiscal concerns as the dominant challenge facing community colleges” (p. 263). The participants also ranked the following issues that community colleges faced as high or very high: federal financial support for students; federal financial support for programs and teaching; state financial support for programs and teaching; state financial support for students; and fiscal management and resource allocation (Cejda & Leist, 2006). In addition, Miller & Seagren (1997) noted:

Effective and efficient financial management has been identified as perhaps the single most important management function on a college campus...one that can be devastating if appropriate recognition is not given to financial implications of programs and the management of resources. (p. 38)

Financial Crises and Effects on Texas Community Colleges

In Texas, mid-year budget cuts in 2003 meant, in addition to the usual reduction of programs and services, that building repairs and new construction ceased (“Texas

College Enrollments,” 2005). This seems to follow the trend of mid-year cuts at greater incidence during times of economic weakness or recession (Katsinas & Tollefson, 2010). The natural occurrence would have state coffers feeling the effects of weak revenues, coupled with the increasing battle for discretionary spending dollars. The recession of 2001 resulted in 37 states making mid-year cuts to their 2002-2003 budgets, which funded community colleges (Potter, 2003). In Texas, a FY 2002-2003 \$10 billion budget deficit resulted in a reduction mid-year (Trombley, 2003).

As the economic climate strengthened following the 2003 budget reductions, state directors of community colleges nationwide reported only 12 states pursuing mid-year cuts in 2004 (Katsinas et al., 2004). Although there was a slight increase in appropriations funding following the 2003 budget cuts for Texas community colleges, 2004 provided a landmark moment as “local taxes, for the first time, exceeded state support” (TACC, n.d., p. 22). According to the Texas Community College Teachers Association ([TCCTA], 2011), the continued underfunding of community colleges carries significant changes to open-admission institutions:

- Tuition has increased significantly;
 - The number and variety of course offerings are affected;
 - Fewer support materials and copies of information are available to students;
 - Fuller and larger classes result in less interaction and support from professors;
 - Hiring delays make it harder to get help from counselors, librarians, and tutors;
- and

- Many students have to delay or prolong their college educations because they cannot get into classes that fit around their family or work schedules or they cannot afford the ever increasing costs. (TCCTA, 2011, p.1)

Signs of impending funding difficulties for Texas were evident prior to the full economic collapse of 2008, when nine states reported mid-year cuts for the 2007-2008 time period. In a 2009 survey conducted by the Education Policy Center for the National Council of State Directors of Community Colleges, 22 states predicted a high probability that mid-year budget cuts would occur. This occurred even with 27 states responding prior to the October 2008 economic collapse of financial markets. As most states looked toward mid-year budget cuts in 2009, an ominous reminder of the 2003 recession forecasted tough times ahead for community college funding (Katsinas & Tollefson, 2010).

The effects of the mandated 5% budget reduction for the 2010-2011 biennium, the 2.5% mandated reduction for FY 2011, an 18.2% increase in base year contact hours, and the elimination of \$15 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds (TACC, 2011a), proved detrimental to the funding of Texas community colleges. State funding for Texas community colleges was highlighted during this time when the 82nd Texas Legislature considered eliminating some existing programs and completely eliminating state funding for four community colleges (Mangan, 2011). Although the four community colleges were spared elimination, all of the funding turmoil occurred at a time when enrollment in Texas community colleges increased 34% during the previous five years, accounting for 70% of all college freshmen enrolled in Texas (TACC, 2011b).

Community College Chief Academic Officers (CAO's)

The changing nature of the modern community college can be further seen in stronger community partnerships, accountability, governance, instruction, employees, support services, and management philosophies (Bragg, 2000). Sitting squarely in the middle of this ever-changing institution is the CAO, who must maintain quality of instruction with “considerable constraints on resources” (Walker, 2000, p. 2). This individual usually has overall responsibility for an institution’s academic program, including the instructional operating budget (Vaughan, 1990). The decisions a CAO makes are very visible, while the decision-making process is “a lonely activity” (Findlen, 2000a, p. 33). Smith (1995) emphasized that, “it is incumbent for decision-makers at community colleges to plan well and allocate resources in ways that enable their respective schools to fulfill their missions and achieve their objectives” (p. 14). As the position itself is a key component to this study, it is important to understand the role (and its associated conflict or ambiguity) of the CAO in community colleges, the scope and depth of the decision-making aspects associated with the role, and identified stressors inherent to dealing with fiscal emergencies that immediately affect planning and operations of the instructional unit.

The CAO of a community college may be known by different titles: academic dean, dean of instruction, vice president of instruction, provost, vice president for academic affairs, vice chancellor, executive vice president, among other things (Andrews, 2000; Moden, Miller, & Williford, 1987; Murray et al., 2000; Walters & Keim, 2003). A review of the literature concerning community college CAO’s demonstrated growing research on the CAO’s career preparation, leadership attributes, professional

development, job satisfaction, and challenges facing the respective position (Anderson, 2002; Anderson et al., 2002; Bragg, 2000; Cejda & Leist, 2011; Cejda & McKenney, 2000, 2001; Edington, 2006; Fons, 2005, Murray et al., 2000; Walker, 2000; Walters & Keim, 2003). However, there is limited research on the decision-making approaches and skills utilized by this integral administrator during times of unanticipated financial crises.

With the CAO typically being responsible for instructional integrity (teaching and curriculum) and items related to this central mission of the community college (Bragg, 2000; Erwin, 2000), it is reasonable to assume that his or her responsibilities encompass a sizeable portion of the institutional operating budget. In fact, a random sampling of five Texas community colleges' (Amarillo College, Blinn College, Frank Phillips College, Lone Star College System, and San Jacinto College) operating budgets demonstrated that instructional and academic support expenses accounted for approximately 42% to 53% of total institutional expenses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In a study of community colleges during financial crises, Lombardi (1972) acknowledged that faculty fringe benefits and salary alone accounted for over half of an institution's operating expenses.

The importance of the CAO position is echoed by Vaughan (1990) who viewed this administrator as being:

...at the center of what is ultimately of greatest importance to the community college, teaching and learning. Deans of instruction also occupy that middle ground where many of the tensions of the college come together, where daily battles are fought: administrative concerns versus faculty concerns; student services concerns versus instructional concerns. (p. 19)

The CAO has been compared on a level of importance to that of the President of the institution (Anderson et al., 2002). Although the role of the CAO has been described as *ambiguous*, the vital nature of the position to the institution is difficult to dispute (Moden et al., 1987). The internal affairs of the institution are touched most profoundly by the CAO who is the conduit between administration and faculty. Accompanying the unique hierarchical placement of the CAO is the stress brought about by role ambiguity and role conflict (Murray et al., 2000). Andrews (2000) described the role of the CAO as a “pressure role” that when “finding funding to support the needs and efforts of the faculty create a pressure-cooker atmosphere of issues and needs within the institution” (p. 19).

In light of decreased funding of community colleges and the ensuing financial turmoil for those in charge, the CAO faces an environment of tough decisions in trying to carry out the mission and goals of educating an increasing student population. Findlen (2000a) impressed upon the visible nature of decision-making for the CAO who must react quickly to pressing issues of the institution while suffering the immediate criticism that ultimately follows. Rapid reactionary responses by the community college CAO may be considered the norm as the community college is predisposed as a medium for continual change of educational trends, as well as a target for economic policy (Levin, 1998).

Conceptual Framework

Traditional trait-based theories on leadership seem to be shifting to more cognitive theories inclusive of participation, collaboration, and flexibility, while also taking into account the effect of the situation presented (Eddy, 2010; Robles, 1998). As

described by Basham and Mathur (2010), the current higher education environment and the ensuing demands on leadership are evolving:

As the twenty-first century progresses, educators face considerable turmoil from the economy, shrinking budgets, aging facilities, and high turnover and attrition among employees at all levels... Within this climate, job roles and responsibilities of leaders and managers are stretched beyond the boundaries of their traditional descriptions. (p. 25)

The evolving landscape of the higher education environment leads to the needs of institutional leaders to have the skills needed to function and lead within an uncertain environment. According to Eddy (2010), leadership at the community college is challenged even more today by funding streams that rely on varied and inadequate state appropriations. This is even more evident for the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) who is responsible for managing the budget that is directly tied to the main function of the community college – instruction. The role of the CAO is more clearly defined using the definition of academic leadership presented by Gmelch and Wolverton (2002), which states it is “the act of building a community of scholars to set direction and achieve common purposes through the empowerment of faculty and staff” (p. 3).

The leadership style and skills needed to lead in an uncertain environment are supported through transformational leadership theory (Wallin, 2010, p. 5). Transformational leadership is a proactive and encompassing style that: (a) anticipates -- reducing the need to be reactionary; (b) analyzes -- searching the environment for data in order to make decisions; (c) acts -- through collaboration and without delay; and (d) affirms -- by continued review and confirmation of implemented changes (Wallin, 2010).

All of the skills noted above are perceived to be instrumental in the ability of CAO's to make decisions during times of financial crises and uncertainty.

Studies involving crisis theory and leadership during a crisis situation in higher education are quite varied as to what actually constitutes a crisis, and have led some researchers to question the overexposure of the use of crisis to merely describe external pressures resulting in organizational change (e.g., Tight, 1994). Toward a description of organizational crisis, Das (1980) posited:

In general, it can be stated that all crisis situations are characterized by high stress for all individuals concerned. This is mostly on account of the threat it produces to the key values held by the persons involved and the surprise element characteristic of all crisis situations. (p. 182)

Hermann (1963, p. 64) proposed three dimensions of an organizational crisis: (1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization. These dimensions are all evidenced at a time when higher education institutions experience mid-year budget cuts in the middle of the biennium.

Decision-making by academic administrators during a time of crisis may take place in an environment surrounded by uncertainty, stressors, and pressure (Christensen & Kohls, 2003; Das, 1980; Keinan, 1987). Research has shown that the unexpected nature of a crisis and the ensuing sense of immediacy for resolution create a decision-making environment where quick decisions may be perceived as necessary (Billings, Milburn, & Schaalman, 1980; Christensen & Kohls, 2003), though other research has

noted that impairments to decision-making in stressful crisis circumstances existed even when time constraints were removed (Keinan, 1987).

Perhaps awareness and planning on the part of the community college CAO as crisis manager would help fulfill the suggestion that “the more vulnerable an organization thinks it is, the more crisis it prepares for; as a result, the less vulnerable it is likely to be” (Mitroff, Shrivastava, & Udwadia, 1987). King (2002) stressed the importance of planning ahead for a crisis event as responsible leadership, and suggested the reliance on teamwork in confronting and planning for such an instance. In their research on crisis management, Pearson and Clair (1998) recommended that “a variety of preparations is associated with more effective reactions. By thinking about and practicing responses to various incidents, organizations build agility” (p. 70).

The purpose of this study was to explore the approaches and skills that CAO’s utilized during times of financial crises and uncertainty at their institutions, to make decisions that affected the instructional mission of their institutions. The conceptual framework that guided this study combines attributes noted in the literature on leadership theory and crisis theory, as well as the findings from prior research that decision-making by academic administrators during a time of crisis may take place in an environment surrounded by uncertainty, stressors, and pressure (Christensen & Kohls, 2003; Das, 1980; Keinan, 1987). This environment leads to a sense of immediacy for resolution, creating a decision-making environment where quick decisions are perceived as necessary, when in reality they may be detrimental to an institution during times of financial uncertainty.

Summary

The two-year junior college was created with the humble intentions of providing transfer credit, keeping students close to home as they matured for university, and providing access to higher education for those in rural areas. Today's public community colleges enroll more than 12 million students nationwide. In fall 2010, Texas open-door community colleges served over 700,000 students annually and provided access to 70% of all first-time students (TACC, 2011b). Despite the legislative mandate to provide technical and vocational programs, transfer credit courses, continuing education and workforce training, and more, this impressive higher education institution is not immune to funding cuts, even during the middle of the fiscal period.

Usually in charge of planning and administering the operational instructional budget at public community colleges is the Chief Academic Officer (CAO). The delicate and tumultuous funding cycles have caused the CAO to face growing decision-making instances that include budgetary matters during times of uncertainty. There is limited empirical research that addresses the approaches and skills utilized by CAO's during times of financial uncertainty to make decisions that support the instructional missions of community colleges.

Chapter III outlines the methodology and the research design that was used to conduct this study. The population and sample, data collection and instrumentation, and the data analysis process that were used will be presented.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present the methodology of the study. It provides a discussion of the research questions, research design, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis that were used to conduct the study. The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making approaches utilized by Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) at Texas public community colleges, during a time of unexpected financial crises that required drastically reducing expenditures in the middle of a fiscal period (mid-year budget cut). This study sought to explore and describe the critical reactionary skills and approaches employed by these CAO's to address the financial implications at their institutions.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What decision-making skills are utilized by Chief Academic Officers to address mid-year budget cuts precipitated by a reduction in state appropriations?
2. What decision-making skills are perceived as most critical for Chief Academic Officers when faced with unexpected mid-year budget cuts precipitated by reductions in state appropriations?

Research Design

This qualitative study sought to explore the experiences of community college CAO's during times of financial crises. In general, qualitative research studies seek to capture human interactions and social context and to develop some type of understanding (Creswell, 2014). This particular type of research has roots in the social sciences and

humanities. Duemer (2007) emphasized the use of qualitative research “to better illuminate our understanding of human behavior in academic organizations” (p. 155).

Type of Study

A phenomenological research design was used for this study. It used a framework borne out of the works of Edmund Husserl to capture the essence of the decision-making processes used (Moustakas, 1994) by Texas community college CAO’s during times of reduction of state appropriations with no prior notice after the start of the fiscal funding year. Phenomenological research attempts to enter the consciousness of the individual experiencing a particular phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Sanders, 1982). Creswell (2007) suggested that the “phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). The phenomenological research design is appropriate for this study “not only because of its rigorous descriptive approach but also because it offers a method for accessing the difficult phenomena of human experience” (Giorgi, 1997, para. 11). This particular format offered the opportunity to focus closely on a single event, financial crisis during mid-year budget reductions, while capturing the in-depth nuances and description that might be missed by other methods of inquiry (Berg, 2004).

Instrumentation

The researcher is the primary data collection method in qualitative research (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), who develops, collects, and analyzes the data collected from multiple sources. Other sources of data collection in qualitative research include “interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 85).

The interview process was utilized as a method of gathering initial data from participants in this study. The in-depth interview method is widely used and is a preferred data collection technique for phenomenological research (Finlay, 1999; Giorgi, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Moustakas, 1994). As this was the basis of data gathering and inquiry for this study, a carefully executed plan on the type and structure of interview was imperative. A semi-structured interview process was used. Using a semi-structured interview protocol (Erlandson et al., 1993), the researcher collected answers to the interview questions, and also probed further with participants to explore their experiences to understand their constructed reality of a situation (Erlandson et al., 1993).

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed and an interview protocol was established to gather the data to address the research questions that guided this study. The questionnaire consisted of 15 open-ended questions that were designed to probe the participants about their experiences as CAO's during times of state-mandated mid-year budget reductions at their institutions, and how they made decisions to deal with these budget reductions during times of financial crises.

Pilot study. Prior to participant selection and interviews, a pilot study was conducted of the interview protocol and the semi-structured interview questions. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) recommended the use of a pilot study when conducting a research interview prior to collecting research data to determine “the need for rephrasing questions or revising the procedure” (p. 246). Johnson and Christensen (2008) suggested conducting a pilot study for the interview questionnaire “to find out whether it operates properly *before* using it in a research study” (p. 189).

After Texas Tech University Human Subjects Review Board approval to conduct this study (please see Appendix A), the pilot study participant was selected and was provided the semi-structured interview questions (please see Appendix B) and the study description (please see Appendix C). The participant served as a CAO at a large, rural-serving Texas community college during the time of the 2010 mid-year budget reduction.

The interview for the pilot study was conducted using the same protocol as was intended for the actual study. It took place at a site chosen by the participant and the interview was digitally audio recorded. Silverman (2000) suggests recording interviews to allow for re-visiting of data in the future. The 15 semi-structured interview questions were presented using the following interview techniques as recommended by Gay and Airasian (2003, p. 213), Gall et al. (2003, pp. 246-248), and Creswell (2007, pp.132-134):

- Assure participants of absolute confidentiality;
- Establish rapport through small talk;
- Explain the procedures for the interview and offered benefits of participation to study participants;
- Participate as a good listener versus that of a constant speaker throughout the interview experience;
- Avoid leading questions and interruptions; and
- Remain sensitive to nonverbal responses when applicable.

After completion of the interview for the pilot study, recorded data was transcribed and edited to remove typographical errors and redundancies. This process served as additional practice for the researcher prior to the actual study interviews and also allowed for a written linkage between research questions and responses.

The results of the pilot study provided valuable feedback to refine the interview questions. It was determined that some of the interview questions were unclear and did not fully achieve the goal originally intended when they were initially formulated. Subsequently, the interview questions were reconfigured by combining several questions, providing more succinct wording, and reducing the overall number of questions from 15 to 13, resulting in a revised set of interview questions (please see Appendix D). It was determined from the pilot study that no revisions were needed to the interview protocol.

Participants and Sampling

Participants for qualitative studies are selected using a purposive sampling methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Purposive sampling is especially important for a qualitative study, to fully understand the unique and lived experiences of the participants, and to help add depth and understanding to the particular phenomenon being investigated. The purposeful sampling technique was used as a method for finding participants for this study. This particular sampling technique refers “to the practice of selecting cases that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purposes of a qualitative study” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 178). Central to the focus of this study was the purposeful selection of five Chief Academic Officers (CAO’s) employed at public community colleges in Texas during the time of the 2010 state government mandated mid-year budget reductions. Inclusion criteria was that the participants served in CAO administrative positions within a Texas public rural-serving community college during the national economic crisis of 2008.

The potential participants were identified through personal knowledge of the researcher of CAO’s at public community colleges in Texas, as well as help from others

in administrative positions in higher education institutions. Once the potential participant was identified, he or she was sent an email that explained the purpose and nature of the study, along with a description of the project (please see Appendices D and E). The email also explained the participation criteria for the study, which included that the participant was the serving CAO at the institution in 2008 through the time the study was conducted. The email also outlined that the researcher would follow up with the potential participant 10 days after the email to obtain his or her decision about participating in the study. The email solicitation resulted in two study participants. Two other study participants were identified and recommended by those in positions of higher education administration and research. In addition, the technique known as snowballing (chain) sampling was utilized to obtain the final study participant:

The basic strategy of snowballing involves first identifying several people with relevant characteristics and interviewing them or having them answer a questionnaire. These subjects are then asked for the names of other people who possess the same attributes as they do. (Berg, 2004, p. 36)

Data Collection

The semi-structured interview technique was used as the primary method of collecting data for this study. The semi-structured format provided both a set of predetermined questions for participants and the ability to make adjustments and clarifications when necessary during the interview activity (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Gall et al. (2003) considered a similar qualitative interview format, “the standardized open-ended interview,” where a set of predetermined questions is used for each participant with the premise of reducing researcher bias (p. 240). Moustakas (1994) described the

phenomenological interview procedure as “an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114).

Creswell (2007) identified the following process as instrumental to conducting interviews as a data collection method in qualitative research:

- Use purposeful sampling to identify research participants;
- Determine the type of interview to conduct to meet the needs of answering the research questions (group, individual, face-to-face, telephone, and so forth);
- Select equipment appropriate for the procedure selected;
- Utilize a well constructed interview protocol with optimum number of questions;
- Consider pilot testing interview questions for refinement;
- Determine a distraction free location conducive for conducting the interview;
- Ensure consent of participant to take part in the study. An overview of the interview process and the reason for the study should be shared prior to the interview; and
- Listen closely to the participant while displaying appropriate demeanor to include staying close to the recorded interview protocol. (pp. 133-134)

Guidelines pertaining to interview data collection include clear communication and explanation of any relevant terminology; the creation of an interview protocol – the list of questions to be used with participants, and created prior to the interview; and the decision to audio-record and take notes during the interview (Creswell, 2014).

Observations and documents are other sources of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Observations can include “taking field notes on the behavior and

activities of individuals at the research site” (Creswell, 2014, p. 190). These notes should include “demographic information about the time, place, and date of the field setting where the observation takes place” (Creswell, 2014, p. 194). Documents also may be used as a data collection source in qualitative inquiries. Creswell (2014) urges researchers to consider using sources in addition to interviews and observations, such as documents, because “they create reader interest in a proposal and can capture information that observations and interviews may miss” (p. 190).

The processes outlined by Creswell (2007) above were used to guide the data collection in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five purposefully selected participants. Three interviews were conducted in person and two were conducted over the telephone. The length of the interviews varied; they were between 49 minutes and three hours. Field notes were utilized periodically to capture emphasis or highlights during the interview experience, as well as to document observations. All interviews were audio recorded through digital means. Silverman (2000) supports the use of audio recording during interviews as “tape-recorded interviews, like texts and tapes of naturally occurring interaction, allow you to return to your data in their original form as often as you wish” (p. 126). Each interview was transcribed within two weeks of the interview.

Data Analysis

“The process of reduction of data into a compelling, authentic, and meaningful statement constitutes an end goal of qualitative research design” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 61). Giorgi (1997) revealed five steps of data analysis common to all qualitative methods:

1. Collection of verbal data;
2. Reading of the data;
3. Breaking the data into some kind of parts;
4. Organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective; and
5. Synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community. (para. 27)

In a phenomenological study, the researcher focuses on the premise of the description and experience of phenomenon rather than other methods, which seek an explanation of meanings (Finlay, 1999; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). A modified version of Hycner's (1985) guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method presented by Moustakas (1994) was used to analyze the data collected for this study. Step one involved transcribing the interview data collected through the five participant interviews. An essential tenet of phenomenological research is the avoidance of presuppositions by the researcher (Zahavi, 2003). The concept of the researcher being truly without personal prejudice is discussed by Levering (2006) as being an almost impossible task; however, the researcher approached this study with an openness of mind. The ability to "bracket" (set aside, compartmentalize, suspend) speculation or preconceived notions requires a "fundamental change of attitude" on the part of the researcher (Zahavi, 2003, p. 46). Malteraud (2001) distinguished between researcher preconceptions and bias by acknowledging that bias only exists when the researcher fails to disclose them.

The second step of analysis of the data collected included meticulous rereading of interview data to identify initial patterns or themes to determine units of general meaning

(Hycner, 1985). A phenomenological attitude sensitive to the phenomenon being investigated and committed to openness was assumed by the researcher as suggested by Giorgi (2009). Hycner (1985) defined a *general meaning unit* “as those words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communications which express a unique and coherent meaning (irrespective of the research question) clearly differentiated from that which precedes and follows” (p. 282). In addition, the data was analyzed as it was being gathered (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The constant-comparative method, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is an analytical approach which was used throughout the data analysis process, “involves the constant comparison of identified data or concepts to determine their distinctive characteristics so that they can be placed in different and appropriate categories,” with new concepts or pieces of data compared “to existing categories” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 233).

The third step and perhaps the most crucial aspect of the data analysis process for this study involved theme development. Once non-redundant units of meaning were determined, the researcher established clusters of themes. It was then determined if a central theme expressed the essence of the clusters previously developed (Hycner, 1985). Sanders (1982) offered four questions pertinent to the phenomenological researcher to arrive at this stage:

1. How may the phenomenon or experience under investigation be described?
2. What are the invariants or themes emergent in those descriptions?
3. What are the subjective reflections of those themes?
4. What are the essences present in those themes and subjective reflections? (p. 357)

Creswell (2007) suggested describing emerging themes in terms of their textural and structural content. Textural description involves “what” participants experienced, while the structural description is concerned with the context or “how” an experience occurred (Creswell, 2007, p. 159; Gall et al., 2003). Finlay (1999) reminded the phenomenological researcher that the emergence of themes is a time consuming process whereby rushing the process may result in “superficial” results (p. 304).

The ability to address the research questions effectively is directly related to the ability of the researcher to properly and accurately find and identify themes. Gall et al. (2003) offered confirmation of the importance of this notion when they wrote, “one of the most critical steps of interpretational data analysis is developing a set of categories that adequately encompass and summarize the data” (p. 453). As the study emerged, the assistance of computer software was considered to aid in theme identification. In fact, Gall et al. (2003) suggest using specialized computer software in the procedural method of segmenting data, developing categories, coding segments, grouping category segments, and drawing conclusions. Due to the lack of availability and experience with such computer software, the researcher manually processed data through all segments of analysis, which included:

- Read interview transcripts multiple times to detect errors and, more importantly, to gain an understanding of the perspectives of each participant.
- Thoroughly re-read and practiced line-by-line analysis of raw data for initial coding to identify expressions of meaningful units of data as related to the research questions.

- Practiced the use of the constant comparative method of data analysis by identifying meaningful units of data throughout the process.
- Synthesized textural descriptions into clusters of themes once non-redundant units of meaning were determined and coded.
- Organized and identified themes through a comparison of theme clusters present across all interviews.

The final stage of analysis was to develop a composite summary that accurately captured the *essence* of the experience under study (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Sanders, 1982). The term *essence* is found widely in the literature (Maggs-Rapport, 2000; Moran, 2000; Mortari, 2008; Moustakas, 1994; Sanders, 1982; Sokolowski, 2000; Zahavi, 2003) to describe the true meaning of the experience of the participant. This can only be achieved when presuppositions of the researcher are removed or bracketed in order to arrive at themes through an open mind concentrated on the lived experience of the participant.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined four methods to ensure trustworthiness of the data collected and analyzed in qualitative research: 1) credibility, 2) confirmability, 3) dependability, and 4) transferability. Credibility is the likelihood “that credible findings and interpretations will be produced” in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). This is accomplished through prolonged engagement, which is accomplished through an extended period of time with participants and triangulation of data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation is accomplished through the collecting and comparing of multiple sources of data to further confirm findings, which are used to increase the

likelihood of producing credible findings from the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant interviews lasted between 49 minutes and three hours. The interviews were triangulated with other sources of data, including documents from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Texas Association of Community College Teachers Association, and the Texas Association of Community Colleges, in addition to the field notes and observations of the researcher during the participant interviews. Member-checking, which is the act of confirming information collected from the participants (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was conducted throughout each interview, in which participants' responses were repeated back to them so they could confirm or correct the information. In addition, the transcribed interview was sent to each of the participants for their review.

Confirmability relates to the ability for someone to confirm the information collected, and confirm that findings are accurate (Erlandson et al. 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purposes of this study, field notes were used to document observations, thoughts, ideas, and questions pertaining to this study. The field notes were used to establish confirmability

Erlandson et al. (1993) argued that one cannot have confirmability without dependability. Dependability refers to "evidence that if it [the study] were replicated with the same or similar respondents (subjects) in the same (or similar) context, its findings would be repeated" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The explicit details provided in the process used to conduct this study serve as tools to support dependability. Dependability in particular is meant to illustrate overall consistency within the findings (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability refers to the ability of readers to glean an understanding from a qualitative work so that they can transfer the information read into their own contextual meaning (Erlandson et al., 1993). Narratives from the participants' interviews, written using thick, rich descriptions, helped to provide a detailed contextual background in the story of this phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The results of this study are not generalizable, but may be transferable. The transferability of the results of this study are at the discretion of the reader.

Context of the Researcher

The researcher has a background in community college teaching and administration within the state of Texas. The impetus for this study was his experience of the effects of mid-year budget cuts due to unexpected appropriations reductions in 2003 while working at a Texas public community college. After noting the negative effect of institutional budget cuts in order to meet the mandated appropriations request, the unplanned nature of the event, and the apparent stress that was placed on institutional leaders to make decisions that had a far reaching impact; it forever left an impression upon the researcher.

The nature of phenomenological research requires the researcher to set aside personal experiences and assumptions while conducting a study in order to view research data through an unbiased lens. Moran (2000) suggested that the researcher conducting phenomenological research should be free of biases related to his or her own personal experiences during the data analysis process. The researcher for this study acknowledges the potential for bias but believes his work has not been influenced by past experiences. The only assumption that was not held while conducting this study is the belief that

unannounced mid-year appropriations reductions may be detrimental to the publicly supported community college.

Summary

Chapter III presented the methodology and research design for this qualitative phenomenological study. The phenomenological method of inquiry occurred through the use of multiple data collection instruments including the researcher, a 13-question semi-structured interview protocol, observations, field notes, and other documents. The phenomenological approach to data analysis was used to identify emerging themes that could be used to address the two research questions that guided this study. Analysis of research data included coding and the use of the constant comparison method. Trustworthiness of data analysis was assured through the integration of methods to ensure the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of this study. The following chapter, Chapter IV, will provide a summary of the data collection and analysis methods used, a profile of the five study participants, and the findings of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Chapter IV presents the results of the study. The topics that will be presented include: summary of the research design, participant profiles, and the study's findings. The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making approaches utilized by Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) at Texas public rural-serving community colleges, during a time of unexpected financial crises that required drastically reducing expenditures in the middle of a fiscal period (mid-year budget cut). This study sought to explore and describe the critical reactionary skills and approaches employed by these CAO's to address the financial implications at their institutions.

This research study was guided by two research questions:

1. What decision-making skills are utilized by Chief Academic Officers to address mid-year budget cuts precipitated by a reduction in state appropriations?
2. What decision-making skills are perceived as most critical for Chief Academic Officers when faced with unexpected mid-year budget cuts precipitated by reductions in state appropriations?

Summary of the Research Design

Prior to the collection of data for this study, approval was sought from the Texas Tech University Human Subjects Review Board. After their approval was received (please see Appendix A), the study began.

Data Collection Process

Participants for this study were identified through the personal knowledge of CAO's in Texas community colleges of the researcher, higher education administration

contacts, and the snowballing technique. Once potential participants were identified, they were sent an email that outlined the study and inclusion criteria for participation (please see Appendices D and E). The researcher then followed up with potential participants within 10 days of sending the email, seeking their decision on participating in the study. Despite several potential participants unable to participate in the study due to not meeting the inclusion criteria, two were selected from this solicitation. In addition, two participants were identified through the recommendation of higher education contacts, and one was recommended by a study participant.

There were several methods of data collection used in this study. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool. In addition to the interviews, data were also collected through observations, field notes, and documents from the Texas Community College Teachers Association, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Association of Community Colleges.

The interviews were conducted in two formats. Three of the interviews were conducted in-person and in the personal offices of the participants. Two interviews were conducted over the telephone due to scheduling and travel difficulties of both the participants and the researcher. All five interviews were digitally audio recorded after receiving prior consent from the participants. Each interview followed a similar protocol, which consisted of a brief introduction, informal conversation, an overview of the research study, an opportunity for the participant to ask any questions he or she may have of the researcher, a reiteration of privacy and confidentiality, and a clear indication that recording of the event was beginning. In each instance, only the participant and the researcher were present. Although generally free from interruption, one instance of a poor

telephone connection required the researcher to briefly suspend the interview process in order to acquire communication absent of electronic interference with one of the participants.

Each participant was asked the same interview questions (please see Appendix C). Each question was asked in a cohesive manner, utilizing consistent inflection and tone. Relying on the discretion of the researcher, initial interview questions were probed further or followed up with secondary questions to elicit greater depth and quality (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The interviews varied in length, lasting between 49 minutes to three hours due to the varied nature of participants, their experiences, and ultimately due to their apparent degree of interest in the research study. Throughout the interview, member checking occurred as the participant and the researcher explored each question. The researcher consistently ensured that he clearly understood the participant's response and asked for clarification and verification throughout the interview process. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher expressed gratitude for the time and effort given by the participant for his or her involvement in the study.

Within hours of each interview, the researcher documented observations and reviewed field notes, and added recollections and additional notations for greater clarity. The interviews were transcribed within two weeks of when they occurred. Transcribed data was closely reviewed for typographical errors and compared to field notes to expose inconsistencies. Finally, the audio recording was matched to the transcription report to ensure an exact relationship was reflected. As a final step, all participants were provided a copy of their transcribed interview and were asked to review and ultimately validate the

contents of the interview transcript. None of the five participants made any changes to their transcribed interview.

Data Analysis

Responses to interview questions yielded a significant amount of data. The phenomenological procedures used to analyze research data and identify themes in this study involved a modified version of Hycner's (1985) guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis as presented by Moustakas (1994). The first step of the process involved addressing interview material and transcriptions with an open mind and by avoiding presuppositions by the researcher (Zahavi, 2003). Transcripts were read multiple times to detect errors and, more importantly, to gain an understanding of the perspectives of each participant. Preliminary statements of interest were noted directly on transcripts and in researcher field notes. All data analysis was conducted manually and without the aid of computer software.

The second step of data analysis involved initial coding of raw data, thorough rereading of interview transcripts, and line-by-line analysis to identify expressions of meaningful units of data. Coding involved analyzing data and by assigning labels to areas in order to differentiate or combine their significance (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participant responses were manually coded based on key words, expressions or phrases through the use of the constant-comparative method. The constant comparison of data was on-going throughout the analysis process.

The third step of the data analysis process involved theme development, with particular attention given to the textural context, or *what* participants experienced, in their

decision-making roles as CAO's during times of financial uncertainty. Once non-redundant units of meaning were determined and coded, the researcher synthesized textural descriptions into clusters of themes. Themes were organized and identified through a comparison of theme clusters present across all interviews, with key statements representing each theme. Three distinct themes emerged from the analysis of data for each of the research questions. The three themes that emerged for research question one were: 1) tenacity and perseverance, 2) open communication, and 3) strategic planning and operations. The three themes that emerged for research question two were: 1) mastery of budget analysis and resource management, 2) people skills, and 3) intricate knowledge of the community college mission and functions.

Participant Profiles

Five purposefully selected participants were interviewed for this study, all serving in the position of Chief Academic Officer (CAO) at a Texas public rural-serving community college at the time of the interview. Participants served in their present positions of CAO for an average of four years, with seven years being the longest period served at the time of this study. Several titles were used among the participants' positions to represent the CAO including: Chief Academic Officer, Vice President for Instruction, Dean of Instruction, and Vice President for Academic Affairs. No matter the title, each participant agreed that the term CAO was appropriate to describe his or her current administrative function.

The five participants were from small, medium, and large-size community colleges. According to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.) classification system, a small community college has full-time student enrollments

between 500 and 1,999; a medium-size institution has between 2,000 and 4,999 full-time enrollments; and a large-size institution has between 5,000 and 9,999 full-time students.

Mr. John Bond is Dean of Instruction for a small rural-serving community college. He has been in this position for almost three years and holds a Master of Business Administration degree. Prior to being named Dean of Instruction, he served in various administrative capacities, which included assistant dean, dean, and a position in the Institutional Research office. In total, he had been at his current institution for over 11 years at the time of this study, having no prior higher education experience, other than as a student. In addition to his administrative responsibilities, John is a member of the teaching faculty.

Ms. Erin Elliott has served as Vice President of Academic Affairs for three years at the small rural-serving community college where she has worked for over 15 years. Erin spent 12 years serving in various administrative roles (associate dean and dean) at her current institution. Erin holds a Master of Arts degree in a discipline outside of higher education administration. Prior to her joining her present institution, Erin had no previous experience working in higher education.

Dr. Felix Carter has served as Dean of Instructional Services for four years; his first year was in an interim capacity. This was his first time serving as an administrator at this level. He started as a Division Chair at the rural-serving medium size community college where he has subsequently been given progressive administrative responsibilities. His background prior to starting at the college was in private industry. He holds a Ph.D. in a discipline outside of higher education.

Dr. Jane Carol has served as Chief Academic Officer/Vice President for a rural-serving medium size community college for almost three years. She is the only participant to have served in a similar position at another community college, as a Provost, a position she held for three years prior to arriving at her current institution. At the time of the interview, Jane was serving as interim President. She holds a Ph.D. in a discipline unrelated to higher education administration.

Dr. Don Founds has the title of Vice President of Instruction and represents the largest rurally-located institution included in this study. Don has served in his present position for a little over seven years. This is his first time serving in the position of CAO, but had increasing administrative responsibilities at previous institutions. Don holds a Ph. D. in a discipline outside of higher education.

In summary, the educational background of participants included three had earned doctorate degrees, and two held master's degrees, representing a variety of disciplines. The participants brought varied previous experiences into their current roles. Only one of the five participants had served in a comparable position at a previous institution. Additionally, three of the five participants served in various positions at their present institutions, with an average of 16 years of service at their current institution. All three of these participants had progressive positions of administrative responsibility leading to their present position.

Findings

Decision-Making Skills of Chief Academic Officers (CAO's)

Research question one asked: What decision-making skills are utilized by CAO's to address mid-year budget cuts precipitated by a reduction in state appropriations?

Three themes emerged from the data analyses: 1) tenacity and perseverance, 2) open communication, and 3) strategic planning and operations.

All five of the participants confirmed that they were completely, or almost entirely, responsible for the management of their institutional instructional budgets. The degree to which their respective rural-serving institutions were affected by unexpected appropriations reductions varied; however, all participants agreed that their instructional budgets were directly decreased due to the 2010 mid-year reductions. While the financial impact initially seemed greater on smaller institutions, the Board of Trustees for one of the larger institutions represented in this study declared financial exigency (emergency) as a response to the mid-year reduction.

Despite open communications with institutional stakeholders at the time of the reduction, all five of the participants had to ultimately make the decision as to which area(s) of the instructional budget would be affected in order to support the institutional mission. Ultimately, upholding the core mission of the institution and protecting full-time faculty positions proved to be essential for all participants. When asked to assess the outcomes of their decision-making during the period focused upon in this study, all participants agreed that they would not have changed the course of their original decisions had they been given the opportunity to do so.

Tenacity/perseverance. All five study participants consistently displayed the tenacity to continue supporting the mission of the institution in the face of budget reductions, and somehow ensured already limited instructional resources were managed effectively. A mentality of vigilance surfaced when the CAO's decided and allocated supplies and resources that were essential to the institution's core mission. Jane noted

that even with financial exigency having been declared at her institution, they were “doing an amazing job and our communities need us for workforce development and we answer those needs.” Despite the fact that many of the institutions represented in this study were already saddled with slim budgets prior to the mid-year reductions, each participant exhibited the strength and resolve to move forward in meeting a multitude of challenges before them. Don expressed his strength to endure as “savvy” as he addressed revenue matters.

It was also revealed by the participants that in order to manage resources effectively and move forward with success, they had to take on multiple duties and responsibilities. This was a concept that was referred to by John and Felix as “wearing many hats.” Erin described the not-so-glamorous reality of the CAO who is assigned multiple roles by relaying what occurred at her institution, “We had a vice president and two deans. I’m all three of those positions now with no increase in pay.” John offered further insight into the reality facing the CAO at a small institution. He revealed that any unexpected budget cuts were so potentially damaging to already thin margins, that in addition to traditional administrative duties, he himself ended up filling a needed faculty position that otherwise would not have been funded. He openly discussed this situation at his institution and the dilemma he was in:

We desperately needed to hire a History teacher... but we don’t have the capability to hire another full-time History teacher, our adjuncts are kind of stretched, we’ve got them maxed out in what they can do. So, it kind of fell to me [to determine] how we’re going to deal with it, so I end up teaching it, which I don’t have time to do.

John exhibited a certain resolve when learning the extent of mid-year budget cuts on his institution by commenting, “Basically you just had to roll up sleeves and say ‘it’s here, we’ve got to find it [resources] somewhere or cut somewhere’, so we began immediately; I remember we froze budgets.” Erin indicated a “mode of survivorship” when it came to the cuts and allocations, and stated, “So, you just kind of have to buckle down and say, you know it could have been more.” Erin later elaborated on the motivation to buckle down by stating, “In everything that we have done to deal with our financial crisis, the people who work here and the students who attend here are our whole reason for being, so we’ve worked hard to figure out how to protect those.”

Felix stated, “Basically, after we got through cussing, then being ‘well it’s going to happen,’ then you dig in and you get your budgets out and you figure out how you will cope with it.” He also discussed the way that he engaged faculty during this difficult time by leading by example. He stated:

I proved to them [the faculty] that I would be willing to budget for and fund necessary things and I told them the way that we were going to be able to do some of these things is to be very frugal on the expenditures – for them to be very frugal on the expenditures side of things.

The perseverance required by the participants to continue during times of extreme budget crises, may be examined closely by the true extent of the meaning of “bare bones.” Erin described the experience as, “we just felt like we were in the middle of the boxing ring unexpectedly and at some point it had to end.” Jane noted operating costs were cut to the “absolute bare bones,” resulting in the lack of even the most basic necessities, including the ability to properly test students. She illustrated the hardship by

discussing an example of what occurred at her institution. Entire departments, by the middle of the year, had their faculty asking, “I’m out of scantrons. I can’t test. What do I do?” Yet despite having to scrape by so that students and faculty could meet their respective goals, motivation to persevere was best illustrated by Erin, when she stated, “... you work all the time, and you work as hard as you can, and you know somewhere out there is the reward. For us that reward isn’t money, and it’s not prestige – it’s just doing the right thing.”

Tenacity and perseverance were displayed by all of the participants during a time of financial upheaval at their respective institutions. Despite being placed in precarious, sometimes even dire situations, participants continued to protect the mission of their institutions – to serve students and to uphold the community college mission overall, to ensure the quality of instruction, and to create a sense of stability for the faculty and staff.

Open communication. Open communication was discussed by all of the participants. Whether communication lines were informal or formal appeared to be dependent on the size of the institution. Participants from small institutions described communication lines that were characteristically informal. For example, John described the informal nature of communication at his small institution. “The administration are all located here on campus and so basically it’s a phone call, it’s go down and knock on the door and say ‘we’ve got to discuss this and this issue has come up.’” Erin, also at a small institution, described not only an informal, open communication environment, but one inclusive of the institution’s president and faculty as key stakeholders. She expressed the ease and comfort in being able to “run to the president’s office” as a regular course of

daily life. In addition, Erin also described the open and informal communication lines she had with faculty:

I used to have an office that had a door to the hallway and I actually had to move into this internal office, not to keep them out, but because I would be sitting in a meeting with you and they just would knock on the door and come in.

Perhaps due to the very small size of the institution, it appeared that faculty and staff felt they could enter her office unannounced to voice their concerns.

Felix, who represented a slightly larger institution than Erin's, had a communication system unique to the other study participants. In this system, regularly scheduled administrative team meetings were routine and adhered to. He used committee structures to enable communication among the different components of the college. Yet despite these more structured communication events, Felix perceived that the structure itself enhanced transparency and brought more parties to the table. In fact, the once territorial nature that surrounded communication at his institution resulted in him commenting, "I don't think we're [as] much in silos as we used to be, and it's getting better all of the time." This was a result of the need for the institution to come together during times of financial uncertainty.

Jane, who was at a medium size rural-serving institution, described monthly administrative meetings involving deans, department chairs, and program coordinators. Meetings were guided by formal agendas that were distributed prior to each gathering. Additionally, if she needed to get a broad message to the faculty, Jane relied on email communication. Yet, despite the apparent nature of formality surrounding her communication experiences, she smiled when she admitted, "I don't leave this office

without a notepad because I'm going to have 15 people tell me they need something before I get back."

While the communication lines seemed to have a more formal structure at medium and large size institutions versus smaller institutions, two participants representing these institutions conceded that an informal element actually existed. Don shared the nature of communication events at his large size institution. He stated, "In some ways it's formalized in a sense that we meet at the same time each week, but other than that it's a rather informal meeting." Jane provided additional details concerning these types of communication events at her institution:

We are unlike a big institution where a cabinet meeting is sort of a formal affair, and you are all there representing different areas. We are an informal affair; offices are all right here together. I can walk into the president's office any time. Cabinet is every week. It is intimate. It may last four hours.

The majority of participants reported changes in communication lines when a perceived threat to the financial well-being of their respective institutions was on the horizon. Don, who was previously steadfast in his belief that unexpected mid-year cuts were becoming commonplace, with a pattern of diminishing support from the state legislature, reported no change in communication lines, reiterating the point that perceived threats are routine. He stated, "You can pretty much broach from one emergency to another every Monday morning."

Other participants described changes in the frequency and nature of communication events during times of fiscal crises, as well as a need for openness and honesty to reassure employees of stability. When mid-year cuts were revealed, John

described the change in communication at his institution: “When you are dealing with that kind of financial emergency that doesn’t fare too well with a telephone call or email, and so it [communication] increases that way in the face-to-face meetings.” Erin elaborated on the details of how communication was affected by the immediacy of unexpected financial constraints at her institution:

In fact, I think it gets more open [communication] because people want to be reassured. I think when people feel a threat to their job in terms of performance, those [communication] lines may get harder. They [faculty] get a little more afraid. But, honestly it’s a matter of “are we going to have enough money to operate next year?” Then, I think people are completely comfortable, and they go to the president. They want him to tell them,” Yes, we’re going to be okay.”

Jane provided a profound conclusion about the communication of major fiscal threats to faculty when she shared her observation that the scope of an event will not be fully appreciated, “Until you can tell them [faculty] how it is going to affect them, that’s when they pay attention.”

Felix described a financial crisis as “a major fire emergency.” When such an event occurs, he admitted to overall communication increases at his institution, including personal visits to faculty. This was described by Felix positively as, “an advantage of being a small school,” and he seemed proud of the fact by pointing out, “That can’t happen at Lone Star College.”

Increases in the openness of communication in order to protect employees from the immediate impact of bad news were limited, but utilized by several of the participants. Essentially, a managed or delayed response in sharing with employees was

utilized as administration took time to first evaluate the extent of the impact on their respective institutions. However, Jane described the delay while planning for how to accommodate its budgetary impact resulted in, “Communication lines became rumor, and frantic phone calls occurred here and there. And people stopping you in the bathroom, in the hallway, and all that.”

Erin shared her experience of administration taking the sacrificial brunt of the initial impact of news that the institution had been targeted for mid-year budget cuts:

The stress and fear of what we dealt with, was you know, a thousand times more than what we allowed our employees to experience. I think that’s a skill you have to work hard at cultivating [as a leader], because they all want us to tell them it’s okay, but you want to be honest and you want to tell them there is a chance that this will have an impact on us.

Several participants identified areas in which communication methods were not entirely effective or were in the process of improvement. In retrospect, John stated that the communication at his institution could have been improved during the time of financial uncertainty, “Maybe, probably the communication could have been better as far as just saying we’re in a budget freeze...So I think it’s probably where I erred in not communicating why.” Felix suggested that communication is a work in progress, since the territorial nature that once existed in administrative units of his institution were now diminished significantly and concluded, “It’s getting better all of the time.”

In summary, open communication in the decision-making process was used by all of the participants, as they helped lead their institutions through financial uncertainty due to mid-year budget reductions from the state. Utilization of both informal and open

communications were reported by all of the participants as important to their ability to lead their institutions. In instances of formal communication settings, the communication exchanges themselves were of an informal nature. CAO's used various communication methods to deliver their messages, depending on the audience involved and the nature of the information that needed to be shared, but all identified open communication was instrumental to their successes in leading the instructional unit through financial uncertainty.

Strategic planning and operations. Participants consistently recalled the challenging effects of appropriations reductions and associated budget cuts. They utilized adaptive budget management techniques, exhibiting what could best be termed *strategic*, to manage these financial deficiencies on relatively short notice. Several participants identified the almost exclusive use of professional judgment to make budget decisions, usually by limiting available choices and almost always out of necessity, further supporting the need for strategic planning in decision-making. John revealed his perspective of skill acquisition specific to decision-making relative to sudden budget adjustments:

So I guess I've acquired [skills] since I've been here just out of necessity, that caveat that's in your job description, that...other assigned duties. That really means a lot at [our institution] because we have a bunch of [programs] that are not funded but that become your duty once you show you can do that, then it's your job.

Jane revealed that her skill of being strategic when making decisions was developed over time, and enabled her to discern through familiarity where costs could be

reduced while sustaining instruction. She went on to provide examples of how she utilized this skill in meeting immediate budget goals:

...all non-essential travel was halted... Institutional memberships were cut immediately... lots of faculty had a membership in the American Association of Physics Instructors or whatever. All of that ground to a halt... The entire budget, every travel budget on the campus was removed or cut...

Jane further spoke to the inherent difficulty in the decision-making process as it pertained to budget cuts. She stated, “We still have positions that we really should eliminate. You know, it’s hard to make [these] decisions and pull that trigger, but every organization has some stuff, dead wood if you will. It’s not the people, but the position.”

Felix noted the personal effects the budget cuts created and the importance of leading by example, which was another strategy that led to his success in decision-making. He had been at his institution for over 20 years and expressed the very personal relationship he had with every faculty member on his campus. He shared a story that was probably not uncommon at a small institution, and illustrated the deep impact his strategic decisions had beyond the fiduciary duty his job required:

He’s [the foreign language instructor’s] always had two sections, he’s always got ‘x’ dollars in summer pay over the summer and that was his vacation trip money, and now I have cut that by cutting that one class. I basically cut his summer income in half.

To make the impact more palatable for faculty, Felix felt it was important to serve as an example, so he made certain that his office budget was “the first one on the chopping block.”

All of the participants demonstrated the skill of being strategic when making decisions in order to be able to maintain full-time faculty positions at their institutions. Felix indicated that although no lay-offs occurred, reassignments were implemented and positions were left vacant due to lack of funding. Erin supported this strategy when she stated, “You know, there are a lot of positions that when someone leaves, we don’t re-hire.” Jane was proud of the fact that by being conservative in her choices of expenditure savings, she “didn’t lay off anyone because of that.” Instead, “we just didn’t replace and duties were reassigned as they came up...some people have been terminated [unrelated to mid-year budget cuts] and not replaced and some have resigned and not been replaced.”

Don described a method of selecting which areas of the instructional unit to reduce in response to fiscal crises, which further supports strategy skills utilized by the participants in their decision-making. This involved the consolidation of personnel and resources or maintaining vacant positions. He looked at “those things that are outside the core of credit missions. Like CE [continuing education].” Finally, “low performing programs” were scrutinized. This could result in popular, yet low producing, programs being closed. Don went on to identify the challenges associated with these reductions. He stated, “Well, I think the greatest challenge is trying to figure out how to affect these things without doing harm to the students primarily. And secondarily, how to figure out how to do it without harm to employees.”

In summary, all of the participants demonstrated strategic planning and operations skills when faced with making decisions about the planning and operations of the instructional functions of their institutions. Of importance to all of the participants was that the quality of instruction remained intact, and the needs of faculty were met when

possible – when their needs supported the institutional mission of serving students. Evidence of the participants’ strategic planning and operations skills were demonstrated through their use of adaptive budgeting strategies to reduce unnecessary costs such as non-essential travel and faculty memberships to professional organizations, as well as delaying hiring decisions when possible. Participants indicated that instances of continuous contingency planning were the norm in terms of budgeting and indicated that this was not something that was going to change in the near future.

Perceptions of Critical Decision-Making Skills

Research question two asked: What decision-making skills are perceived as most critical for Chief Academic Officers when faced with unexpected mid-year budget cuts precipitated by reductions in state appropriations? Using their experiences from the 2010 mid-year budget cuts at their institutions, participants shared their viewpoints of the skills they perceived as most critical in successfully steering through this uncertain financial period. Three themes emerged from the analysis of data: 1) mastery of budget analysis and resource management, 2) people skills, and 3) intricate knowledge of the community college mission and functions.

Mastery of budget analysis and resource management. All of the participants perceived the application of analyzing instructional budgets and reacting to respective unanticipated budget reductions in order to maintain necessary instructional resources as skills most critical when making financial decisions due to mid-year budget cuts as a result of appropriations reductions.

Felix perceived “dealing with numbers” as a critical skill needed by CAO’s when faced with unexpected mid-year reductions. A self-described “detail person,” Felix

perceived his exceptional command of budget facts and his upbringing with private industry experience as crucial in his decisions as an administrative budget manager. He recognized that his prior experience with budgeting was a skill that was transferrable and proved valuable when faced with making decisions for his instructional unit.

Jane perceived her requisite “knowledge of where it would be most reasonable to cut [the budget]” as a way to prioritize necessary resources in order to carry on the mission of the instruction. She explained her perceptions were due to her familiarity with and personal history of instruction, which enabled her to analyze and initiate reductions or transfers of resources to keep instruction intact. John perceived that the overwhelming budget challenges facing his institution required him to initiate his skills in analyzing his budget, and further attributed his experience of “wearing many hats” as noteworthy and helpful when making critical budget decisions. John explained, “Even though sometimes it’s a detriment to the institution that you don’t have enough help, it’s a benefit because you can cut straight to the chase [on budget decisions].” John noted that he acquired the skill of budget expertise out of “pure necessity.”

People skills. The perceptions that people skills were a critical skill needed by CAO’s in a time of financial uncertainty were discussed by all of the participants, and these skills were utilized during the time of mid-year appropriations reductions in 2010 when making decisions. The participants from small institutions (John and Erin) described close interactions with personnel in general, which seemed to place particular importance on relationships during times of perceived stress and uncertainty. Felix illustrated the warm relationships he felt toward faculty at his institution:

I know every single full-time faculty by first name, and I know their family. I have 84 full-time faculty, and know every single one of them. I know where their offices are, I know what their office hours are. I talk to each one. There is not a semester that goes by that I don't have at least one personal visit, not in a group but a personal visit with probably each and every full-time faculty member on campus. And I know that's an advantage of being a small school.

Erin placed a high value on her perceived people skills, which she referred to as her ability to "lead people through a difficult period by reducing their stress and fear, to a place where you get past these things and you move on." Ultimately, Erin believed this skill aided her "keeping the doors open." Initially, it seemed as though this was achieved purely through effective budget management; however, Erin explained it instead as the "cultivation of teamwork in the midst of a crisis."

Felix perceived "people skills" as a critical skill needed by CAO's when facing decisions related to unexpected mid-year reductions. His ability to talk to faculty and have them realize that "I will never ask you to do anything that I would not be willing to do myself" is the message Felix consistently expressed to faculty members during periods of financial difficulty. He cultivated a culture where faculty had a sense of ownership of budget matters.

All of the participants discussed the importance of people skills in their ability to lead their institutions through times of financial uncertainty. The ability to reduce the concerns and stress of the faculty, and to model the behavior that others could follow, proved instrumental to the success of these CAO's in leading their instructional units during this difficult time.

Intricate knowledge of community college mission and functions. Participants overwhelmingly perceived the importance of a deep respect for, and understanding of, the community college mission and functions, and the priority of upholding the mission during times of financial crises.

Don, perhaps the most matter-of-fact of the participants, perceived having a “solid sense of the core mission of the college and what programs and services you offer” as the most important skill to possess. Don suggested that he was able to differentiate between what was necessary and what was simply nice to have, and that this skill was crucial when it came down to having to strategically reduce budgets. He explained that, “Sometimes you need to keep the stuff that really does serve a local community need or a local workforce need, but you also need to keep other stuff that helps pay for that.”

Jane perceived her most critical skill as “familiarity with instruction,” which is relative to the core mission community colleges – teaching students. She acknowledged that she did not “bluff” her way through a budget, and consequently she was not afraid to rely on financial experts when it came to raw budgeting and financial matters. She admitted that her experience gave her tremendous “familiarity with where we could bear the cost the best.”

In summary, all of the participants in this study appeared to possess critical skills needed to lead their instructional units successfully during times of financial crises. They were quick to point out that their acquisition of skills to meet fiscal challenges and their development of budgetary prowess took place outside of formal channels. Erin attributed her skill development to “on-the-job observation.” Jane was appreciative of the mentorship she received in mastering the budgeting process. Don acknowledged that he

“had a couple of good mentors along the way” in developing his budget management skills. Felix, who grew up in a financially conservative family, gave credit to this experience along with his private industry experience prior to entering higher education.

The participants revealed the decision-making skills they perceived as most critical for CAO’s to lead their instructional units during times of financial uncertainty: mastery of budget analysis and resource management, people skills, and intricate knowledge of community college missions and functions. As mentioned by the participants, the decisions a CAO makes are very visible, but as also noted in the literature, the decision making process is “a lonely activity” (Findlen, 2000a, p. 33). The reliance on certain perceived skills to assist in the decision-making process to keep the instructional mission functioning, particularly at a time when the decisions that are made will ultimately affect the well-being of those with whom personal close relationships have been formed, will help CAO’s lead during times of difficulty.

Summary

Chapter IV presented the findings of this study and the themes which emerged as a result of the analysis of the data collected from the five study participants. The emerging themes relative to research question one were: tenacity and perseverance, open communication, and strategic planning and operations. The themes that emerged relative to research question two, which addressed the critical skills needed by CAO’s to make decisions during time of financial uncertainty included: mastery of budget analysis and resource management, people skills, and intricate knowledge of the community college mission and functions. The following chapter, Chapter V, will present a discussion of the findings, as well as the implications of this study to higher education institutions, as well

as recommendations. In addition, recommendations for further research will be discussed.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Chapter V provides a discussion of the overall findings of the study. It includes an overview of the study, discussion of the findings, implications and recommendations for higher education, and suggestions for further research.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the decision-making approaches of Texas public rural-serving community college Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) during a time of unexpected (mid-year) budget reductions. The five participants for this study were purposefully selected based upon their being in their positions during the economic recession that began in 2008, and their experience in their positions at Texas public community colleges during the time of the 2010 mid-year reduction of state appropriations in Texas.

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What decision-making skills are utilized by chief academic officers to address mid-year budget cuts precipitated by a reduction in state appropriations?
2. What decision-making skills are perceived as most critical for chief academic officers when faced with unexpected mid-year budget cuts precipitated by reductions in state appropriations?

Study participants were CAO's at five rural-serving Texas public community colleges. Participants served in their present positions of CAO for an average of four years, with seven years being the greatest length of service. The following provides a brief profile of study participants:

- Mr. John Bond is Dean of Instruction for a small rural-serving community college. He has been in this position for almost three years and has an earned Master of Business Administration degree.
- Ms. Erin Elliott has served as Vice President of Academic Affairs for three years at the small rural-serving community college where she has worked for over 15 years. Erin holds a Master of Arts degree in a discipline outside of higher education administration.
- Dr. Felix Carter has served as Dean of Instructional Services at a rural-serving medium size community college for four years. He holds a Ph.D. in a discipline other than higher education administration.
- Dr. Jane Carol has served as Chief Academic Officer/Vice President for a rural-serving medium size community college for almost three years. She holds a Ph.D. in a discipline unrelated to higher education administration.
- Dr. Don Founds has the title of Vice President of Instruction and represented the largest rural-serving institution included in this study. Dr. Founds has a Ph. D. in a discipline other than higher education administration.

Discussion of Findings

Publicly-supported community colleges in the U.S. are regularly faced with shrinking budget reimbursements due to appropriations reductions from state legislatures. To make matters worse, the economic recession in the U.S. beginning in 2008, not only affected community college budget planning and forecasting, but resulting state

mandated mid-year budget cuts only served to exacerbate the matter (Johnson, Oliff, & Koulish, 2008).

In Texas, public community college appropriations are based on a formula determined by the legislature. Started in 1973 by the 63rd Texas legislature, the formula used to determine funding for public community colleges, which incorporates the number of contact hours produced (in 26 instructional areas) to capture enrollment by an institution, has never been fully funded (Hudson, 2008). The 81st legislature appropriated funds amounting to only 48% of the full formula for the 2010-2011 biennium (Texas Association of Community Colleges [TACC], 2009).

With a clear relationship established between the CAO position and the responsibility of controlling a sizeable portion of the institutional budget (Ferren & Stanton, 2004), an unexpected reduction in state appropriations presented a hardship for the participants in this study. This study posited that the effects of the mandated 5% budget reduction for the 2010-2011 biennium, the 2.5% mandated reduction for FY 2011, an 18.2% increase in base year contact hours, and the elimination of \$15 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds (TACC, 2011a), was detrimental to Texas community college CAO's and their responsibilities as instructional budget managers. Additionally, the involvement of the CAO's in the instructional budget was not just in controlling it, but more importantly there was a personal ownership in the process of developing the budgeting blueprint for their institutions. They all had some degree of responsibility in the budgeting process beyond simply the management function. Although Pearson and Clair (1998) warned that "survivors of crises tend to be reluctant to share perspectives, perceptions, and lessons learned" (p. 74), study

participants reflected openness and candor as they shared their perceptions during the time the events of the 2010 mid-year reductions unfolded. The participants agreed that the 2010 mid-year reductions affected their instructional budgets negatively, but the degree to which budgets were affected varied. They all also stated that they would not have changed the decisions that they had to make during this time of financial uncertainty. In addition, not all of the participants perceived that the mid-year budget cuts that occurred in 2010 constituted a financial crisis.

Decision-Making Skills of Chief Academic Officers

The first research question that guided this study was: What decision-making skills are utilized by Chief Academic Officers to address mid-year budget cuts precipitated by a reduction in state appropriations? The three themes that emerged in response to this question were: 1) tenacity and perseverance, 2) open communication, and 3) strategic planning and operations.

The participants discussed the multiple skills they used when making decisions during the period of financial uncertainty caused by the 2010 mid-year budget reductions by the state, all instrumental in enabling them to continue to support the instructional mission of their institutions during this time. There were three areas that emerged as essential to them as they made decisions that affected the instructional unit of their institutions: 1) upholding the core mission of their institutions; 2) serving students; 3) and protecting full-time faculty positions. Ferren and Stanton (2004) noted that the public institution CAO must have an understanding of “the [funding] basis used for their institution... and advocate responsibility for adequate funding both internally and externally” (p. 117). In most instances, participants relied on their professional judgment

when making final decisions about the budget, but several spoke to the inherent difficulty in the decision-making process. Hellmich (2007) warned that some decisions made by the CAO may generate dissonance within or across dimensions, causing varying degrees of distress to the decision-maker or others. It is important to remember that many of the institutions represented in this study already had slim budgets prior to the mid-year cuts in 2010 – and had made cuts previously to employees and resources. The mid-year cuts were just another layer of decreases in resources – increasing uncertainty and perhaps dissonance. The stress of having to make additional cuts was evidenced by the participants when they discussed having to make difficult financial decisions that they knew would affect faculty and staff at their institutions – many whom the CAO’s had personal relationships with through work, their children, and other events throughout their lives.

Many of the participants portrayed the skill of tenacity and perseverance in their approaches to their decision-making, as well as in the actual implementation of the decisions they were forced to make. Throughout the data analyses, phrases like “bare bones,” “wearing many hats,” “roll up sleeves,” “middle of boxing ring,” “mode of survivorship,” and “dig in” were used to describe the environment these individuals were operating in during this period of financial uncertainty. Birnbaum (1988) noted that, “it has been suggested that one of the main characteristics of a successful president is persistence – the willingness to pursue a program over an extended period of time until it is implemented” (p. 224). Though specifically targeting college presidents, this same persistence was evidenced by the CAO’s in this study in their decision-making roles. In addition, as many of the CAO’s had had longstanding relationships with employees at

their institution, they evidenced the ability to make the decision that was best for the institution and students, though they recognized that human relations were involved and that people would be affected by the decisions they made. As Erin stated, “In everything that we have done to deal with our financial crisis, the people who work here and the students who attend here are our whole reason for being, so we’ve worked hard to figure out how to protect those.”

The tenacity and perseverance skills demonstrated by the participants are supported by the work of Hellmich (2007), who stated “a CAO needs courage to tolerate dissonance and to remain both centered and responsive while navigating the sometimes treacherous waters of ethical decision-making” (p. 99). This was never more necessary than during the 2010 mid-year budget cuts that affected all facets of the institution. All of the participants openly discussed they felt a responsibility toward employees to keep their institutions intact, as well as to the institutions themselves, but more specifically to the students they served. John’s experience provides a representative example of what these institutions were faced with. He noted that any unexpected budget cuts were so potentially damaging to his institution that at times, employees had to take on additional roles – even when they were already overcommitted. An example of this was that John made the decision to teach a history course versus hiring someone to do it - which put an additional burden on him – but that was in his opinion the best decision for the students at his institution, “...it kind of fell to me [to determine] how we’re going to deal with it, so I end up teaching it, which I don’t have time to.” The tenacity and perseverance to continue despite difficult challenges are characteristic of the heavy workload engrained into the CAO position (Vaughan, 1990).

In addition to tenacity and perseverance, open and effective communications emerged as necessary during times of financial uncertainty. The participants noted instances when crucial communication skills were employed to disseminate information to institutional stakeholders, and when formulating strategies to meet demands of unexpected reductions. What becomes apparent from the experiences of the participants was that it was difficult to have a plan in place for how information would be communicated during times of uncertainty. Oftentimes, it takes experience with a specific situation to truly understand how to best manage it and to have a process in place that is effective in handling it.

Though the communication efforts discussed by the participants appear to have gotten the job done, they were not always timely or effective. John admitted that he could have initially communicated better to his faculty by simply providing them the reason behind him having to implement a budget freeze. Other participants also addressed communication issues that could have been handled differently to be more effective. One example was shared by Jane about the effects of trying to manage or delay a response to employees during times of uncertainty. Though administration needed time to evaluate the situation, “communication lines became rumor, and frantic phone calls occurred here and there.” Felix discussed that at his institution, silos and territories existed among some of the administration, which diminished the effectiveness of some of the communication during this time, but that the institution also benefited from going through the situation as it helped to eliminate some of these. He stated, “I don’t think we’re [as] much in silos as we used to be, and it’s getting better all of the time.” These

examples support that sometimes it takes actually experiencing a situation and learning from it, before the best decisions can be made on how to handle communications.

The ability to openly and effectively communicate during a time of crisis seemed to be an essential factor – both up and down the organizational hierarchy. This open and effective communication also appeared to be important in maintaining the mission of the institution, as well as reassuring employees, and creating some level of stability during uncertain times. It is important to remember that also at the time of the 2010 budget reductions, the U.S. economy had been in a recession for two years. Both of these financial situations led to great concern for all involved, more so when it affected them personally. As Jane stated when discussing faculty, “until you tell them how it is going to affect them, that’s when they pay attention.”

The types of communication events held and what stakeholders were involved appeared to depend on the institution size and the leadership style adopted by the CAO. Smaller institutions appeared to have more informal and collaborative communication structures, while those institutions that were larger had more formal structures in place, but still engaged in informal and collaborative communication styles and structures, when needed. An example of open communication was discussed by Felix, who shared his way of communicating about the need to decrease the instructional budget by involving the faculty in the decision-making process. He also made sure that faculty knew that his budget was cut prior to anyone else’s. This type of communication has particular importance as McBride (2000) suggested that faculty tend to believe “that budgets are imposed to keep resources from them and that the institution has vast hidden resources to bail them out” (p. 54). On the other hand, though, there are times when open

communication is detrimental to the stability of the organization. College administration's role is to be the lead decision-makers for the operations of an institution. They must decide what information can be openly shared and what information needs to be controlled and provided on a need to know basis. There are times when open communication and transparency are not in the best interest of all of the stakeholders involved. There are times that the administration of the college needs to be able to perform their roles as decision-makers for the institution, and not be hampered by the perceptions of stakeholders that perceive that all information and decisions should be transparent. But, as cautioned by Ferren and Stanton (2004), limiting open communication may not be sufficient "to handle a changing environment" (p.12). Regardless of what type or how effective communication is during times of financial uncertainty, the administration is going to take the sacrificial brunt of the initial impact of the news.

The participants operated in a way that allowed for necessary changes to strategically be made in order to meet the demands of fluctuating budgetary priorities, while still maintaining their institution's mission of serving students. They also were concerned about their employees and their well-being. In a study of CAO's by Vaughan (1990), the importance of the practice of flexibility in decision-making was found to be significant. Flexibility is possible with strategic planning and operations skills.

The participants assessed and responded to internal and external changes, as well as demonstrated the ability to monitor the environment and strategically align the organization to sustain its mission. Flexibility was an important component for all of the participants in meeting the needs of the instructional unit when appropriations were

unexpectedly reduced, and this was accomplished through the use of adaptive budget management techniques. As noted by Basham and Mathur (2010), flexibility is one of the traits used to define the “ideal leader” (p. 26).

As an example of the flexibility practiced by the participants, in almost every instance, they perceived the protection of full-time employees as paramount, second only to serving students, and strategically exercised the use of adjunct faculty to maintain the full-time positions of existing employees. In addition to strategically using adjunct faculty, the participants focused their budget cuts to those areas that did not affect the core mission of the institution such as eliminating all unessential travel by employees, cutting memberships to professional organizations, combining positions when an employee left or was terminated, and simply not rehiring to fill vacant positions. Some employees had to take on additional roles during this time of financial crisis, including the participants in this study. As noted earlier, John taught a history course to save money instead of hiring an adjunct. Erin described the not so glamorous reality of her position as CAO. “We had a vice president and two deans. I’m all three of those positions now with no increase in pay.” These strategic moves ensured that full-time employees could maintain their jobs.

Even during this time of financial uncertainty, though, it was still difficult for institutions to cut the “dead wood.” Jane discussed this at her institution, “We will have positions that we really should eliminate. You know, it’s hard to make decisions and pull that trigger, but every organization has some stuff, dead wood if you will. It’s not the people, but the position.” This further supports the stress of the job when decisions made affect people. The inevitable is that community college state funding may never again

rise to the level where these institutions can fill many of the positions that they have had to eliminate. This means that the employees at these institutions will continue to wear many hats. Ultimately, this can result in employee dissatisfaction as well as could directly impact the students, if there are insufficient employees and resources to provide the level of services needed to ensure student success.

Critical Decision Making Skills of Chief Academic Officers

Research question two asked: What decision-making skills are perceived as most critical for Chief Academic Officers when faced with unexpected mid-year budget cuts precipitated by reductions in state appropriations? Three critical skills were identified: 1) mastery of budget analysis and resource management; 2) people skills; and 3) intricate knowledge of the community college mission and functions.

As noted in the above discussion, the participants used strategic planning and operations skills to make budget decisions that allowed them to continue to meet the missions of their institutions during times of financial uncertainty. These skills proved critical, especially as they analyzed their budgets and managed resources. They had to formulate budgetary reductions, consolidate resources, transfer and/or absorb responsibilities, as well as had to have an overall sense of how the instructional function would continue to operate in the face of budgetary restrictions. Resource management proved to be an essential necessity to sustain institutional assets and to fulfill the mission of the institutions. The participants not only acknowledged that the instructional budget was mainly their responsibility, but exhibited a command of their instructional units in terms of budgeting matters. There was an expressed sentiment of a willingness to seek collaboration and input from other stakeholders for any items needing further

confirmation or explanation prior to instituting budgetary changes. Ferren and Stanton (2004) offered the suggestion that CAO's should provide an explanation to faculty about funding formulas and allocations, and that "a budget development process that is open and participatory has the greatest potential for credibility and appropriate representation of unit needs" (p. 119).

The participants identified that the ability to analyze the instructional budget and react to respective unanticipated budget reductions was necessary to ensure instructional resources were available in order to continue to serve the needs of the students and uphold the institutional mission. As noted by some of the participants, not all of them were proficient in these skills prior to the mid-year budget reductions, but they became much more knowledgeable and skilled at them during this time. As Felix acknowledged, he is a detail person, which served him well. He also identified that "dealing with numbers" is a critical skill needed by CAO's when faced with unexpected budget cuts, but he did not learn these skills in his position as a CAO, but from his prior private industry experience. This proved to be crucial experience that helped him in his decision-making role as the CAO. Jane's skills in analyzing the budget and resource management were honed through her familiarity with and personal history of instruction, which enabled her to analyze and initiate reductions or transfers of resources to keep instruction intact. John's acknowledgement of how he acquired his budget analysis skills was – "pure necessity" – which is probably the way most CAO's acquire them.

As evidenced through the examples provided above about communication and dealing with employees during times of financial uncertainty, people skills are instrumental to leaders in moving their institutions through these stressful times. The

participants at the smaller rural-serving institutions, where familiarity and informality were regularly present, discussed that “people skills” were not solely an important necessity, but were engrained in the institutional culture. In a study of CAO’s conducted by Vaughan (1990), “the overwhelming set of skills required by the successful dean of instruction is what a number of deans refer to as ‘people skills’” (p. 15). Basham and Mathur (2010) defined an outstanding community college administrator as one who could go beyond the pure analytical aspects of the position to demonstrate the attribute of emotional intelligence. The concept of possessing, “emotional intelligence may be the key attribute that distinguishes outstanding performers from those who are merely ‘adequate’” (Basham & Mathur, 2010, p. 26). All of the participants in this study demonstrated high levels of people skills and also reinforced how important they perceived these were to not only their success in leading through times of uncertainty, but also to the institution and the ability to continue to move the community college mission forward of serving students.

Yet despite the best efforts of the participants to regularly employ and demonstrate interpersonal skills, Ferren and Stanton (2004) cautioned, “at times, there will be conflict between the assumptions that decisions should be made through the democratic process and the need for administrators to retain the authority for many decisions” (p. 7). Felix’s example of the warm relationship he felt toward the faculty at his institution supported why this is a concern:

I know every single full-time faculty by first name, and I know their family...I talk to each one. There is not a semester that goes by that I don’t have at least one personal visit.

The participants recognized that the only way they were going to be able to successfully lead their faculty through this period of financial uncertainty, was to use their people skills to help engage them and to lead through them. As Erin noted, her people skills enabled her to lead her faculty through a difficult time and she was able to reduce their stress and fear, which enabled them to move forward. Felix's ability to talk to faculty and have them realize that he would never ask them to do anything that he would not do helped him to develop a culture where faculty had a sense of ownership of budget matters.

The final critical skill identified by the participants were that CAO's need to have an intricate knowledge of the community college mission and its functions. Don expressed the consensus of participants by stating, "You need to have a solid sense of the core mission of the college and what programs and services you offer." This statement suggested that if a CAO did not have an understanding of the mission of the community college and who it serves, the individual may make decisions that negatively impact students and the many other stakeholders.

Participants for this study overwhelmingly demonstrated deep respect for, and understanding of, their individual institutional missions, and the priority of upholding that mission in the shadow of budget reductions. Hellmich (2007) provided a comprehensive explanation of the importance of community college employees in upholding their institutional missions, its relationships, and far reaching implications:

Few people in or out of higher education, however, face as many daily challenges in pursuing their institutional mission as do community college faculty, staff, presidents, and trustees. They are charged with educating the most diverse student

body ever to enter postsecondary education's physical and virtual doors, and they are challenged to do so in the face of soaring costs and languishing budgets, even more oversight from external agencies, and too few hours in the day to keep on top of it all. (p. x)

The importance of the role of the community college to the local community was also noted by Don, who explained that "sometimes you need to keep the stuff that really does serve a local community need or a local workforce need, but you also need to keep other stuff that helps pay for that." This emphasizes the importance of the skills and knowledge of the CAO to understand the mission of the community college and who all of its stakeholders are.

The critical skills areas identified by the participants showcased that CAO's do not always have all of the necessary skills they need when they take on their roles. As noted by Erin, her skill development occurred through "on-the-job observation." Jane and Don acknowledged that they had received some mentorship throughout their career, which proved useful in their development of their mastering budget skills.

The decisions made by CAO's during times of financial uncertainty are either effective or not. The acceptance and effectiveness of the decisions made are reliant on how the CAO chooses to make the decision – either solely or collaboratively, and in what contextual environment he or she presents them. These decisions can be enhanced by strategically grounding decisions in solid budget analysis and resource management skills, utilizing necessary people skills to lead through times of stress and fear, as well as staying true to the core mission of these institutions.

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in leadership and crisis theories, and the concept that the decision-making environment of academic administrators during a time of crisis may take place surrounded by uncertainty, stressors, and pressures (Christensen & Kohls, 2003; Das, 1980; Keinan, 1987). As the research has shown, the unexpected nature of a crisis and ensuing sense of immediacy for resolution create a decision-making environment where quick decisions may be perceived as necessary (Billings et al., 1980; Christensen & Hohls, 2003). The findings of this study did not indicate that any of the participants – in their CAO roles – felt the need to make rash decisions without careful and strategic analysis of the situation at hand. They did experience additional stress during the time of financial uncertainty due to the unexpected 2010 mid-year budget reductions, especially when making decisions that could affect their institution's commitment to the community college mission, students, employees, and other stakeholders to their institutions. None of the participants indicated that their institution had a plan in place to deal with further budget cuts when they were faced with the mid-year reductions in 2010, which left their institutions vulnerable. As King (2002) stressed, responsible leadership plans ahead for a crisis event, and this same leadership should rely on teamwork in confronting and planning for such an occurrence. The experiences of the participants indicated that even though they did not plan ahead for the possibility of a mid-year budget reduction, they did rely on teamwork to make the best decisions possible to move their institutions forward during this time of financial crisis.

Implications and Recommendations for Higher Education

This study of CAO's and their decision-making skills during a time of unexpected mid-year budget cuts due to a reduction in state appropriations has highlighted several implications for higher education institutions and practitioners. As Ferren and Stanton (2004) stated, "decision making is an imperfect art. It is especially difficult to make decisions that stay made when changing circumstances require constant adjustment" (p. 14). For the participants in this study, there was no textbook or course available to aid in their decision-making during a tumultuous period. Some had no prior experience in managing this type of situation. Instead, they had to rely on previous experience, collaboration with stakeholders, and a pure sense of survival. It is important for higher education institutions to ensure that their top administration has the skills and knowledge to operate in times of financial crisis. The state of higher education funding is a critical issue that all public institutions are facing, and this skill will continue to be a necessity. Those in CAO roles can benefit from consistently evaluating their skill sets and work to improve those skills they are weak in or need to acquire. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2013b), a competency needed by future leaders of community colleges is that they can "equitably and ethically sustain people, processes, and information as well as physical and financial assets to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the community college" (p. 8)

All of the participants discussed that they had had no formal educational training in higher education administration. On the contrary, most of the participants expressed the very real impact of on-the-job training or learning by doing. Ferren and Stanton (2004) cautioned that, "too often administrators find themselves muddling through

because they lack the expertise or experience in an area that causes them to not ask the right questions or seek appropriate data” (p. 15). McBride (2000) warned that CAO’s “are generally not prepared for their financial management roles” (p. 51). The research highlights the need for these leaders to have the skills and competencies necessary to make sound financial decisions, especially during times of decreased state funding, diminished resources, and accountability expectations. When financial margins are already tight, even a small budgeting decision can have drastic impact on an institution. Higher education institutions need to ensure that they are hiring individuals with the skills necessary to manage budgets and make sound financial decisions. If an individual does not have these skills, it is important to recognize this and either have the individual professionally develop in this area, take coursework in budgeting and funding, or have him or her work closely with a mentor who is an expert in the area of fiscal management.

The impact of mentors and the importance of the mentorship experience for rural-serving community college leaders appear to be crucial (Eddy, 2010). It is recommended that the beginning CAO seek opportunities to be mentored, while the experienced administrator may find personal and professional gain in identifying those who may benefit from the offer of mentorship. Community colleges, particularly those in rural-serving locations, should actively pursue the implementation of mentorship programs and begin facilitating formal training programs for their academic leaders. Attention should be paid to those being promoted from within their present institutions. Considerations to training and professional development are timely as community colleges need to fill a void of qualified leaders due to impending retirements.

Mid-year reductions and fiscal concerns are becoming a way of life for leaders of the public community college. Ferren and Stanton (2004) suggested that the severity of state budget deficits will result in the likely continuation of appropriations reductions. Contingency planning may become a necessary part of the regular budgeting cycle. Participants in this study generally agreed that some form of contingency planning occurred while formulating a budget. The process of contingency planning was informal for all institutions represented in this study, but the implication of this is that institutions may struggle and make poor decisions if they do not have a plan in place. This is never truer than in times of unexpected mid-year budget reductions. It is advised that in order to avoid criticism when changing the budgeting process, to include contingency planning, as well as a clear rationale and course action that is communicated in an open, participatory and collaborative event (Ferren & Stanton, 2004).

King (2002) suggested that not only is it the responsibility of senior administrators to prepare for a potential crisis, but an organization should have formal guidelines and processes in the event of a crisis. Darling (1994) offered a similar assessment to prepare for a crisis and furthered the advice that “comprehensive planning must become an integral part of a firm’s mode of operation in good times and bad” (p. 7). Billings, Milburn, and Schaalman (1980) offered a perceptual model of crisis suggesting that “a potential crisis is more likely to become a crisis if no plans exist to deal with the problem, and unexpected events are more likely to be those for which no contingency plans have been formulated” (pp. 306-307). The institutions represented by the participants in this study did not appear to have a plan in place to handle the mid-year budget reductions.

It is recommended that CAO's and other academic leaders of community colleges consider making changes from "business as usual," as threats to the mission of the community college abound by likely continued appropriations reductions. Addressing immediate emergencies in the short-term does little to plan for the future, especially when there is a high probability that appropriations may continue to fluctuate negatively. It appears that planning ahead and reducing the time pressure, may allow for greater attention to reduce hasty decision-making. Contingency planning, both emergency and long-range, should be incorporated into the budgeting process as a regular course of action.

The rural-serving community college is a unique institutional type of its own. An overall lack of resources, in comparison to suburban and urban counterparts, and a lower valuation tax-base with low population have put increasing pressure on institutional leaders to struggle with continued financial woes (Eddy, 2013). As community colleges continue to wrestle with inadequate funding, and the rural-serving institution struggles with its unique place in the higher education environment, it is recommended that leaders of these institutions seek collaborative measures to maximize scarce resources and harness the power of strength in numbers.

Recommendations for Future Research

The CAO at the rural-serving Texas public community college will likely continue to face challenges with decision-making when it is associated with financial uncertainty, perhaps that which can be classified as unexpected. While research exists on the role of the community college CAO, and numerous acknowledgements abound regarding the lack of adequate funding for Texas community colleges, very little attention

has been devoted to how an unexpected financial crisis may be successfully negotiated by those with significant responsibility for the continuation of the instructional mission.

Recommendations for future research include:

1. This study focused on five CAO's at five different Texas public rural-serving institutions. To increase the knowledge base of how higher education administrators make decisions at times of uncertainty, this study should be conducted with a broader audience. CAO's manage the largest portion of an institution's budget, so their experiences are vital to the success of the institution. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods could be used to explore this phenomenon further.
2. Institutions of different sizes and types will be impacted differently by financial uncertainty, as well as administrator decision-making. Studies that explore these concepts based on institution size and type can further expand higher education knowledge of financial situations and their impact.
3. As noted by most of the participants in this study, the skill they had to help them make sound budgeting decisions during times of uncertainty were honed prior to their roles as CAO's or they were learned on the job. Studies that looked at how college administrators obtain their skills and how these skills can be improved through training, mentorships, and professional development activities would be valuable for higher education practice.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the decision-making approaches utilized by Chief Academic Officers (CAO's) at Texas

public rural-serving community colleges, during a time of unexpected financial crises that required drastically reducing expenditures in the middle of a fiscal period (mid-year budget cut), during 2010. This study sought to explore and describe the critical reactionary skills and approaches employed by these CAO's to address the financial crises at their institutions.

The five participants were purposefully selected based on their experience with the 2008 economic downturn and mid-year reductions at their institutions in 2010. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect the data for the study, and the phenomenological data analysis process, utilizing constant comparative analysis methods, was used to analyze the data collected.

The conceptual framework that guided this study was based on the attributes of leadership and crisis theories, and the concept that decision-making during times of uncertainty can lead to a sense of urgency in making decisions. This can often result in a decision-making environment where quick decisions are perceived as necessary, which can be detrimental in a crisis situation. The findings of this study indicated that CAO's exhibited tenacity and perseverance, open communication, and strategic planning and operations skills when making decisions related to the instructional mission of their institutions, during the 2010 reductions in state appropriations. Furthermore, the CAO's perceived that there were critical skills that guided their decision-making in times of financial uncertainty. These included: mastery of budget analysis and resource management, people skills, and intricate knowledge of the community college mission and functions. All of the skills and approaches identified by the study participants did not support hasty decision-making during times of financial crises.

The implications of this study for higher education are that there are critical skills needed to make decisions in order to lead institutions through times of financial crises. Institutions need to ensure that their leadership has these skills or that they provide opportunities for their leaders to obtain them through on the job training or professional development. In addition, many of the participants noted that they learned many of their skills from prior work experiences, and not necessarily from their positions in higher education. This highlights the need for hiring managers at institutions to be cognizant of what skills are necessary in their leadership, and to ensure they hire individuals with these skills or that they provide training and mentorship opportunities to acquire them.

The results of this study will contribute to higher education practice and knowledge base on the critical skills needed by higher education leadership to lead their institutions through times of financial difficulties. This is one of few empirical studies that examines the decision-making skills of leadership during times of crises in a higher education context. Additional research should be conducted to further expand this research into other types of community college environments such as urban and suburban. Institution size and geographic location may have a direct impact on the decisions an institution is forced to make in times of financial uncertainty. In addition, a quantitative study on the decision-making skills utilized by CAO's would also expand the empirical research on decision-making skills used during times of crises, and could result in the findings of the study being more generalizable to the broader context of higher education.

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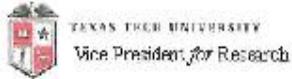
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APPENDIX A

Texas Tech University Human Subjects Approval



February 29, 2012

Dr. Stephanie Jones
Ed Psychology & Leadership
Mail Stop: 1071

Regarding: 503203 A Phenomenological Study of Chief Academic Officers of Texas Public

Dr. Stephanie Jones:

The Texas Tech University Protection of Human Subjects Committee approved your claim for an exemption for the proposal referenced above on February 28, 2012.

Exempt research is not subject to continuing review. However, any modifications that (a) change the research in a substantial way, (b) might change the basis for exemption, or (c) might introduce any additional risk to subjects must be reported to the IRB before they are implemented.

To report such changes, you must send a new claim for exemption or a proposal for expedited or full board review to the IRB. Extension of exempt status for exempt projects that have not changed is automatic.

The IRB will send annual reminders that ask you to update the status of your research project. Once you have completed your research, you must inform the Coordinator of the Committee either by responding to the annual reminder or by notifying the Coordinator by memo or e-mail (donna.peters@ttu.edu) so that the file for your project can be closed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rosemary Cogan".

Rosemary Cogan, Ph.D., ABPP
Protection of Human Subjects Committee

APPENDIX B

Original Interview Questionnaire Guide for Chief Academic Officers

1. How long have you served in your present position of Chief Academic Officer at this institution? Have you served in this position at another institution?
2. To what degree are you responsible for the management and construction of your institution's instructional budget?
3. What effect did the 2010 mid-fiscal year mandatory reduction of state appropriations have on the functioning of your institution?
4. Did this reduction result in a direct decrease of your institution's instructional budget? If not directly, did you perceive an indirect effect on another aspect of the budget or operational functioning?
5. Do you consider the 2010 mid-fiscal year mandatory reduction of state appropriations to your institution a matter of crisis?
6. Can you think back to the moment you were aware that your funds were going to be reduced? Please explain the experience.
7. What skills, as Chief Academic Officer and instructional budget administrator, do you identify as most useful or beneficial in coping or approaching the mandate to reduce your institution's instructional budget mid-fiscal year?
8. How did you acquire these skills?
9. Are there skills that you can identify as being detrimental to your coping or approaching the mandate to reduce your institution's instructional budget mid-fiscal year?

10. Do you engage in regular contingency budget planning that takes into account the possibility of an unexpected mid-year reduction in state appropriations allocated to your institution? If yes, can you explain key aspects of your contingency planning process? If no, would you consider contingency budget planning and explain the reasoning for your response?
11. What do you perceive as the most difficult aspect of having to negatively restructure your institution's instructional budget unexpectedly while already months into a fiscal period?
12. Can you explain the communication lines you have with key personnel and decision-makers at your institution? How does this change, if at all, when there is a perceived threat to the financial well-being of your institution?
13. In retrospect, how do you feel you handled financial crisis events in the best possible way given the circumstances? Would you have handled them differently upon reflection of the event?
14. Which areas of your instructional budget are you more willing or likely to reduce or cut when faced with an unexpected reduction in appropriations? Least likely? Why?
15. Is there a brief story you can share about a fiscal crisis event at your institution?

APPENDIX C

Revised Interview Questionnaire Guide for Chief Academic Officers

1. How long have you served in your present position of Chief Academic Officer at this institution? Have you served in this position at another institution?
2. To what degree are you responsible for the management and construction of your institution's instructional budget?
3. What effect did the 2010 mid-fiscal year mandatory reduction of state appropriations have on the functioning of your institution? Did this reduction result in a direct decrease of your institution's instructional budget? If not directly, did you perceive an indirect effect on another aspect of the budget or operational functioning? Do you consider the 2010 mid-fiscal year mandatory reduction of state appropriations to your institution a matter of crisis?
4. Can you think back to the moment you were aware that your funds were going to be reduced? Please explain the experience.
5. What skills, as Chief Academic Officer and instructional budget administrator, do you identify as most useful or beneficial in coping or approaching the mandate to reduce your institution's instructional budget mid-fiscal year?
6. How did you acquire these skills?
7. Are there skills that you can identify as being detrimental to your coping or approaching the mandate to reduce your institution's instructional budget mid-fiscal year?

8. Do you engage in regular contingency budget planning that takes into account the possibility of an unexpected mid-year reduction in state appropriations allocated to your institution? If yes, can you explain key aspects of your contingency planning process? If no, would you consider contingency budget planning and explain the reasoning for your response?
9. What do you perceive as the most difficult aspect of having to negatively restructure your institution's instructional budget unexpectedly while already months into a fiscal period?
10. Can you explain the communication lines you have with key personnel and decision-makers at your institution? How does this change, if at all, when there is a perceived threat to the financial well-being of your institution?
11. In retrospect, how do you feel you handled financial crisis events in the best possible way given the circumstances? Would you have handled them differently upon reflection of the event?
12. Which areas of your instructional budget are you more willing or likely to reduce or cut when faced with an unexpected reduction in appropriations? Least likely? Why?
13. Is there a brief story you can share about a fiscal crisis event at your institution?

APPENDIX D – STUDY DESCRIPTION

A Phenomenological Study of Chief Academic Officers of Texas Public Community Colleges: The Identification of Critical Decision-Making Skills During Times of Financial Crises

What is this research project about?

The purpose of this study is to identify the decision-making skills used by chief academic officers during times of mid-year budget reductions.

What would you do if you participate?

This study will involve your participation in an interview session where you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences relating to mid-year budget cuts while serving in your capacity as chief academic officer.

Can I quit if I become uncomfortable?

Yes, without question. The researchers and the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board have reviewed the questions included for the interview and believe you can answer them comfortably. However, participation is voluntary and strictly by your own choice. You are welcome to stop answering questions at any time and you may leave any time you wish.

How long will my participation take?

The researcher is asking for no more than two hours of your time.

How are you protecting my privacy?

All participants can request that their names and institutions not be identified in the study. If this is your preference, we will utilize a pseudonym to identify you and your institution. Demographic information will be gathered during the interview process, such as the number of years of experience in community college administration, the size of colleges for which you have worked, and any advanced degrees you hold.

All study data will be held in secured, locked file storage. The only individuals privileged to view data will be the researchers and a third-party transcriber. Once interview transcripts are complete, any data that includes your name will be promptly destroyed.

I have some questions about this study. Who can I ask?

1. If you have any questions about this research study, you can contact Jason Altieri at (800) 628-1580 (toll-free) or e-mail him at j.altieri@ttu.edu.
2. You may also contact Dr. Stephanie Jones, who is supervising this study, at (806) 742-1997, ext. 245 or via e-mail at stephanie.j.jones@ttu.edu.
3. TTU also has a Board that protects the rights of people who participate in research. You can ask them questions at (806) 742-2064. You can also mail them at

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, Office of the Vice President for Research, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409.

How will I benefit from participating in this study?

There is no financial compensation for your participation in this study. However, participants will benefit from the knowledge that they contributed to the study of an event which affects many Texas community college chief academic officers and the performance of their duties.

How can I participate in the study?

If you would like to participate in this study, please contact Jason Altieri at (800) 628-1580 (toll-free) or e-mail him at j.altieri@ttu.edu.

APPENDIX E – PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear _____,

As part of my doctoral program at Texas Tech University, I am conducting research involving Texas public community colleges and the event of unexpected mid-year budget reductions.

Specifically, the qualitative study will focus on the role of Chief Academic Officers in approaching this particular crisis situation. With the Chief Academic Officer having such a pivotal role in instructional budget development and administration, I believe your input will be of particular high value. The identification of approaching and coping mechanisms in response to these unexpected reductions may further assist other Chief Academic Officers when facing similar circumstances.

The protocol for participating in this study would involve a face-to-face interview, which will be captured via audiotape and note taking. I would anticipate the process to last no longer than two hours and to be scheduled with consideration to your busy schedule. There might also be follow-up questions that arise, however this could be addressed via internet or telephone.

To be included in this study, you must have been in your current position as the Chief Academic Officer at your institution since 2008. I will contact your office within 10 days to follow up on your interest in participating and to set a time, date and location for the interview. Of course you are welcome to contact me prior to the deadline through e-mail or by calling me toll-free at (800) 628-1580.

A summary of findings will be provided to you at the conclusion of the project.

I have attached an overall description of the project, including answers to questions you may have. If you have any other questions in regards to this research study, you can contact me by telephone (toll-free) at (800) 628-1580 or via e-mail me at j.altieri@ttu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Stephanie Jones, who is supervising this study, at (806) 742-1997, ext. 245 or via e-mail at stephanie.j.jones@ttu.edu. TTU also has a Board that protects the rights of people who participate in research. You can ask them questions at (806) 742-2064. You can also mail them at Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, Office of the Vice President for Research, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409.

Your consideration of participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

J. Chandler Altieri