

**PLANNING FOR CHANGE: ENGAGING UNIVERSITY STAFF IN STRATEGIC  
PLANNING**

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# **PLANNING FOR CHANGE: ENGAGING UNIVERSITY STAFF IN STRATEGIC PLANNING**

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Universities are under pressure from multiple directions with accrediting bodies requiring increased focus on institutional planning efforts. University staff who manage programs, provide student services, and serve in other specialized roles are at the forefront of this changing environment. These employees may have difficulty understanding how their daily work relates to institutional planning efforts and resist change imposed from the top.

While researchers have examined employee engagement during change efforts, staff participation in strategic planning in higher education constitutes an overlooked topic. The aim of the study was to address three questions: 1) How and to what extent have university leaders communicated the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to staff? 2) How and to what extent have staff responded to the strategic planning process? 3) What are the perceptions of middle managers involved in implementing strategic initiatives?

The study occurred at Mid-Atlantic University (MAU), a public research university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. MAU began a strategic planning process and instructed schools and administrative units to align their strategic plans with the MAU plan before entering the implementation phase.

Study participants included eight middle managers, individuals who direct programs, supervise other staff, and are in the middle of the institution's hierarchy. A 45-minute semi-structured interview elicited information on staff reactions to the strategic plan, communication of strategic initiatives at the university and school level, and interactions between supervisors and employees. The researcher collected and analyzed documents from the university's strategic planning website, the staff governance association, and university publications.

Several themes emerged in the areas of communication, staff responses, and perceptions of implementation. These themes included: 1) communication of the strategic planning process did not permeate the organization; 2) staff members responded in three main ways: searching for understanding, getting excited, or becoming disillusioned or resigned to the ongoing changes; and 3) a disconnection between the planning process and implementation. This paper adds to the current body of literature and includes implications for practice and recommendations for future research in the area of staff involvement in planned change initiatives in higher education.

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## **PREFACE**

Completing a dissertation is a challenging process. I am grateful to the support, encouragement, and insight of my committee: Dr. Kerr, Dr. Trovato, and Dr. Guilleux. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Kerr, my advisor, who pushed me to do my best work and offered advice and suggestions throughout this process.

To the members of Table Two/Team Wipeout: Karin, Rob, Mike, Sarah, and Sarah, thank you for being a network of support from our very first summer in the program.

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## 1.0 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE STATEMENT AND INQUIRY QUESTIONS

At a large public research university, a Town Hall on the new strategic planning process has just concluded. Instead of engaging the university community, the session resulted in confusion and frustration. As employees walk back to their offices, one group wonders why they bothered to attend:

*“What was the point of going to that Town Hall? Everyone on that stage acted like they have all the answers. I thought they wanted our input.”*

*“This strategic planning process is a crock. The people at the top are so worried about having a plan that they don’t realize what’s happening on the ground.”*

*“Maybe they would understand if they talked to people like us.”*

A group of managers headed to lunch, discussing their ambivalence about the whole process:

*“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to implement change when I don’t understand what’s happening, let alone how to explain it to my team.”*

*“Even if I get my team to understand, I can’t get them to change...”*

As this case illustrates, higher education leaders, managers, and employees view the change process in varied ways. As universities plan for strategic change, how can higher education leaders effectively engage their employees in this process?

## 1.1 PROBLEM AREA

Universities are feeling pressure from three directions: parents, the public, and accrediting bodies. The illusion of the ivory tower has given way to a semi-corporate environment in which parents discuss return on investment, accrediting bodies review assessment of student learning outcomes, and administrators worry about the percentage of students gainfully employed post-graduation. Colleges are desperate to convince students and parents that the cost of attendance is worth the investment, while initiatives like Complete College America are calling public attention to the myth of the four-year degree and advocating for performance-based funding. Accrediting bodies like the Middle States Commission on Higher Education are adding to the pressure. New standards for accreditation require increased focus on assessment of student learning outcomes and institutional strategic planning efforts. In short, parents, accrediting bodies, and the public expect higher education institutions to change.

Institutions are scrambling to respond, while neglecting to consider how to involve employees in change efforts. University staff who manage programs, provide student services, and market, fundraise, and lobby for the institution are increasing in number and find themselves at the front lines of the changing higher education environment (Brainard, Fain, & Masterson, 2009). These employees, who are not members of the faculty and typically do not have instructional duties, are largely ignored by outdated governance structures (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2014). These employees may have difficulty understanding how their daily work relates to institutional planning efforts and resist change imposed from the top. Higher education leaders must harness the energy and enthusiasm of their staff for there to be any change. However, best practices for doing so in the current higher education environment have yet to be articulated.

## **1.2 INQUIRY SETTING**

Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) is a public research university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. MAU provides a unique research context to study the involvement of staff in strategic planning and implementation. MAU began a strategic planning process after the arrival of a new President. A draft framework for the strategic plan was presented to the university community at a series of town hall meetings, before MAU's Board of Trustees approved the plan. Following this approval, university leaders instructed schools and administrative units to align their strategic plans with the MAU plan before entering the implementation phase. This inquiry will be situated within one of MAU's professional schools that offers undergraduate and graduate programs.

## **1.3 STAKEHOLDERS**

This inquiry focuses on employees at a college or university who hold positions without instructional responsibilities. This inquiry focuses on employees in professional positions and not clerical or maintenance positions. MAU employees over 6,000 full-time staff. This inquiry focuses on staff in one school at MAU that employs approximately 100 individuals. 68 percent of the staff in this school are female and 32 percent of the staff are male. The staff is predominantly white (82 percent), with African-American (9 percent), Asian-American (3 percent), individuals reporting two or more races (1 percent), and individuals not reporting a race or ethnicity (5 percent) comprising the rest of the staff. Over 30 percent of the staff are in management classifications that include responsibilities for supervising staff, managing

programs, and overseeing budgets. Less than 9 percent of the staff are in clerical positions. The remaining staff are classified as professionals in specific job families, such as research, communications, or student services.

#### **1.4 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE**

Change management literature (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Lines, 2004; Senge, 1990; Zeffane, 1996) suggests organizations are likely to experience implementation challenges when staff are not involved throughout the planning process. Highly structured organizations that institute planning from a top down approach must also consider how to communicate their goals and plans to a multi-layered organization (O'Reilly, Caldwell, Chatman, Lapiz, & Self, 2010; Simoes & Esposito, 2014). Research shows that middle managers play a key role in translating the goals and objectives from leadership to their employees (Balogun, 2003, 2006; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a). However, the change management literature has not yet described in detail the role of higher education staff in organizational change in colleges and universities. The proposed study would extend the change management literature to the higher education setting.

## **1.5 INQUIRY QUESTIONS**

The inquiry questions to be explored as part of this research study are:

1. How and to what extent have institutional leaders communicated the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to university staff?
2. How and to what extent have staff members responded to the strategic plan and the planning process?
3. What are the perceptions of middle managers involved in implementing strategic initiatives?

## **1.6 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY**

I have worked as a staff member in higher education for over a decade. In that time, I have held supervisory and non-supervisory positions. At different points in my career, I have been both on the receiving end of organizational change and involved in implementing change. The topic of engaging university staff in strategic planning is of particular interest because I hold a position in which I am responsible for envisioning strategic initiatives and communicating these initiatives to a unit comprised of approximately 60 staff members.

## 2.0 CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this section is to explore the literature on change management. To facilitate understanding of this specific literature, we begin with definitions of key terms. What follows is research on change management, resistance to change, strategic consensus, and employee engagement in strategic planning. We hope to answer these questions: How do leaders manage in a changing environment? How do individuals resist change? How do organizations effectively implement change? To conclude, we consider the implications for higher education leaders in a changing environment.

### 2.1 KEY TERMS

The following words and phrases will be used throughout the literature review. To assist in understanding, they are defined here.

**Change Agent:** A leader who outlines a change initiative for an organization.

**Change Recipient:** An employee who is told of or “receives” the change. These employees could be middle managers or other, non-supervisory employees.

**Employee/Staff:** Individuals at a college or university who hold positions without instructional responsibilities. For the purposes of this research, we use the term to mean employees in professional positions and not clerical or maintenance ones.

**Faculty:** Individuals at a college or university who have instructional responsibilities. These individuals could be tenured/tenure-stream faculty or non-tenure-stream lecturers.

**Higher Education Leader:** High-level university administrators who have overall responsibility for setting the strategic direction of the institution. These individuals may be classified as faculty or staff and hold titles like President or Vice President, Chancellor or Vice Chancellor, Provost or Vice Provost, and Dean or Associate Dean.

**Middle Manager:** An employee who directs a program or unit, supervises other staff members, and is in the middle of the institution's hierarchy.

**Strategic Planning:** For purposes of this research, we use the term to mean a process during which an institution assesses the changing environment, establishes goals and priorities, and sets measurable objectives. A strategic plan typically covers a period of three to five years.

## 2.2 SEARCH METHODS

Peer-reviewed publications and previous studies comprise this review. Sources came from databases including EBSCOhost, Academic Search Premier, Business Source Complete, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, and Internet search engine Google Scholar. Searches were conducted using the keywords *change management*, *resistance to change*, *strategic consensus*, *sensemaking*, *employee engagement*, *strategic planning*, *organizational change*, and *implementation*.

## **2.3 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.3.1 Change Management and Resistance to Change**

#### **2.3.1.1 Change has been under study for decades.**

After World War II, researchers turned their attention to how individuals and systems experienced change. Lewin (1947) focused on how social groups and systems experience change. He studied how groups, which he defined as “a dynamic whole which is characterized by a close interdependence of their members” (p. 8), operate and influence behavior. Change within groups continually occurs, but at different levels and degrees. Lewin developed a three-step model of change: unfreezing, moving, and re-freezing. Unfreezing requires overcoming social customs, breaking ingrained habits, or changing established behaviors. Moving requires individuals to adopt new or revised customs, habits, or behaviors. Once these new behaviors and customs stabilize and are accepted by the group, the change has re-frozen at the desired state. Lewin’s theory has come under criticism for being too simplistic, neglecting the influence of politics and power in organizations, and focusing only on change implemented from the top (Burnes, 2004).

Coch and French (1948) focused on how change could increase mass production efficiency. When management implemented any changes, they observed that factory workers responded by banding together to suppress production, filing union grievances, and leaving their positions at higher rates. To determine why individuals resist change and how to overcome this resistance, they conducted a series of experiments that provided workers with different levels of involvement in planning for change. They found that representative and full participation minimized resistance, but total participation appeared to result in a faster return to expected

production levels. The control group, which did not have any opportunity to participate, found the changes implemented by management to be “arbitrary and unreasonable” (Coch & French, Jr., 1948, p. 529) and continued to resist. In short, Coch and French found that improving communication with employees and involving them in the change process lessened resistance and employee turnover.

Beginning with the 1970s, researchers began to turn their attention to change in the office environment. Kotter and Schlesinger (1979/2008) suggested strategies for managers seeking to implement change. Much of their work focused on providing managers with practical strategies for diagnosing and managing resistance. They provided four typical reasons for resisting change: “a desire not to lose something of value, a misunderstanding of the change and its implications, a belief that the change does not make sense for the organization, and a low tolerance for change” (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979/2008, p. 132). Because managers have the ability to influence how their employees respond to change, they suggested managers use specific approaches to overcome resistance. These approaches are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 *Methods for dealing with resistance to change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979/2008, p. 136)*

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Commonly used in Situations</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Drawbacks</b>
Education and communication	With incomplete or inaccurate information and analysis	Once convinced, employees will likely assist with implementation	Time consuming if involving many people
Participation and involvement	When change agents need information or when employees have considerable power to resist	Employees will be more committed to implementing change and their expertise will be utilized	Time consuming and may lead to a poorly designed change

Table 1 (Continued)

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Commonly used in Situations</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Drawbacks</b>
		during the change process	
Facilitation and support	When employees resist because of adjustment problems	No other approach works better	Time consuming, costly, and may still not work
Negotiation and agreement	When a group will be negatively affected and has considerable power to resist	May minimize resistance	May be costly if other groups try to negotiate for compliance
Manipulation and co-optation	When other approaches are not feasible because of cost or the political environment	May be relatively fast and economical	May cause problems in the future if people realize they were manipulated
Explicit and implicit coercion	When change needs to happen quickly and change agents have considerable power	It is speedy and can overcome any kind of resistance	Can be risky if it leaves people mad at the initiators

Kotter and Schlesinger did not distinguish between good and bad changes. Their framework contained an implicit assumption that the manager who desires change is always correct.

I chose to begin this literature review by focusing on the early theories at the core of change management. In the sections below, I will explore different strands of the change management literature that have developed since these early theories were established. These more recent works explore why individuals respond in certain ways to change, the effect leaders can have during times of change, and the concept of adaptive leadership.

### **2.3.1.2 Adults have well-documented responses to change.**

Researchers have spent decades studying how adults respond to change. Change involves uncertainty and learning. Individuals can continue to develop mental capacity throughout adulthood, which is key to how individuals respond in an increasingly uncertain and complex work environment (Kegan & Lahey, 2010). This environment requires continual learning of new skills, technologies, and knowledge. Adults, however, face psychological barriers to successful learning. Schein (2002) emphasized that learning new things in the workplace can lead to anxiety. Anxiety may exist because individuals fear job loss, or because they fear others will view them as incapable of learning something new. Argyris (1991) explained how individuals fear being seen as incompetent, which inhibits true learning. Most individuals strive to present an image of a competent professional to their colleagues and superiors. Admitting that one has something to learn runs counter to this image (Argyris, 1991; Kegan & Lahey, 2001). This fear of failure leads successful individuals to blame others for their failure (Argyris, 1991). As a result, individuals may avoid situations in which others will force them to learn something new (Schein, 2002).

### **2.3.1.3 Personality affects how individuals react to change.**

Much of the literature on change management focuses on organizational factors influencing resistance, but some researchers have studied how an individual's disposition and personality affect how they respond to change. Wanberg and Banas (2000) conducted a longitudinal study to determine how individual characteristics predict how one will respond to organizational change. They found individuals with high personal resilience, which they defined as a combination of self-esteem, optimism, and perceived control, were more likely to accept organizational change. Contextual factors, such as participation level, the amount of information

shared, and self-efficacy in responding to the change, also influence the likelihood of an individual's openness to change. The higher an individual's participation, the more likely he/she saw the change as positive. Having more information about the change and increased self-efficacy for responding to the change, correlated to higher acceptance of the change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000).

Bovey and Hede (2001) considered the psychological factors that contribute to an individual's resistance to change. They identified defense mechanisms that employees display when faced with change. They categorized five of these defense mechanisms (denial, disassociation, isolation of affect, projection, and acting out) as maladaptive and two (humor and anticipation) as adaptive. Individuals who displayed higher levels of maladaptive defense mechanisms were more likely to engage in behavior that resisted change. Alternatively, individuals who employed adaptive defense mechanisms were less likely to engage in behavior that resists change. Projection, "when an individual deals with internal/external stressors by falsely attributing to another their own unacceptable feelings, impulses, or thoughts," (Bovey & Hede, 2001, p. 537) had the highest correlation to resistance to change. They found that managers could minimize individual resistance by engaging in information-based interventions and counseling interventions. These interventions are designed to create awareness and understanding of how defense mechanisms influence behavior and the perceptions of change (Bovey & Hede, 2001).

Oreg (2003) developed a Resistance to Change Scale that evaluates how disposition affects an individual's response to change. In particular, Oreg focused on the behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions of resistance to change and developed four factors that predict an individual's tendency to resist change. An individual who is Routine Seeking has

more difficulty adopting new routines. The Emotional Response factor measured an individual's stress level when undergoing change. Short-Term Focus measured an individual's likelihood of being distracted by short-term problems instead of seeing the long-term benefits of the change. An individual's Cognitive Rigidity measured how often and easily an individual changes his/her mind. Of note, Oreg conducted seven studies to develop, validate, and test the predictive value of this Resistance to Change Scale and found it to be reliable in different settings and contexts.

Studies presented in this section are arranged by author, date, study aim, and key findings in Table 2.

Table 2 *Literature review studies and findings on individual resistance to change*

<b>Study Author (Date): Aims</b>	<b>Setting and Participants</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Bovey & Hede (2001): Role of adaptive and maladaptive defense mechanisms in individual resistance.	615 employees in nine organizations undergoing major change.	Survey	Individuals who tend to use humor as a coping mechanism during anxiety are less likely to resist change. Individuals who use projection as a defense mechanism are at the highest likelihood of resisting change.
Oreg (2003): Establish and validate a scale measuring individual differences in resistance to change.	Seven studies were conducted at Cornell University. Participants varied in gender, age, employment (e.g. student, faculty, staff, etc.).	Surveys	Resistance to Change Scale can be used to explain how individuals react differently to change and predict how and individual will react to change.

Table 2 (Continued)

<b>Study Author (Date): Aims</b>	<b>Setting and Participants</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Wanberg & Banas (2000): Individual differences and context-specific predictors of employee openness toward organizational change.	Two state chapters of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) undergoing a restructuring.	Longitudinal study consisting of three surveys	Personal resilience correlated to higher levels of change acceptance. Context-specific variables were predictive of greater employee openness to change.

#### **2.3.1.4 Leaders can influence how employees react to change.**

Leaders create an environment in which change can occur (Beer et al., 1990). Instead of mandating change from the top, senior managers are most effective when they can chart the “general direction in which the company should move without insisting on specific solutions” (Beer et al., 1990, p. 159). Zeffane (1996) cautioned leaders not to enact change from the top and expect the organization to fall in line, nor to expect that employees will be able to successfully generate change that bubbles up through the organization. He suggested that both approaches weaken the overall effectiveness of the organization to achieve lasting change. Strategic change “should preserve the strengths of the two approaches: the role of the leader in providing directions (in the form of transformational leadership) and the proactive involvement of participants being responsible for carrying out planned change” (Zeffane, 1996, p. 42). While employee involvement in the change process has a generally positive correlation with successful implementation, the impact is strongest when the change is intended to increase organizational efficiency (Lines, 2004). Leaders can reinforce the positive effects of change by highlighting

units which have undergone change successfully, as well as creating promotion pathways for middle managers who have displayed essential leadership skills (Beer et al., 1990).

Much of the research on leadership and change focuses on an organization’s senior leaders. However, leadership at different levels affects an organization’s ability to implement change. The likelihood of successful change implementation increases when employees believe that leaders from different levels of an organization endorse a new strategy (O’Reilly et al., 2010). Senior and middle managers influence the amount of change-related uncertainty that employees experience (Cullen, Edwards, Casper, & Gue, 2014). Employees in the midst of ongoing change are often concerned about their job performance. The “uncertainty employees perceive in the work environment sends a signal ... regarding whether the organization values and supports them. As such, perceived organizational support is an appraisal that explains the relationship between stress (change-related uncertainty) and satisfaction and performance” (Cullen et al., 2014, p. 276). Supervisors and middle managers who provide support to employees during change initiatives can lessen fears of poor performance and minimize resistance (Cullen et al., 2014).

Studies presented in this section are arranged by author, date, study aim, and key findings in Table 3.

Table 3 *Literature review studies and findings on how leaders influence employees’ response to change*

<b>Study Author (Date): Aims</b>	<b>Setting and Participants</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Beer et al. (1990): Role of managers in creating and implementing	Six large U.S. corporations undergoing organizational change.	Case study	Managers should follow six steps to effective change in aligning tasks within

Table 3 (Continued)

Study Author (Date): Aims	Setting and Participants	Methods	Key Findings
programmatic change.			an organization. Leaders create an environment for change.
Cullen et al. (2014): Influence of employee adaptability and change-related uncertainty on perception of organizational action.	Material handling employees from two organizations.	Survey	Perceived organizational support acts as a mediator between employee adaptability and change-related uncertainty and employee satisfaction and performance.
O'Reilly et al. (2010): Consistency of leadership effectiveness across hierarchical levels and impact on implementation of strategic initiatives.	Healthcare system; physicians in eight specialty departments working in six medical centers.	Case study consisting of surveys	Leaders' effectiveness at different levels correlated with significant performance improvement.

### 2.3.1.5 Adaptive leadership is crucial in times of change.

Adaptive leadership is “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). Adaptive leaders encourage employees to admit that they do not have all the answers. Senge (1990) suggested that organizations should encourage their employees to seek out other perspectives and insights while admitting while one’s own gaps in reasoning and generalizations. Adaptive organizations see these opposing viewpoints and differing opinions as a way of refining available options and arriving at the best possible solution

(Heifetz et al., 2009). This two-way communication process also lessens resistance to change, but only when it is a true dialogue (Simoes & Esposito, 2014). If leaders are just going through the motions, employees are likely to be more resistant to change:

Genuine participation is based on respect, which comes from recognizing a real dependence on people's contributions. This would drive the agent to gather ideas and suggestions, not in a backhanded way to get compliance, but in a straightforward way to gather some good ideas and avoid some unnecessary mistakes. (Simoes & Esposito, 2014, p. 328)

Heifetz et al. (2009) warned leaders not to avoid addressing the underlying issues in their workplace, but, rather, to spend time diagnosing the challenges that exist within the system and within oneself. Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggested "organizational silence" occurs when systematic forces lead employees to withhold information about potential problems and issues. Managers who fear negative feedback, reject dissent, and believe that managers know best contribute to situations in which organizational silence occurs. When employees are silent, new programs and initiatives are unlikely to undergo a sufficiently critical internal review. By not detecting and correcting errors prior to implementation, a greater chance of failure exists (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

## **2.3.2 Implementation of Strategic Change**

### **2.3.2.1 Middle managers are responsible for implementing change.**

Middle managers serve a key role in implementing change in hierarchical institutions by exerting influence in upward and downward directions (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992b). Middle

managers fall into four non-exclusive categories: championing alternatives, synthesizing information, facilitating adaptability, and implementing deliberate strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992b). Middle managers who champion alternatives are continually advocating for different courses of action to senior management. Those who synthesize information are providing senior management with key knowledge and interpretations that may be used to make strategic decisions. Middle managers who facilitate adaptability assist employees to experiment and create flexible arrangements that will influence the organization's long-term success. Those who implement deliberate strategy "align organizational action with strategic intentions" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992b, p. 155). These roles reinforce how important middle managers are to an organization's success.

#### **2.3.2.2 Middle managers must make sense of change before they can implement it.**

Middle managers within the same organization can perceive change in considerably different ways. Senior leaders cannot control how middle managers make sense of change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Senior leaders expect change to occur according to a certain script, which contains implicit assumptions about how the change will ensue (Bartunek, Lacey, & Wood, 1992). Employees, too, hold assumptions about how change will unfold. Based on these assumptions, employees will evaluate how leaders communicate and behave during the change process (Bartunek et al., 1992).

The experience of change recipients is more complicated than what change agents assert (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006). Change agents should consider the categories of meaning that change recipients' experience: "(a) meanings consistent with the change agents', (b) perceptions of inconsistencies or contradictions with the aims of the change agents, and (c) perceived personal impacts of the change initiative" (Bartunek et al., 2006, p.

201). Bartunek et al. suggested better education on planned change initiatives leads to greater acceptance. Indeed, additional education and information may help employees accept change. In particular, leaders must monitor how employees are responding and determine appropriate levels of support and resources during implementation (Bartunek et al., 2006).

While senior leaders may create the vision for organizational change, middle managers have “responsibility for determining the detail of how the new structure was to work” (Balogun, 2003, p. 72). During periods of organizational change, middle managers are balancing time between their ongoing operational activities while attempting to make sense of the ongoing changes. Weick (2012b) explains the process of sensemaking as “how can we know what we think (texts), until we see (listening) what we’ve done (conversing)? Communication, language, talk, conversation, and interaction are crucial sites in organizing” (p. 5). Within an organization, sensemaking revolves around understanding how things came to be and what they mean (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2012). This process of sensemaking marks a shift in understanding the role middle managers play in the change process. Rather than being a recipient of change, middle managers serve as a change intermediaries who help others within the organization understand and cope with the changes that are occurring (Balogun, 2003).

In order to help others within the organization understand and cope with change, middle managers must first make sense of what is occurring. Balogun (2006) identified how individuals, during times of uncertainty and confusion, share their experiences with others through the exchange of stories, rumors, and information. This process of sharing experiences reinforced that change was occurring. Weick (2012c) cautioned that organizations “affect what people notice, affirm, label, and act upon as well as the stories they construct retrospectively to

make sense of their actions” (p. 16). In other words, sensemaking is a process of looking backwards and connecting actions to beliefs (Weick, 2012a).

Balogun (2006) argued that change is not something that can be controlled by senior managers, but, rather, a process by which individuals interpret and react to what is occurring around them. This view of change heightens the need for a more nuanced way of communicating change. Instead of distributing information through formal channels, communication of the change process must include lateral, informal communication. Further, senior managers must acknowledge that gossip, behaviors, and informal discussions among middle managers create shared understanding and may lead to unanticipated outcomes (Balogun, 2006). Regardless of these actions and communications, Weick et al. (2012) found that “what is plausible for one group, such as managers, often proves implausible for another group, such as employees” (p. 141).

Studies presented in this section are arranged by author, date, study aim, and key findings in Table 4.

Table 4 *Literature review studies and findings on middle manager sensemaking*

<b>Study Author (Date): Aims</b>	<b>Setting and Participants</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Balogun (2003): Analysis of the role of middle managers during strategic change.	UK utility corporation undergoing a restructuring; 26 of 90 middle managers	Case study that included analysis of diaries, follow-up phone interviews, unstructured interviews, document analysis	Middle managers serve as change intermediaries by undertaking personal change, assisting others understand the transition, maintaining operations, and implementing change.

Table 4 (Continued)

<b>Study Author (Date): Aims</b>	<b>Setting and Participants</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Balogun (2006): Strategic transformation from a middle manager perspective. Development of a sensemaking framework.	Middle managers in a UK utility undergoing top-down strategic change.	Case study that included middle managers keeping diaries for a year	Senior managers have limited control over change outcomes. Recipients make sense of the strategy and are influenced by lateral and informal communication processes.
Balogun & Johnson (2004): Analysis of sensemaking during an organization's transition from a hierarchical structure to a decentralized one.	Middle managers in the core business division of a recently privatized UK utility.	Longitudinal, qualitative study that included analysis of diaries, follow-up phone interviews, unstructured interviews, and document analysis	Middle managers rely on social interaction to shape change in the absence of senior management.
Bartunek et al. (1992): Understanding the cognitive dynamics associated with expectations and implementation of a new empowerment framework.	Teachers attending a faculty institute at which the new empowerment framework was implemented	Journals, observations, document evaluation	Conflicts will arise when the implementation does not mirror expectations.
Bartunek et al. (2006): Analysis of change recipients' experiences and interpretations.	Nurses undergoing a hospital-initiated move to shared governance.	Surveys	Individuals assess personal gains and losses during times of change. Participation in the shared governance initiative led to more positive reactions.

### **2.3.2.3 Strategic consensus and its impact on implementation.**

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a) defined strategic consensus as “agreement among top, middle-, and operating-level managers on the fundamental priorities of the organization” (p. 28) and recognized that consensus has cognitive and emotional dimensions. Through interviews and questionnaires, they constructed consensus and commitment maps to identify gaps in implementation and found most organizations fell short of the appropriate levels of consensus. They suggested organizations focus on improving understanding and enhancing commitment to improve consensus. To improve understanding, senior managers should build communication channels with a wide variety of middle managers and encourage continual discussion of strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a). A clear understanding the overall vision can also lead to a shared sense of purpose within the organization (Rapert, Velliquette, & Garretson, 2002). To enhance commitment, senior managers should refine systems and structures to reinforce the intended strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a). Much like Balogun (2006), Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a) emphasized that these reinforcing behaviors have more of an impact than any official communication. Rapert et al. (2002) suggested that when true strategic consensus occurs, it has a positive impact on the organization’s overall performance.

In contrast to Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a) and Rapert et al. (2002), Weick et al. (2012) questioned whether consensus within organizations is necessary for successful action to occur. Instead, they suggested “equivalent rather than shared meanings” (p. 146) are more likely to result in an effective outcome because individuals are approaching the situation with their own impressions, beliefs about what actions should be taken, and ideas on how to work together. In other words, there is alignment within the organization around the overall goal, but individuals within that organization should be given the freedom to explore ways to reach that goal.

#### **2.3.2.4 Organizational culture affects implementation of change.**

An organization creates culture through its norms, values, and underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990). Leaders must understand these norms and values while attempting to implement change. When leaders attempt to make changes that contradict the established culture, they are less likely to be successful (Danışman, 2010). To reduce organizational barriers to change, leaders must create a shared vision across the organization (Hutt, Walker, & Frankwick, 1995). Similarly, organizational culture influences the behavior and expectations of employees. Heifetz et al. (2009) described how groups create culture and how quickly new employees recognize they must model certain behaviors in order to succeed. Organizations have an interest in preserving their culture and take pains to hire new employees who will fit in with the status quo (Schein, 1990). At the same time, employees who have learned to model expected behavior and navigate the complex structure may be reluctant to criticize the existing organizational culture (Heifetz et al., 2009). These forces, existing at the individual and organizational level, act to preserve the status quo.

Studies presented in this section are arranged by author, date, study aim, and key findings in Table 5.

Table 5 *Literature review studies and findings on organizational culture*

<b>Study Author (Date): Aims</b>	<b>Setting and Participants</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Danişman (2010): Effect of societal-based cultural understandings on organizational change.	Office workers at a construction company in Turkey.	Case study consisting of observations, unstructured interviews, and document analysis.	Change implementation may fail when societal and cultural understandings and behaviors are neglected.
Hutt et al. (1995): Barriers to strategic change in functional and business units	Managers at different levels in a Fortune 500 communications corporation.	Case study using in-depth interviews at three points during the change process.	Structural reorganization alone does not create change. Managers must use political and administrative influence when conflict among units arises.

### **2.3.2.5 Higher education has its own unique culture.**

Organizational culture is key to understanding management and performance issues in higher education (Tierney, 1988). External factors (e.g., demographics, political conditions, etc.) and internal factors shape institutions. These internal factors have:

roots in the history of the organization and derive ... force from the values, processes, and goals held by those most intimately involved in the organization's workings. An organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level. (Tierney, 1988, p. 3)

Many higher education institutions have created an organizational saga to define their uniqueness and differentiate themselves from peer institutions (Clark, 1972). An organizational saga is a “unified set of publicly expressed beliefs about a formal group that (a) is rooted in history, (b) claims unique accomplishment, and (c) is held with sentiment by the group” (Clark, 1972, p. 179). These sagas influence organizational decision-making and perceptions of change among faculty and staff.

Institutions have different subcultures made up of faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Because so many higher education leaders are former faculty members, the culture surrounding administrators is comprised of rituals common to both academia and the corporate world. Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) identify six organizational cultures that are present in higher education. Two of these, the collegial culture and the managerial culture, are relevant to our discussion of strategic planning in a public research university. In the collegial culture, individuals identify with their own discipline or academic department and emphasize educational quality, discussion, and interaction within faculty/administrative committees. Institutions that focus on research, prioritize academic issues, and transfer decision making to departments and schools represent collegial culture (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). In the managerial culture, the focus shifts to organizational goals and objectives. Instead of discussion and rational planning, assessment and evaluation of operations takes precedence (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008). For those of us wishing to create change in the higher education environment, awareness of these competing priorities and customs is critical.

### **2.3.3 Resistance to “Resistance to Change”**

While the research we have reviewed thus far suggests that resistance to change is a negative force, not all research supports this view. Dent and Goldberg (1999) challenged the idea that individuals resist change and instead argued that individuals are merely responding to change. They suggested that resistance to change has become an umbrella term that covers “employees [who] are not wholeheartedly embracing a change that management wants to implement” (Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 26). Further, they argue that the works of Lewin (1947) and Coch and French (1948) have been misrepresented to lend support to the idea of resistance to change. They argued that Lewin’s research on resistance to change falls under systems theory and is not about individual resistance. Additionally, they suggested that the choice of title for the Coch and French article is unfortunate because it is not about overcoming resistance to change, but rather, the importance of employee participation. This argument, however, appears overstated. While the Coch and French article emphasized the importance of employee participation, it suggested that participation is a strategy for overcoming resistance to change implemented by management.

Dent and Goldberg (1999) and Ford, Ford, and D’Amelio (2008) highlighted that the research on resistance to change assumes that those in favor of change are always correct. Ford, et al. referred to this phenomenon as a “change agent-centric” (2008, p. 362) view of resistance. Further, they redefined resistance as an interaction between three elements: how individuals respond to change initiatives, how change agents interpret individual responses to change, and the interactions and relationship between the change agent and the employees. They argued that change agents can be just as resistant to change as change recipients.

Waddell and Sohal (1998) suggested that resistance is a function of multiple factors. They cautioned leaders from viewing resistance as an enemy to change, but, rather, to see it as means to developing additional alternatives and more innovation:

To this end, resistance plays a crucial role in influencing the organization toward greater stability. While pressure from external and internal environments continue to encourage change, resistance is a factor that can balance these demands against the need for constancy and stability. (Waddell & Sohal, 1998, p. 545)

Waddell and Sohal concluded that individuals resist the uncertainty that results from change, not change itself.

Piderit (2000) argued that the research on resistance to change fails to account for the positive aspects of resistance, as well as ignoring the cognitive, emotional, and intentional dimensions of an individual's response to change. Ambivalence occurs when an individual's response among one of the dimensions is in conflict with his/her response within another dimension. Ambivalence is prevalent among individuals responding to change (Piderit, 2000).

## **2.4 CONCLUSION**

The research on change management has a long history. While rooted in a manufacturing context, the last four decades have seen it become embedded in the office environment. As higher education adopts more of the characteristics and practices of the business world, the literature on change management can inform leaders how to engage their employees in planning effectively.

Change brings uncertainty and the need to learn new information and skills. Adults tend to shy away from learning new things, fearing that their peers and supervisors will think they are incompetent. Individuals may avoid change or respond by adopting behaviors and attitudes to lessen the effects of change. Individuals with certain personality characteristics are more likely to respond well when faced with change. Leaders can lessen resistance by involving employees in the change process, ensuring clear and continual communication, and welcoming differing viewpoints and opinions. Just going through the motions is not enough. Leaders must genuinely engage in dialogue.

Middle managers play a crucial role in implementing change. Middle managers must interpret the vision laid out by senior executives, determine how to implement the change effectively, and assist others in making sense of the ongoing change. While most research assumes that managers will encounter resistance when implementing change, our review of the literature has shown that resistance is a contested idea. What some term resistance may be more accurately characterized as a response or reaction to change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Managers who seek to stamp out all resistance to change may find themselves doomed to fail during implementation. Without an honest exchange of information, concerns, ideas, and alternatives, employees and managers cannot prepare for problems and unintended consequences.

What does all of this mean for engaging higher education staff in strategic planning? Higher education leaders must be aware of their limitations in creating and implementing change. While leaders can create a vision for change, middle managers and employees throughout the organization will interpret and implement that vision. By creating an environment in which higher education leaders, middle managers, and employees engage in dialogue and discuss a diversity of opinions, viewpoints, and alternatives, implementation is

more likely to be successful. While higher education leaders and middle managers may assume that they will face employee resistance, a review of the literature has shown that the concept of resistance may be overstated. Clearly, further research is needed to determine how higher education leaders can effectively engage staff in planning for change.

### **3.0 APPLIED INQUIRY**

#### **3.1 INQUIRY APPROACH**

##### **3.1.1 Qualitative Case Study**

A qualitative case study approach is appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, qualitative research is an approach that fits well in a situation where a researcher is describing a situation and attempting to make sense of the situation (McEwan & McEwan, 2003). Second, a qualitative case study provides the researcher with an opportunity to gather rich, thick descriptions of what is occurring within a particular setting (Merriam, 2009). Yin (2014) argued that a qualitative case study is a response to a “desire to understand complex social phenomena” (p. 4).

Yin (2014) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2014, p. 16). Yin (2014) further explained that a case study “relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2014, p. 17). This case study uses multiple sources of evidence collected from document analysis and interviews.

I will use a case study to explore the strategic planning process at Mid-Atlantic University (MAU). The case study is designed to gather rich information about how MAU communicated information about the strategic planning process to staff, how staff members responded to the planning process, and the perceptions middle managers have about the planning process and implementing strategic initiatives.

### **3.1.1.1 Case Study Limitations**

Limitations of case study research include concerns about generalizability, reliability, and validity (Merriam, 2009). Another concern is the role of bias in how the researcher evaluates and reports findings (Merriam, 2009). While these are very real concerns, the benefits of qualitative research outweigh these limitations:

The strength of qualitative approaches is that they account for and include difference – ideologically, epistemologically, methodologically – and more importantly, humanly. They do not attempt to eliminate what cannot be discounted. They do not attempt to simplify what cannot be simplified. Thus, it is precisely because case study includes paradoxes and acknowledges that there are no simple answers, that it can and should qualify as the gold standard. (Shields, 2007, p. 13 as cited in Merriam, 2009, pp. 52 – 53)

## 3.2 METHODS

### 3.2.1 Document Analysis

Document analysis refers to a systematic process by which print and electronic material is reviewed and evaluated (Bowen, 2009). This process of review and analysis involves the “subjective interpretation of the context of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Coffey (2013) argued that any analysis of documents must include a consideration of the *intertextuality* of documents, or how documents relate to one another.

There is a wide array of documents ripe for analysis. Bowen (2009) identified items such as newspaper articles, institutional reports, and memoranda. Coffey (2013) included visual, digital, and electronic items as well. Coffey (2013) suggested that documents can be analyzed beyond the text itself. In other words, “if we understand documents as accomplishments, as products with purpose, then it naturally follows that analysis should seek to locate documents within their social as well as textual context” (p. 370). Document analysis should consider intended and perceived messages, audiences, and usages (Coffey, 2013). An understanding and analysis of the social setting is particularly appropriate given the aims of this research study.

Document analysis has potential flaws. Bowen (2009) summarized these limitations as relying on documents that have insufficient detail, having difficulty obtaining documents, and encountering an incomplete set of documents due to bias in how an organization compiles and retains its records.

### 3.2.2 Interviews

Interviews enable the researcher to “elicit information on people’s perceptions, attitudes, and meanings” (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2011, p. 126). The researcher may use interviews as a way of obtaining “detailed answers which are embedded in contextual information ... helping us to understand more about the factors and processes that influence actions and attitudes” (Menter et al., 2011, p. 128). Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with a “sketch map of the territory to be explored, but the freedom to explore it as he or she will” (Menter et al., 2011, p. 131).

Interview participants selected through purposeful sampling enable a researcher to obtain rich, deep data that is relevant to the research questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, citing Kuzel, 1999; Merriam, 2009, citing Patton, 2002). Polkinghorne (2005) explained that individuals are selected for interviews “because they can provide substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation” (p. 139). The pool of potential interview participants was restricted to one school at MAU in order to ensure that participants shared key similarities (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, citing McCracken, 1988; Morse, 1995).

When deciding on a number of individuals to interview, the term saturation is often used. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) defined saturation “as the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook” (p. 65). Morse (1995) acknowledged “there are no published guidelines or tests of adequacy for estimating the sample size required to reach saturation” (p. 147). After conducting sixty interviews, Guest et al. (2006) found that 94 percent of high-frequency codes were identified within the first six interviews.

They concluded that “very little appears to have been missed in the early stages of analysis” (p. 73).

As with any method, the use of interviews has limitations. Polkinghorne (2005) cautioned that:

evidence about human experience has inherent limitations compared with data about human behavior. Because experience is not directly observable, data about it depend on the participants’ ability to reflectively discern aspects of their own experience and to effectively communicate what they discern through the symbols of language. (p. 138)

As a result, the researcher can misunderstand or misinterpret individuals’ responses during the interview process (McEwan & McEwan, 2003). To limit this potential problem, the interview guide used for this study enables the researcher to ask follow-up questions to probe for additional information or clarification.

### **3.3 ETHICAL SAFEGUARDS**

This research study was submitted to the University of Pittsburgh’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review in late August 2016 and was approved in early October. A modification was sought and granted in December 2016. Confidentiality will be prioritized throughout this research study. All researcher memos, interview transcripts, audio recordings, and participant data will be stored in a locked cabinet and/or on Pitt Box, a secure, password-protected cloud storage drive, with only the researcher allowed access. After agreeing to be interviewed, participants will be assigned both a pseudonym and an ID number for cross reference throughout the study. These pseudonyms and ID numbers will be used in place of participants’ actual names

and identifying information and only the researcher will have access to the identification key, which will be stored in a separate location.

### 3.4 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This section describes the types of data collected. Within the description of each type of data, I describe how the data was collected and analyzed. Table 6 details how the research study’s inquiry questions, evidence, and data collection methods are aligned.

Table 6 *Inquiry question matrix*

<b>Inquiry Questions</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Data Collection Method</b>
How and to what extent have institutional leaders communicated the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to staff?	Evidence will consist of roles and responsibilities individuals have during the strategic planning process; the expectations leaders have of staff during the strategic planning process; expectations university leaders have regarding staff contributions; and communications that discuss implementation, resources, and staffing	Document Analysis
How and to what extent have staff responded to the strategic plan and planning process?	Evidence will consist of the interests, attitudes, and perceptions of staff members during the strategic planning process	Document Analysis and Interviews
What are the perceptions of middle managers involved in implementing strategic initiatives?	Evidence will consist of the attitudes, interests, and perceptions of middle managers who are implementing strategic initiatives	Interviews

After collecting the data, I began the process of data analysis. Merriam (2009) equated data analysis to making sense of the data collected, which “involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (pp. 175–176). Making meaning begins with identifying units of data that relate to the inquiry questions. Merriam (2009) defined a unit of data as a “meaningful (or potentially meaningful) segment of data ... [It] can be as small as a word a participant uses to describe a feeling or phenomenon, or as large as several pages of field notes describing a particular incident” (pp. 176–177).

### **3.4.1 Documents**

The process of data collection began with accumulating text items related to the MAU strategic planning process. These include items officially promulgated by the university, including:

- Text and documents from the university’s strategic planning website
- Memos from leaders to members of the university community that communicate information about the strategic plan and planning process

I collected items that were not official university communications, but provided additional information and context about the strategic plan and the planning process. These included:

- News articles that discuss the strategic planning process and include quotes from university leaders
- News articles that discuss the strategic planning process and include quotes from staff or letters to the editor written by staff

- Communications (e.g. emails, memos, online postings) from the Association of University Staff (AUS). The Association of University Staff (AUS) is identified in the staff handbook as an official organization for shared governance composed of elected representatives from MAU staff not covered by a collective bargaining agreement.

MAU's strategic plan, supporting documents, and official memos were publicly available on MAU's strategic planning website. I accessed online and newspaper articles about the strategic planning process published by MAU's faculty and staff newspaper or through MAU's news office. Archived issues were available on the MAU website. I requested copies of the communications (e.g. memos, emails) the AUS sent to its members during the strategic planning process.

#### **3.4.1.1 Document analysis**

I approached the documents collected using a document analysis protocol, which is available in Appendix B. This protocol ensured that key contextual information was recorded and preliminary topics and codes were identified. Merriam (2009) and Saldaña (2015) suggested data collection and analysis are not two distinct processes, but, rather, should occur concurrently and inform each other.

To begin, I immersed myself in the data. In practice, this meant reading and rereading the documents collected and capturing initial impressions through notes in the margins. These "reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and things to pursue" (Merriam, 2009, p. 170) will be summarized in researcher memos. By using Dedoose and a research journal, I was able to record my notes on emerging patterns and themes. I compared these emerging patterns and

themes against collected documents, interview transcripts, and researcher memos (Mertens, 2015).

Coding led to further discovery of patterns and themes. Saldaña (2015) defined a code in qualitative research as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). The coding process is iterative, with the researcher coding and recoding in order to distill the data collected into themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2015).

This study uses a directed approach to document analysis. A directed approach is when researchers use existing theory to identify initial coding categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, citing Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999) and determine operational definitions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). During the initial stage, I coded words, lines, and segments using Dedoose. Initial categories used during analysis included staff involvement, staff responses, staff responsibilities, implementation, and communication. These initial codes were tested against the data with the expectation that more nuanced and specific codes would emerge and lead to the discovery of patterns and themes.

### **3.4.2 Individual Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with middle managers from one of MAU’s professional schools. From a pool of 18 potential interview participants, eight individuals were recruited by email to participate in this research study. Their roles and backgrounds are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7 *Individuals participating in interviews*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Years Employed at MAU</b>	<b>Years of Experience in Higher Education</b>	<b>Strategic Planning Experience outside of MAU</b>
Ginny	28	28	No
Frank	4	4	Yes
Jane	14	14	Yes
Gene	4	4	No
Julie	2	2	Yes
Susan	8	8	No
Rose	4	5	Yes
Henry	9	32	Yes

I conducted one-on-one, 45-minute interviews with each participant that followed the interview guide available in Appendix A. Interviews elicited information on:

- Reactions to the strategic plan and initial stages of the planning process
- Perceptions of how the planning process may affect them
- Perceptions of the communication process within their school
- School-based initiatives resulting from the strategic planning process and their role in these initiatives
- Reactions of the staff they supervise to the planning process
- How they have communicated information about the planning process to the staff they supervise
- What they have learned about change by participating in this process

Interview documentation included interview audio-recordings and researcher notes. Following the interviews, I transcribed the audio-recordings. Transcripts were compared to audio-recordings and researcher notes to ensure the accuracy of the data. Following transcription, data was moved to Dedoose, a secure, cloud-based application used to analyze qualitative data.

### **3.4.2.1 Analysis of interview data**

I began analysis of the interview data by reading and rereading the interview transcripts and capturing initial impressions. Similar to the process of document analysis, I used researcher memos to capture these reflections, questions, and items to pursue from the transcripts (Mertens, 2015). By using Dedoose and a research journal, I was able to record my notes on emerging patterns and themes. I compared these patterns and themes against collected documents, interview transcripts, and researcher memos (Mertens, 2015).

During the initial coding stage, I coded words, lines, and segments using Dedoose. Initial categories used during analysis included staff involvement, staff responses, staff responsibilities, implementation, and communication. These initial codes were tested against the data with the expectation that more nuanced and specific codes would emerge. As these more specific codes emerged, the sorted and codified data was reread, retested, and recoded. These new codes led to the discovery of patterns and themes.

I used researcher memos to record how initial and new codes were identified and compared to the collected data. These memos also captured how specific stories or quotes from the interviews were selected to capture the essence of the middle manager's experience during the strategic planning process at MAU.

### **3.4.3 Limitations**

The quality of qualitative research includes four main criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Mertens, 2015). To address the limitation of transferability, the study was designed to gather thick descriptions of the strategic planning process at one

university and, in particular, the perspectives of middle managers at one school within this institution.

Credibility was addressed by triangulating the data of documents and interviews to seek “consistency of evidence across sources of data” (Mertens, 2015, p. 295). In addition, “prolonged and persistent engagement” (Mertens, 2015, p. 292) was achieved through collecting documents from a strategic planning process that lasted over a year and conducting interviews that were sufficient in number and content to avoid “reaching conclusions that are erroneous[ly] based on limited exposure to the phenomenon” (Mertens, 2015, p. 293).

Mertens (2015) used the metaphor of an audit trail to describe how qualitative researchers should document their data collection and analysis processes. Using the idea of an audit trail helps to visualize how a qualitative researcher can address concerns about dependability and confirmability. To address concerns about dependability, researcher memos document how the study evolves and describe the context for any modifications (Mertens, 2015). Examples of items captured in these memos include changes to any interview questions or the inability to collect specific documents. This emphasis on transparency and documentation helps to maintain the dependability of the study.

Mertens (2015) defines confirmability as when “the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher’s imagination” (p. 296). The use of a document analysis protocol and interview guide assists in standardizing data collection procedures. In addition, memoing, or the process of “reading and thinking and making notes about your thoughts” (Mertens, 2015, p. 462), will be used to address concerns about confirmability. These memos provide a path by which others can understand how I collected and analyzed the data.

## **4.0 FINDINGS**

The primary aim of this study was to describe how institutional leaders at Mid-Atlantic University (MAU) communicated the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to staff, how staff responded to the strategic plan and planning process, and the perceptions of middle managers involved in implementing strategic initiatives. To provide a sense of the overall picture, this chapter begins with a description of the most frequently coded documents and interview responses. The last section includes a discussion on the interpretation of the staff members' views and experiences during the strategic planning process.

### **4.1 DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY**

To provide the reader with an overall sense of the findings, I include a section on frequently coded documents and interview responses by research question. Following this summary, I turn to the interpretative findings.

**4.1.1 How and to what extent have institutional leaders communicated the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to staff?**

University leaders used open forums and town halls, memos, a strategic planning website, by-invitation-only meetings with particular groups (e.g. planning and budgeting committees), and interviews with university publications to communicate the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to staff. In the documents collected about the strategic planning process, institutional leaders repeatedly stressed that participation in the planning process was sizable and spread across the entire university community.

Of the 25 documents collected, 19 (76%) specifically mentioned staff or referred to the broader university community and 12 (48%) mentioned implementation. These documents identified ways that staff could learn about the planning process, listed public sessions where staff could provide feedback, and documented that MAU leaders consulted the MAU Association of University Staff (AUS) leadership during the early stages of the planning process. Table 8 outlines selected documents, items analyzed, and a brief summary of findings.

Table 8 *Documents collected and findings*

<b>Document</b>	<b>Does the document reference staff? How?</b>	<b>Does the document reference implementation? How?</b>	<b>Findings</b>
MAU Plan	Yes, references to “our people” and “a culture in which faculty, staff, students, and alumni all strive for excellence”	Yes, in terms of next steps in the planning process.	Mentions a communication plan and information being presented to units to gain buy-in.

Table 8 (Continued)

<b>Document</b>	<b>Does the document reference staff? How?</b>	<b>Does the document reference implementation? How?</b>	<b>Findings</b>
MAU planning website and posted documents: Summary of Environmental Scans	Yes, in that personnel development was mentioned	No	Mentions of bureaucracy, silos, and a need to invest in personnel development
MAU planning website and posted documents: President's statement on planning	Yes, by total number and through references to the "university community"	No	Staff received only a cursory mention.
MAU planning website and posted documents: Working groups	Yes, in that some staff are listed as working group members	No	Of the five working groups, staff comprise just over 21 percent of the members and staff participation is heavily weighted in three of the five groups.
MAU planning website and posted documents: Initiatives for advancing the strategic plan	Yes, in terms of specific roles that staff play, including advisors, technology experts, etc.	Vaguely, in terms of what will be accomplished "this year"	Unclear who is responsible for these initiatives and whether they are drawn from school-level plans or meant to inform school-level plans
Emails exchanges among AUS leadership about the planning process	Yes, mentions staff engagement at the implementation stage	Yes, where staff engagement will occur	University leaders were in contact with AUS leadership before the plan was publicly announced. Shared governance is highlighted as key to future success.

Table 8 (Continued)

<b>Document</b>	<b>Does the document reference staff? How?</b>	<b>Does the document reference implementation? How?</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Emails from AUS to MAU staff inviting them to attend open forums	Yes, mentions an opportunity for staff to provide feedback	No	Staff were encouraged to attend to “provide input” and “learn more”
MAU Monthly article: Adventure ahead: Welcome back to the plan	Yes, mentions staff participating in environmental scans	Yes, discusses unit plan alignment with the university plan and working groups	University leaders acknowledge people were “excited to be heard” and promise additional opportunities for participation
MAU Monthly article: MAU strategic plan advances with public forums	Yes, mentions an engagement session with the leadership of AUS	No	AUS leadership was consulted early in the strategic planning process
MAU Times article: Goals outlined in planning process	Not specifically, but refers to the MAU family and the MAU community	Yes, discusses the working groups and mapping action at the school level	Implementation timeline is vague and appears to be continually shifting
MAU Times article: Administrators: Time for action on strategic plan	Yes, mentions that staff work supports the excellence of the university	Yes, mentions next steps in the planning process, working groups, and alignment with school-level plans	Disconnect between the view of administrators and the lived experience of employees
MAU Times article: Faculty learn more about strategic plan initiatives	Yes, mentions staff development	Yes, mentions faculty as “key players in implementation” and that the “impetus for implementation” is on the deans	Faculty mention university culture as a barrier to change. Inconsistency of shared governance across campus units is identified as a concern

Table 8 (Continued)

<b>Document</b>	<b>Does the document reference staff? How?</b>	<b>Does the document reference implementation? How?</b>	<b>Findings</b>
MAU Times article: Staff give input on strategic plan	Yes, the session was for staff and hosted by AUS	Yes, staff “asked for more opportunities to provide input before new processes are implemented”	Only two of five strategic goals were discussed
MAU Times article: Facilities master plan committee is formed	Yes, Faculty Senate president mentions that faculty, staff, and students had opportunities to participate during the planning process	No	The facilities master plan committee increased student representation, but appears to have no school-based or Student Affairs staff, just administrators
MAU Times article: Provost reports on strategic plan implementation	Yes, mentions “a committed staff” and responsibilities the university has to staff in terms of promotion and development	Yes, title references implementation and the provost discussed “impact” of new measurements, updated policies, and streamlined operations	Focus is on staff development and seems to suggest their contributions are supportive and less about having impact on the goals themselves

There were at least three steps in the planning process communicated to staff by university leaders: gathering information, developing the strategic plan, and implementing the plan. When university leaders gathered information, they did so by conducting environmental scans with various constituent groups. One university publication described the strategic plan as, “This isn’t a typical ... *yawn* ...strategic plan; it’s ultimately a dynamic course of action involving the entire MAU community.” This focus on involving the entire community was echoed throughout university leaders’ comments on the strategic plan and planning process. One university leader stated, “There will be broad room for participation.” Constituent groups who

provided responses during this initial stage included faculty, staff, students, alumni, and members of the Board of Trustees.

It is unclear from the university's publicly available documents whether the plan was developed only by administrators who work in the Offices of the University President and Provost, or whether deans and other high-ranking administrators were involved. The plan was released in the summer, a time when many in the university community are not physically on campus.

While the first two steps in the planning process were relatively distinct, the implementation stage was more difficult to define. Almost immediately from the time the plan was announced, university leaders signaled that it was time for implementation. One of the first steps in the implementation stage was the creation of five working groups, which were primarily comprised of high-ranking university administrators (e.g. dean-level and above). After announcing the creation of the working groups, one university leader stated, "You'll be seeing a lot of them in the coming weeks." Outside of two "engagement sessions," there appeared to be little public interaction with the members of the working groups. During this stage, university leaders continued to stress that they welcomed feedback. One university leader stated, "We expect this to be a dynamic process, not something carved into stone."

The university community was encouraged to attend open sessions and provide suggestions and feedback through the strategic planning website. One university leader characterized the response from the university community in this way, "People were very excited to be heard, and we want to make sure we continue to build on that communication." There appears to be no public record of the feedback the university received through its planning website after the initial series of environmental scans. University leaders did not publicize any

instances of the university changing course or delaying action based on feedback it received from the university community. This omission could be due to the university choosing to keep private internal deliberations, a result of delays, or because of shifting priorities.

In the documents collected about the strategic plan and planning process, university leaders used several repeated phrases to refer to staff. Often, staff were grouped with other members of the university community and referred to as “our people” or the “MAU Family.” One university leader spoke about “creating an ecosystem in which the faculty, the students, the staff can all attain excellence.” In these documents, university leaders did not typically discuss specific staff roles and responsibilities. Rather, there were broad references to the contributions staff make. For example, one university leader explained the importance of having an environment in which staff can “excel in the work that they do to support the excellence of the University.”

#### **4.1.2 How and to what extent have staff responded to the strategic plan and planning process?**

The university held one engagement session, sponsored by AUS, specifically for staff. Nearly 100 staff members attended. Of note, only two of the five strategic goals were discussed at the staff engagement session. This contrasted with the engagement session for faculty where all five goals were discussed. Of the staff members interviewed, only two attended one of the open town halls or engagement sessions. Of the six who did not attend an open session, three did not specify a reason, one person said she was too busy, one said she had a conflict, and one said no one told him to go.

Staff members were asked to recall what they remembered about the beginning of the university's strategic planning process. All eight staff members stated that they were not involved at the university-level planning process. One of the staff members interviewed, Gene, could not recall anything about the beginning of the university's strategic planning process, and asked, "Was I here at the time?" (He was.) Two of the staff members, Ginny and Jane, specifically recalled the open forums held by university leaders. Ginny stated, "What I remember about the time is that staff were asked to participate in various forums, open events. I definitely thought the university made the effort to be inclusive." Jane recalled her reaction to attending one of the early town halls and explained, "I didn't feel like there was a lot of excitement about the meetings. There wasn't any hostility. It was just kind of a meeting of a presentation and you just heard about it and then you left."

Two staff members, Henry and Rose, remembered reading *The MAU Plan* after it was released. Rose recalled thinking about how the university goals tied to her work. She remembered creating "a list of things that I shared with the associate dean and assistant dean saying I took a look at this and these are some questions I have and this is how I think this makes sense [for my programs]." Ginny remembered the early stages of the strategic planning process, but acknowledged that she focused on the school plan "because that is going to have the most impact on my life and my job."

Staff members were asked how information was communicated to them about school-level planning and initiatives. Six staff members (75%) could recall school-level communication. Susan, Gene, and Ginny recalled attending staff meetings where the school plan was discussed. Ginny explained, "The associate dean meets with her directors and basically we spent several meetings talking about the school's strategic plan and what that looks like." Rose

recalled the dean sending out an email that outlined how the school goals mapped to the university goals. Henry recalled informal communication about school-level planning, and hearing the dean speak to external groups about school priorities. Julie recalled being very involved in rewriting the school plan with the dean.

Six of eight staff (75%) expressed dissatisfaction with the strategic planning process. Two staff mentioned difficulty in understanding the big picture. Frank stated, "It's not really transparently clear from my angle to see how our school goals, how they overlay into the university as a whole's goals." Three staff members (37.5%) expressed that involving staff and gathering feedback was not a priority. Henry elaborated, "When the dean announced his strategic plan, it wasn't necessarily given in a way that he was allowing people to give feedback. It was this is the direction ... and now we're just soldiers carrying on." Two staff (25%) mentioned doubts they had about the overall process. Jane stated, "I don't think the university's strategic plan ultimately changed very much from what it was five or ten years ago. I think it's the same plan with different words and it's packaged a little differently." Gene expressed, "I feel like the strategic plan, the annual plan is something we do on paper to make others at the university happy."

Staff were asked how university leaders should involve staff in organizational change. Their responses were multifaceted. Staff mentioned the importance of communication (n=3), listening to staff (n=2), bringing staff together who do similar work (n=2), and respect (n=1). Julie elaborated on the importance of communication, "I think having a better understanding of the reason for some of the goals. I think at a very high level, there's a lot of dialogue around the goals and, without that understanding or dialogue, I think sometimes it's confusing as to what the university is really trying to accomplish, what we're trying to measure." Three individuals

(37.5%) mentioned the importance of leaders understanding change management. Two individuals (25%) focused on the personal characteristics leaders possess. One individual, Jane, questioned whether university leaders have an interest in involving staff, “The first thing I would advise the university leadership is that they really, really have to determine how much staff input matters and address that. If it doesn’t matter ... going through the process and knowing that your input doesn’t matter is worse than not going through the process at all.”

#### **4.1.3 What are the perceptions of middle managers involved in implementing strategic initiatives?**

Without explicitly being asked about their perceptions of implementing strategic initiatives, staff were asked how they talk about school-level initiatives with the staff they supervise. They discussed the meetings they have with their staff and the ways they involve them in implementation.

Six of the eight staff members (75%) mentioned regular meetings they have with the staff they supervise. Three of the eight staff members (37.5%) expressed that while they inform their staff about the school’s priorities and initiatives, it does not have an impact on the day-to-day work that their staff does. Henry explained, “They’re involved in it, but it’s mostly about helping advance the cause and for no other reason. Unfortunately, a lot of it is just basically the grunt work that needs to be done.” Two of the eight staff members (25%) mentioned how their staff may feel during times of change. Ginny explained, “I’m really sensitive to the fact that different people deal with ambiguity differently. Some people are kind of okay with it ... and others really worry and become very anxious.” Jane stated that she tried to address concerns in weekly meetings and “as much as we can, we are transparent” about decisions that are made that

will affect the staff. Two of the eight staff members (25%) discussed how they involve their staff and get them to buy in to the changes that are occurring. Susan explained that when she was given the school's strategic plan, "I pulled the team in and said, 'Okay, here are three major plans we need to come up with. What are your thoughts?' Because I've learned from working with the group, if they don't have input, they don't buy in to it."

Staff were asked how their experience with the strategic planning process has made them think differently about their role in change. Three staff members (37.5%) spoke positively about how they view their role in change. Ginny explained her experience has "made me feel like I never want to be the person who won't try something new." Rose stated her involvement in change was the "part of my job that I find very interesting and engaging." Others were less enthusiastic. Julie felt she could have an impact at the school-level, but not at the university-level. Susan expressed her frustration with the slow pace of change within the university and having to find ways "to work within the confines of the system." Jane flatly said, "I have very little control over the change that happens here at the university." Frank stated, "People are resistant to change. I don't want change." The wide variety of examples given indicates that there is no common perception of middle managers involved in implementing strategic initiatives.

## **4.2 INTERPRETATIVE FINDINGS**

The following sections include the interpretative findings of the study using the coded excerpts discussed previously. The interpretations for this section occur in three main categories the

research questions express: communication of the strategic planning process, staff responses, and middle manager perceptions of implementation.

#### **4.2.1 Communication of the strategic planning process: “Sometimes there’s confusion as to what the university is really trying to accomplish”**

Change is difficult. Within an organization, leaders, middle managers, and front-line employees all play a role during times of organizational change. Zeffane (1996) noted successful strategic change preserves “the role of leader in providing direction ... and the proactive involvement of participants being responsible for carrying out planned change” (p. 42). The notion of providing direction was evident throughout the documents collected about the university’s strategic planning process. One university leader explained that the strategic plan “is designed to articulate a sense of direction – a North Star that we believe is important for this University’s future and for its continued growth and improvement.” A shared vision (Hutt et al., 1995) and a shared sense of purpose (Rapert et al., 2002) are important aspects of strategic change. University leaders attempted to evoke a shared vision and sense of purpose through the creation of strategic framework and the identification of signature initiatives. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a) suggested that leaders build communication channels with a wide variety of middle managers. University leaders pointed out that they “reached across multiple layers and units of the university” during the planning process. For all of these efforts, the consensus among the staff was that there was room for improvement. They identified issues with communication, internal culture, and a general understanding of the plan and its goals.

Bartunek et al. (2006) suggested that organizations that do a better job educating their employees on planned change initiatives will see greater acceptance. While no staff member

asked for additional education, some questioned whether university leadership shared enough information with individuals in positions like theirs. Julie explained, “It’s harder to understand how it all fits together. I’m sure if it’s hard for me to understand how it fits together, I would think the average staff person would have difficulty understanding that.”

The influence of culture within an organization is strong and can impede change efforts (Heifetz et al., 2009; Schein, 2002). University leaders acknowledged institutional barriers to change during the environmental scans. A few of the staff members identified organizational culture as a barrier to strategic change. Frank stated, “Culture can eat your best strategy for lunch. No matter how strategic the president and his team may have been in coming up with the plan, if the culture is not primed for it, it’s not going to work.” A common concern that appeared was that the university is decentralized and it is difficult to know what is going on across units. University leaders acknowledged there is a lack of awareness of what is happening within the university. One university leader stated, “One of the things we’ve been struck by is how many initiatives currently exist in the University that don’t know about each other.” Julie asked what university leaders were doing to encourage collaboration and the exchange of information, “Does someone sit and review every strategic plan and question any of the goals? Or is anyone looking to see if goals overlap between schools and collaborative efforts could result as a result of the two schools being aware that they have conflicting goals or similar goals?”

When discussing the university’s strategic planning process, staff with strategic planning experience outside of the university setting were more critical of the process. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a) explained that strategic consensus occurred when there was “agreement among top, middle-, and operating-level managers on the fundamental priorities of the organization” (p. 28). While none of the staff interviewed used the term strategic consensus,

they did express concerns about how well university goals and priorities filtered throughout the organization. Julie stated, “I came from a very mature strategic planning environment. We used balanced scorecards, and clear down to the assistants in the organization, they understood what the goals were and how they could personally affect those goals.” Exploring how and why communication breakdowns occur during organizational change is an avenue for further investigation.

#### **4.2.2 Staff responses: “When I ask questions, you would think I’m questioning the process”**

Resistance to change is a core strand of the change management literature. Managers can find advice on how to respond to resistance to change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979/2008), explanations for why individuals resist learning new things (Argyris, 1991; Kegan & Lahey, 2010; Schein, 2002), and explanations of why individuals react in certain ways (Bovey & Hede, 2001; Oreg, 2003; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Staff interviewed as part of this study did not appear to be highly resistant to changes that were occurring. One individual specifically mentioned resistance to change and referred to Kotter during his interview. Dent and Goldberg (1999) suggested that individuals do not resist change, but rather are responding to change. While resistance to change evokes a negative reaction, responding to change is a more neutral way to describe how individuals react to change. In general, staff responses fell into three main categories:

1. Searching for meaning
2. Excitement
3. Becoming disillusioned or resigned to the situation

Middle managers play a key role in translating the goals and objectives from leadership to their employees (Balogun, 2003, 2006; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a). In organizations, sensemaking is the process of understanding how things came to be and what they mean (Weick et al., 2012). While no staff member used the term sensemaking, staff members expressed wanting to understand how their work fit into the bigger picture. Frank discussed asking questions to find his “GPS moment” so he could understand what he needs to do and how it fits in relation to everything else.

The staff who expressed excitement about ongoing change appeared to be those who participated and felt they had an impact on the planning process. Simoes and Esposito (2014) highlighted the importance of “genuine participation ... based on respect” (p. 328) during times of organizational change. The responses of staff in this study reflected the importance of providing staff with opportunities to participate and be engaged in the process. Rose explained, “When I saw the university plan and saw how the dean had tied our school goals to it, that was actually very affirming. I thought I can relate to this. I can connect to this. I have a better idea of where I can spend my time that makes a difference to the university and the school.”

Leaders who turn to their employees for information, discussion of competing views, and acknowledge that they do not have all the answers, are more likely to be successful during times of organizational change (Heifetz et al., 2009; Senge, 1990). The staff who expressed disillusionment or resignation about the planning process were those who believed that their expertise and skills were not valued. Jane articulated questions and suggestions she had for university leaders based on her experience during the planning process, “Does staff input matter? If it does, how? At what level? And communicate that clearly to the staff. If it only matters up to a certain level, then be honest.” Morrison and Milliken (2000) explained the dangers of

“organizational silence” during times of change and identified that leaders who feared negative feedback, rejected dissent, and believed they know best are contributing factors to organizations suffering from organizational silence. None of the staff interviewed indicated they were afraid to give their opinion because their supervisors reacted poorly to negative feedback or dissent. However, some alluded to situations where goals were given to them without discussion, which suggests that leaders believed they already had the answers. Susan elaborated, “If I saw the goals as completely unreasonable, I would have challenged them.” Based on the findings of this study and the works of Heifetz et al. (2009), Senge (1990), and Morrison and Milliken (2000), the consequences of not involving higher education staff in planning and implementing organizational change may be an avenue for further exploration.

#### **4.2.3 Middle manager perceptions of implementation: “The work is making the plan ... not actually making sure the plan is executed”**

Middle managers are key in implementing change in hierarchical institutions (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992b). When discussing implementation, the staff members interviewed pointed to their ability to have an impact on their school, how they work with the staff they supervise, and questioned whether implementation goes beyond what is written on paper.

During times of implementation, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992b) saw middle managers exerting influence on senior leaders and the staff they supervise. Without specifically referring to synthesizing information, two staff members articulated ways that they provide information to their supervisors about the work occurring in their units and how it may affect the strategic plan. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992b) suggested this type of information assists leaders in making strategic decisions. Without mentioning facilitating adaptability, one staff member discussed

ways that she involves her team in developing projects and creating new initiatives to meet the school's goals. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992b) stated that these types of managers will have a positive impact on the organization's long-term success. None of the staff interviewed articulated ways that they champion alternatives, which occurs when middle managers continually advocate for different courses of action (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992b). Waddell and Sohal (1998) argued that suggesting alternative methods and outcomes leads to greater innovation during times of change.

Balogun (2003) saw middle managers as change intermediaries who help others in the organization understand and cope with change. Although no one interviewed for this study used the term sensemaking, staff members expressed ways in which they discuss ongoing changes with the individuals they supervise. Staff members outlined ways their staff are able to participate in change initiatives, which they hope lead to feelings of empowerment and ownership. Others provided examples of how they provide information and build awareness about changes that could have a negative effect on their staff.

Weick et al. (2012) found that managers and employees interpret situations in very different ways. In keeping with this observation, a significant number of the staff questioned whether the strategic planning process was something other than just an exercise to get through or "something we do on paper to make others at the university happy." Others expressed frustration because "There isn't that interaction or any understanding [of what happens next] beyond the submission of the plan." These responses suggest that university leaders have not been successful in monitoring how employees are responding during times of change and need to reexamine the education and support provided (Bartunek et al., 2006).

## **5.0 DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

Universities are under increasing pressure to change. Higher education staff are at the forefront of this changing environment, but often feel disconnected from the strategic change driven by university leaders. The main contributions of this study include a description of the communication during a strategic planning process, staff responses during organizational change, and their perceptions of implementation. This chapter discusses the findings and limitations, implications for future research, and implications for practice.

### **5.1 DISCUSSION**

Change in higher education necessitates the involvement and actions of many, yet university staff often feel disconnected from institutional planned change initiatives. By studying the strategic planning process at one institution, my goal was to describe the role of higher education staff during organizational change in colleges and universities. More specifically, the focus was on communication during the strategic planning process, staff responses to the planning process, and the perceptions of middle managers during implementation. Documents were collected, eight people agreed to be interviewed, and three themes emerged.

The first theme that emerged was that communication of the strategic plan and planning process did not permeate the organization. Employees have assumptions about how change will

unfold and evaluate how leaders communicate during the change process (Bartunek et al., 1992). Individuals questioned what the university was hoping to accomplish, as well as what happens after school strategic plans are submitted. Bartunek et al. (2006) encouraged those leading change efforts to be attentive to the perceived personal impact on those within the organization. Nonetheless, university leaders chose to take a one-size-fits-all approach to communicating the strategic plan and the planning process. Large-scale open forums may be effective in reaching many people at once. Their sheer size, however, makes it impossible to communicate more specific or nuanced information to distinct groups of individuals who will be affected in varying ways.

How staff responded to the strategic plan comprised the second theme. Leaders cannot control how individuals make sense of change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). The staff interviewed for this study responded to the strategic planning process in three main ways: searching for understanding, getting excited, and becoming disillusioned or resigned to the changes that were occurring. While those who ascribe to a “change agent-centric” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362) view of resistance would deem the staff who were searching for understanding or resigned to the situation as resistant to change, active resistance was not something that emerged from the interviews. In keeping with Bartunek et al.’s (2006) findings, staff wondered how the changes would affect them. Further, some staff members questioned what university leaders were really hoping to achieve and whether they had any real interest in staff input at all. This disconnection is in keeping with one category of meaning that change recipients are likely to experience: “perceptions of inconsistencies or contradictions with the aims of the change agents” (Bartunek et al., 2006, p. 201).

The third theme that emerged was a disconnection between the planning process and implementation. The emphasis was on getting data to put into next year's planning document, not the change initiatives themselves. This emphasis corresponds to Weick's (2012c) observation that individuals attach importance to and find meaning in events and activities that organizations highlight. In this case, staff members perceived more emphasis being placed on the planning document than on any underlying or overarching change initiatives. From another perspective, it is possible that by focusing on the planning document, staff were focusing on the part of the planning process over which they had more control and about which they had more knowledge. Schein (2002) found that individuals may avoid situations in which others will force them to learn something new. Argyris (1991) and Kegan and Lahey (2001) suggested that individuals were reluctant to learn something new because it contradicted the image of a competent professional. Staff members may have chosen to sidestep implementation of new initiatives if it would have resulted in learning something new.

## **5.2 LIMITATIONS**

Before discussing the larger implications of this study's findings, we must review its limitations. The data collection and analysis plan reduced the number of potential limitations, but some limitations continue to exist. The primary limitation is generalizability of the study's findings. This study was conducted at one research site with a small sample size (8 participants) of individuals and documents that were publicly available. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the interview participants could provide insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Polkinghorne, 2005). However, interviews captured only the perspective of staff serving in

middle manager roles. Further research is needed to capture the perspectives of university leaders and front-line staff. This university has its own culture, processes, and priorities, which makes it difficult to generalize to other higher education institutions.

A second limitation regards the two data collection methods used, document analysis and interviews. The limitations of document analysis include documents that have insufficient detail, difficulty gathering documents, and obtaining incomplete documents based on what the organization has chosen to make public (Bowen, 2009). This study used official university documents that were publicly available. Not having access to internal, confidential documents limited the ability to have a broader understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The limitations of interviews include the researcher misunderstanding or misinterpreting individuals' responses during the interview process (McEwan & McEwan, 2003) and how well the interview participants communicate their experiences to the researcher (Polkinghorne, 2005). The use of semi-structured interviews minimized the potential for misunderstanding. Conducting a series of follow-up interviews over time would further minimize the potential for misunderstanding.

A final limitation concerns the timing of the study and the amount of data gathered. The strategic planning process began a year and a half before this study was launched. Interview participants may have had difficulty recalling events and actions that occurred in the past. Additionally, because the implementation of the strategic plan was in process at the time of the interviews, participants may not have been able to discuss fully this aspect of their work. The validity of this study may be increased by gathering additional data and increasing the length of time over which the study was conducted. Ways to gather additional data include: conducting multiple interviews with the participants over a longer period of time, conducting interviews or focus groups with university leaders and front-line staff, requesting and including internal

documents that are not publicly available, and expanding the number of research sites to multiple units at this institution.

## **5.3 IMPLICATIONS**

This section details the implications of the study's findings for both research and practice.

### **5.3.1 Implications for Research**

Change management literature (Beer et al., 1990; Heifetz et al., 2009; Lines, 2004; Senge, 1990; Zeffane, 1996) suggests organizations are likely to experience implementation challenges when staff are not involved throughout the planning process. Highly structured organizations that institute planning from a top down approach must also consider how to communicate their goals and plans to a multi-layered organization (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Simoes & Esposito, 2014). Research shows that middle managers play a key role in translating the goals and objectives from leadership to their employees (Balogun, 2003, 2006; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992b). This research study sought to describe in detail the role of higher education staff in organizational change in colleges and universities.

The first implication for research concerns expanding the data gathered. Individuals involved in change, whether leaders, managers, or front-line staff, perceive the events occurring around them in very different ways (Weick et al., 2012). This study focused on the experiences and perspectives of middle managers in higher education. Further research is needed to understand the perspectives of university leaders and front-line staff during periods of change.

The second implication for research concerns the timing of the study. Gathering data over a longer period – ideally from the pre-strategic planning phases until implementation is complete – would broaden understanding and more fully capture the phenomenon under investigation. Further research is needed to explore the consequences of minimal involvement of higher education staff during periods of organizational change. Research has shown that employee involvement helps organizations increase efficiency (Lines, 2004), as well as refine available options and arrive at better solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009). Given the timing of this research study, implementation was incomplete. As a result, it was too early to assess the impact of minimal staff involvement during organizational change.

The final implication for research concerns the intersection of communication and organizational culture. Tierney (1988) saw organizational culture comprised of decisions, actions, involvement, and communication, which have both an actual and symbolic dimension. Weick (2012a) found that individuals made sense of change by connecting actions to beliefs. After interviewing staff members, it was clear that the communication of the strategic plan and planning process did not filter through the organization. This research study did not explore why these communication breakdowns occurred. Further research is needed to explore how higher education leaders can minimize communication breakdowns and more effectively communicate during periods of organizational change.

### **5.3.2 Implications for Practice**

The aim of this study was to describe how university leaders communicated the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to staff, how staff responded to the strategic plan and planning process, and the perceptions of middle managers involved in implementing strategic

initiatives. In addition to the research implications discussed previously, I believe these findings are relevant for anyone attempting to communicate and implement change within the higher education setting.

Leaders and managers appear to underestimate significantly the amount and frequency with which communication needs to occur during periods of change. Intentions may have been good, but, in practice, staff generally did not understand the rationale behind the university's goals or feel invested in them. As someone who leads a unit, this finding causes me to question how I might be more intentional about the messages I send to the individuals who report to me, as well as all the approximately 60 staff who are part of my unit. Leaders could experiment with using targeted and more nuanced communication tactics with different groups of people. While some individuals may still choose not to pay attention, with more awareness of where communication breakdowns occur, leaders can minimize the impact.

Leaders and managers need to temper their concerns about resistance with understanding that all individuals will respond to change differently. Asking questions, requesting additional information, or expressing frustration does not necessarily equal resistance. Adopting an attitude that encourages questions and allows for the open exchange of information may go a long way toward creating an environment that encourages change.

Finally, leaders and managers need to highlight explicitly the change process, specific markers that demonstrate progress is being made, and any results. By highlighting these areas, staff are more likely to identify the change initiatives occurring around them, see their impact, and connect them to the work for which they are responsible. Staff interviewed as part of this study focused more on the planning document than any outcomes that resulted from the planning

process. Without calling sufficient attention to outcomes, the planning process will dominate the conversation instead of any substantive changes that leaders are attempting to make.

## **5.4 CONCLUSION**

Staff are at the forefront of a changing higher education environment. As universities attempt to envision and implement planned change initiatives to strengthen their positions, staff will be expected to contribute to these initiatives. The intent of this study was to describe how institutional leaders communicated the strategic plan and the steps in the planning process to staff, how staff responded to the strategic plan and planning process, and the perceptions of middle managers involved in implementing strategic initiatives. The findings indicate that staff feel disconnected from strategic university goals and planning initiatives. Staff desire to be heard and to play an active role in the university's change initiatives. Without their insight and expertise, higher education leaders risk unnecessary blunders, disjointed attempts at implementation, and an increasingly frustrated staff. Higher education leaders must do a better and more nuanced job of communicating priorities to staff, while being more purposeful about how, why, and when they solicit feedback during periods of planned change. University leaders should value staff expertise and incorporate it throughout the planning process in order to improve staff morale and effectively position their institutions for success during these challenging times.

## APPENDIX A

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Every interview will begin with some basic questions to help respondents feel comfortable with the interactive nature of the interviews and with the audio-recording device used during the interviews (if they permitted audio-recording). These basic questions provide context and demographic information, and set the tone for the interactions. Such basic questions asked of each respondent include:*

- A. How many years have you worked in higher education?
- B. How many years have you worked at this institution?
- C. What undergraduate and graduate degrees do you hold?
- D. How long have you held your current position?
- E. What do you do in this position?

As you know, I am interested in exploring how higher education staff are engaged in strategic planning and organizational change. The concept of involving employees in change efforts has been studied in many settings, but has not received much attention in higher education. My goal is to learn more about how you perceive the strategic planning process happening here. As you may remember, *The MAU Plan* established the University's goals and Schools were instructed to align their strategic plans to *The MAU Plan*.

#### **Interview Questions**

**I thought we might start by thinking about the beginning of the University's strategic planning process. What do you remember about that time?** *Possible probes:*

- a. What was your reaction?
- b. How did you think the planning process would affect you?
- c. Did you attend any of the open meetings or town halls on the strategic plan?
- d. What do you remember about those sessions?

**Thank you. That really helps me understand how things happened for you.**

**Now, let's fast forward a bit and think about what happened that signaled to you that the strategic plan would mean changes for the School. Do you recall any meetings or memos or other communications *within* the School?**

- What can you tell me about any role that you played in the meetings or communications?

**Those are helpful examples. Thank you for sharing them.**

**Now, let's move forward a few more steps. . .**

**Are there specific initiatives or projects within your School that you believe are resulting from the University's strategic planning process?**

- What can you tell me about the role you played in planning for any of these initiatives or projects? *Possible probes:*
  - a. When would you say you were invited to share input or provide feedback? Would it be during the creation phase, implementation phase, or somewhere in between? *If necessary, ask them to elaborate.*
  - b. How did getting involved at that point make you feel about the impact you could have?

**Thank you. That is helpful information.**

**Now, let's talk about how you've worked with the staff you supervise during the planning process.**

- What can you tell me about any discussions you've had with your employees about these initiatives/projects? *Possible probes:*
  - a. How have they reacted to these changes?
  - b. Tell me how you explained the importance of these initiatives/projects.
  - c. How did they respond?
  - d. Did any of your staff provide feedback that you felt compelled to share with your supervisor? *If yes, ask them to elaborate on how they shared this feedback.*
- Tell me about a time when one of your employees asked a question about the new initiative/project that you couldn't answer. *Possible probes:*
  - a. How did that make you feel?
  - b. What missing information do you wish you'd had?

**Thank you for sharing your experiences. It has been very helpful.**

**Before we conclude, I'd like to you to step back and think about what you've learned and experienced throughout the strategic planning process.**

- If you were giving a short talk – like a Ted Talk – for University leaders on how to involve staff in organizational change, what advice would you give?
- How has your experience with this strategic planning process made you think differently about your role in change?

## APPENDIX B

### DOCUMENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Table 9 *Document analysis protocol used during document collection*

<b>Document Title</b>	
<b>Source/Location</b>	
<b>Date</b>	
<b>Author</b>	
<b>Intended Audience</b>	
<b>Sequence (e.g. Is this the 1<sup>st</sup> of multiple memos)</b>	
<b>Related Documents (e.g. articles written about a town hall)</b>	
<b>Preliminary Topics/Codes</b>	

Table 9 (Continued)

<b>Does the document reference university staff? If yes, how?</b>	
<b>Does the document reference implementation? If yes, how?</b>	
<b>Unexpected Findings</b>	

## APPENDIX C

### RECRUITMENT EMAIL SCRIPT

From: Jessica Hatherill

To:

Date:

Subject: Research study on strategic planning and higher education staff

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Hello, my name is Jessica Hatherill and I am a doctoral student in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting research on how higher education staff are engaged in strategic planning and organizational change. I am inviting you to participate because of your position at Mid-Atlantic University.

Participation in this research includes being interviewed by me for approximately 45 minutes. During the interview, I will ask you about your perceptions and experiences as a Mid Atlantic University employee with programmatic and supervisory responsibilities. Participation is voluntary and your answers will be confidential.

If you would like to participate in the research, please contact me at [jhath@pitt.edu](mailto:jhath@pitt.edu) or 412-624-9894. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time.

Jessica Hatherill

## APPENDIX D

### REMINDER RECRUITMENT EMAIL SCRIPT

#### Option A – Colleague recommended I speak with this individual

From: Jessica Hatherill

To:

Date:

Subject: Reminder: Research study on strategic planning and higher education staff

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Hello, my name is Jessica Hatherill and I am a doctoral student in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting research on how higher education staff are engaged in strategic planning and organizational change. Your colleague, \_\_\_\_\_, suggested I speak with you about your experiences in this area.

Participation in this research includes being interviewed by me for approximately 45 minutes. During the interview, I will ask you about your perceptions and experiences as a University of Pittsburgh employee with programmatic and supervisory responsibilities. Participation is voluntary and your answers will be confidential.

If you would like to participate in the research, please contact me at [jhath@pitt.edu](mailto:jhath@pitt.edu) or 412-624-9894. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time.

Jessica Hatherill

**Option B – Reminder only, no word of mouth referral**

From: Jessica Hatherill

To:

Date:

Subject: Reminder: Research study on strategic planning and higher education staff

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Hello, my name is Jessica Hatherill and I am a doctoral student in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting research on how higher education staff are engaged in strategic planning and organizational change. I would very much like to learn about your experiences in this area.

Participation in this research includes being interviewed by me for approximately 45 minutes. During the interview, I will ask you about your perceptions and experiences as a University of Pittsburgh employee with programmatic and supervisory responsibilities. Participation is voluntary and your answers will be confidential.

If you would like to participate in the research, please contact me at [jhath@pitt.edu](mailto:jhath@pitt.edu) or 412-624-9894. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time.

Jessica Hatherill

## APPENDIX E

### VERBAL CONSENT SCRIPT

Prior to beginning this interview, I need your verbal consent to participate in this research. If you agree, I would like to audiotape this interview so I can capture all of your perspectives. I will save the recording on a password-protected drive, transcribe it, and delete the recording after the research study is completed. If you don't want to be recorded, I will not. The interview should last no longer than 45 minutes.

You are welcome to withdraw from the interview or not answer any interview questions.

Are you willing to participate in this face-to-face interview? Please respond with a verbal YES or NO. \_\_\_\_\_

During this interview, I will be asking you about your perceptions and experiences as a XXX employee. When I write about or discuss any research findings, I will use pseudonyms to refer to XXX. For example, the XXX will become Mid-Atlantic University or MAU.

I will also use pseudonyms to refer to interview participants. Would you like to select a pseudonym or would you like me to assign one to you? \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX F**

### **INDIVIDUAL CONSENT HANDOUT**

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to explore how higher education staff are engaged in strategic planning and organizational change. The concept of involving employees in change efforts has been studied in many settings, but has not received much attention in higher education. Using a range of methodologies (i.e. face-to-face interviews and document analysis), this study hopes to describe the perceptions and experiences of higher education staff during a strategic planning process. My goal is to gather information that can be used to improve the way higher education staff are involved in future strategic planning efforts.

If you agree to participate, you will be participate in a one-on-one confidential interview (45 minutes).

#### **RISKS**

Participants are asked to participate in a one-on-one confidential interview. This activity will not be any more risky than daily interactions experienced as part of the participant's professional life. Breach of confidentiality is a possible risk. However, precautions regarding confidentiality are taken to protect participants' privacy. Participants may withdraw from the study at any point, or choose not to answer a particular question or questions.

#### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in how higher education staff are involved in strategic planning. Possible general benefits are that information gathered may be used to improve the way higher education staff are involved in future strategic planning efforts.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The PI and faculty mentor will maintain confidentiality throughout the study. All researcher memos, interview transcripts, audio recordings, and participant data will be in a locked cabinet and/or stored on Pitt Box, with only the researchers allowed access. After agreeing to be interviewed, participants will be assigned both a pseudonym and an ID number for cross reference throughout the study. These pseudonyms and ID numbers will be used in place of

participants' actual names and identifying information, and only researchers will have access to the identification key. ID numbers will link data from interviews; however, neither the numbers nor participant names will be used in any publications or presentations. Where necessary, references to participants in the study or other individuals will be made with pseudonyms. In addition, pseudonyms will be used for XXX and all of its colleges, schools, and other administrative units.

The University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office may have access to the research data for monitoring purposes. In unusual cases, research records may be released in response to an order from a court of law.

## **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

## **CONTACT**

This study is being conducted by:

- Jessica Hatherill, EdD student at the University of Pittsburgh. She may be reached at 412-624-9894 or [jhath@pitt.edu](mailto:jhath@pitt.edu) for questions or to report a research-related problem.
- Mary Margaret Kerr is the Faculty Mentor for this study. Dr. Kerr may be reached at 412-648-7205 or [mmkerr@pitt.edu](mailto:mmkerr@pitt.edu) for questions or to report a research-related problem.

You may contact the University of Pittsburgh Human Subject Protection Advocate at 1-866-212-2668 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

## APPENDIX G

### IRB APPROVAL



University of Pittsburgh  
*Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
(412) 383-1400  
(412) 383-1508 (fax)  
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

#### **Memorandum**

To: Jessica Hatherill  
From: IRB Office  
Date: 10/3/2016  
IRB#: [PRO16070456](#)  
Subject: Planning For Change: Engaging University Staff in Strategic Planning

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The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the above referenced study by the expedited review procedure authorized under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. Your research study was approved under:

45 CFR 46.110.(6)  
45 CFR 46.110.(7)

The IRB has approved the waiver for the requirement to obtain a written informed consent.

The risk level designation is Minimal Risk.

Approval Date: 10/3/2016  
Expiration Date: 10/2/2019

**This study meets the criteria for an extended approval period of three years. In the event that any type of federal funding is obtained during this interval, a modification must be submitted immediately so the IRB can reassess the approval period.**

For studies being conducted in UPMC facilities, no clinical activities can be undertaken by investigators until they have received approval from the UPMC Fiscal Review Office.

Please note that it is the investigator's responsibility to report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others [see 45 CFR 46.103(b)(5) and 21 CFR 56.108(b)]. Refer to the IRB Policy and Procedure Manual regarding the reporting requirements for unanticipated problems which include, but are not limited to, adverse events. If you have any questions about this process, please contact the Adverse Events Coordinator at 412-383-1480.

**Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.**

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Figure 1. IRB research study approval.

## APPENDIX H

### IRB MODIFICATION APPROVAL



University of Pittsburgh  
*Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue  
Ground Level  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
(412) 383-1480  
(412) 383-1508 (fax)  
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

#### **Memorandum**

To: Jessica Hatherill  
From: IRB Office  
Date: 12/22/2016  
IRB#: [MOD16070456-01](#) / PRO16070456  
Subject: Planning For Change: Engaging University Staff in Strategic Planning

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The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the requested modifications by expedited review procedure authorized under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110.

Modification Approval Date: 12/22/2016  
Expiration Date: 10/2/2019

For studies being conducted in UPMC facilities, no clinical activities that are impacted by the modifications can be undertaken by investigators until they have received approval from the UPMC Fiscal Review Office.

Please note that it is the investigator's responsibility to report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others [see 45 CFR 46.103(b)(5) and 21 CFR 56.108(b)]. Refer to the IRB Policy and Procedure Manual regarding the reporting requirements for unanticipated problems which include, but are not limited to, adverse events. If you have any questions about this process, please contact the Adverse Events Coordinator at 412-383-1480.

The protocol and consent forms, along with a brief progress report must be resubmitted at least one month prior to the renewal date noted above as required by FWA.00006790 (University of Pittsburgh), FWA.00006735 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center), FWA.00000600 (Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh), FWA.00003567 (Magee-Womens Health Corporation), FWA.00003338 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Cancer Institute).

**Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.**

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Figure 2. IRB approval for research study modification.

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