

**UNDERSTANDING THE RESISTANCE OF COMMUNITY LEADERS TO THE MERGERS OF  
TECHNICAL COLLEGES IN GEORGIA**

by

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(Under the Direction of Erik C. Ness)

**ABSTRACT**

For the purpose of saving costs, the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) in 2008 announced and began a plan to reduce its total number of colleges from 33 to 26 through a series of mergers. As soon as the plan became public, however, it ran into resistance from leaders in some of the communities where the colleges were located. Although the kinds of factors which might have triggered such resistance can be surmised from the literature on mergers or from organizational change theory, the specific factors most at work in this set of TCSG mergers were unknown. The purpose of my study, therefore, is to explore, understand, and describe the perspectives of community leaders who resisted the mergers.

The study was a qualitative case study bounded as a single case by the dynamic between TCSG's merger plan and the resistance of community leaders. It used purposeful sampling to identify mergers and community leaders, gathered data through face-to-face interviews and document archives, and used interpretive analysis to identify themes leading to naturalistic generalizations. At all stages in the study, trustworthiness was a constant concern.

The study found that community leaders believed the mergers originated with the Governor, they rejected TCSG's cost-savings rationale, and they would have preferred a rationale with a vision even if cost savings or a reduction in the number of schools were a side effect. They felt that the plan overlooked differences of fit between the merging communities, they felt as though it overlooked an interdependence between community and college, and of great importance, they felt as though a sense of community

ownership of the college was violated thus creating the sense of a loss by a taking. Community leaders expressed their opposition primarily through local and state networks of contacts and avoided public demonstrations. They felt as though their efforts were ineffective, that they were unable to gain a voice with state leaders, and that the mergers were a *fait accompli* from the start.

INDEX WORDS: Community leaders, Higher education mergers, Mergers, Open systems, Psychological contract, Resistance to organizational change, Technical colleges.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

On September 4, 2008, the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) announced a controversial plan to merge seven pairs of its technical colleges as a cost-saving measure during a time of increasingly tight state budgets. The 14 colleges would become seven, and the total number of colleges would be reduced from 33 to 26. Each combined college would operate under a single name to be selected later, no campuses would be closed, and most of the mergers would be on a fast-track timeline of 10 months. To reflect the cost savings, each combined college would have its budget reduced by half a million dollars for an annual savings of \$3.5 million to the state.

As soon as the plan was announced, however, leaders in some communities rose up to question, resist, and oppose the mergers. Those local business, civic, and political leaders spoke out in their own communities in a variety of venues, and they took their concerns to the leadership of TCSG and to state political leaders. They caused a hesitancy at TCSG about proceeding with the mergers (but did not stop them), caused one merger to be altered, stimulated extra explanation from TCSG about the merits of the mergers, and precipitated the near-passage of state legislation limiting any future mergers. It was this resistance which caught my eye as a researcher, and I was intrigued by the potential of understanding *why* they resisted.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study is to explore, understand, and describe the perspectives of community leaders who resisted the merger of their local technical college, and I do so as a qualitative case study that is bounded by the community leaders' resistance to TCSG's merger plan. To find that pool of community leaders, I first used purposeful sampling to choose four of the six sets of merging schools in which to seek potential respondents and then in a second step to select community leaders within those mergers; to be clear, the case is one case focused on the whole of those community leaders around the state and not four

cases corresponding to individual mergers. (A listing of all of the colleges included in the merger plan are shown in Table 1.) I then conducted confidential and individual face-to-face interviews with a minimum of three and a maximum of five persons in each of the four merger sets, for a total of 16 which formed my composite of community leaders for the case.

The core research question guiding my study is this: *What aspects of the mergers sparked resistance in the community leaders and why? How did they express their resistance and how effective was it?* There are embedded along the way a series of more specific research questions that by their content and sequence are intended to parallel and support the core research question.

1. In seeking to understand what aspects of the mergers sparked the resistance and why, there are two sequential questions that must be answered.
  - (a) Were the opponents familiar with the cost-savings rationale of the mergers, and did they agree or disagree with that rationale? How did their agreement or disagreement with the rationale affect their decision to resist the mergers?
  - (b) What (other) factors influenced the decision of the community leaders to be in opposition, and why? What mattered most?
2. In seeking to understand how opponents of the merger expressed their resistance, and how effective it was, there are two questions.
  - (a) How (in what venue, in what manner) did the community leaders express their concerns, resistance, or opposition?
  - (b) To whom did they express their opposition?
3. In seeking to understand how effective the opposition was, there are two key questions.
  - (a) How effective was their opposition? Why did they think so?

In short, the first set of questions is about the merger plan, including the *what* and *why* of it that sparked resistance; the second set is about *how* the community leaders expressed their resistance, especially to decision makers; and the third question is about its *effectiveness*, that is, to what extent did it change anything or influence anybody.

Table 1

*The Colleges Included in the Merger Plan*

| Original Name and Main Campus                                 | New Name and Main Campus  |
|---|---|
| Appalachian Technical College*<br>Jasper, Pickens County      |   |
| Chattahoochee Technical College<br>Marietta, Cobb County      | Chattahoochee Technical College<br>Marietta, Cobb County        |
| North Metro Technical College<br>Acworth, Bartow County       |   |
| Flint River Technical College<br>Thomaston, Upson County      | Southern Crescent Technical College<br>Griffin, Spalding County |
| Griffin Technical College<br>Griffin, Spalding County         |   |
| Coosa Valley Technical College<br>Rome, Floyd County          | Georgia Northwestern Technical College<br>Rome, Floyd County    |
| Northwestern Technical College<br>Rock Spring, Walker County  |   |
| Southeastern Technical College<br>Vidalia, Toombs County      | Southeastern Technical College<br>Vidalia, Toombs County        |
| Swainsboro Technical College<br>Swainsboro, Emanuel County    |   |
| West Central Technical College<br>Waco, Haralson County       | West Georgia Technical College<br>Waco, Haralson County         |
| West Georgia Technical College<br>LaGrange, Troup County      |   |
| East Central Technical College<br>Fitzgerald, Ben Hill County | Wiregrass Technical College<br>Valdosta, Lowndes County         |
| Valdosta Technical College<br>Valdosta, Lowndes County        |   |

\* Note: The original number of pairs was seven and included 14 schools, but this was changed. Appalachian Technical College was originally paired with North Georgia Technical College, but instead joined with Chattahoochee Technical College and North Metro Technical College in a three-college merger. This resulted in six sets and included 13 schools. North Georgia Technical College was not merged.

## Significance of the Study

Although the kinds of factors which might have triggered such resistance might be surmised from a review of the literature on higher education mergers, or on organizational change, the specific factors most at work in this set of TCSG mergers were unknown. My study's focus on understanding the perspectives of the community leaders helps to clarify these factors.

First, my study adds to the body of research and policy on mergers among public higher education institutions, and it does so at an important time. My study adds very specifically and importantly to research on the mandated use of mergers as a policy response to economic hard times and budgetary stresses, and it does so at a time when it is plausible to believe that more might be in the pipeline. Precisely because of this, it is "vitally important to understand what drives higher education mergers, what forms they can take, what objectives they can achieve, and how they can best be planned and managed" (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 4). Too, my study speaks very pointedly to the role of community leaders in such mergers, including the extent to which their resistance could affect the outcome of mergers. As a hint of the conclusions from my research, I found that community leaders' acceptance or resistance during a merger is influenced by the *why* of a merger, *what* the merger tries to do, *who* tries to do it, and *how* it is done.

Second, my study adds to the body of research on organizational change in the context of higher education mergers. I use open systems theory as a conceptual framework for exploring and explaining the nexus between the budgetary pressure on TCSG, the decision to require mergers, and the resistance of community leaders. I adopt and adapt heavily from Katz and Kahn (1978), Burke (2002), and Levinson (1962, 1973, 1976). As a hint of my conclusions, in an open system it is the tendency of an organization towards homeostasis which predisposes community leaders as part of a system to react in resistance to the change sought by the environment; they resist because it is the nature of the internal components of an open system to do so. Another important part of the theoretical grounding of my case is Levinson's theory of multiple layers of open sub-systems, even onto a psychological man in an organization who reacts to change as a loss. I use this as a conceptual framework for exploring and explaining the reactions

of community leaders as part of their local college organization. As a hint of my conclusions, for psychological men and women in an organization the experience of community leaders to the mergers is indeed one of change and loss; they resist because it is the nature of men and women in an organization to resist change.

Third, the significance of my study is also in its counsel upon matters both political and practical. In the most immediate political sense, it speaks to discussions in Georgia about any potential future mergers among the technical colleges, and perhaps even to any mergers between the technical colleges governed by TCSG and the two-year colleges governed by the University System of Georgia—this topic took on renewed life in 2009 with the recommendation of a study group to merge all the two-year schools into one governance system (Office of the Governor, 2009, April 20). In a starkly practical sense, my study offers general advice for any leadership which may contemplate promoting such mergers, whether in Georgia or elsewhere. As Yukl (2002) notes, “efforts to implement change in an organization are more likely to be successful if a leader understands the reasons for resistance to change, the sequential phases in the change process, and different strategies of change” (p. 273). This may hold special significance when the failure to understand resistance can result in the surrender by state leaders of an important policy or budgetary initiative; conversely, understanding such resistance may help improve a policy or improve its chance of success by causing a careful evaluation of assumptions regarding the what and why. As a hint of my conclusions, while it is indeed possible for the state to use legal authority and political clout to mandate mergers, it is possible instead that state leaders might engage in conversations with community leaders about a correct number of schools, a new policy direction, and even an inspired vision.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

My dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter One is an introduction which includes the purpose of my case study, a listing of the schools in mergers, and the significance of the study, including some hints regarding my conclusions. Chapter Two is a literature review in two main sections: The first reviews the literature on mergers among higher education institutions, including definitions and trends through the lens of why, what, who, and how. The second establishes the theoretical grounding of my

research through open systems theory and my use of it as a conceptual framework for exploring and explaining the resistance of community leaders to the change of mergers. Chapter Three explains my research design, which is a qualitative case study using purposeful sampling to choose community leaders from around the state, using document archives and face-to-face interviews as primary sources of data collection, and using interpretive analysis techniques to identify themes and naturalistic generalizations. Chapter Four presents the facts of the case, which includes the state budgetary pressures, timelines, and actions behind TCSG's merger plan and the resistance to it. Chapter Five presents my interpretive findings from the community leaders. Chapter Six presents my discussions and conclusions through the several frameworks presented in the earlier chapters.

### **Summary**

In this first chapter, I opened with a quick overview of the tension between the decision of TCSG to merge schools and the resistance of leaders in some communities. I presented the purpose of my research, which is to explore, understand, and describe the perspectives of community leaders who resisted the merger of their local technical college. I introduced my research approach as a qualitative case study, I defined it as a single case through the juxtaposition of the TCSG merger plan and the community leaders around the state who resisted it, and I noted that purposefully chosen community leaders from among four of the mergers are included in the study. I explained the significance of my study, which adds to the body of research on higher education mergers at a time when mergers may become an increasing part of the landscape in hard economic times, which adds to the body of research on organizational change with a focus on resistance, and which offers insight to the practical and political decisions of merging colleges as this may confront leaders in Georgia and elsewhere.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) in September, 2008, initiated a series of cost-saving mergers among its two-year technical colleges, but there arose questions, resistance, and opposition from community leaders who took their concerns to state leaders and caused hesitation about the mergers. Although the literature speaks in general to the kinds of factors associated with acceptance or resistance in a merger, the factors vary from case to case, and the ones which were most at work in the current mergers were unknown. This led me to my own case study.

My study is informed and framed by existing literature in two principal ways. First, I find insight on the what, why, who, and how of higher education mergers, including definitions, trends among mergers, and the issues associated with acceptance or resistance in mergers. In doing so, I shape a merger literature-based framework which assists in my analysis, interpretation, and description. Second, I find a theoretical grounding for my study through an open systems theory of organizational change with a special focus on the role of inertia or homeostasis, on the concept of multiple sub-systems, and on the concept of a psychological man who reacts to change as loss and then resistance. In doing so, I create a conceptual framework that I can take, so to speak, to the analysis and description of the nexus between the environmental or market pressures on TCSG, the decision to seek cost savings through mergers, and the resistance of community leaders.

#### **Framing the Case through Public Higher Education Mergers**

In this first section of the literature review, I find terminology used to define mergers and their key characteristics—how does one know a merger when one sees it. I find trends among the mergers of higher education institutions, with the goal of finding a dominant theme and of understanding the why, what, who, and how of mergers. I find insight into the kinds of issues or factors which at least anecdotally are articulated with acceptance or resistance in mergers—what tilts the playing field.



## Definitions

In doing research on the definition of *merger*, I found out very quickly that researchers go to considerable effort to define what a merger is and is not, and there is not a consensus as to a definition. “One of the major areas of concern noted in the literature relates to the variety of terms interchangeably used to describe this phenomenon of organizational change” (Cannon, 1983, p. 6). Yet they do agree on some key points: They agree that there are many different ways in which two institutions may work with together, and it can be anything from becoming a single new institution to simply sharing a few resources. They agree, too, that this array of relationships can be viewed as a continuum with the points along it differentiated by the *degree of control or autonomy* given up by one or more of the partners in the new relationship. Thus, when two institutions become a single new one, this could be a complete relinquishment of autonomy by the original institutions; on the other end of the spectrum, if they simple share a few resources, then there is little if any autonomy lost.

***The term merger.*** What researchers do not agree on, however, is which of those several arrangements along the continuum should be called a *merger*. One pair of researchers who use the term merger in an umbrella sense to cover most if not all relationships on the continuum is Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994). They offer a “typology of higher education mergers” (p. 24) which has these categories: (a) pure merger; (b) consolidation; (c) transfer of assets; (d) consortium, federation, or association; and (e) joint venture or affiliation. Of these, a *pure merger* is defined in terms of dissolution of one partner.

A pure merger is generally defined as an agreement by which Institution A is *merged into* Institution B, with Institution B serving as the exclusive legal successor. In effect, Institution A is dissolved, leaving Institution B as the sole surviving institution. (p. 24)

A *consolidation* is one in which “two or more institutions that are collapsed into one new college or university, usually with a different name, mission and scale of operation: Institution A and Institution B become Institution C” (p. 26). A *transfer of assets* is an arrangement in which “Institution A transfers and assigns its right, title, and interest in some or all of its assets to Institution B, which provides as consideration, the continued maintenance and operation of some or all of Institution A’s programs” (p.

27). As for the remaining categories, a *consortium*, *federation*, or *association* revolve around “common resource-sharing objectives” (p. 29), while a *joint venture* or *affiliation* refers to narrow agreements on some limited initiative. These last two sets of categories have the least impact on a college’s autonomy, and the number of such agreements “run to the hundreds, even thousands” (p. 31).

This umbrella use of the term merger is not, however, shared by all researchers, most of whom (Chambers, 1983; Cannon, 1983; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Harman & Harman, 2008) use the term merger to refer to one particular choice along a “continuum of legal relationships” (Chambers, 1983, p. 14). A merger, writes Chambers (1983), is distinguished by an agreement in “which one or more institutions contract with one another to change the corporate control of one or both places” (p. 14). Cannon (1983) takes the same approach, noting that a merger is the “extreme form of interinstitutional arrangement” (p. 5) which is marked by the loss of autonomy.

The most salient feature of [a] merger is the requisite surrender of the institutional charters of one or both institutions. In consequence, there emerges one board of trustees, one administration, one faculty and one organizational structure for the newly created system. Hence, through the process of reorganization each educational institutions loses its individual identity and autonomy and becomes an integral part of the new system. The very nature of merger then attests to its extremism. (p. 5)

Harman and Harman (2008) find that “higher education collaboration can take many forms, from highly informal and *ad hoc* linkages to formal institutional mergers or amalgamations... on a continuum based on the degree of autonomy being surrendered by participating institutions” (p. 104). The definition of a merger, however, is the loss of control.

A merger can be defined as the combination of two or more separate organizations, with overall management control coming under a single governing body and single chief executive. Normally all assets, liabilities and responsibilities of the former institutions are transferred to either a continuing institution or to a new institution (Harman and Meek, 1988; Goedegebuure, 1992). (p. 105)

Eastman and Lang (2001) take the same approach. On the one hand, it is true that the “various forms of inter-institutional cooperation... occupy a common theoretical continuum or evolutionary stream.... On the continuum, each institution gains or loses autonomy as it loses or gains from cooperation” (pp. 15-16), but only one inter-institutional form is a merger.

The term “merger” is often used loosely in reference to all sorts of cooperative arrangements among colleges and universities—consortia, federations, affiliations, and so on. Be warned, however: an affiliation is not a federation, and a federation is not a consortium, and a merger isn’t any of the above. (p. 15)

A merger is distinguished by four key characteristics, and mergers with these characteristics have been the dominant trend of recent years.

Two or more institutions combine to form a single new organization with a single governing body and chief executive; at least one institution and potentially all merging institutions relinquish autonomy and separate legal identity; all assets, liabilities, legal obligations, and responsibilities of the merging institutions are transferred to a single successor institution; [and] mergers are virtually impossible to reverse. (p. 17)

Additionally, there are several types of these mergers, with the difference among them revolving around “how the former institutions fit together to form the new one” (p. 108): (a) In a *consolidation*, the two institutions become one new one. “Both parties to such a merger cease to exist in their former incarnations. The outcome is a melding of their features with new ones to form a genuinely new entity” (p. 108). (b) In a *pure acquisition*, one institution absorbs another without the absorbing partner “being substantially affected in the process” (p. 109). The acquisition is pure in the sense of being total: “In cases of *pure acquisition*, the aim is complete integration—that is, that the acquired organization become a unit like any other of the acquiring institution” (p. 109). (c) In a *transformative acquisition*, the acquiring institution does not remain unchanged, but rather, is changed substantially. “It seizes on the merger as an opportunity to bring about internal change, and its structure, policies, processes, and culture all change—albeit to a lesser extent than those of the subordinate partner” (pp. 109-110). (d) In a *semiautonomous acquisition*, the acquiring institution changes both itself and the other institution in ways that it wants to, but it allows the second school to “retain a measure of autonomy” (p. 110). By definition, a merger means a loss of control for at least one partner, but “various organizational arrangements can be made that allow for considerable degrees of local autonomy for the previously independent institutions” (p. 110). (e) In *subsidiaries and ancillaries*, the “smaller partner in the merger may continue to enjoy a distinct identity and considerable local autonomy” (p. 111). It is appropriate only when the entity is

“distinctly different... for example, when a museum or conservatory of music merges with a college or university” (p. 111).

*Other measures of mergers.* Mergers can also be viewed through the lens of how closely the two institutions resemble each other in terms of the fields of study and credentials which each brings to the table. It is clear from the literature that there is a wide diversity of mergers which occur at nearly all levels within and among the undergraduate and graduate spectrum; in same-level and inter-level combinations of two-year colleges, undergraduate colleges, and universities; and among various program offerings. As a schema for viewing these combinations, Eastman and Lang (2001) offer three categories: (a) A *horizontal* merger is among schools “in the same field that provide similar offerings (e.g., a merger of two dental schools)” (p. 107), which I interpret to mean that in the new school the fields of study and award levels will be essentially the same as in the old. (b) A *vertical* merger is between colleges that “are in the same field but provide different offerings or credentials (e.g., a merger of a degree-granting engineering school with a college that trains engineering technologists” (p. 107), which I interpret to mean that in the new school the fields of study have remained the same but are vertically complementary, as are award levels. (c) A *diversification* merger is between colleges that “are in different fields of study but offer similar types of programs” (p. 108), which I interpret to mean that in the new school the fields of study provide more choices but at the same award levels.

Such terminology (horizontal, vertical, diversification) is similar to commonly used terminology in the realm of corporate mergers, and as I show in the next section, this may not be a coincidence. It is also worth noting that interorganizational agreements in the corporate world may face the same kind of autonomy issues as do higher education institutions.

As steps toward linking up with another organization begin, the parties involved are faced with at least two clear yet perplexing paradoxes, ones of vulnerability [if they remain alone] and control (Haspelgh and Jemison, 1991). Organizations have to decide how much they will cede control to their partner. (Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997, p. 127)

It remains to be seen, they write, whether the “recent proliferation of interorganizational collaborations represents a new spirit of cooperation or a new level of cost-cutting and market exploitation” (p. 127).

## **Trends: Market-Responsive Rationales**

The next purpose of my literature review was to find a sense of why mergers occur, that is, for a sense of merger rationales. I began this with the temptation to be drawn into a litany of facts and figures from the history of mergers, or as Harman and Harman put it, the “long history of the use of mergers within higher education systems and institutions that is well documented and analysed in various higher education literatures” (2008, p. 101). I found instead that the literature was offering a clear conceptual premise underlying merger trends: Mergers are a response to pressures from the environment of the institutions, or to put it another way, *mergers tend to stem from a market-driven rationale*. As Eastman and Lang captured this, mergers are “means to many possible ends—ends shaped by the systems in which the institutions are embedded” (2001, p. 6). I cannot overstate the importance of this unifying theme, which as I will discuss later in this chapter, dovetails with an open systems-based model of organizational change.

The starting point for laying out this conclusion is to first acknowledge higher education’s longstanding tradition of independence and autonomy, and its reluctant acceptance of change. As Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) put it, a “great part of the genius and drive of higher education in American life lies in its strong tradition of institutional autonomy” (p. vii). Nevertheless this preference towards independence has been forced to give way to new pressures.

During the twentieth century, new developments have profoundly altered the conditions of higher education... including those on which the tradition of going it alone was based.... Mergers have occurred and are now occurring among a surprising number of institutions of differing size and prominence, some private and some public. (pp. viii-ix)

Eastman and Lang (2001) echo this changing landscape.

Throughout most of the history of higher education, the natural disposition of colleges and universities has been to ‘go it alone’ wherever possible. As institutions, colleges and universities are often cranky and eccentric in their individuality, jealous of their autonomy, and aloof in their relationships with other institutions and social estates. In spite of this history of zealous independence universities and other institutions of higher education were not immune from the merger virus of the late twentieth century. (pp. 4-5)

Today, they note, “mergers have become ubiquitous” (p. 3).

The changes in this history began in two unlikely places: first, in the corporate sector, and second, in public colleges overseas. On the former, the first major wave of corporate mergers “began in the late 1800s, [and] the principle motive was horizontal integration; firms bought others in their industries in order to add capacity with which to serve rapidly expanding markets” (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 3). This was the dominant theme until the 1960s, when there emerged a trend of vertical integration, that is, corporations focused on firms in some other stage of the production process. It was a “trend toward conglomeration, driven by a desire to circumvent regulatory constraints, stabilize financial performance, and build earnings through merger and acquisitions activity itself” (p. 4). As with the earlier wave, it “was driven mainly by the desire... to achieve economies of scale” (p. 3) in the face of market pressures.

At about the same time and for the same kind of rationale, there emerged a wave of mergers overseas among public higher education institutions under a centralized or national higher education system. The rationale was at least in part the same as corporate mergers, that is, they aimed at “building capacity, improving efficiency, and achieving economies of scale” (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 5). Initially such mergers were mandated by those governments, but later governments turned instead to the “more subtle approach” (p. 5) of requiring institutions to be of a certain size to receive some kinds of funding: “As a result, institutions sought out and merged with partners large enough to enable them to exceed these minimums. Governments provided powerful inducements; institutions then rationalized themselves” (p. 5). The resulting number of mergers was dramatic, with Eastman and Lang estimating that by “the 1990s there had been at least five hundred mergers” (p. 5) in foreign nations.

From the literature on mergers in the United States, it is apparent that the same kinds of financial purposes were the dominant theme at work in this country as well, but there was an additional tier of market-responsive rationales as well. In the following subsections, I present four principal groupings of such rationales which I glean from the literature: (a) financial, such as cost savings, an economy of scale, or other financial efficiencies; (b) strategic or competitive repositioning, including an academic mutual-growth strategy; (c) improved service to students, including more access or more diversity in programs; and (d) economic development, including jobs development or job training. As I noted earlier, I

demonstrate how each of these supports a conceptual trend of mergers as one driven by a response to the environment. In doing so, I avoid a deficiency noted by Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) in which some attempts to look at the causes of mergers end up missing an opportunity to find a unifying context.

John Millett's 1976 study, *Mergers in Higher Education: An Analysis of Ten Case Studies*, was an effort to find commonalities among ten merger situations. Millett attempted to identify common precipitating characteristics in the ten cases but made little attempt to place mergers in a larger public or societal context. In his determination that financial issues, geographic proximity, and reputational matters were important in each decision to merge, as well as a variety of broader issues such as complementary programming and qualitative considerations, he finally suggests that these characteristics appear in specific institutional instances and are not generalizable. (pp. 118-119)

Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) go on to argue that Millett should have attempted to frame these in a public policy context, just as they themselves attempt to frame mergers in a mutual-growth context.

*Cost savings, economies of scale, and efficiencies.* As noted earlier, the first and natural preference of colleges is to be financially independent: "Where adequate resources—financial, physical, human—are available, merge presumably will not be undertaken... Colleges and universities traditionally aim to be distinct and self-sufficient" (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 11). It is only when the demands upon a higher education institution outstrip its resources that a merger is considered. "Colleges and universities are attracted to merger, and to other forms of inter-institutional cooperation, by the chance to do things that they cannot do individually, usually because of a lack of wherewithal" (p. 11). The perceived benefit may be articulated in different ways, such as an actual cost savings, or perhaps as an efficiency or economy of scale—but at the heart of it is a financial impetus: "Throughout the research literature about mergers, the dominant theme is economy and efficiency. This is as true of involuntary mergers initiated by governments as of voluntary mergers initiated at the institutional level" (p. 11).

The explanation for the trend, that is, why institutions need to achieve that economy and efficiency, lies in the pressure to do more with less. Martin, Samels, and Associates express this as "the classic economic dilemma posed by the growth and diversification of demand for higher education: *how best to reconcile apparently unlimited needs with clearly limited resources*" (1998, p. viii). Eastman and Lang (2001) label this pressure as *demand overload*: "Demand overload refers to a situation in which the

resources that support a college or university become more and more limited while the services demanded of it increase, along with their concomitant costs” (p. 11). Usually in the face of this pressure, they write, the first instinct of a college is not to turn to cooperation or merger with another college, but instead, to become more competitive; only as the demand overload intensifies do they reluctantly turn to cooperation or to merger. I note that, in my earlier explanation of Eastman and Lange’s definition of merger, the notion of inter-institutional cooperation was defined on a continuum which was defined by the degree of institutional control given up or retained by each institution. The preferred location on that continuum is, of course, the one with the highest degree of autonomy. In the face of pressures such as demand overload, however, the status quo becomes “untenable” (p. 16) and some level of inter-institutional cooperation is chosen. “Inter-institutional cooperation are not natural behaviors. They are more the result of overcoming institutional inertia than a response to institutional momentum. Their motivating factors are mainly external” (p. 18).

Bess and Dee express this same notion of mergers as an intentional resource strategy which they tie to resource dependence theory. The foundation of this theory characterizes a higher education institution as dependent upon its environment.

This perspective builds on the notion from systems theory that all organizations depend on their environments for resources. Since organizations cannot produce all of their necessary resources internally, nor can they obtain required resources at will from the environment, they are dependent on external entities (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). (Bess & Dee, 2008, pp. 148-149).

The theory goes on to assert that institutions are not helplessly dependent upon the vicissitudes of the environment, but rather, they can engage in strategies to make themselves less vulnerable. “Rather than considering the environment to be an unchangeable force, organizational leaders can work to make external conditions more hospitable” (p. 151). Mixed in with strategies such as marketing, lobbying, and coalition building, there is also the choice of mergers or some other form of cooperative agreement. The goal of any and all of these is to redefine the environment.

Here, the organization envelops the environment (makes the environment part of itself) to gain more control over it. For example, in the Amherst, Massachusetts, area, students in a five-college consortium can take courses at any of the institutions, thereby dampening the fluctuations in demand for courses at any one college. (p. 151)



The effect of this example as well as the other strategies is to help ensure “a continuity of inputs and a relatively greater certainty of expected resources” (p. 151).

Eastman and Lang agree that resource dependence theory can help explain the resource-seeking behavior underlying most mergers. “The resource dependence paradigm ties survival to a single factor: resources or money (Birnbaum, 1983; Goedegebuure, 1992). That factor includes as well the authority or franchise to raise or claim money, for example, under system-wide funding formulas (Goedegebuure, 1992)” (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 20). In short, when a merger occurs among public higher education institutions, the merged school is able to claim a larger share of resources from its primary source in the environment, that is, from the government. At the same time, one positive side effect to this is that it has reduced its competition for resources by merging with the competitor.

The notion that higher education institutions are under market pressure to do more, to find more resources, and to save costs seems commonplace in the literature; the emphasis may be different, but the underlying message is the same. For example, Breuder (1989) notes, as part of his commentary on the merger of Williamsport Area Community College (Williamsport) as an affiliate of Penn State University (Penn State), in which Williamsport became the Pennsylvania College of Technology (Penn College)—hereafter referred to as the Williamsport-Penn State merger—that the merger is a sign of the times: “Growing pressure from citizens in communities across the country to provide the highest quality education at the lowest responsible cost will continue to challenge college executives and boards of trustees (p. 40). MacNeil (2000), on the other hand, frames the pressure in terms similar to corporate mergers: “In the world of business, in recent years, the word ‘merger’ has had a magic ring.... It’s no surprise, then, that mergers have also become a constant on the community college scene” (p. 8). Eastman and Lang (2001) point out the cost savings but also emphasize that higher education mergers can be about a savings of a different sort, that is, in executive leadership: “Higher education merger has managerial as well as economic dimensions. It reduces the number of separate organizations for which executive responsibility must be taken; in other words, it sharpens the peak of the organizational pyramid” (p. 6). There is one other benefit, namely, that a merger “makes systems of higher education

look less complex.... Policies can be simpler and politically more comprehensible” (p. 6). Harman and Harman (2008) describe the many pressures on higher education institutions and the increasing use of mergers by government as a response: “Mergers became an increasingly common phenomenon across many higher education systems, particularly as higher education provision rapidly expanded and governments looked for cost savings and ways to build stronger degree-awarding institutions” (p. 102).

This emphasis on financial pressures is also widespread in the context of particular mergers as the following three examples illustrate. First, in 1989, the Williamsport-Penn State merger was because Williamsport had lost two financial sponsors in a row. The merger provided a solution (Brueder, 1989). Second, in 1999, in a proposed Pratt Community College (Pratt) merger with Fort Hays State University (Fort Hays)—hereafter referred to as the Pratt-Fort Hays merger—it was the local community’s reduction of its financial support that caused Pratt to seek the merger (Hanna, 1999). Third, in 2003, a three-college merger of community colleges in North Carolina was proposed as a way to save costs. In the end, however, the merger was scrapped by the Board of Community Colleges when a consultant reported that any administrative savings from the merger would actually be offset by reduced local government support if the merger occurred (Report Opposes, 2003). There are literally scores of other examples in the literature.

***Strategic or competitive advantage.*** The difference between the rationale of a financial merger versus a strategic merger is a subtle yet important distinction that emerges from the literature. It can best be explained through a three-step logic, as follows: Sometimes a financially-initiated merger is merely articulated as being about finances; sometimes a financially-initiated merger is about an immediate issue of finances but it also articulates an aim of improving the college’s competitive positioning in the market; and sometimes the financial benefit of a merger is not the goal at all but merely a side effect of a merger whose core purpose is articulated as a strategic positioning in the market (sometimes by schools that were already financially strong). In short, a strategic merger is about its namesake, but finances may be a part of it as well.

Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) argue that, in response to the increasing need to do more with less, institutions have strategically tried to reposition themselves in the market. This includes, they write, tactics such as building bigger and more complex institutions; creating systems, that is, systems of colleges and campuses; creating consortia agreements of various sorts; and too, turning to mergers or other cooperative agreements. They frame this genre of strategic mergers in mutual-growth terms where institutions do not merge out of financial necessity, but rather, because they see mergers as “persuasive, effective methods” (p. 4) to accomplish other goals. For Martin, Samels, and Associates, many of these in recent years have been about academic quality, for which they openly advocate.

Mergers at the collegiate level have become one of the most creative, effective vehicles academic planners now have to achieve academic excellence, to articulate a broader institutional vision, and to solidify the strategic position of the combined institution locally and regionally. More significantly, the motives behind merging institutions to achieve academic excellence rather than to avoid bankruptcy—signal the arrival of a new way to think about U.S. higher education managerially and strategically. (p. 3)

Under such a “mutual-growth approach, proactive mergers form an entrepreneurial educational management strategy able to rapidly improve academic quality to a degree not feasible through most other planning models” (pp. 4-5). Such a change is not, however, easy for institutional leaders to accept:

In this new context, we may define academic merger as a creative opportunity to combine significant and powerful educational resources and academic cultures as well as books, microscopes, and sports equipment. Preserving the sovereignty and autonomy of U.S. campuses has preoccupied so many generations of academic leaders that it will take a great deal more than one merger handbook to implement this broad a shift in managerial outlook. (p. 5)

Nonetheless, they write, “it is increasingly possible... to discern the openness of many governing boards, presidents, deans, and faculty members to the significant benefits an academic strategy proposing institutional merger can offer” (p. 5).

The strategic implications of mergers are also emphasized by Harman and Harman (2008), who adapted Martin, Samels, and Associates’ concept of strategic merger to their own case study of a merger that created a new University of Manchester.

Strategic mergers are formal combinations of two or more organizations into a single organization deliberately planned so as to more effectively meet external challenges and opportunities. In relation to higher education, strategic mergers are what Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) describe as strategies of “merging colleges for mutual growth.” Driven by an

increasingly competitive global market for higher education services and external research funding, institutional mergers are one of a number of responses seriously considered by higher education institutions. (p. 99)

Harman and Harman emphasize also that such self-initiated strategic mergers among strong institutions—rather than among ill-positioned institutions—are a trend in both the public and private sector.

Within the American not-for-profit sector, there has been a clear trend towards increased numbers of strategic partnerships of major organizations seeking mutual advantages, such as larger market share, better access to capital and enhanced ability to win government contracts (La Piana, 2003; Kohm and La Piana, 2003), while in the corporate sector there is an increased tendency towards “strategic mega-mergers” (Weston and Weaver, 2004) often aiming to create quasi monopolies (Karier, 1993). (Harman & Harman, 2008, p. 102)

Two examples of such strategic mergers are the following: First, in 1989, the Williamsport-Penn State merger was on the surface an explicit response to Williamsport’s loss of two financial sponsors in a row. Yet President Brueder of the new Penn College later noted that it also helped achieve a needed strategic response to environmental expectations: “Mergers have become a common practice in today’s business community... looking to maximize individual strengths and minimize their weaknesses by combining resources, thus securing their future in a highly dynamic marketplace.... The public is demanding increased educational quality at a reduced cost” (Brueder, 1989, p. 37). Second, in 2004, Roosevelt University and National-Louis University explored a proposal to create a 14,000-student school and the third-largest private university in the state of Illinois. Among the issues considered were “each other’s current financial status, academic programs, contractual obligations and market position” (Boulard, 2004, p. 3). Because both colleges were considered to be financially strong, the merger seemed more about strategic partnering as a basis for expansion (Boulard, 2004).

***Enhanced service to students.*** Another market-responsive rationale articulated in a merger is that it would satisfy pressure to better serve students, such as providing more program offerings, or making transfer of credits easier. Lang (2003) notes that a financial impetus for mergers may be giving way to mergers which aim at diversification of programs and services.

The conventional wisdom is that mergers are undertaken mainly for economic reasons, either to expand markets or to reduce costs.... There is, however, another motive.... Mergers can produce greater diversity of programs and services, both among individual colleges and universities and within systems of postsecondary education. (p. 19)

This is, of course, somewhat reminiscent of Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) notion of strategic mergers for enhanced academic quality.

MacNeil (2000) found that “efficiency and better service for students” (p. 6) were frequently identified by students, faculty, and communities as the benefits of mergers (although it is unclear whether MacNeil means these as pre-merger rationales or post-merger outcomes). He cites multiple examples in support: In Memphis, the Shelby State Community College and the State Technical Institute were experiencing declining enrollments as separate institutions, but after the merger, the perception of academic offerings was so improved that enrollment went up (MacNeil, 2000). The same was true in Arkansas in 1991, where a task force recommended mergers among the two-year schools in the state, and after the merger, the perceived benefits led to a rapid growth in enrollment (MacNeil, 2000). A different benefit occurred after the creation in 1991 of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, that is, an improvement in transferability was later noted by a key legislative advocate of the merger: “For the first time in my 30 years in the senate, this year, when the student senates brought their annual list of concerns, they did not mention the transfer of credits” (MacNeil, 2000, p. 6). In Maryland in 1998, three community colleges in Baltimore County had low enrollment and “duplicated each other’s courses and didn’t cooperate” (MacNeil, 2000, p. 6); after the merger, the different campuses offered specializations, and staff reported more “flexibility and convenience” (MacNeil, 2000, p. 6). Finally, in Maryland in 2000, another three-school merger among community colleges resulted in “enough clout to convince several four-year schools, such as the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University, to open campuses in an area without a four-year school” (MacNeil, 2000, p. 6).

***Economic development.*** In some instances, a market need for economic development or jobs creation is seen as at least part of the cause, or perhaps the benefit, of a merger. As an example, in the Williamsport-Penn State merger, community leaders believed that the change would “benefit business and industry.... And strengthens Pennsylvania’s continuing commitment to economic development by providing advanced technology training to ensure availability of the work force necessary for existing and newly emerging business and industry” (Breuder, 1989, p. 40). The same was true in the 1991 creation of

the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, where the majority leader in the state Senate cited as a reason for favoring the mergers was the fact that “the shelf life of jobs was becoming increasingly less secure and new technologies were opening up” (Healy, 1996, p. A24). In the 1999 merger proposal of Pratt and Fort Hays, part of the context for this pairing was a new law which aimed to double the statewide job-training capacity of its colleges, with one writer noting that “The old assumption of educators was that someone would enter and leave the higher education system once in a lifetime. With workers needing new job skills more frequently, officials expect to see some Kansans go through the system several times” (Hanna, 1999, p. A24). In 2001, the Governor of Alabama proposed merging and changing Lurleen B. Wallace State Junior College into a four-year campus of the University of North Alabama, noting that “a four-year institution in the Cullman area would boost the potential for economic development and quality job growth for all of Northwest Alabama” (“Alabama Officials Frown,” 2001).

***Other market-driven considerations.*** In some instances, there are other factors which can be attributed to market or environmental pressures, but they can easily be overlooked as seemingly minor. Nevertheless, they can affect the sensibility of a merger. Examples include the pressure of a geographical proximity of the colleges to each other; a historical interaction or relationship, such as sharing facilities or traditions; a fit between the purpose of the school, or program offerings; or even that both schools are public institutions (or alternatively, both private).

The creation of the new University of Manchester is an example, as this was in part “driven by the adjacent proximity of the two institutions, their historic close association and the fact that they continued to share a number of common services including residential halls and counseling, as well as some joint academic departments” (Harman & Harman, 2008, p. 116). Too, in the case of the Century College merger in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, this technical college and a community college “faced each other across a road” but “rarely collaborated” (Healy, 1996, p. A24); in the end, this proximity was cited as helping make sense for the merger. Of course, there is always a caveat of caution offered by Lang (2003): A merger should never be done just because a partner is “willing, available, and

geographically nearby. ‘Because they are there’ might be a plausible reason to climb mountains, but it is a very bad reason to select partners for merger” (p. 32).

### **The Who of Mergers**

In addition to seeking insight into the why or what of mergers, one piece of my inquiry into the literature is to discern the who of mergers. I discover that there are a variety of answers as to who pushed for or initiated mergers, and as well, who resisted them. No dramatic answers emerged, however, such as I found in the previous section on the why of mergers.

It is safe to say that the most prevalent source behind a merger is some level of state government, or more precisely, some elected body, elected official, an agency, or board at the state level. “For public institutions, merger may be mandated by the courts, legislature, or state administration. It may also be sought voluntarily for institutions or regional reasons” (Chambers, 1983, pp. 14-15). Most often, the list narrows down to a state governing board with jurisdiction over higher education institutions, to a local governing body such as a county or city government, or to a local postsecondary authority; in short, the source is often not very far removed from the institutions themselves, and sometimes it is even the college’s own board. As to the federal government, it has not been a factor except when the federal courts have ordered mergers as a remedy in desegregation cases, predominately in the 1960s through the 1980s (this is not a part of my review).

On rare occasions, the literature gives peripheral mention to the role of a study group; these do not, however, come across as having a role of consequence. One example in the literature mentions such a role, and yet at the very same time undercuts the value or effectiveness of such studies: In the Kansas creation of a merged governance board, MacNeil (2000) quotes one state official as noting that the issue of a single governance board first came up in 1973 and that “there were 25 or more studies of governance of post-secondary education” before a change occurred (p. 8). One variation of a study group is seen in the proposed merger of the University of Bridgeport and the University of New Haven, where trustees from each school formed a “‘bridge’ board...[which] would then select and negotiate the

permanent form of merger most likely to help the new institution” (Chambers, 1983, p. 16). In the end, however, its fate illustrates the difficulty of study groups.

It was hoped that such an arrangement could overcome a basic lack of trust between the institutions at all levels and provide a way for them to focus on the future of their mission together. It also asked the boards to place the affairs of the new institution beyond their own more parochial concerns by letting the long view prevail. The plan was not accepted. (p. 16)

The reason for the failure: One school insisted on an acquisition of the other, and the second school “demurred” (p. 16).

It is not unusual to find that one political leader is mentioned as the source of a merger. This single person is sometimes referred to as a champion of the merger, and to no surprise, he or she is someone with recognized authority and prominence. An example of this is found in a case which I use several times in this chapter, namely, the successful 1989 Williamsport-Penn State merger. In this case, it was the Governor who was viewed as the champion of the merger, and who helped it to occur as described in an after-the-merger interview with the president of the new Penn College.

Political reality suggested that for any merger among public institutions to take place, there needed to be a “champion” at the state level. A decision-maker with influence.... After all, one institution would be “going out of business,” leaving the community college “system” with one less member. That would certainly raise concerns among the remaining community colleges....

The obvious person to lead this merger... was the Governor. Almost two years earlier, Gov. Robert P. Casey observed in a meeting... that a merger would likely be the best solution to Williamsport’s sponsorship [financial] dilemma.... In September 1988 Casey observed: “This is a landmark day for higher education in Pennsylvania, because today we affirm our willingness to rise above the ordinary....” With the Governor’s news conference, merger was no longer a local issue; it had catapulted to the state level with the state’s chief executive serving as the primary steward. (Brueder, 1989, p. 39)

Another champion is found in the 1995 creation of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System which merged three separate postsecondary systems for state universities, community colleges, and technical colleges (only the University of Minnesota was left on its own). It was the majority leader in the state Senate who drafted the merger legislation in 1991 and pushed for the change.

As most policy makers know, reorganizing college systems and campuses can pose daunting obstacles to lawmakers, who fear that campuses in their districts will lose money and jobs or will even close. Such concerns did not deter Roger D. Moe, the Democratic majority leader in the state Senate, from drafting the merger legislation in 1991. He used his influence to push the bill through a hesitant Legislature, persuading others that the merger would force colleges to combine



or coordinate academic programs and develop new training programs together. (Healy, 1996, p. A24)

Another researcher (MacNeil, 2001) credited Moe as the one who also stopped an after-the-merger attempt by the legislature and Governor to un-do the merger.

But for three years after the merger, supporters had to beat back attempts in the state House of Representatives to repeal enabling legislation, said state Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe, author of the [original] 1991 legislation. “We also had appropriations vetoed by the Governor,” Moe said. (p. 8)

Those attempts to undo the merger illustrate the other side of the coin, namely, that there are sometimes leaders in resistance to a merger. In the same Minnesota mergers, Healy (1996) notes that, while the majority leader in the state Senate pushed for the mergers there were other legislators who strongly opposed it. Even after the merger, one legislator who was the chairman of the House Education Committee and “an early opponent of the merger, says the merged college [system] has shown more interest in doing ‘dramatic things quickly’ than in running operations smoothly. ‘The jury is still out about whether the impression of the system is favorable,’ he says” (p. A24). Sometimes the juxtaposition of well-titled champions on either side can make for political drama: In the 2001 Wallace State Junior College merger in Alabama, elected officials lined up on both sides of the issue. The Governor of Alabama as well as the local State Representative favored a proposal to change the two-year Lurleen B. Wallace State Junior College in Cullman, Alabama, into a four-year campus of the University of North Alabama. Opposing the move was the Speaker of the House, who also happened to be the President of the two-year college itself. The Speaker said that the state could not afford for the two-year colleges of the state to become four-year institutions, and that “‘I’m hopeful we can continue our system of two-year colleges as we have them today’” (“Alabama Officials Frown,” 2001). Also opposing the move was the Alabama Education Association, and the State Board of Education, which oversees the two-year colleges. Additionally, the Chancellor of the two-year system “said he considered any merger talks... to be a ‘good waste of time’” (“Alabama Officials Frown,” 2001). The proposal failed.

In other instances, it can be peer colleges which are the source of resistance. This includes not only the local community where the college to be merged is located, but sometimes from a broader

audience. An example is the successful 1989 Williamsport-Penn State merger, with President Breuder (1989) writing that “With the exception of the three regional state universities, which perceived the merger as a threat, the reaction to the merger from within the immediate college service area (10 counties) was overwhelmingly positive” (Breuder, 1989, p. 40). Another example is the failure of the proposed merger of Pratt with Fort Hays in order to strengthen Pratt’s financial situation (Hanna, 1999) which was not completed because of resistance from other community colleges (W. Wojciechowski, personal communication, March 15, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

### **Factors Associated with Acceptance and Resistance**

Another reason why I turn to the literature on higher education mergers is for insight into the many factors which are articulated in the literature with acceptance or resistance in mergers—things such as the reason for the merger, a name for the merged school, or perhaps the quality of communication during the merger. I do not attempt a compendium of all such factors. Rather, I seek sufficient insight and enough examples to illustrate that there are indeed factors associated with a merger which may be articulated by participants, by observers, or by researchers as having an effect on acceptance or resistance. As I discuss later in this review, this means that such factors have an effect on organization change.

In the process of looking for such factors, I realized that I was gleaning such factors from the literature in two different ways. The first was from reports about a particular merger, such as I utilized in the previous sections to illustrate different points. These come from sources as diverse as newspaper articles or peer-reviewed journals, and many also tend to be anecdotal, that is, they are set in the context of a story about a particular merger. Nonetheless, they are a valuable source of insight, provide good illustrations of a point, suggest trends when put side by side, provide rich descriptions in relevant contexts, and are utilized heavily by me as well as other researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> I found literature on this proposed merger, but when I did an internet search to see how the merged college was coming along I was surprised to find that the college’s history on the website said nothing about the merger. I contacted an administrator and learned of the outcome, including the reason for the failure. As a researcher, this experience is a caution, namely, that perhaps merger proposals which fail get less written about them compared to mergers that go forward.

A second source that I discovered was the compilations of such factors by researchers who focused on higher education mergers, including the kinds of issues which emerged in those mergers and the kinds of factors which influenced success or resistance. One example is the research of Burke and Biggart (1997), which lists as contributors to success the following items: having a superordinate goal that requires mutual cooperation to achieve; having a balance of power, expertise, and status; creating mutual gain; having a committed leader; having an alignment of rewards, notably the compensation systems; having respect for differences; achieving equity; having realistic assumptions about what can be accomplished, as well as by when; and having good luck. They also offer a list of items that can cause resistance and failure, including these: insufficient clarity about goals and how to measure progress; imbalance of power and control between the two organizations after the merger; imbalance of expertise, status and prestige; overconfident and unrealistic notions about future success of the relationship; lack of a contingency plan when things get off track; and lack of perceived equity in the distribution of valued goods such as jobs.

Another more extensive and well-organized treatment is found in Eastman and Lang's (2001) book, appropriately titled *Mergers in Higher Education: Lessons from Theory and Experience*. They call upon their first-hand involvement in two mergers to offer what they refer to as *observations* and *suggestions* on many of the topics that can come up in a merger. In effect, what Eastman and Lang (2001) do is identify factors which may affect acceptance or resistance depending how they are handled. I think it worthwhile to illustrate through one example, as follows: In a section on the "Dynamics of Negotiation" (p. 136), they note that there are "two possible paths to a merger agreement: courtship and combat" (p. 136). According to which path is chosen, negotiators will have a different posture towards ambiguity in the negotiations: "*Courtship may be associated with issue avoidance and ambiguity, if lead negotiators are intent on preserving a harmonious façade*" (pp. 139-140). If the negotiators instead prefer combat, then this "*tends to produce clarity and comprehensiveness in any resulting agreement*" (p. 140). Too, a smaller institution should beware: "Ambiguity tends to serve the interests of the larger, more

powerful merger partner... [and so the smaller school should] seek a clear, reasonably detailed agreement” (p. 143).

Yet another compendium is Martin, Samels, and Associates’ (1994) book on *Merging Colleges for Mutual Growth: A New Strategy for Academic Managers*. Their “merger handbook” (p. xi) is a collection of chapters written by practitioners who are familiar with the impact of a merger on the various organizational areas of a college, and I find it to be a comprehensive how-to manual as stated in their purpose.

For too long, institutional managers have operated without a set of clearly articulated, practical guidelines for planning and implementing... university mergers built on mutual-growth, mission-complementary principles.... We... arranged the chapters into a comprehensive set of strategic guidelines which may be used in linear fashion (as the volume presents a complete merger planning process) or... selected chapters. (p. xi)

In short, the researchers are identifying factors associated with a merger and showing how they can affect success or resistance. As an example of how they couch their advice, I turn to their chapter on “Strategic Planning for Growth Mergers” (p. 103) where they suggest how to handle a planning schedule.

By outlining a clear and realistic schedule for the planning process, organizers may resist pressures to address all issues at once. This strategy allows for the deferral of various operational and structural decisions until points at which they can be made most effectively. (p. 111)

As another illustration, in the chapter on “An Academic Action Plan” (p. 75), the advice on dealing with collective bargaining agreements includes what I find to be a rather interesting insight.

Avoid confrontation. A complementary growth merger is a rare opportunity for a faculty union legitimately to increase its membership. Administrations must grasp and acknowledge this and not be open to charges of unfairly breaking the union if it is the will of the combined faculty to enlarge its membership through incorporation of non-unionized members from the partner campus. In most institutional mergers, this move will come in the form of a new union election, which should not be viewed as a threat. In the cases of different bargaining units on the two campuses, the resolution would be to hold one coordinated election to determine the final representative. (p. 95)

Each of the 12 chapters in this volume—each authored by different individuals with first-hand experience in a merger—contains the same kinds of detailed insights.

As I looked to all of these sources, I quickly realized that the quantity and variety of anecdotal insights, observations, suggestions, and other factors were overwhelming. Accordingly, I looked for a

simple way to think about them, and at the same time, to provide a conceptual bridge to an organization change model. For example, when Martin, Samels, and Associates discuss the importance of a creating a realistic planning schedule for a merger, they are actually talking about how this one small aspect of a merger's organization change can be managed for better or for worse. There are, however, hundreds of such relatively small factors.

I came to decide on a two-category framework based on whether the factor being articulated in the literature was about *substance* or about *process*. Let me offer two very simple illustrations: If an article noted that the purpose of a merger was to solve a financial problem for a college, then this is about substance. Conversely, if an article noted that the communication in a merger was viewed as poor, then this is about process. As it turned out, I discovered in my readings on organizational change that Burke (2002) used the same schema for two broad types of organizational change, which he referred to respectively as the *content* or *what* of change, and as the *process* or *how* of change. Burke's definitions of content and process in organization change are as follows, and I insert parenthetically within them the words *the merger* to illustrate my use of them: "Content has to do with purpose, mission, strategy, values, and what the organization [the merger] is all about—or should be about" (p. 14). Content is "the *what*" (p. 14), writes Burke. On the other hand, "process has to do with how the change [the merger] is planned, launched, more fully implemented, and once into implementation, sustained" (p. 14). Process is "the *how*" (p. 14). I fully embrace his categorization for my own purposes, and I rely on the details of his definition to guide me as I select a few principal examples of both content and process factors.

***Examples of content.*** I begin by repeating that factors of content or *what* are about purpose, mission, strategy, and values. With that in mind, it is clear to me that the number one content factor associated with acceptance in mergers is the presence of a *market-responsive rationale* which serves as an impelling *raison d'être* for the merger; perhaps it helps make the merger more acceptable to participants because it is a response to a pressure that is known to participants. One example is in a merger previously discussed, namely, the successful 1989 Williamsport-Penn State merger, which solved a critical funding problem for Williamsport because of its previous loss of two financial sponsors in a row (first the local

school systems and then the City of Williamsport). There may be, of course, other compelling market-responsive rationales, which as noted earlier can include financial advantage through cost savings, economies of scale, or efficiencies; strategic or competitive advantage; enhanced student services; or economic development and job creation. On the other hand, a cautionary note is in order: The presence of a market-responsive rationale may not in itself be enough to ensure acceptance. Consider that the rationale driving the proposed Pratt-Fort Hays merger in 1999 was to strengthen Pratt's financial situation after the loss of local funding (Hanna, 1999). The merger did not occur, however, because of resistance from other community colleges (W.Wojciechowski, personal communication, March 15, 2009).

A second content area in the literature includes *cultural and mission issues*, such as academic versus occupational emphases, together with concomitant issues of teaching methodology or the role of faculty in school governance. They tend to be articulated more as internal instances of resistance rather than of acceptance. In the 1991 creation of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, as described by Healy (1996), there was a clash of cultures that emerged in at least one of the several pairs of schools that merged, known as the Century College located in the Twin Cities region.

Like most consolidated institutions, Century combined a technical college and a nearby community college—the two faced each other across a road—that had rarely collaborated. Members of the two faculties now serve on a curriculum-planning committee, but it has been bogged down as both sides continue to explain how they used to teach and administer.

Still, Century has taken some new steps, like using more college-level textbooks in technical programs to address a finding by accreditors that the former technical college gave short shrift to the liberal arts.

The combined missions and practices at Century and elsewhere overwhelm some faculty members, who say the two divisions have different habits, hours, and ideas about academics. They say the momentum of change has distracted people from the basics of education.

“The merger has resulted in much busyness, taking energy away from teaching and learning,” says Carrie Kostroski, a student counselor who heads Century's community-college faculty group. “By trying to combine two cultures and missions, you wind up with no identity. We fear we will lose what we did well before.” (Healy, 1996, p. A24)

Healy (1996) also lists the merging of faculty associations and student associations as the source of culture clashes in the merger. In Montana's 1995 merger of its three boards for technical colleges, community colleges, and universities, “some Montana vo-tech educators also are concerned about the

disappearance of the word ‘vocational’ from the higher education system. They fear it could lead to ‘mission drift’ and possible elimination of some trade and industry programs” (A merger trend? 1994 p. 12).

Another example of a prominently mentioned content factor revolves around a *sense of identity or ownership* as felt by one or more partners to the merger (Hanna, 1999). This can include the name, logo, or the school colors, and also a community sense of ownership and control, of pride, and of identity with the college. These are more often articulated as being problems or concerns associated with the expression of resistance to a merger, both from internal and external constituencies.

Inevitably, the merging colleges... must confront the sensitive issue of postmerger name identification.... From the perspective of the less dominant college or university, institutional pride, distinctiveness, and a natural desire to continue its traditions will weigh heavily in the balance of considerations. For the larger and more powerful institutions, any dilution of its single identity or ambiguity regarding its present institutional name identification may be enough to extinguish its appetite for merger. (Martin, Samels, & Associates, 1994, p. 34)

An example of where a sense of loss was expressed—but a solution found—is the proposed Pratt-Fort Hays merger. Hanna (1999) wrote that the local community was concerned about losing not only a community identity with the college but also as a sense of control. In fact, next to money, Hanna (1999) found that the second most important issue which the “regents must grapple with is power. Locally elected boards of trustees govern community colleges” (p. 9). As an intentional effort to preserve a sense of ownership and identity for Pratt, a compromise left the local board of trustees in place, although with reduced authority: It retained control over buildings and grounds, including their upkeep and security; it retained control over local athletic teams; and they could suggest program initiatives for the college.

As an example of how it tries to preserve Pratt’s separate identity, the affiliation agreement allows Pratt to field its own athletic teams as a local initiative financed by property taxes. “The community colleges are community based and they meet community needs,” Hammond says. “The model needs to have a way in which they can continue to feel comfortable that those needs will be met.” (Hanna, 1999, p. 9)

The president of Fort Hays thought such a compromise important, and said that the proposal would not have gotten its needed support without the compromise (Hanna, 1999). Despite the compromise and as I

noted earlier, the merger did not go forward because of the objections of other community colleges (W. Wojciechowski, personal communication, March 15, 2009).

Another example of the importance of identity is articulated in the Williamsport-Penn State merger. The president of the new Penn College wrote that the initial reaction of administrators to the merger was negative, and among the reasons was the loss of a long-held identity (as well as other content and process issues):

Initially the idea of merging with another college generated serious fears and a negative reaction among WACC administrators involved in the decision-making process. Losing an identity that had taken 24 years to develop, possibly abandoning the community college philosophy and mission, and further compromising control of one's destiny were among the immediate responses to a suggested merger. (Brueder, 1989, p. 38)

The merger did, however, go forward.

MacNeil (2000) writes that in Baltimore County, Maryland, a three-college merger of community colleges in 1998 worked out many issues, but according to one school official, "The biggest problem... was getting the three schools to agree on a logo, image, name and colors" (p. 6). Boulard (2004) writes that in the 2004 merger proposal between Roosevelt University and National-Louis University, the loss of identity was a major issue: Even though the strategic-driven combination which would make it a 14,000-student school and the third-largest private university in Illinois, one issue was the name of the institution. This had proved to be a roadblock three years earlier when the two schools discussed a merger, and in the end, it derailed the merger a second time (Boulard, 2004).

***Examples of process.*** I begin by repeating that factors of process or *how* have "to do with how the change is planned, launched, more fully implemented, and once into implementation, sustained" (Burke, 2002, p. 14). There are many such process factors associated with acceptance or resistance in mergers, such as communication or voice in the process, implementation or operational issues, and a sense of whether the merger was voluntary or whether the partners were equals.

Perhaps the most prominently articulated process factor associated with acceptance is the importance of open *communication and a voice in the process*, including the planning as well as implementation stages; the inverse is cited in stories of resistance. Eastman and Lang (2001) note that



“good communication about organizational restructuring is rare” (p. 187) and that a survey of 148 corporate executives involved in restructuring found that improved communication was the one major change they would have done differently. Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) emphasize that communication, even without active participation, is a counterweight to human nature.

A very clear lesson... is the vital importance of openness—not so much of broad active participations as of a free flow of information about how the process is proceeding. Because of the human issues, because resentment and suspicion are inevitable... at each major step, key stakeholders... should know beforehand, even if only in general terms, what is coming and how it was decided. (p. 114)

Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) note the importance of a “Merger Task Force... comprised of individuals who represent critical constituencies and who are oriented to substantive outcomes while remaining sensitive to issue of process and consensus building” (p. 46). The subsequent planning process for a merger must be extensive and open to many if automatic opposition is to be reduced.

In every merger situation, the plan for the new institution must be developed through a broad, participatory planning process. Unless this plan emerges in clear written form and is subjected to extensive discussion and explication, there is a risk that no shared understanding of the new institution’s character and goals will be achieved. Equally important is the need for an inclusive plan for the merger process itself, allowing individuals and constituencies to see immediately when and how their specific concerns will be addressed... If the growth plan has not been adequately endorsed by faculty, students, and alumni—and each group will have its own reasons for opposition—the costs of merging will typically be prohibitive. (p. 105)

An example of a crafted plan of positive communication and its successful effect is illustrated in the Williamsport-Penn State merger. President Brueder (1989) wrote that a special effort was made to “ensure a positive reaction to the proposed merger within the community college family” (Brueder, 1989, p. 40) by communicating information in multiple and very specific ways: calling a collegewide meeting to announce the merger, framing the merger as the logical next step after the transition two decades earlier from technical college to community college, holding numerous meetings led by the president and at which he answered questions, submitting questions in writing that were answered and posted for everyone to read, providing special briefings to the faculty union and other internal leaders, and having the president of Penn State come to Williamsport to meet with the faculty and staff. The emphasis on communication, said Brueder, paid off: “By sharing information on a regular basis, fears were alleviated

and the customary resistance to change significantly reduced” (1989, p. 40). This same strategy paid off with the community as well.

Community leaders, while caught by surprise with the announcement, expressed enthusiasm and excitement, acknowledging that such a merger would further strengthen their community college and, in particular, benefit business and industry in north central Pennsylvania as well as the community at large. By sharing the fundamental principles upon which the merger was based with the community, officials curtailed any serious concerns within any segment of the college service area about loss of local control and the possibility that the college might evolve into something different. (1989, p. 40).

The inverse is true as well, and the negative effect of poor communication can show up in the context of specific merger issues: In the 1991 creation of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, it came as a surprise to leaders of the institutions that as many as 145 faculty were to be laid off, and also about 100 staff in the system’s central office; the culprit was the lack of information about a decentralization move out to the colleges (Healy, 1996). “‘We weren’t prepared for the system downsizing,’ says Diann Schindler, president of Minneapolis Community and Technical College, a consolidated institution that the auditors criticized for management problems” (Healy, 1996, p. A24).

Sometimes the literature raises *implementation* or *operational* factors as linked to resistance in mergers. These can include personnel issues, such as job security, pay scales, or even working hours. MacNeil (2000) found in the Minnesota system mergers that the unions resisted the merger’s effect on their members:

As the systems merged, so did the individual colleges—the state now has 53 campuses, compared with 63 in 1995—but the unions of each college didn’t make the same leap. “We have different contracts, salaries and work schedules within the system and within some colleges,” said Nancy Livingston, a spokeswoman for the merged system. (MacNeil, 2000, p. 6)

MacNeil also notes that Connecticut ran into the same multi-union issue after its merger of technical and community colleges. Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994), however, note that in some mergers the “structure and predictability afforded by a collective bargaining environment” (p. 37) helped the merger process. Sometimes the implementation issue can be something as mundane as the internal operational systems: In the Minnesota systems merger, Healy (1996) found that the reaction inside the merged colleges was negative at least in part because internal operational systems were not working properly.

Many on the campuses say this downsizing, along with accompanying changes in computer systems and college missions and practices, has been too much, too fast. Some paychecks did not go out on time, and some new telephone systems and student-services offices have not worked well. (p. A24)

These and other issues, wrote Healy, no doubt contributed to the feeling of a leading legislator that (as noted earlier) “the merged college has shown more interest in doing ‘dramatic things quickly’ than in running operations smoothly” (p. A24).

In some mergers, the question of whether a merger was *voluntary* or *compelled* is articulated as a factor associated with acceptance or resistance. An example of a voluntary merger, where both partners have a choice as to the merger, is seen in the successful merger that created a new University of Manchester in 2004 as described by Harman and Harman (2008). In this instance, the merger was a self-initiated merger between two colleges who “strategically planned to create a new university in the north England with the capacity and expertise to compete effectively with Oxford, Cambridge and the leading London universities” (p. 113). As a voluntary merger, it “was also achieved with comparatively little conflict and the kind of anxiety and disturbances that have characterized even many successful mergers” (p. 113). Other successful mergers point to the importance of *equality* among the institutions, that is, there was no sense of one being strong and the other weak, or one taking over the other. The same University of Manchester merger illustrates this: Both of the colleges were volunteers, both would gain equally from the merger by sharing a competitive strategy, and both were already “strong institutions” (p. 99).

### **Framing the Case through Open Systems Theory**

In this second section of the literature review, I find a theoretical grounding for my study through an open systems theory of organizational change with a special focus on the role of inertia or homeostasis, on the concept of multiple sub-systems, and on the concept of a psychological man who reacts to change as loss. In doing so, I create a conceptual framework for analyzing and describing the nexus between the environmental or market pressures on TCSG, the decision to seek cost savings through mergers, and the resistance of community leaders.

## The Original Open Systems Model

Open systems theory traces its roots to the general systems theory of the life sciences as traced to Von Bertalanffy (1950). As he himself notes some two decades later, “So far as can be ascertained, the idea of a ‘general system theory’ was first introduced by the present author” (Von Bertalanffy, 1969, pp. 10-11) although he acknowledges that “the systems concept [itself] has a long history” (p. 11). In contrast to the presumptions of classical science rooted in the predictable linear behavior of the parts of a whole, a systems’ view focuses on the “organized complexity” (p. 34) of the whole—it “is a general science of ‘wholeness’” (p. 37). In addition, the whole as a system must be viewed not as a closed system that is “considered to be isolated from their environment” (p. 39), but instead as an open system which continuously interacts with and is shaped by its environment. Not only is “every living organism... essentially an open system” (p. 39) but the same principles that govern the interaction of the living organism with its environment are the basis for a broader view of general systems which applies to multiple disciplines.

As other researchers put it, the common thread is the notion that, as with a living organism, a human “organization is ‘open’ because of its dependency on and continual interaction with the environment in which it resides” (Burke, 2002, p. 43). As Druckman, Singer, and Van Cott (1997) put it, “organizations must be compatible with their environments, which include all the external, social, economic, and political conditions that influence their actions” (p. 2).

One of the most often-referenced models of an open system is that of Katz and Kahn (1978), whose characteristics of open systems have been applied to the widest spectrum of organizations, including businesses as well as education organizations. Their classic description of an open system includes the following nine characteristics, many of which stem from the work of Von Bertalanffy (1950, 1969): An organization needs to *import energy* from the external environment; an organization does the activities or *through-puts* for which it exists, such as creating a new product or providing a service; the results of those activities are the *outputs* of the organization; an organization’s structure can be seen as a *cycle of events*, that is, it is “events rather than things which are structured” (p. 166); an organization

suffers from the same *negative entropy* that moves all open systems “toward disorganization or death” (p. 167), and to prevent this an open system must import energy; in order for an open system to provide the outputs sought by the environment, it must stay on target through *information input*, negative feedback, and the coding process, with an emphasis on negative feedback “to correct its deviations from course” (p. 167); these corrections result in a *steady state*, dynamic homeostasis or equilibrium which is accomplished by continual, and offsetting adjustments, namely, “an adjustment in one direction is counted by a movement in the opposite direction and both movements are approximate rather than precise in their compensatory nature” (p. 168); at first such dynamic interactions tend to facilitate *differentiation* but later lead to an organizational stiffness through the growth of internal regulatory mechanisms; and in the early stages the differentiation facilitates *equifinality* in an organization by which it gets to the same end by any number of paths, but this is reduced as an organization develops structures and processes.

### **The Role of Resistance in an Open System**

One key distinction related to the role of resistance from Katz and Kahn is that, although an organization must be responsive to its environment in order to prosper, its conceptual tendency towards a dynamic homeostasis is a bias in favor of not changing. This is implicit in the importance placed by Katz and Kahn on the need for negative input to steer an organization away from what it is already doing, that is, it will continue to do what it has been doing without corrective input. In addition, this is implicit from their observation that organizations characteristically tend to develop rigidity in internal structures over time, which implies a bias inherent to its internal components in favor of doing what it has been doing and a resistance to the flexibility that the organization may need in order to respond to change. To further understand this resistance of an open system to change, Burke (2002) suggests two important contributions which help to link open systems to my own research, namely, on the importance of a system’s internal parts, and on a closer look at the nature of equilibrium in an open system.

First, Burke (2002) writes that it is not enough to look merely at an open system as a whole, but rather, it is important to remember that it is composed of many parts.

Although their boundaries are permeable and open, organizations are also entities with internal elements or parts that are easy to identify: physical and technological parts, such as buildings, machines, desks... task- or work-related elements, such as specific jobs, roles... and suborganizations or sub-systems, such as departments, divisions.... Most important, there are the people: male or female, African American or Irish American, skilled or semiskilled, old or young, and so on. All these parts compose a whole, a total organization that represents an entity different from the simple sum of its elements and dimensions. (p. 44)

Accordingly, when change in an organization occurs, both the whole and the parts must be kept “in mind... because the change of one part will affect other parts, perhaps all parts eventually” (p. 45). I note, too, that in support of such a configuration theory, Druckman, Singer, and Van Cott (1997) find that “perhaps as an extension of systems thinking (Katz & Kahn, 1978), the importance for performance of a simultaneous fit among *all* organizational characteristics as well as with the organization’s environment has become clear” (p. 23). Second, Burke (2002) considers more closely the role of equilibrium in an organization, which he makes clear is the mechanism not only of needed change but also of resistance to change. The logic is this: As the conceptual regulator of change for the organization, the steady state allows change as needed to stay in sync with the environment, and yet, it is also the source of resistance to change because of the innate tendency of a steady state towards inertia, that is, to stay as it is. Burke reminds us that the steady state is not one that is actually static or unmoving, but rather, it is constantly adjusting as needed to counteract changes and to maintain an equilibrium that is correct or appropriate, so to speak, for that organization (as inherent to its character or what the organization is about). “An organization’s apparent equilibrium is actually up at one moment (during one event in the cycle) and down at another, but the overall averaging of these ups and downs gives the appearance of a stationary or steady-state situation” (p. 47). The very tendency to return to an average, however, is also the source of resistance to change in a steady state. “Part and parcel of equilibrium periods is inertia. One can begin to understand why it is so difficult for systems to change” (p. 66).

### **The Mechanisms of Resistance**

The next piece along the link between open systems theory and my own research is how and why this resistance actually occurs in an open system, that is, the mechanics of it, and especially through the human beings that in part comprise the internal components of the organization. Burke (2002) goes on to

describe how six researchers frame the resistance of human beings to change through specific categories or lists: First, O'Toole (1995) provides a laundry list of 33 hypotheses as to why organizations are resistant to change, ranging from “continual change is not a natural condition of life; hence resistance... is a healthy human instinct,” to “the best and the brightest have set us on the current course” (Burke, 2002, p. 66). Second, a three-dimension framework of resistance is provided by Gersick (1991), that is, three “powerful barriers to change” (Burke, 2002, p. 66) which are cognition, motivation, and obligation: The cognition framework centers on a rationality that shapes “our awareness and thinking, how we interpret reality, and how we consider choices for action” (p. 66); the motivation framework centers on an affective view of resistance to change, that is, resistance is a way to reduce the “loss and uncertainty” (p. 66) which accompanies change; and the obligation framework or barrier to change focuses on how participants’ expectations of how the “system is supposed to operate” (p. 66) creates a resistance to change. Third, the psychiatrist Kubler-Ross (1969) sees the reaction of individuals to personally significant change in an organization as similar to the five stages of grief which individuals experience in a terminal illness: shock and denial, anger, bargaining or attempts to postpone, depression, and acceptance (Burke, 2002, p. 92). Fourth, Brehm (1966) argues that resistance to change is not because of the change itself, but rather, to *forced* change. As Burke explains, “people are not simply and naturally resistant to change. What comes closer to a universal truth about human behavior is that people resist the imposition of change” (Burke, 2002, p. 93). Brehm’s theory of *psychological reactance* help to explain this human phenomenon, namely, when one’s feeling of freedom is in jeopardy, the immediate reaction is likely to be an attempt to regain this sense of freedom. Burke adds that “the degree of ease and success with which an organization change is introduced is... directly proportional to the amount of choice that people feel they have in determining and implementing the change” (p. 93). Fifth, Hambrick and Cannella (1989) see resistance in three categories (Burke, 2002), namely: *Blind* resistance is when people are afraid of any and all change; *political* resistance is when “the persons involved believe that they stand to lose something of value” (p. 93); and *ideological* resistance is when “the resistance comes from honest, intellectual differences and/or genuine beliefs, feelings, or philosophies that are different” (p. 94). Sixth,

one other perspective on the resistance of human beings to change is that of Levinson (1962, 1973, 1976), who argued, as Burke (2002) puts it, that whether change “is resisted or embraced, all change is nevertheless a loss experience, particularly a loss of familiar routines. And the more that what one leaves behind is psychologically important, the more likely one’s behavior will take the form of resistance” (p. 92).

While most of those six could be utilized as a framework for my research, Levinson offers three concepts which especially appeal to me in understanding the resistance of humans to change in an open system, namely, of a psychological contract, of individuals as systems, and of a sense of loss.

***The psychological contract.*** The first of Levinson’s contributions to my conceptual model is his notion of a *psychological contract* between an organization and its members, which is unwritten and yet defines expectations of reciprocity between an organization and its members. For the employee in a workplace, it affects the employee’s view of self, the employee’s relationships with peers in a group, and even the employee’s relationship to the stuff of his or her job—its duties, processes, equipment, and so forth.

The organization has certain minimal conditions and requirements which must be met if he is to remain a member. Similarly, the person demands of the organization minimal guarantees of continuity, financial reward, and other acknowledgments that he is contributing to a larger organizational purpose.... The frequency with which these expectations seemed to have an almost obligatory quality was impressive to us. As people expressed their expectations, or even where expectations were tacit, it was as if the company or other people were duty-bound to fulfill them.... We evolved the concept of the “psychological contract.” The... contract is rarely made formal.... The psychological contract is a series of mutual expectations of which the parties to the relationship may not themselves be even dimly aware but which nonetheless govern their relationship to each other.... It became evident to us that reciprocation could be understood as the way in which the contract is affirmed, altered, or denied in day-to-day work experience within the organization. (1962, pp. 19-21)

In short, people “form bonds with organizations and develop expectations of how organizations should behave toward them.... In effect, people and organizations form unconscious psychological contracts” (1976, pp. 90-91).

***Systems.*** The second piece from Levinson (1976) is his notion of multiple layers of systems, each overlapping and each with its own equilibrium, namely: The organization as an open system in an



environment seeks its steady state; the individual within the organization is an open system and defines its steady state through a psychological contract; and further, the individual is himself or herself composed of sub-systems inherent to humans and which seek equilibrium. Levinson's terminology is more reminiscent of Von Bertalanffy (1950) rather than of Katz and Kahn (1978), but it is clear that Levinson is talking about open systems: "All living matter is embedded in a context.... We cannot really understand people and their behavior unless we take the system into account, too" (1976, p. 6). As systems themselves, individuals are composed of internal biological and psychological sub-systems which comprise a system and in which an equilibrium is sought as in any system.

We must also follow a systems approach to the person himself. Psychoanalytic theory is the only comprehensive theory of personality which seeks to understand, describe, and explain man's motivations.... It takes... the inner forces, both biological and psychological, which make man uniquely human. It conceives of these forces as sub-systems of an integrated total system which we speak of as personality, and of that total system in interaction with its environment.... Personality is the totality of the complex interaction of feelings, thoughts, and behavior as a series of interrelated sub-systems and the whole as a system in equilibrium. (pp. 5-6).

In short, he writes, "a person is a system within a system" (p. 6).

**Loss.** The third piece from Levinson (1976) is his view of a clear nexus between the psychological contract, a violation of the contract, and a sense of loss. His logic is in three parts: First, on the psychological contract, he writes that the expectation of both parties is that the contract is *binding*, that is, it is to be upheld.

However unconsciously they do this, they [people] form bonds with organizations and develop expectations of how organizations should behave toward them. Organizations foster such expectations not only by the kind of work they do, but also by the attitudes they take toward their employees, the benefits and services they provide, and the ideologies they hold forth. In effect, people and organizations form unconscious psychological contracts.... The striking feature of the psychological contract is that nowhere is it written. But if each party tacitly assumes that such a contract exists, each expects the other to act in keeping with it. (1976, pp. 90-91)

Second, on *violations* of the contract, he writes that while some change is to be expected, some change goes too far.

Change is a fact of life. Every man must cope in some fashion with the inevitability of change.... In the course of his working life, he moves from the status of neophyte to veteran. He may be promoted or transferred, sustain an injury, learn new skills or give up old ones. Meanwhile the company will be changing in various ways. The very name of the company may change in a merger. Policies change. Supervisors, peers, and subordinates come and go. The initial

psychological contract is subject to significant change over the period of the relationship between man and organization... The fact of change is not new, [but]... those changes which are interpreted as violations of the psychological contract result in anger, withdrawal, hostility, and similar reflections of distress... Violation occurs when the changing expectancies of one party are imposed on and threaten the state of interdependence... (1962, pp. 103-104)

It is not just the change itself which is of importance, but rather, it is the *imposition* or unilateral nature of the change which creates the violation. He repeats: "When one or another party to that contract unilaterally violates it, then the other reacts with all of the anger and frustration that usually follows an experience of being unfairly treated" (1976, p. 91). Implicit in this is the fact that it is the offended party who judges whether the change has been imposed. Third, on the sense of loss, Levinson makes clear that *loss occurs* whenever any change violates the psychological contract—or in system terminology, any change which upsets the equilibrium of the person in a system and as a system themselves. The imposition of change leads to loss because it takes away some piece of the contract as psychologically negotiated and disturbs an equilibrium which was important to the individual, that is, an equilibrium to which the person was attached. He argues that, just as a tree experiences the loss of attachments when it is uprooted, so do people in the face of such change.

The human experience is much like that of the tree. We attach ourselves to other people, places, things, goals, wishes, aspirations, skills, knowledge and even life styles. The experience of loss is the reaction to the destruction of attachments. It includes mixed feelings of deprivation, helplessness, sorrow, and anger in varying degrees. (1973, p. 67)

"All change," he concludes, "is loss" (p. 68).

For Levinson, the significance to organization change is that the leadership of an organization must recognize this relationship between contract, change, and loss; must anticipate it; and must have strategies to deal with it.

Most organizational change flounders because the experience of loss is not taken into account... Organizational change is best effected when people have a clear understanding of why the change is necessary, opportunity to critically cross-examine the leader and verify for themselves the necessity for change, occasions to mourn the loss of the old which must be given up, and modes of action by which they themselves can participate in the change. (1976, p. 83-66)

As one review (Diamond, 2003) of Levinson's work puts it, "Application of the psychological contract between employer and employee requires perpetual dialogue between the parties, acknowledging the dynamics of mutual needs and expectations, conscious and unconscious" (p. 3). When change occurs in

an organization, it may be experienced as a personal loss by members, because so much of their self is defined in the status quo of the contract with the organization as well as with the psychodynamics intertwined with the member's self view. Organization leadership should "acknowledge that changes in the workplace are not effectively implemented without processes that acknowledge participants' feelings of attachment to routines and structures and the pain of relinquishing social defences and embracing the uncertainty of the future workplace" (p. 7).

### **Higher Education Context**

Some three decades after Katz and Kahn (1978), their principal points remain as the starting point for the writings of others on open systems theory, including the work of Bess and Dee (2008) on colleges and organizations as open systems. Within their depiction of open systems theory, three especially relevant points are these: First, they argue that colleges are open systems, and as such, they must be responsive to the environment to ensure the receipt of needed resources.

Colleges and universities are surrounded by a variety of forces that induce the organization to respond in some way. External constituencies (*e.g.*, state governments, parents, granting agencies) provide resources for higher education and also set formal and informal expectations for institutional outputs (*e.g.*, values, skills, and competencies in graduating students and new knowledge that can be used in social, commercial, and esthetic ventures). Because of these influences, institutions develop and execute both strategic and practical plans that accommodate the evolving needs of society and fluctuating resource availability. (p. 90)

While Katz and Kahn had viewed open systems theory as applying to both corporate as well as education organizations, they saw a difference when it came to inputs: Whereas for businesses, the environment is the market place, and the source of inputs is money from the selling of things for a profit, "universities and public agencies depend rather on bequests and legislative appropriations" (Katz and Kahn, 1976, p. 164). Of course, as noted in Bess and Dee's broader interpretation, today's entrepreneurial college sees it differently.

Second, Bess and Dee (2008) go one step further with Katz and Kahn's point about the influence of the external environment upon internal components, and too, with Levinson's point about individuals as sub-systems themselves in search of equilibrium.

Systems theory... is helpful in analyzing and explaining the behavior of two fundamental complex institutions in all societies—organizations and individuals. Both organizational and individual systems operate well when they are successful in balancing the often competing forces influencing them. The primary forces affecting them are both inside and outside the system. An organization must address the demands and expectations of the recipients of its outputs—its products and services—while at the same time attending to its need to link and coordinate its internal component parts—departments and people. Individuals, similarly, must be concerned with balancing the expectations of elements outside themselves against the requirement that their [individual] internal needs be met. (p. 93)

This individual component, they say, is explained through social systems theory, which “fits within general systems theory and can be useful in understanding how human beings as bounded systems interact with their environments” (pp. 109-110).

Third, Bess and Dee (2008) explore the usual notion of an open system as being in a steady state, or homeostasis, but they develop it in the context of a college and also raise a crucial juxtaposition about change and resistance. Should the leaders of a college embrace the minor change or incremental approach of a survival-enhancing steady state, or should they view such equilibrium as the source of resistance to fundamental change?

If we assume that organizations are constantly changing, then equilibrating forces such as standard operating procedures and long-standing traditions may act as inhibitors to ongoing change and development. It is, therefore, important for higher education leaders to understand whether leadership means bringing an organization (especially a successful one that may seem to have gone astray) back into equilibrium or pressing an organization toward continuous change. (p. 799)

The answer, they write, is for leaders to “aim toward an optimum balance between the two” (p. 799).

### **Summary**

In the first main section of my literature review I found the following: The dominant definition of a merger is the act of transferring control from one institution to another, but there are a considerable number of nuances regarding the types of mergers. The dominant conceptual theme among mergers is a market-driven rationales, and while this is often if not usually centered on cost savings or economies of scale, in other instances the rationale may be strategic positioning, better service to students, or economic and job development. In the past few decades the principal initiator of mergers was a governmental body, although a political champion might also have a role. When looking for characteristics articulated with

acceptance or resistance in mergers, it is useful to categorize such factors as either a *what* or substance, versus the *how* or process.

In the second main section, I found the following: Open systems theory sees organizations as responsive to the pressures of its environment through internal mechanisms which adjust as needed to maintain a steady state, but this homeostasis can also be an inherent source of resistance to change; this inherent resistance includes the internal components of an open system which themselves are systems, including the individuals within an organization who themselves have homeostatic needs. One other way to conceptualize the relationship between individuals and the organization is as a psychological contract between organization and the individual. Violations of this contract occur when organizational change takes place without the consent or at least the participation of individuals. Such change is perceived as loss, and this sense of loss may lead to resistance to the change.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I begin by describing the way in which my interests in the merger plan of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) led to my purpose, namely, to explore, understand, and describe the resistance of community leaders to the plan. This purpose led me in a very natural way to the choice of a qualitative study and to the intense focus on context provided by a case study, which I have bounded as the community leaders' resistance to TCSG's merger plan. I lay out my method of data collection through document archives and face-to-face interviews, I describe my data management and analysis approach, and I address the ways in which I ensure trustworthiness.

#### **The Choice of a Qualitative Case Study**

As Merriam (1998) describes the essence of qualitative study with a simple elegance, it is the search for “meaning in context” (p. 1), and “understanding the meaning of the process or experience constitutes the knowledge to be gained” (p. 4) by the researcher. The meaning cannot be divorced from the context, and the context is for the most part constructed by people.

Qualitative researchers *are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world and the experiences they have in the world. Qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p. 7). (Merriam, 1998, p. 6)

Accordingly, for Merriam a qualitative study is “an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5).

Other qualitative researchers embrace those same core features: Ezzy (2002) writes that “qualitative research methods are particularly good at examining and developing theories that deal with the role of meanings and interpretations” (p. 3). Stake (1995) notes that, while “there is no single wellspring of qualitative research” (p. 35), it is distinguished by “understanding as the purpose of

inquiry.... understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists” (p. 37). Part of that complexity is the context, and “qualitative researchers treat the uniqueness of individual cases and contexts as important to understanding. Particularization is an important aim, coming to know the particularity of the case” (p. 39). Creswell (2007) says pointedly that qualitative research is “the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). It is no surprise, he writes, that qualitative research might be preferred when “a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue” (p. 40) is needed; when “we want to understand the contexts or settings” (p. 40) experienced by a participant; or when “we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices” (p. 40).

This search for meaning in context which characterizes qualitative research is a reflection of the dominance of a social constructionist paradigm or worldview. Its core premise is that reality is a human creation constructed through the interactions of individuals and groups, each with their own “frame of reference that consists of his or her set of values, concepts, and ideas. These perceptual frames affect what we take note of, what we ignore, and how we interpret what we experience” (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 14). Consequently, multiple perceptions of reality are possible, and hence the need for a researcher to understand the meaning of a phenomenon as held by the participant—the classic core of qualitative research.

If a qualitative study is good at finding the meaning-in-context as held by participants, the approach of a qualitative case study is even better suited to do so because of its intense focus on, as Stake (1995) puts it, “the particularity of the case” (p. 39).

A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case. A single leaf, even a single toothpick, has unique complexities—but rarely will we care enough to submit it to case study. We study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its contexts. Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. (p. xi)

Yin (2003) writes that, among the choice of qualitative approaches, a case study is “the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed” (p. 1), because it facilitates the investigation of “contextual conditions—believing that they might be highly pertinent to... [the] phenomenon of study”

(p. 13). Hammersley and Gomm (2002) write that “‘case study’ refers to research that investigates a few cases, often just one, in considerable depth” (p. 3). Merriam (1998) defines it this way: “A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii).

The notion of boundedness is a key characteristic of a case study, namely, it serves to narrow, limit, and focus the case. In fact, Merriam contends that the case study approach is defined by that very sense of boundedness: “I have concluded that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (p. 27). This object is “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. I can ‘fence in’ what I am going to study” (p. 27). Creswell (2007) describes case study with this same emphasis on boundedness and notes that the size of the bounded case can be “one individual, several individuals, a group, an entire program, or an activity” (p. 74). Hammersley and Gomm (2002) note, however, that one advantage of a bounded focus upon a smaller number of cases is the obvious: “Other things being equal, the fewer cases investigated, the more information can be collected about each of them” (p. 2).

### **Case Selection and Description**

My case selection was an evolution from my initial choice of topic and purpose. As a vice president at North Metro Technical College, I saw firsthand the initial stages of the proposal to merge Chattahoochee and North Metro Technical Colleges, and too, the first hints of local community concerns. As TCSG’s merger plan evolved and expanded, I found myself wanting to understand the resistance of community leaders for a variety of reasons, including professional, intellectual, policy, and even political. Such motives as a valid basis of research topic and purpose are well supported by qualitative research texts in the social sciences (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), which note that the choice of topic can be driven by factors as varied as one’s own personal or professional interest in a topic, a desire to do something practical or to improve something, an intellectual goal of understanding something for its own sake, or even the opportunity and practicality of being able to do the research.



As I began to focus on the topic, I quickly turned away from a comparative study of the resistance, that is, I did not want to know whether community leaders in a particular demographic category, geographical location, merger pair, or even individual college were more or less likely to be against it. Instead, I wanted to know *why* community leaders on the whole were in resistance to the mergers. I knew, too, that I wanted to understand this in terms of the community leaders' *own* perspective, in their *own* community context, and in their *own* words—I felt as though they were trying to tell their story, and I wanted to understand it. This led me inexorably to the choice of a qualitative case study, and it led me just as certainly to a decision on the bounds of my case, namely: My case is the community leaders around the state who questioned, resisted, or objected to the plan—it is bounded by the dynamic interaction between the merger plan and the resistance.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

To identify community leaders for the study, I utilized purposeful sampling techniques to identify and select a pool of community leaders from around the state to be included in the case. I did so by, first, identifying mergers in which to look for respondents, and second, by identifying specific respondents. This targeting is deliberate: As Merriam (1998) describes it, “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). The researcher “first identifies the case—the bounded system, the unit of analysis—to be investigated,” (p. 65) and then uses “purposeful sampling... to select the sample within the case, just as it is used to select the case itself” (p. 66). In short, the qualitative researcher deliberately uses “nonprobability sampling” (p. 66) to target respondents that may have the most to offer about the phenomenon being studied. Creswell (2007) writes that “purposeful sampling... in qualitative research... means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). Ezzy (2002) notes that a “purposeful sample is one that provides a clear criterion or rationale for the selection of participants, or places to observe, or events, that relates to the research questions” (p. 74).

My application of purposeful sampling techniques to identify mergers and community leaders relied on the examination of documents such as minutes of meetings or news reports, and key informants—contacts and referrals at the state level or in communities—as a source of anecdotes pointing me to potential respondents.

### **Identification of Four Mergers**

Applying purposeful sampling first to the selection of mergers, I chose four that seemed to have generated more resistance and, therefore, would be better sources of community leaders for the case. While I found evidence of resistance in all six of the mergers, I settled upon the four which came up more often in my sampling techniques as the ones which I should look into. For example, one key informant who wished to keep his identity hidden told me that community leaders in the City of LaGrange (part of the West Central and West Georgia merger) were ready to “tar and feather” (personal communication, February, 2010) state leaders; this of course encouraged me to look for community leaders there. Additionally, four mergers was a comfortable number for “maximum variation sampling” (Merriam, 1998, p. 62) reasons, that is, if the perspectives of community leaders differed among the mergers then choosing participants from four would give at least major variations a chance to emerge (Ezzy, 2002).

Of the four, one was the original or first set of merging colleges, which were Appalachian Technical College, Chattahoochee Technical College, and North Metro Technical College. It is distinctive not as one of the more publically visible sources of resistance but for other reasons: It was the initial focus of the budget-induced discussions on cost savings, of the state decision to merge schools, and importantly, of the appearance of community resistance. It also had a formal task force that had been appointed to study the possibility of a merger, and this offered me the opportunity to find participants who were familiar with or had served on it; no other merger had such a group. The additional three sets of merging colleges which I targeted as a source for participants were chosen on the basis of having the greater potential of community leaders who were in resistance to the mergers. The three were Flint River

Technical College and Griffin Technical College, Southeastern Technical College and Swainsboro Technical College, and West Central Technical College and West Georgia Technical College.<sup>2</sup>

### **Identification of Community Leaders**

The second step in my search for participants followed the same purposeful logic through document review and key informant referrals in order to find community leaders who were in resistance to the merger of their college. In practice, this task proved to be rather straightforward: The community leaders who had expressed resistance to the mergers had already self-identified or revealed themselves by their utterances or actions, and all I had to do was to find them. The use of key informants, especially at the local level, worked especially well. I simply asked local staff of the technical college, local press, and other local community leaders if they could assist me with the identification of individuals who resisted the mergers. I found that it was not unusual for me to get the same prospective participant's name from more than one key informant, and I found also that these were often confirmed by my examination of a document or media report. In the end of my sampling process, I ended up with more potential participants than I needed, and so I subsequently prioritized them on the basis of what I learned about them from my identification efforts. I set a minimum of three participants from each merger, because I wanted to give all perspectives the chance to emerge. In the end, I chose a minimum of three and a maximum of five respondents from the various mergers. The number of respondents selected from each merger set are shown in Table 2.

The distribution of these respondents *within* each merger set is important to note. To my surprise—although in retrospect it should not have been—my purposeful sampling found that such potential respondents were skewed in their geographical distribution toward communities associated with a particular college in the merger pair. This was not, however, cause for methodological concern, but rather, this was taking me as a researcher exactly where purposeful sampling was intended to have taken me, namely, to a pool of resisters. The fact that they were skewed in this way began to tell me that there

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<sup>2</sup> The two mergers not included were Coosa Valley Technical College and Northwestern Technical College, which became Georgia Northwestern Technical College, and East Central Technical College and Valdosta Technical College, which became Wiregrass Technical College.

was potentially a shared perspective held by those leaders which had something to do with being in that community—it mattered somehow.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2

*The Source of Respondents by Merger*

| New Name<br>and Main Campus                                     | Number of<br>Respondents |
|---|--------------------------|
| Chattahoochee Technical College<br>Marietta, Cobb County        | Four                     |
| Southern Crescent Technical College<br>Griffin, Spalding County | Five                     |
| Georgia Northwestern Technical College*<br>Rome, Floyd County   | Zero                     |
| Southeastern Technical College<br>Vidalia, Toombs County        | Four                     |
| West Georgia Technical College<br>Waco, Haralson County         | Three                    |
| Wiregrass Technical College*<br>Valdosta, Lowndes County        | Zero                     |

\* Note: Purposeful sampling did indicate that there were community leaders in opposition in these two mergers, but the two mergers were not included in the case as a source of respondents because of case size considerations.

**Data Collection**

Qualitative researchers may differ on the categorizations of what constitutes data—observations, interviews, documents, audiovisual, physical artifacts, and so forth—but they concur, as Merriam (1998)

<sup>3</sup> In the fair and balanced mantra of our modern times, it is an automatic reaction to wonder if my study should be a comparative pro and con study, that is, non-resistance community leaders versus resistance community leaders. This is not the purpose of my study, however, which instead seeks to explore, understand, and describe *only* the perspectives of the resisters; to focus in depth on their perspectives; and to bound the case as the dynamic juxtaposition of the TCSG merger plan versus the whole of the community leaders who resisted. In short, the orientation of my research is the resistance versus TCSG, and not the resistance versus the non-resistance.

reminds us, that the overriding goal of qualitative data collection is to find the meaning-in-context which is at the heart of the study.

[Data collection]... is about collecting data through interviews, observations, and documents, or in Wolcott's (1992) "common, everyday terms" (p. 19), data collection is about asking, watching, and reviewing. It should be kept in mind, however, that "the idea that we 'collect' data is a bit misleading. Data are not 'out there' waiting collection, like so many rubbish bags on the pavement. For a start, they have to be noticed by the researcher, and treated as data for the purposes of his or her research..." (Dey, 1993, p. 15). The data collection techniques used, as well as the specific information considered to be "data" in a study, are determined by the researcher's theoretical orientation, by the problem and purpose of the study and by the sample selected. (Merriam, pp. 69-70)

Two forms or sources of data collection which are often utilized in qualitative research are document archives and interviews, and those were the focus of my own data collection.

### **Document Archives**

Document research or review is a consistent theme among qualitative research. Stake (1995) asserts that "almost every study finds some need for examining newspapers, annual reports, correspondence, minutes of meetings, and the like" (p. 68). Yin (2002) finds that "documentary information is likely to be relevant to every case study topic" (p. 85), and "for case studies, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p. 87). Merriam (1998) writes that the use of documents "is not much different from using interviews or observations" (p. 120). Stake (1995) says that "documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly" (p. 68), and the recorder might actually be "a more expert observer than the researcher" (p. 68).

In my own data collection, I sought documents by relying primarily on various internet search engines, and I looked extensively among news articles and news stories, minutes of meetings, or even blogs. The data about the mergers in Georgia was not to be found in scholarly reports or journal articles, but rather, in the day-to-day media events of communities around Georgia. As an example, a search at NewsLibrary.com using the search terms *Swainsboro*, *Southeastern* and *merger* yielded news articles in papers from cities as diverse as Newnan, LaGrange, and Savannah—but none from either Swainsboro (home city of Swainsboro Tech) or Vidalia (home city of Southeastern Tech). Apparently the newspapers

in those specific towns did not participate in such a global search engine, and I found that I needed to use the general Google search engine search or to look in the specific archives of such newspapers (if an archive search engine was available at the newspaper's website). This worked quite well, and a search of, for example, the archive of *The LaGrange Daily News* using the terms *west*, *technical*, and *merger* yielded a dozen useful articles. In another instance, from a general Google search, I got the title of an article but had to physically look in the bound volumes at the weekly newspaper publisher's office to find the actual article (which I then took a photo of using my phone—a modern-day research accessory). In all search instances, I continued forward on any relevant and promising path until it was exhausted or until repetition had set in.

Minutes of meetings were found by going to specific websites, for example, to the website of a technical college. In one other instance, a reference by an interviewee to an event at a county commission meeting took me to those minutes, and also to a local television station that recorded such meetings. The discovery of such audio and video material during my document review was quite rare (and regrettably so, because I would have loved to have found audio tapes of some of the community-based meetings about the mergers).

## **Interviews**

The use of interviews is a mainstay of the qualitative researcher's search for meaning-in-context. Merriam (1998) finds that "in all forms of qualitative research, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews" (p. 71), and the most common interview is the "person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another" (p. 71).

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe... feelings, thoughts, and intentions... behaviors that took place at some previous point in time... how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world... The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective ([Patton, 1990,] p. 196). (Merriam, 1998, p. 72)

Stake (1995) would add—in a view resonating with a social constructionist paradigm—that multiple interviewees may actually have "multiple views of the case. The interview is the main road to multiple realities" (p. 64). Yin (2003) couches interviews as an "essential source of case study evidence because

most case studies are about human affairs... and well-informed respondents can provide important insights into a situation” (p. 92).

***The degree of structure.*** Included in a decision to use interviews are a series of other decisions to be made by a qualitative researcher. First, the extent to which the interview will be structured, semistructured, or unstructured (Merriam, 1998), namely: For a qualitative case researcher, the structured interview is too rigid and does not allow for exploration, while the unstructured interview is far too exploratory. It is the semistructured interview which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 74).

For my own research, I chose the format of a semistructured interview, that is, a series of open-ended questions. This should be of no surprise given my research purpose, my social constructionist paradigm, my qualitative study methodology, and my case study approach. The semistructured or focused interview was an ideal choice which allowed me to keep the flow of the interview moving down the needed data-collection path while also allowing interviewees the latitude to go down the path as far—or not—as they wished to do so. I achieved this balance by utilizing an interview guide (as found in Appendix A), which contains a list of topics to be explored through specific questions that are intentionally worded to be open-ended. They start the conversation about a topic relevant to my research purpose and then allow for probes concomitant with my research purpose as the conversation unfolds.

***Relationship between purpose and interview questions.*** As Maxwell (2005) notes, “your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your *interview* questions are what you ask people in order to gain that understanding” (p. 92). As illustrated in Table 3, my research questions and my interview questions were indeed not the same. As one example, my research question included a focus on the cost-savings rationale of TCSG, but I did not want to ask specifically about it (or at least not before the interviewee had been given a chance to bring this up on his or her own); instead I asked about how they heard about the merger, what they knew about the rationale, or what factors influenced their resistance—and then waited to see if the cost-savings rationale emerged. Obviously this drilling down—from core research question to specific research questions and to interview questions—works in reverse

Table 3

*The Intertwining of My Research and Interview Questions*

| Core Research Question   | Specific Research Questions  | Interview Guide   |
|--|--|---|
| <p>What aspects of the mergers sparked resistance in the community leaders and why, how did they express their resistance and how effective was it, and what insights do the answers to these questions provide?</p> | <p>1. In seeking to understand what aspects of the mergers sparked the resistance, and why, there are two sequential questions that must be answered:</p> <p>(a) Were the opponents familiar with the cost-savings rationale of the mergers, and did they agree or disagree with that rationale? How did their agreement or disagreement with the rationale affect their decision to resist the mergers?</p> <p>(b) What (other) factors influenced the decision of the community leaders to be in opposition, and why? What mattered most?</p> <p>2. In seeking to understand how opponents of the merger expressed their resistance, and how effective it was:</p> <p>(a) How (in what venue or in what manner) did the community leaders express their concerns, resistance, or opposition?</p> <p>(b) To whom did they express their opposition?</p> <p>3. In seeking to understand how effective the opposition of community leaders was:</p> <p>(a) How effective was their opposition? Why did they think so?</p> | <p>1. Position in the community</p> <p>(a) As background, can you help me to understand your leadership role in the community?</p> <p>2. The timeline and the factors that impacted the decision</p> <p>(a) Let's talk some about how you first heard about the merger, and what your reaction was. Can you recall it?</p> <p>(b) So what happened after that; do you recall how events unfolded?</p> <p>(c) So tell me more about the main factors that led you to have concerns or to be in opposition to it; what mattered the most?</p> <p>3. Expression of opposition</p> <p>(a) I'm curious about how you expressed that opposition? Who did you talk to about it, or did you write about it; what did you do?</p> <p>(b) How vocal would you say you were?</p> <p>4. Effectiveness of opposition</p> <p>(a) Do you feel as though your being against it influenced others to be against it; what makes you feel that way?</p> <p>(b) Do you feel as though the people making the decisions listened to you; what did they say or do that made you feel that way?</p> <p>(c) In the end, did your opposition change anything about the merger, that you know about?</p> <p>5. Capstone question</p> <p>(a) Do you feel as though there was anything that the state agency could have done differently to make you feel better about the merger?</p> |



once the data is collected and analyzed, namely, the data collection and analysis leads to the answering of the specific research questions, and from there, to the core research question.

***Creation of narrative.*** Hand in hand with the choice of a semistructured interview with open-ended questions is another spectrum of assumptions about flexibility, namely, to what extent will the researcher participate in the creation of narrative during the interview, and with it, the building of meaning. Riessman (2008) sees this interaction as the joint construction of meaning, and Ezzy (2002) sees it as a joint effort to “turn meaningless events into meaningful episodes” (p. 95). Whereas Riessman and Ezzy see the dialogue as the joint *creation* of narrative and meaning, Charmaz (2006) in her work on grounded theory sees an interview as “contextual and negotiated” (p. 27), as a “flexible, emergent technique” (p. 29), and as the *discovery* of data and meaning from the respondent. Creswell (2007) sees open-ended questions as a process that facilitates the researcher’s interpretive shaping of a narrative. In my own research, I chose the in-between approach of Charmaz and Creswell. My use of open-ended and follow-up questions was used carefully to jointly *bring out* meaning (Charmaz and Creswell) without jointly *creating* it (Riessman and Ezzy). Each exchange was as dialectical as possible.

***The unfolding of the interviews.*** My purposeful sampling resulted in 16 respondents for face-to-face interviews (one respondent brought two other community leaders, which made the total 16). As illustrated in Table 4—together with an intentionally non-descript pseudonym of One to Sixteen<sup>4</sup>—their roles in the community are as stereotypical as one might expect among such leadership, and these roles include service with multiple boards and organizations. Each is well acquainted with the technical college in their community, and approximately half of them served at one time or another on a board affiliated with the college.

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<sup>4</sup> The assignment of a pseudonym and the listing of the occupation of each respondent was no easy research decision. As a researcher, I need to disclose as much information as possible about the respondents but also to protect their anonymity. I might inadvertently violate this trust if I identify a respondent with a particular merger, if I provide any greater detail of their occupation, or if I list demographic information. This concern increases since their various quotations contain hints as to geography, college, community, or position on a board—despite my efforts to reduce such references.

Table 4

*An Overview of Respondents by Role in the Community*

| Assigned Pseudonym | Community Role  |
|--------------------|---|
| One                | Executive with a chamber of commerce                            |
| Two                | Retired small businessman, and local elected official           |
| Three              | Executive with a power company                                  |
| Four               | Executive with a hospital                                       |
| Five               | Retired corporate executive, and economic development executive |
| Six                | Local government economic development official                  |
| Seven              | Retired chamber executive, and economic development leader      |
| Eight              | Small business owner  |
| Nine               | Executive with a power company                                  |
| Ten                | Executive with a chamber of commerce                            |
| Eleven             | Small business owner  |
| Twelve             | State government employee, and local elected official           |
| Thirteen           | Newspaper editor and publisher                                  |
| Fourteen           | Retired from an executive position in a technical college       |
| Fifteen            | Small business owner and local elected official                 |
| Sixteen            | Retired state government employee, and a farmer                 |

After selecting the preferred respondents, I proceeded to contact each by phone in order to explain the purpose of my research, to let each know in general terms how I had come to identify him or her, and to ascertain by their response if I was correct in my identification of him or her as someone who had concerns about the mergers. I also emphasized my protection of their identity, and I requested a face-to-face interview. Once I had locked down a scheduled day and time with the first prospect, then I contacted the next prospect from my prioritized listing. The location of the interview was in the community at the location which best represented their role in that community, which was at their office

whether in a business or elsewhere (one was in an office in a barn on a farm). Such a location—on their home turf—helped to put them at ease and, I believe, was accepted by them as a sincere gesture on my part since I was driving to their location (usually a considerable distance). Too, and perhaps most importantly to the purpose of my research, this helped me to understand better the context of their role in the community and perhaps their resistance to the merger—this is crucial to the meaning-in-context of my qualitative study. As Creswell (2007) notes, a researcher with a social constructionist bent will seek to understand the “specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (p. 21).

When I arrived on the agreed-upon date, time, and place, I began with brief cordialities, my thanks to them, a brief restatement of the purpose of my research, and an explanation of the consent form (see Appendix B) and its purpose. I emphasized the confidential nature of the interview, which was especially important to discuss since I was laying out on the table a recording device. I explained how this would ensure that I accurately heard and understood the interview, that my major professor might choose to listen to some portion, and that the recordings would otherwise be absolutely confidential. After the very first interview, I listened to the tape and typed out a transcript, but on subsequent interviews I used a confidential commercial transcription service. Upon receipt of it, I listened to each recording while reviewing the transcript to ensure accuracy (see Appendix C for an example of a page of transcript). Too, I should note that during the interview I was very mindful of the promise I had made to the interviewee that the interview would not last more than one hour. Some were shorter and some went longer, but in each instance this was driven more by the interviewee than by me.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

My research adopts what Creswell (2007) describes as a generally accepted process, “across many books on qualitative research” (p. 148), for managing, analyzing, and representing data in a case study.

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. (Creswell, 2007, p. 148)

Creswell says that such a process is neither linear nor composed of clearly independent steps, but rather, it is a “data analysis spiral” (p. 150). In this spiral, the parts of the process are “interrelated and often go on simultaneously” (p. 150) and can be visualized as a “process of moving in analytic circles” (p. 150) that overlap as the analysis proceeds. “One enters with data... and exits with an account or a narrative” (p. 150). There are four principal pieces to the spiral as listed by Creswell and as I adopt them.

### **Data Managing**

The researcher creates and organizes the data through the use of folders, index cards, or even computer files. Yin (2003) believes that, with respect to the creation of a database, “the lack of a formal database for most case study efforts is a major shortcoming of case study research and needs to be corrected” (p. 102). Whatever the format of the data, says Yin, they should all be stored and retrievable “in such a manner that other persons, including the investigator, can retrieve them efficiently at some later date” (p. 102). In turn, this makes possible a chain of evidence between the actual case study report and the case study database. In my own research, this kind of document management was achieved through the careful labeling of data as acquired, a filing system for hard-copy documents in tabbed notebooks, and computer files on my computer.

### **Reading and Memoing**

The researcher tries to get “a sense of the whole database” (Creswell, 2007, p. 150) by carefully reviewing the whole of the data. The review is focused on the detail but it seeks to see the case as a whole, that is, in a colloquial sense as the collection of its parts. As Merriam (1998) writes, it is important to remember that “a case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit. Conveying an understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data” (p. 193). In practice, this means that for textual data, for example, the researcher will read through it, make margin notes, and begin to develop codes for capturing data points. In my own research, my principal reading and memoing focus was on the transcripts of the interviews, which included listening to the original voice recording while reading the transcripts, adding color highlights, and making margin notes.

## **Describing, Classifying, and Interpreting**

This step of the process is actually three parts which are closely intertwined and extremely important, because they are the bridge from the data itself to the naturalistic generalizations which are a hallmark of qualitative research. Creswell (2007) notes that “here researchers describe in detail, develop themes or dimensions through some classification system, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views or views of perspectives in the literature” (p. 151). In my own research, I adopt Creswell’s (2007) approach of analyzing the data to detect potential themes and of developing codes for those themes (see Appendix C for an example of how themes can be highlighted on a transcript), and I follow his recommendation about “‘winnowing’ the data... [because] not all information is used.... I continue to review and re-review.... I find myself working to reduce and combine... into the five or six themes that I will use in the end to write my narrative” (p. 152). I did not embrace a mechanistic technique of phrase-by-phrase or line-by-line coding, and I did not count the frequency of how many times a particular code appeared—this would begin to creep into a comparative rather than a holistic study. In assigning the codes, I simply choose “names the researcher composes that seem to best describe the information” (p. 153), which for me closely tracked the focus of the specific research questions. In the interpretation of data to discern themes, my simple approach was to use codes in order to bridge to themes, and to use themes as the language of interpretation in order to make “sense of the data, the ‘lessons learned,’ as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 154).

## **Representing and Visualizing**

“In the final phase of the spiral, researchers present the data, a packaging of what was found” (Creswell, 2007, p. 154) in order to tell “the story” (p. 155) that the data has to tell. Remembering the importance of context to a case study, this includes a “detailed description of the case and its setting... [and] a chronology of events” (p. 163). The researcher also makes generous use of the quotes of participants: “In addition to encoding text with the language of qualitative research, authors bring in the voice of participants in the study. Writers use ample quotes” (p. 182), whether “short eye-catching quotations... embedded quotes, briefly quoted phrases within the analyst’s narrative... [or] the longer

quotation, used to convey more complex understandings” (pp. 182-183). In my own research and especially because of the case study approach, I write in a narrative style which makes very generous use of longer quotes from interviewees. It is, after all, their perspective which I seek to capture and present, and as I previously noted, who better to make the case for the participants than the participants themselves through their own utterances.

### **Trustworthiness**

At all stages of my study, trustworthiness was a constant concern. The assumption of this case study is that, as Stake (1995) put it, “Qualitative inquiry is subjective.... Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential element of understanding” (p. 45). Concomitant with this is a responsibility for the qualitative researcher to “have a respectable concern for validation” (p. 45) as a researcher conducts the study, interprets the data, and reports on it. In my own research, I rely on the methods of triangulation, member checking, and clarifying research bias in order to maximize the trustworthiness of my study.

### **Triangulation**

As Creswell (2007) describes it in a broad sense, triangulation is the use of “multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (p. 208) in the collection of data. As Stake (1995) describes it, “data source triangulation is an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances” (p. 113). For my own study, the data source triangulation consisted of collecting data from a variety of sources that included but are not limited to news media accounts, minutes of meetings, correspondence, and interviews with opponents. It should be noted that correspondence data was limited and was collected only from publicly available sources or through the respondents themselves. No effort was made to secure documents through open records requests, which would have adversely affected my relationship of trust with the interviewees. Another means of triangulation in my study is through my purposeful selection of multiple respondents in multiple mergers.

As one further note on triangulation, it should be noted that a second benefit of triangulation, beyond accuracy, is that it assists the researcher in understanding that which is being studied. Using interviews as an example, Maxwell (2005) notes that interviews indeed provide information through what an informant said, but it alone may not give the researcher a “direct understanding of his or her perspective” (p. 94). To the extent that triangulation conveys the same information but through a different context, it assists the researcher in grasping that perspective, and in general, a “broader and more secure understanding of the issues” (p. 94). I found on several occasions that a remark made by one respondent took on a different or clarified meaning when another respondent spoke about the same issue; conversely, sometimes accounts differed on a detail so I tended to discard both if it was not of real consequence.

### **Member Checking**

This approach to validity makes the assumption that the informant, member, or interviewee is part of the case study, and as such, it is natural for the researcher to involve the participant in parts of the process beyond the initial point of data collection. “This approach, *writ large* in most qualitative studies, involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Merriam (1998) notes that “a number of writers suggest doing this continuously throughout the study” (p. 204), but others suggest involving participants in only part of the process, for example, by furnishing participants with raw data such as transcripts for them to react to. Applied to my own study, member checking took place either through the use of a transcript review by the interviewee, or through a review of my preliminary analyses as represented by the emergent themes (I did not include quotations from individual interviewees). In the use of transcript review, the focus was not on whether the participant agreed that the transcript accurately reflects what was said, but rather, whether it accurately expresses what the interviewee intended or meant to say. In the use of draft analyses, the focus was on whether the interviewee has a sense that the analyses captured the themes, at least from the standpoint of the particular interviewee. In both the transcript review and the theme review, clarifying modifications were encouraged as part of my assumption that

participants are indeed a part of the case study and that further dialogue about the transcripts or themes can only enrich the data collection process.

It should be noted, too, that the issue of reliability in the recording of interviewees and their subsequent transcription, while not a validation issue per se, does play a role in validation for the obvious reasons. As described earlier, the data collection through the recording and transcription process was done according to a very strict protocol that ensured complete accuracy.

### **Clarifying Research Bias**

Yet another validation strategy utilized by qualitative researchers is the purposeful acknowledgment by the researcher of “the value-laden nature of the study... [of] their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field” (Creswell, 2007, p. 18). By acknowledging this—especially by describing how his or her personal posture towards the research topic might be a potential influence—the researcher gives the reader a chance to judge the extent to which it may matter to the study. In his or her statement, the researcher acknowledges that their “background shapes their interpretation, and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 21).

Accordingly, in my own research, I state that my own interest in the topic of the merging technical colleges can be traced back to my two decades of service at North Metro Technical College (NMTC) as a vice president, including a year as the acting president. During that time, I had long heard remarks from NMTC’s neighboring and larger school, which was Chattahoochee Technical College (CTC), that NMTC should have been created in 1989 as a satellite campus of CTC instead of as a new, separate college. These remarks were no more than gossip for two decades, but in the year or two preceding the actual merger, it began to seem as though there might be some plan in the wind to merge the schools. The hints went beyond mere water-cooler talk when the new TCSG Commissioner froze the filling of several vice presidential vacancies at each of the two colleges, and shortly thereafter froze the presidency of CTC when its long-time president of nearly 25 years retired.



Soon such hints turned to actual events, as the Commissioner appointed a task force for the purpose of studying the potential of a merger. I was asked to work with the task force as a staff member from NMTC, just as a staff member from CTC was also asked to serve. In reality, however, neither of us participated in the deliberations of the group, and we did very little in the manner of actual staff support. TCSG staff took the lead, and we were just there. Nonetheless, I did hear firsthand the charge of the Commissioner to the study group, I did hear firsthand the case made for the mergers, and I did hear firsthand some of the concerns related to the merger as expressed by some of its members. I admit to having been intrigued on several levels. As a college administrator, I wondered how a merger might impact the delivery of services to students, and too, the employment of faculty and staff. As a higher education researcher, I had an intellectual curiosity about the larger policy question of mergers among higher education institutions. I also had an interest in its political implications, because in my career as a college administrator and as a state-level education policy assistant to two different governors, I had learned through the lessons of life that community and political opposition to state policy decisions can trump the best of well-meant decisions. Now I am the provost and executive vice president of the college which resulted from the merger of not only Chattahoochee Tech and North Metro Tech but also Appalachian Tech.

A couple of other notes regarding the issue are needed: First, I recall Creswell's (2007) admonition regarding studying one's own workplace. "A question that students often ask is whether they can study their own organization, place of work, or themselves. Such a study may raise issues of power and risk to the researcher, the participants, and to the site" (p. 122). In my research, I did not collect data from college personnel within my organization, but as I noted earlier in this chapter, I did include the merger of Appalachian, Chattahoochee, and North Metro in my pool of mergers from which to draw community leaders as participants. This did not, however, put me in any compromised position whatsoever. Second, my immediate supervisor, who is the president of the merged college, as well as his supervisor, who is the TCSG Commissioner, were made aware by me of my study, and both were

supportive of it. I have not discussed it further with them; they were not privy to my research, findings, or conclusions; and this supervisory relationship has not compromised the study.

### **Summary**

My own interests led me to the topic of mergers and from there to the specific purpose of understanding the perspectives of the community leaders who resisted the mergers. I embraced a qualitative case study because of its intense focus on meaning-in-context. I bounded my case as the resistance of community leaders taken as a whole—not as four and not as 16 cases—because I decidedly wished to stay away from the comparative implications of multiple cases (the dynamic under research is not between the community leaders, but rather, between TCSG and the community leaders). I identified and chose respondents through purposeful sampling, just as I used such sampling to find the mergers from which to draw those respondents. My principal data collection was through document archives and face-to-face interviews using a semistructured approach and at the site in their community which best reflected their role in the community. I interviewed three to five leaders in each of four mergers around the state. Recognizing the spiral if not dialectic nature of data analysis and interpretation, the data was carefully collected and coded in such a way as to help discern themes which became the basis of naturalistic interpretations and, later, of conclusions. At all stages, trustworthiness was a constant responsibility.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE TCSG MERGER PLAN AS CONTEXT

In keeping with the intent of a qualitative case study and my research purpose, the facts and timelines of the merger plan and resistance frame the case and provide context or background that is crucial. It is not a short scenario to paint, but it is indispensable to making sense of the study, and more importantly, to making sense of what the community leaders said, did, and meant. Over a roughly 17-month period, there are three distinct phases in the merger and resistance which can be benchmarked by key dates and events:

- the period from October, 2007, to September, 2008, which set the stage for the merger announcement;
- the date of September, 4, 2008, which was the merger announcement itself; and
- the period from September, 2008, through February, 2009, which saw the rise, decline, and end of the resistance.

I describe each of these in the following sections along with a table which helps to portray a clear chronology of events.

#### **Phase One: Paths to the Merger Announcement**

There were two independent sequences of events which unfolded from October of 2007 to the merger announcement in September of 2008, and which set the stage for the decision. The first was the slowing of national economy and its negative impact on the State of Georgia's economy, revenues, and budgets. The second was (a) the internal discussion already going on within the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) regarding the cost of running its various schools and programs, and (b) the creation by TCSG of a study group to explore the feasibility of one possible merger. (As a definitional note, I should point out that the governing body for the technical colleges is often referred to by two

different names. The official statutory name is the Department of Technical and Adult Education, but the name that is preferred by the agency and used most often is the Technical College System of Georgia.) Each of these two paths was a crucial half of the congruence of events which led to the TCSG decision in favor of mergers.

### **Slowing of Revenue Growth**

By mid-2007, a dramatic slowdown in the national housing market had already begun to raise concerns about the future economic health of the nation and the states. Yet up to that point in time there were few hints of this affecting State of Georgia's revenues, which continued to enjoy a dependable year-over-year rise. The revenue estimate as set by the Governor for Fiscal Year 2006 was \$17.4 billion (Office of Planning and Budget [OPB], 2005, p. 1), for Fiscal Year 2007 was \$18.7 billion (OPB, 2006, p. 9), and for Fiscal Year 2008 was \$20.2 billion (OPB, 2007, p. 19). As the General Assembly convened on January 14, 2008, it looked as though this dependable trend would continue, with \$21.4 billion as the estimate for the upcoming Fiscal Year 2009 budget (OPB, 2008, pp. 21-22). Other than the Governor noting to the General Assembly that "uncertainty grows about the national economy.... [and] growth is expected to moderate in the year ahead" (OPB, 2008, p. 6), there was no apparent reason to doubt the \$1.2 billion increase in the revenue estimate for the upcoming year.

On March 10, 2008, however, as the legislature was in the midst of writing the state budget, the Governor announced that he was lowering his growth estimate by \$245 million (Office of the Governor, 2008, March 10, p. 1), and he expressed concern about the coming year. The growth of revenues, he said, was slowing down; the budget that was currently being written by the legislature would need to be cut; and in the months ahead his Office of Planning and Budget would be watching expenditures very closely. "We are taking pro-active steps to make sure that Georgia's state government remains fiscally responsible.... We will not repeat the mistakes of the past and wait too long to tighten our belts when the economy signals that it may be softening" (Office of the Governor, 2008, March 10, p. 1). In a letter to legislative budget leaders, he repeated his unease.

With growing uncertainty in the nation's economy and the slowdown in Georgia's overall rate of growth, I have been carefully monitoring our revenue collections. The past few months of revenue collections have set a new trend that may be insufficient to meet the Amended Fiscal Year 2008 Budget or the Fiscal Year 2009 Budget as proposed. I am instructing agencies to curtail discretionary spending and hereby adjusting my revenue estimate for the Amended Fiscal Year 2008 and for the Fiscal Year 2009. These actions are fiscally prudent steps that will help us to avoid a Special Legislative Session at a later point in the year and set us on course to meet revised revenue expectations. (Office of the Governor, 2008, March 10, Associated Documents section)

He reiterated that as the year went on he would be "poised for additional broad-based reductions" (Office of the Governor, 2008, March 10, p. 1).

In the next few months, state revenues did in fact continue to decline, and in July they were down 6.6% (Office of the Governor, 2008, August 11, p. 1). Agency heads were put on notice by a memorandum from the Office of Planning and Budget, which detailed: (a) that 6% of their budget would be withheld; (b) that specific budget limitations were now in effect which included a deferral on state employee pay raises, a hiring suspension, a travel moratorium, a vehicle purchase moratorium, and an equipment purchase moratorium; and (c) that agencies would be required to submit plans for budget cuts of 6%, 8%, and 10% in the fiscal year which had just begun as well as in the new budgets being requesting for the next year (Childress, 2008, August 1, p. 1). As the Commissioner of TCSG expressed it in a cover email to TCSG leadership, this was "tough news from OPB" (R. Jackson, personal communication, August 1, 2008). With his one sentence, the first half of the stage—the budget stress—was now set for the merger decisions which were soon to follow.

### **The Study Group**

During this same period of time dating back to mid-2007, in a different venue the State Board of TCSG had been asking strategic questions that included an examination of topics such as funding, expenditures, and efficiencies. (I present in Table 5 a side-by-side timeline of the two sequences of events in Phase One which I synthesized from my research.) In doing so, its Strategic Planning, People and Finance Committee looked at the number and nature of its campuses and satellites, the costs involved in running these, and the optimal number of campuses needed. Some of the questions being asked: "What is the right size college? Does Georgia have too many colleges? How many technical colleges do we need

to serve the state? How many locations do we need to serve the state?” (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2007, October 4, p. 5). The Commissioner reported to the State Board at its meeting on October 31, 2007, that the agency was actively looking at branch campuses and that “the Governor expects a report on our plans for underutilized campuses, where they are and what we plan to do about them” (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2007, October 31, p. 3).

Table 5

*Phase One, Paths to the Merger Announcement*

| Month          | Sequence of Budget Events   | Sequence of TCSG Events   |
|----------------|---|---|
| October, 2007  | National housing market shows weakness, but State revenues continue to grow.                            | TCSG analyzes efficiencies, including number of campuses and satellites, and prepares for a report to the Governor. |
| January, 2008  | Governor sets annual State revenue estimate at a typically higher level.                                | TCSG Commissioner appoints a task force to study one possible merger.   |
| February, 2008 | Legislature into second month.  | TCSG task force has first meeting.  |
| March, 2008    | During legislative session, Governor lowers revenue growth, requires modest cuts, warns State agencies. | TCSG task force has second and third meetings.  |
| April, 2008    |   | TCSG task force recommends the merger of two schools.   |
| August, 2008   | Governor’s budget office requires deeper budget cuts, warns of more.                                    | TCSG Board authorizes the Commissioner to merge two schools.  |

In January, 2008, the Commissioner created a 17-member task force “to help me look at the feasibility of merging Chattahoochee Technical College and North Metro Technical College” (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2008, August, The Charge section). The group—which I will refer to as the Chattahoochee-North Metro Merger Feasibility Task Force—was composed of members of each college’s local board of directors, local board of trustees, and other local community

leaders from the service area of the two schools. The chair was a member of TCSG's State Board who lived in the area; whether coincidentally or not, he was also the chair of the Board's Strategic Planning, People and Finance Committee which had been looking at the question of how many campuses there should be. The timeline for completing its task would only be a few months, said the Commissioner, because its purpose was "a broad-stroke feasibility study rather than a detailed implementation project" (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2008, August, The Charge section).

The focus of the group was on two schools on the northwestern side of the Atlanta metropolitan region who were adjoining neighbors. The main campus of Chattahoochee Tech was in Cobb County, and it had two satellite campuses elsewhere in Cobb and one in Paulding County. Although the main campus of North Metro Tech was in adjoining Bartow County to the north of Cobb, it was only a few hundred yards from the Cobb County line and roughly 15 miles from CTC's main campus. The so-called service delivery areas (territory, in layman's terms) for each of the schools split Cobb County into two parts; North Metro Tech served the northern portion, and Chattahoochee Tech the southern part. Each school had community leaders from Cobb County on its local board of directors, and each school attracted students from Cobb County. This nexus may help explain the Commissioner's charge to the group at its first meeting in February, 2008:

Given the colleges' close proximity, respected histories, and first-class facilities, there may indeed be a remarkable opportunity to create a single institution—with enhanced learning opportunities for students and an unparalleled workforce for business and industry in Bartow, Cobb, and Paulding Counties. But I need your perspective on that opportunity. (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2008, August, The Charge section)

Later, in its final report, the task force expressed its understanding of the Commissioner's charge in much the same way, but added a mention of efficiency: "The taskforce set out to answer the Commissioner's charge to determine the most efficient and synergistic use of the technical education resources available to citizens of the three-county area of Bartow, Cobb and Paulding counties" (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2008, August, Next Steps section).

Over a four-month period, the group met a total of four times and, despite some reservations, voted unanimously to recommend that "the Commissioner should carefully proceed with the

consolidation, keeping in mind the exchange of ideas presented in this document” (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2008, August, Next Steps section). In the months that followed, the Commissioner instructed leaders of the two colleges to begin working on the outlines of such a merger, and he asked the State Board to approve the merger. They did so on August 7, 2008.

With their vote, the second half of the stage—mergers seen as a cost savings—was now set for the 14-college merger decision which was soon to follow.

### **Phase Two: The Merger Announcement**

It was against this backdrop of lower state budgets and a single merger that, merely one month later, TCSG decided to dramatically up the ante. Instead of just one school, they would do seven pairs of schools, and the rationale to be emphasized would be the cost savings. (I present in Table 6 a composite of events in this Phase Two which I synthesized from my research.)

At the meeting of the State Board on September 4, 2008, the Commissioner made a budget presentation that focused on the requirement from the Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget that agencies submit plans for potential cuts of 6%, 8%, and 10%; this would be an annual reductions of \$21 to \$35 million in state funding for the agency and its colleges. As part of his recommended cuts, the Commissioner unveiled a proposal to save \$3.5 million by merging seven pairs of technical colleges, namely: Appalachian and North Georgia, Chattahoochee and North Metro (already approved for merger), Coosa Valley and Northwestern, East Central and Valdosta, Flint River and Griffin, Southeastern and Swainsboro, and West Central and West Georgia. With little discussion and no dissent, the Board approved the proposed budgets, which included the embedded savings from the mergers; there was no separate vote on the merger issue itself (Technical College System of Georgia, 2008, September 4, p. 1). (Appalachian through its local board later requested to join with Chattahoochee and North Metro as a three-college merger. This still reduced the total number of TCSG colleges from 33 to 26.)

Hours after the vote, the Commissioner sent an internal email to the leadership of the merging colleges in which he asked them “to attempt in every way possible to keep people calm” (R. Jackson, personal communication, September 4, 2008).



This is a budget saving, efficiency move. While it will be very uncomfortable for many, it does not threaten the work or the mission of any of our colleges. We are required to cut as high as \$31 million from our current budget. This step will help us reach that target and keep pay raises, avoid furloughs, impact as few staff as possible and keep instructors in classrooms focused on our core mission, our students. (R. Jackson, personal communication, September 4, 2008, p. 1)

Within a day of the vote, he sent an additional internal email in which he noted that “as the word has gone out about mergers/consolidations, much misinformation and rumors have begun to circulate” (R. Jackson, personal communication, September 5, 2008, p. 1). He asked the leaders of the merging colleges to share a list of key talking points (which he attached) about the plan and its purpose, which was “required to meet our extreme budget reductions of 6%, 8% or 10%” (R. Jackson, personal communication, September 5, 2008, p. 1). Among the talking points, he noted that no name for the combined colleges had been chosen, that no leadership decisions had been made, that the new board of directors would be a combination of the current boards with all communities represented, and that “this should not be construed to be one college taking over another college” (R. Jackson, personal communication, September 5, 2008, p. 1). At one point, the Commissioner referred to a merging college as a “candidate” (R. Jackson, personal communication, September 5, 2008, p. 1), but otherwise there was nothing to suggest any uncertainty.

Newspapers across the state began to circulate the story in the days and weeks that followed, and the typical emphasis was on the budget-driven rationale for the merger. Some examples: (a) *The Savannah Morning News* reported that “the state's technical-college system is moving to consolidate as

Table 6

*Phase Two, The Merger Announcement*

| Month           | Announcement Events   |
|-----------------|---|
| September, 2008 | TCSG Board votes on a cost-savings plan of \$3.5 million to merge seven pairs of colleges, thus reducing the total number of schools from 33 to 26. |
|                 | Commissioner asks all faculty and staff to help counter misinformation.   |
|                 | News media begin to carry story with emphasis on budget rationale.  |

many as 14 schools in an effort to save \$3.5 million.... The board of the Technical College System of Georgia authorized the change as part of an effort to trim spending in the face of the state budget crisis” (Morris News Service, 2008, September 5). (b) The *Rome News-Tribune* wrote that “State mandated budget cuts are forcing the Technical College System of Georgia to merge its technical schools” (Stewart, 2008, September 6). (c) *The LaGrange Daily News* wrote that its local college would be merging “under a cost cutting measure approved last week.... Twelve other technical colleges also will merge under the plan, which will save an estimated \$3.5 million to satisfy a 6 percent budget reduction ordered by Gov. Sonny Perdue” (Martin, J., 2008, September 10, p. 1). (d) *The Valdosta Daily Times* headlined the story as “Val Tech to merge with East Central Tech: Consolidation will save the state about \$3.5 million statewide” (Pinholster, 2008, September 29, 2008, p. 1). (e) *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote that “the state’s deepening fiscal crisis has prompted Georgia technical college officials to merge 14 of the system’s 33 schools (Salzer, 2008, October 11).

In at least three articles on the merger plan, there were confirmations that, as hinted in State Board minutes back in October, 2007, this idea of mergers had been discussed for some time. One newspaper quoted its local college president, who had been present at the State Board meeting when the announcement was made, as saying that there was not “a tremendous amount of shock in the room.... They’ve been planning this for quite some time” (Stewart, 2008, September). A second newspaper quoted a member of the State Board, who represented the local area, as saying that while the ultimate goal is to better serve students, TCSG “had been discussing consolidation of campuses before the current budgetary crisis as a more efficient means of running the technical colleges” (Pinholster, 2008, September 29, 2008, p. 1). In a third, the Commissioner himself said that the first analysis of costs started even earlier, four years ago when he first came over from the Office of Planning and Budget.

“We began then to conduct an aggressive analysis of the costs of our programs.” His team spent time at each college looking at administration, faculty/student ratios, buildings and supplies.... “Looking for cost-cutting measures, we began to ask tough business questions. Was this model sustainable? Was 33 colleges the right number? Maybe there was a better way to peel the apple,” he said. (Raines, 2008, December 26)

The impression that the mergers had long been in planning—and yet kept under wraps until the merger plan was announced—was now an open part of the discussions.

With the headlines around the state touting the merger plan and its cost-savings rationale, the second phase was complete and the third phase—of resistance—was now at hand.

### **Phase Three: The Rise and Fall of Resistance**

In a matter of weeks, resistance began to emerge in some communities, and it continued in one venue or the other through the end of 2008 and into early 2009. (I present in Table 7 a composite of events in this Phase Three which I synthesized from my research.) I offer four sets of examples as to how this resistance manifested itself, as they are found in public sources: (a) in the stories of local news media, (b) in the minutes of TCSG’s State Board, (c) in the records of the Georgia General Assembly, and (d) in meetings of community leaders as referenced in various news media reports and board minutes.

#### **Local News Media**

An extreme example of how resistance played out in local news media can be seen in a sequence of four articles from the *LaGrange Daily News*, and which centered on the merger of West Georgia Tech and West Central Tech. They were printed in the three weeks following the September 4<sup>th</sup> announcement.

- On September 10, 2008, the paper ran the announcement of the mergers, which were a “cost cutting measure... which will save an estimated \$3.5 million to satisfy a 6 percent budget reduction ordered by Gov. Sonny Perdue” (Martin, 2008, September 10).
- On September 21, 2008, the paper printed a letter from the head of one of the college foundations, who said “I am opposed. It’s a redistribution of wealth.... We did not ask for the merger—the decision started from the Governor’s office down the ranks... not from us here—we don’t need it.... Leave us alone....” (Edelson, 2008, September 21).
- On September 27, 2008, the paper printed a letter from a local legislator, who said that he learned of the merger from the front page of the paper and he “was appalled.... There was no legislative input—apparently the decision was made strictly by [TCSG]... with no consideration given to

local communities or local leadership.... This merger is both terribly unfair and very shortsighted” (WGTC merger a mistake, 2008, September 27).

- On September 28, 2008, the paper printed an editorial, which said “All together now: Wrong, wrong, wrong. Woefully, grievously wrong. Wrong and shortsighted. Wrong and illogical. Wrong and deserving of swift reversal—not to mention a swift kick in the bureaucratic pants.... How arrogant. How shameful” (Merger bad for WGTC, 2008, September 28).

The sentiment as felt in this particular merger, of West Central and West Georgia, was aptly captured much later in a post-merger, retrospective article done by a statewide business news magazine. Said the president of the merged college, looking back in time and with tongue in cheek, “I can safely say that no one in our seven-county area was overly excited about the [merger] news” (Reese, 2010, April).

### **TCSG Minutes**

A second public example of the resistance is found from the November 6, 2008, meeting of TCSG’s Committee of the Whole (which is the State Board convened as a committee). At this meeting, the Board took the unusual move of granting a request to speak from a prominent member of the Georgia House of Representatives who served one of the communities where a merger was to take place. The legislator presented his unambiguous opposition to the merger, as attested to by excerpts from Committee notes made at the time.

He does not believe a savings of \$3.5 will be realized. He has seen no evidence of what the real savings are, or what the real costs associated with the merge will be.... He stated that DTAE had not been sensitive to the legislature with this decision, and that on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worse, this move would be a 12. He said the schools, community and legislature had not been given an opportunity for input... He asked if the Board planned to force this plan through. He said he and others had many conversations with the Commissioner to express their extreme disappointment with the plan and the way the plan was put into motion. He has always been a friend of DTAE, and it was not right that he had to hear about the merger from newspapers and the street. He stated that he’s very unhappy—probably a 15 rather than a 12. (Wise, 2008, November 6)

The legislator closed by asking the Committee to reconsider its decision to merge the schools.

Table 7

*Phase Three, The Rise and Fall of Resistance*

| Month           | Resistance Benchmarks   |
|-----------------|---|
| September, 2008 | Local leaders begin to discuss, meet, and react to the merger announcement. Local media print stories, letters, and editorials.                   |
| November, 2008  | State Representative confronts State Board of TCSG at its monthly meeting. State Board decides to review its decision to merge schools.           |
| December, 2008  | State Board affirms decision to proceed with the mergers, gives more detail.  |
| January, 2009   | Commissioner apologizes to legislators for not letting them know of mergers. State Representative introduces legislation limiting future mergers. |
| February, 2009  | House of Representatives passes bill limiting future mergers, then to Senate.   |
| April, 2009     | Senate committee never acts on it, and legislature adjourns.  |

After the State Board reconvened an hour later, the Commissioner took note of the earlier presentation and “recommended to the board that... [the legislator’s] concerns be considered as we move forward with the administrative mergers on the table” (Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2008, November 6, p. 2). Instead of moving forward, however, the Board voted with only one member in opposition to send the issue back to the Strategic Planning, People and Finance Committee for a review of the concerns raised by the legislator. No timetable was included for the review.

This reconsideration was reported in the media without much comment, except for one article in which a local president of one of the merging colleges expressed his belief that the Board was responding to concerns raised by other areas of the state: In “different pockets of the state, there’s resistance to the merger, and it’s just a part of change.... I think they will go ahead with the mergers” (Coosa Valley Tech, Northwestern Tech rethink merger, 2008, November 11).

One month later, the Committee reported back to the Board, and its chair went to some lengths to explain the Committee’s review; in fact, he gave a more detailed explanation about the Board’s rationale for the mergers than had previously been given in a Board meeting. He explained that limited resources

had been leading the agency to strategically evaluate issues such as funding and efficiencies, and “this data and information was the driving force for the potential mergers as long as two years ago”

(Department of Technical and Adult Education, 2008, December 4, p. 2). In considering potential cost-savings mergers, he said, the plan had been to use task forces such as in the original merger, but the budget crisis had speeded up the process. He also allude to some other things of potential benefit, but he did not elaborate.

The process utilized by the taskforce was to be used as a model for other administrative mergers with the end goal of developing a more efficient and effective way to run the system. However, the required budget cuts made it necessary to expedite the implementation of future plans to merge colleges. The budget cuts afforded an opportunity to do some things to benefit the system, the workforce and the students. (The Technical College System of Georgia, 2008, December 4, p. 2)

In the end, he reported to the Board that the Committee “unanimously recommended moving forward with the administrative merger plans and... [with] a motion to reaffirm the administrative merger plan... as set forth in the Amended FY2009 and FY2010 budget requests approved at the September 4, 2008 State Board meeting” (The Technical College System of Georgia, 2008, December 4, p. 4). The Board then did so by a unanimous vote.

As might be expected, the vote to reaffirm the mergers was not welcomed in some quarters, and the newspaper in the legislator’s home community ran a scathing editorial.

Technical Education is NOT a priority in Georgia. The state board of the Technical College System of Georgia voted last week to reaffirm their idiotic plan to merge 13 technical colleges into six on July 1, 2009. They claim the move is to save approximately 3.5 million dollars. They claim their first priority is always the students. They claim the change is “vitaly important...”

Lies, lies and more lies. This entire merger plan is dirty politics. Nothing more.

Your state representative... made every effort.... They were not interested in listening.

Apparently, this board of fools can do whatever it wants.... horribly irresponsible, it should be considered a criminal act. (The Forest-Blade, 2008, December 10, p. 4A)

Other news media also reported on the re-affirmation of the merger plan, but their coverage was a simple news story.

## **The Legislature**

A third public example of resistance to the mergers can be found in the records of the Georgia General Assembly, as seen on two occasions. The first is on January 22, 2009, when the TCSG Commissioner made his annual appearance before the Joint Appropriations Committee (made up of members of the House and the Senate). In his presentation on the mergers, the Commissioner began with a frank apology for not letting legislators know ahead of time, and just as significantly, that there was not time for a study group for the latter mergers.

I personally owe the members of the General Assembly an apology for the way that this was communicated, or not communicated. The events of the budget simply overtook us.... We wanted to do this at the community level the way we did with Chattahoochee and North Metro, where we appointed a task force of local community [people]... and went through a six months process of reviewing whether this would be a reasonable thing to do.... We decided to expedite and move up the schedule of the other potential mergers, and were not able to do that process, simply because we were using [mergers]... to meet our budget cuts. (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2009, January 22)

He then went on to make a detailed case of how the agency began looking at funding and efficiencies four years ago when he came on board, and this has included issues regarding the size of schools.

As to the mergers now unfolding, he singled out one by name as having been particularly difficult for the community, that is, the merger of West Central Technical College and West Georgia Technical College. His lack of communication with those communities “was very difficult, both on the community and the members of the General Assembly here. It was resisted, particularly in the LaGrange area. They feel strongly about their college, as does West Central” (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2009, January 22). While legislators did not chastise him during his remarks, there were two who, during the question and answer portion, reminded him in polite but pointed terms of their unhappiness at how they heard about the mergers. One said: “I appreciate [your] comments... relating to the mishap in the mergers. The last thing legislators want to do is to be walking down the street and be told about something that should have been told to them one-on-one” (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2009, January 22). A second said: “I was delighted to [hear], and accept, your apology about not being notified... I’ve been here 29 years... and

that was not a well-orchestrated plan. The members of the legislature should have been brought in and involved” (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2009, January 22).

Less than two weeks later, the legislator who had spoken to the TCSG Board nearly three months earlier introduced into the House of Representatives a bill known as HB 294. This very short bill was designed solely to limit the ability of TCSG to do any further mergers without the approval of the state legislature. It read: “No creation, consolidation, suspension, or discontinuation of a technical college or institution under the State Board of Technical and Adult Education shall be effective or have any force and effect unless approved by the General Assembly in accordance with this Code section” (Georgia General Assembly, 2009, February 4). When the bill came to the floor of the House, on February 17, 2009, legislators tightened the bill even further, namely, by amending the bill to also limit TCSG’s ability to discontinue a technical college by giving it to the University System of Georgia. Comments during the discussion were few, respectful, and yet pointed. The legislative author expressed his intent of making sure that, in the future, more planning would be done and that legislators would be involved in it.

I want to share a concern.... My concern is the merger and the consolidation of some of our schools. These important decisions should be made only after careful study and planning, and not as a knee-jerk reaction to a short-term problem. These recent mergers took place without input from legislators or the communities that were affected and, in many cases, over their objections. Most of us learned about these mergers after the fact. (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2009, February 17, 00:35:25)

Another legislator in the communities of the East Central and Valdosta merger added to the refrain of how legislators learned of the mergers: “Is it not true that those of us who had technical colleges... affected by this merger were not contacted beforehand and... actually found out through the local media and through some of our local officials?” (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2009, February 17, 00:35:25). The bill passed with only one dissenting vote. It then went to the Senate, where it was assigned to a committee from which it did not emerge prior to the end of the legislative session in April.

### **Community Meetings**

Finally, a fourth source in which the resistance manifest itself is in various community meetings that took place over the months following the announcement of the mergers. These meetings are known



to us from public sources only because of references to them that show up in news reports or in the minutes of meetings. For example, in the Southeastern Tech and Swainsboro Tech merger, *The Forest-Blade* on September 23, 2008, ran a story titled “Officials express concerns about Swainsboro Tech-Southeastern Tech merger.”

Officials representing the Chamber of Commerce, City of Swainsboro and County Commission gathered Friday to discuss options following the state technical board’s decision to merge.... The *Blade* learned that a number of meetings on the proposed merger had been held at the Chamber.... Following Friday’s meeting, a letter was sent to TCSG... requesting a meeting to discuss the merger.... It was learned Monday that a meeting in Atlanta has been scheduled. (Officials express concerns, 2008, September 23)

In another article focused on the East Central Tech and Valdosta merger, *The Ocilla Star* notes on November 26 that a “meeting last week with both Irwin and Ben Hill community leaders indicate strong concern over this upcoming consolidation. ‘We need to do what we can to keep this from taking place...’” (Pruitt, 2008, November 26, p. 1). In a third example, the Coosa Valley Tech and Northwestern Tech merger, *The Cedartown Standard* spoke of an undated meeting held between local legislators “to dig deeper into the proposal. Commissioner Jackson came up and met with our entire Northwest Georgia delegation of legislators” (Neal, 2009, January 27). Finally, in minutes of the State Board, the Commissioner tells the Board that he met with several delegations:

He has met with community leaders, legislative delegations and joint boards from Valdosta and East Central Technical Colleges; West Georgia and West Central Technical Colleges; Northwestern and Coosa Valley Technical Colleges, and a delegation from Appalachian Technical College. After a second meeting with the members of the West Georgia community, they asked for a meeting with the State Board’s Strategic Planning, People and Finance Committee to present their views regarding the administrative merger. (The Technical College System of Georgia, 2008, November 6, p. 1)

These references to meetings between state officials and community leaders are very important data, of course, and contribute to our sense of how the resistance played out. As with much of such information from the public record, however, they do not by themselves convey the insider’s point of view, and for that the perspective of community leaders as to be presented in Chapter Five is invaluable.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I focused on the sequence of events which comprise the context in which the resistance to the mergers played out. In the first phase, I found that two interrelated sequences were unfolding, that is, the decline in the state economy and revenues, and the internal discussions at the TCSG on several issues, namely, about the operating costs of its colleges, about the formation of a study group to look at the feasibility of one merger, and about a decision to merge the first pair of schools. In the second phase, I found that the merger announcement focused on a rationale of saving costs, and that this was repeated in the headline of multiple news stories around the state. In the third phase, I found that the resistance emerged in a variety of venues, including local media, state board meetings, the legislature, and community meetings. In the end, however, the mergers proceeded nearly as planned.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY LEADERS

The decision of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) in September, 2008, to merge some of its technical colleges led to the rise of resistance from some community leaders, and this resistance intrigued me. I subsequently initiated my research study with the purpose of exploring, understanding, and describing the perspectives of community leaders who resisted the mergers. The core question which guided my study is this: *What aspects of the mergers sparked resistance in the community leaders and why? How did they express their resistance and how effective was it?* Accordingly, this Chapter is in three main sections corresponding to the *what* and *why* of their resistance, to the *how* of their resistance, and to the *effectiveness* of their resistance.

Within each of those sections, I describe the perspectives of community leaders through principal themes (these are listed by a short title in Table 8). In support of these themes, I intentionally use very generous quotations from the leaders themselves, because their language provides a richness to the themes that is essential to an understanding of their perspectives—it is one of the reasons why I chose a qualitative case study. As I write my findings, I tend to use verbs such as community leaders *felt* or *believed*, and I caution the reader from taking the impression that each and every individual among the community leaders shares the perspective articulated in the theme. Instead, I mean to convey major themes as qualitative natural generalizations which reflect the perspectives of a composite of the community leaders taken as a whole.<sup>5</sup> I intentionally avoid drifting into a quantitative or comparative analysis by counting or otherwise conveying how many community leaders shared a particular theme, and I avoid words such as a few, most, or many. This stance also influences my choice of the *number* of quotations to offer in support of a theme, namely: The number is as needed to describe the fullness of the

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<sup>5</sup> To offer an analogy of such literary usage for a contemporary health theme, it is said that smokers of cigarettes suffer more disease than non-smokers. This does not mean that each and every smoker suffers from disease, but the theme fairly reflects the reality for a composite of smokers taken as a whole.

perspective held by the community leaders taken as a whole without offering too many or too few quotations. The reader may safely presume that the presence of merely one or two quotations is not the sum total of quotations in the data which could have been offered, and in fact, if my data contained only one or two quotations then such a subtheme would not meet my threshold of being representative of the whole of the community leaders as a composite; it would not have made it through my culling process down to major themes as urged by Creswell (2007). Conversely, there were themes where an overwhelming majority of community leaders offered quotations which I could have redundantly called upon, but I disciplined myself not to include them all. On one other literary usage note, I found that there were degrees of resistance among community leaders as though upon a continuum: Some leaders resisted merely a portion or some particular aspect of it, other leaders resisted much of it, and others resisted just about everything about the mergers. Again, I do not attempt to itemize among these.

Table 8

*Major Themes by Title*

| Research Question                                  | Major Themes  |
|--|---|
| The <i>What</i> and <i>Why</i> of Their Resistance | A Scrutiny Originating With the Governor<br>A Flawed and Even Disingenuous Cost-Savings Rationale<br>Give Us a Vision as a Rationale<br>A Mismatch or Poor Fit Between the Communities<br>A Sense of Loss |
| The <i>How</i> of Their Resistance                 | First Conversations, Calls, and Meetings<br>A Reliance on Networking<br>Meetings with the Commissioner<br>After the Fact  |
| The <i>Effectiveness</i> of Their Resistance       | The Successes<br>A Process Without Input<br><i>A Fait Accompli</i><br>After the Fact  |

## **The *What* and *Why* of Their Resistance**

The findings as presented in this section focus on the first set of my specific research questions, that is, in seeking to understand *what* aspects of the mergers sparked the resistance, and *why*, there are two issues to be answered: First, were the community leaders familiar with the cost-savings rationale of the mergers, and did they agree or disagree with that rationale? How did their agreement or disagreement with the rationale affect their decision to resist the mergers? Second, what other factors influenced the decision of the community leaders to be in opposition, and why? What mattered most?

To help introduce this section, I list as follows the five principal themes by their titles, which begin to reveal the nature of my findings: A Scrutiny Originating With the Governor; A Flawed and Even Disingenuous Cost-Savings Rationale; Give Us a Vision As a Rationale; A Mismatch or Poor Fit Between the Communities; and A Sense of Loss.

### **A Scrutiny Originating With the Governor**

Community leaders believed that the cost-savings rationale was really about the number of schools, that questions about the number of schools led to the mergers, and that behind all of it was the Governor. In fact, the hand of the Governor was seen by community leaders—correctly or not—in many aspects of the mergers as will be explained in this chapter.

They believed that the Governor intended for the Chattahoochee-North Metro Merger Feasibility Task Force, along with its concomitant first merger, to be a pilot for other mergers which were quietly being discussed but not yet been revealed to the public.

Newcomb: Do you remember why TCSG and the Commissioner brought up the merger in the first place? Do you remember anything about the rationale they brought up?

Four: I think pretty much it was well known that the Governor felt like there was savings within the technical college system if we had a fewer number of colleges as a whole. And that the merger of Chattahoochee and North Metro was going to be a pilot for what was a future strategy.

The first merger, said this same leader with emphasis, “Was something that the Governor *really* wanted” (Four). A different respondent echoed—in almost the same words—this perception of a Governor’s intent: “I think the Governor had actually strongly asked the question, do we need 30-something technical

colleges” (Eight). This same respondent later added that a local legislator had publically declared his intent to fight the merger in the legislature, but the community leader knew it would be hopeless because of the Governor’s involvement: “Obviously he [the legislator] couldn’t [fight it] because the Governor was going to make that decision, and it really would come down... to a funding issue” (Eight).

Community leaders acknowledged that this scrutiny of costs and number of colleges had public appeal, and on the surface might appear as well intended, that is, that 33 schools might not be needed today; and they conceded that some mergers—not their own, of course—might make sense because of small size and inefficiency, proximity to other schools, or a political origin. They acknowledged this not just with what they said, but what they did not say: I was struck by the fact that the leaders did not attack the public appeal of TCSG’s inquiry, they did not suggest that the use of taxpayer dollars should not be scrutinized, and they did not come to the defense of 33 technical colleges as being a correct number. To the contrary, they did offer comments that begrudgingly acknowledged the merit of asking about costs. Sometimes it was as simple as this: “I think everybody was business folks, therefore they realized if you can have one administration that you are going to have some cost savings through a merger” (Four).

Another focused her comments on the number of schools.

Ten:                   And I can accept the fact that—what is it—35 technical schools?

Newcomb:          Thirty-three.

Ten:                   Thirty-three may be too many. In fact, I was a big proponent of the consolidation of... [two local governments several years back]. So I get to see that there's a possibility of 33 schools around the state are no longer viable. It may have made sense whenever it was, 15 years ago or 20 years ago, but it doesn't now.... And I'm assuming it's a whole lot about expenditures and budgets, and such.

Another expression of this was through an acknowledgement that some schools might warrant consideration as a merger candidate because of something about the school, such as its smaller size or lack of efficiency.

Eight:                I think it [questions about costs] was primarily to reduce the overall technical colleges.... And I think that there are some areas that that made sense, and the merger thing was joining communities where you have maybe too small a... and you didn’t get the benefit of the larger numbers and things to work together.

Another perceived vulnerability might be the proximity of a school to another school, or perhaps even the political nature of a school's origin or founding. Both of these are illustrated in the following dialogue, in which a community leader (who was opposed to the merger of her *own* school) describes how she would respond to a hypothetical query from someone in a different community about a potential merger of *their* school:

- Newcomb: So... if I had come from some community ... [somewhere other than here] and I said [to you], they're talking about maybe a merger down there, is that a good thing, or a bad thing, how should I feel about it, you would be saying [what to that person]?
- Fourteen: I think each merger has to be looked at individually. There are some schools that were built so close together, and I think mergers could have been appropriate for some of those schools—and I guess you're saying [thinking] I'm biased, correct (laughing)!
- Newcomb: No, you've raised an interesting element, that sometimes the logic of it is, that sometimes it makes sense, but you're saying in this [your own] case it didn't.
- Fourteen: Right, uh-huh, because we're in an isolated area up here serving a larger populace, where down there, I think some of the technical colleges were built, maybe political decisions were made early on, and some of them were built extremely close to each other and are more competitors as opposed to working together, so I see mergers in that situation a little bit more than I can see the mergers up here.

The perception of the role or intent of the Governor took on different—even startling—variations, however, as illustrated by three different community leaders. In the first, it was the Governor's decision to cut the budget which allegedly prompted the TCSG Commissioner in a miff to send the Governor a message by closing schools.

- Newcomb: So the Foundation, the local Board of Directors and all those people, nobody got a whiff of this coming?
- Thirteen: No. No, there was none, again, I really want to emphasize that. There was no warning. There was no memo. There was no, "Oh, maybe we're talking about this," or "This is on the list of considerations." Because clearly they had to make some budget cuts, and that's just—I may not have all my facts straight, and I don't want to—well, I guess I am being quoted, but I don't want to be held to it.
- Newcomb: No.
- Thirteen: And I'm trying to get this right, but my understanding is the Governor told the TCSG, "Okay, we're going to cut you eight percent." For some reason, eight

percent sticks out in my mind. “We’re going to cut you eight percent across the board,” and very candidly, and... [the Commissioner] went, “F that, I’ll close seven schools, I’ll show the Governor.”

In the second, the Governor’s decision to merge the technical colleges is about demonstrating his clout to the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia.

Newcomb: Why do you think they wanted to do the merger? They say budget, but why do you think they, you think it was about budget?

One: No. I think it was politics.

Newcomb: What kind of politics? ....

One: .... I think the Governor has some desire to have his powers extend beyond just his legislative duties and so forth. I think he wants to be a bigger player in education, especially, in the Board of Regents.... I think that by doing this, he was sending a message to the Board of Regents, “We can combine colleges if I want to, you’ve already seen me do it....”

In the third, the Governor’s decision to merge the technical colleges was about increasing the political clout of someone in state government, even though the particular recipient was unknown.

Fifteen: I think it was largely, what I heard, and it sounded more plausible than anything else, it was just an idea that had come about some time ago with the Governor and some of his consultants. I think it was just largely politically motivated. I really do.

Newcomb: Politically, in what way?

Fifteen: Trying to make a case, I guess, to embolden some factions of state government, to bring more power to their, to give them more leverage. I don’t see any other reason for it. Maybe that’s poorly thought out, but when we look for things behind the agenda to try to figure out why this was happening, what the benefit was, I really couldn’t see anything else besides just a kind of a power move.

Newcomb: So if you don’t buy the argument that it was for cost savings, then it leaves you scratching your head as to what, and then that gets you into other notions of why it was occurring.

Fifteen: Yeah. When you’re looking for reasons and you can’t really be persuaded by the facts that you’ve been presented with, I think, yeah, that’s kind of where we were left.

I note that each of those three differing perspectives were from community leaders involved in the same merger. This illustrates, I believe, as even one of the leaders had indicated, how utterly they had rejected the TCSG-offered rationale for the mergers, and how swirling had become the speculation mill.



## A Flawed and Even Disingenuous Cost-Savings Rationale

Community leaders did not agree with or *buy* the cost-savings rationale itself, that is, they saw it as flawed and even disingenuous for several reasons: The merger itself would incur costs that were being ignored; there was no business plan for the merged organization; there was no interest on the part of state leaders in allowing local funds to be raised as a substitute for state funds; the talk of merging schools surfaced prior to the actual decline in the state economy and budget; and the choice of schools to merge seemed to be linked merely to a vacancy in the presidency. All of these undermined the rationale.

***Merger-related costs ignored.*** Community leaders questioned whether the projected cost savings of \$250,000 per school or \$500,000 per merger could be true because there would be new costs due to the merger itself.

Fourteen: I'll be honest, I'm having trouble accepting that [cost-savings rationale]. I know in the beginning you're not going to save any money, you've got signage to change, you've got letterhead, I mean, you've got computer systems to merge, you've got... I cannot see how's it going to save the dollars.

Another leader repeats this new-cost argument but adds a sense of skepticism, namely, that the talk of saving costs is really about a false bookkeeping.

Eight: I agreed with the fact that *they* felt sure that there would be savings, from looking at it on paper. However, I'd dealt enough with the state and federal to know that it usually *doesn't* end up that way. There was tremendous cost to make that conversion. If you just looked at signage on all the campuses and all the vehicles and the truck driving and all of that that had to be redone—and those folks don't—that's the little things, but that's a direct cost that would not have to have been done [if no merger]....

Eight: But they're looking at having to cut budgets, and this was one of the ways that they could save and could move over here and do certain things. Some of the things that are done at the state level and federal level is more or less gaming the budget, rather than having actual dollars saved. And it goes on all the time, and we don't have time to get into that.

Yet others put it even more pointedly.

Thirteen: I'm not going to, but I could certainly do some research and spend some effort and some time, and show you that the three and a half million dollars was a crock. They probably spent that in signage, replacing the signs at the schools they did close.

***Lack of a business plan.*** Community leaders—nearly all of whom were in business—believed that a merger might be more acceptable, or at least more persuasive, if the merger included a business plan which would customarily be expected for something as significant as merging two organizations. They believed that the absence of a plan undercut the persuasiveness of TCSG’s cost-savings rationale among community leaders, because it left the cost-saving rationale standing alone, so to speak, as a simplistic explanation, first, of what TCSG wanted to do—merely save some money and not actually very much of it—and second, of how little an impact that TCSG expected the mergers to have on the organization—merely eliminating some positions. In short, they felt as though change as significant as merging organizations was surely more complicated than that.

One perspective focused on the need for TCSG to have begun with a traditional study on the potential effectiveness of the merger, and to have shared the study with the public.

Fourteen: Well, going back to early technical education, you know they used to do a lot of studies, and they would do these studies utilizing experts and people in the field, and then they the study would be published, and *then* the change would be made. I never heard of any studies being done as to the effectiveness of these mergers. All I ever heard was *after* the decision was made. You know [in the current mergers], I think it may have been appropriate to have let the public know that these studies were being conducted, and possibly write a white paper or whatever and produce your outcome of the studies. And I never heard of any of that being done, now, it could have been just that I was out of the circle of that, but I did not hear of any studies being done to support this decision.

Others made the case that, to someone from a business background, the cost-savings rationale by itself seemed thin, so to speak.

Five: [The Commissioner]... brought a couple of folks along [to our meeting] and... explained why it had to be done, that it was strictly a cost-saving issue. The money really wasn’t there, the demand was up. And so he explained why he had to do it....

Newcomb: What was your reaction when—

Five: I thought it was pretty artificial-sounding. It’s pretty easy—I come from a corporate environment—it’s pretty easy to show cost-savings by throwing two organizations together. It’s very rare that you actually realize all of those savings. I happen to know that. And the [Commissioner’s] philosophy went along a line of “We’re only going to have one president for all campuses and we’re going to have a provost who gets \$30,000 a year less, and so on.” You start

laying that out, and really what you're saying is... it's... [just about] getting rid of staff.

In another extensive dialogue, a community leader shows unequivocally how he felt that a business plan should be part of a merger in order to gain acceptance of the significant change which would be required of a merger.

Three: In my professional career... I was in charge of, or involved in, almost all of the major significant corporate change efforts in ... [my corporation].... Change, even if it's a positive change, is difficult. But when it's perceived with a lot of unknowns... it just gave me all kinds of concerns and fears that this was going to be really tough to pull off.

Three: .... It might make sense, but... all kind of questions came up in mind. Do we have a clear vision for what we're trying to do? Is there a business case to do it, or is it a faddish thing? ....

Three: .... My sense was—and I think that's why there's a lot of pessimism—the business case around saving money was not specific enough to cause people to buy in. That makes sense, that you could possibly merge and save money, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to save money. It just is a possibility. But that was the first business case I heard, just in a very general way, about the possibility of merging and saving dollars.

Three: .... And the very broad charter, “We're going to save money,” was, in my opinion, just not a good answer. It should have been accompanied by, “We plan to expand our access of programming to the broader service area of our schools, we think we can get the best of the best and improve the quality of what we do and this is how we'll know that, we think we can cut administrative overhead costs by x-amount by doing this over a three year period.” Just very clear metrics about why you're doing it....

The lack of credibility in the cost-savings numbers of TCSG was sometimes expressed more candidly, as one leader described how he and other business persons reacted after hearing it at a meeting.

Newcomb: In that meeting, did I understand clearly, that people felt, I hear you saying people were upset....

Nine: Questioned the economics of the merger.

Newcomb: So were they aware that TCSG was making the case that it was about saving money and they didn't buy that, is that what you're telling me?

Nine: It was a crock. I'm sitting here [in my corporate office], this is a... million dollar business and I wasn't the only businessman in the room. And you can make studies come out any way you want to make them come out and all we were trying to say is number one, let us see the study numbers. They did *not* want us

to see those numbers and to give us opportunities to counteract what they said the numbers were.

Said another along the same vein: “I think that there was an economy of scale that was supposed to be involved.... But why not show people that from the very, very onset that you are going to have all these savings... and not some superfluous BS about what you were doing” (Two).

***Lack of interest in substituting local funds.*** Community leaders questioned whether the saving of state tax dollars was the actual reason for the mergers when TCSG was not interested in looking for other ways to save costs without merging, and too, was not interested in allowing the local community to raise local monies as a substitute for the state funds that were to be cut.

Newcomb: What did you think of that cost-savings argument?

Seven: I started thinking about other ways you could save money. I think we all sat down and said, “look, you could do this and save a lot of money without having to merge.”

Five: Actually, I believe it came up after that meeting, where we sat down and said, “What if we come up with that money ourselves, the cost savings?” And that was floated forward. I don’t remember who floated that forward. It was outside the meeting, though, but it came back that that was a nonstarter. So it told you there was a little bit more than money involved [as to the reason for the merger]....

Six: .... I think that another outcome would have been not to merge, period, and look at the [other] cost savings, period, or look at the cost savings plus what the community could put into it. And if we had a scaled down... [current college], it was better than a merged one, I think.

Seven: We could have sold one of the buildings out there.

Six: There’s a lot of things that they could have, if it was financial, which is what they told us, they could have looked at a way of cutting the costs here and keeping them independent.... So I think another outcome, maybe what the State should have done is take a harder look at [not] merging them, period, and come up with another way of saving the money without merging them. My opinion.

Another leader in the same merger echoed the wonderment as to why local funds could not make up the difference.

Nine: So... the Commissioner came down.... But it was along the lines of the context that we can save, and... it was not much money, it was a few hundred thousand a year, by merging the college. And not only me but several people in the room said, “Well, why aren’t we given an opportunity to make up the difference? Why not give the community an opportunity, if this is all about \$200,000, give us an

opportunity to make the appropriate corrections either through revenue improvement in the community for the school or cost reductions on our own to save the money?"....

Nine: The economics that we were presented [with] at the meeting with the Commissioner was not significant enough that the community could not have overcome those economics... at that point, had we been given an option, we would have made up the difference for the State on what they said the savings were going to be. I can tell you we could have done that.

In a different merger, the same interest in coming up with local funds emerged, and it, too, was met with a lack of interest: "We even came up with a plan whereby locally we were going to fund the deficit they said the school was incurring. We offered that plan. Never got any response" (Fifteen).

***The talk of mergers preceded State budget decline.*** Another reason why community leaders questioned the cost-savings rationale as the actual reason for the mergers was because the leaders believed that the rumors or talk about mergers pre-dated a declining state budget; they did concede that a cost-savings rationale would understandably be more germane a year later, after the economy had declined, but not back then. This discrepancy fostered a belief that TCSG's cost-savings rationale was a cover, so to speak, for other reasons for wanting to do the merger. Said one: "Well, when this [merger talk] was starting, times were, we weren't flourishing, but there wasn't the recession we know about today.... I think the conversation would be totally different because we're in the depths of this money crunch" (Ten). Said another: "If we were discussing this as a possibility... [today], it would make all the sense in the world, because we know that State revenues are way, way down.... These decisions were made before we had this current reality" (Three).

***The presidential vacancy was the real reason.*** Yet another reason why community leaders questioned the authenticity of the cost-savings rationale as the reason for the mergers was the suspicion—along with incredulity—that it was actually the vacancy in the presidency of their college which had targeted their college for merging.

Ten: But just because there was presidential vacancy, does this mean this is the right trial? Tell me why there ought to be fewer [colleges] and then let's look. Even if all the presidencies are filled, let's look and see what makes sense. And I'm assuming it's a whole lot about expenditures and budgets, and such. But I got the idea that this was the trial balloon simply because there was no longer a president there. So it made sense to someone.

Others shared this perception that vacancies in the presidency did matter, at least in part, as to which colleges would be merged.

Nine: And at this meeting... [with the Commissioner], we found out that, apparently because of retiring presidents or a number of reasons, that the mergers that were involved were going to be... [our college], because of... [our president's] retirement... and... [also over in another merger] the president at... [one of those colleges] was retiring, but there was some [additional] reasoning for that one. And there was... four in the state that was involved in this [because of a president retiring], as I'm recalling from memory....

Newcomb: .... Why do you think the president retiring had something to do with it?

Nine: I haven't got any idea. Maybe it made it easier on them because they didn't have to worry about appointing another one politically or nothing. I have no idea other than seeing it.

Another recalled when he first heard about the mergers: "My first information was that... we had a vacancy that was created when... [the previous president retired] and that it would be an opportune time to make the merger happen without any rationalization of the business case" (Three).

### **Give Us a Vision as a Rationale**

Community leaders believed that a merger would make more sense, be more acceptable, or perhaps be more persuasive, if its intent included the achievement of some larger vision, plan, or purpose beyond a mere saving of costs.

Ten: I would hope that if somebody came up with the idea that 33 technical schools... doesn't make sense, they would approach it from how can we give the biggest bang for the buck to our two audiences... manufacturers who will come... [to Georgia] in the future and who are already there... and our folks who want to pursue careers offered by the technical schools.... So when you're looking to see how can we get the biggest bang for our buck for those two constituencies, you're going to look to see, "There's no way, with this school, that we could ever offer X, Y and Z, and through the years, students have really been demanding it. We can't do it. So, by putting these together, we can," and such.

Ten: .... We ought to be looking, how can we raise the level of technical education in the state? That *ought* to have been the conversation. I can remember back when what's his face had just left UGA, Knapp, Charles Knapp, and they were about to bring in Mike, and the vision, whether it was Zell, or someone else's, was how can we come up with a premier university in this state? All of our best minds are leaving. How can we do this? It wasn't about saving money.

One such vision articulated by community leaders was the hope that the mergers might lead to better transfer of credit options from technical colleges to other higher education institutions, and in fact, community leaders felt as though they had been given assurances—in order to make the mergers seem more palatable—that this would happen. One community leader described his transition during the merger process from, first, thinking that the merger would be good for program expansion because it resolved a competition issue; second, thinking that the merger would be good because it would resolve the issue about transfer of credits (especially since the Governor was supporting the mergers, he said, it would happen); and third, thinking that this hope had disappeared:

Newcomb: Try to take yourself back to when you first heard about the merger, and at that initial point, what was your first reaction to it...?

Four: I think I always saw it as a positive opportunity, especially having been on... [the board of directors for my college] at that time, knowing some of the needs for us to be able to expand programs and yet we were always sort of competing with... [the merger partner as to] which programs we could start and so forth, that I saw there was the true opportunity of a positive outcome....

Four: I think there was a sense of ... a real potential of improving the system. And not just improving the system by merging to make more efficient operations; really more of improving the system by providing a better product for our students. I think there was truly... a perception that this was a real opportunity to make some changes that needed to be made, probably because we understood it was something that the Governor really wanted. And what we saw as some real changes for our students was being able to take credit hours into the university system that occurred in the technical college system.

Four: I think that was a *big* one right there, that we were hoping we would get, at least within the university system facilities in our service area, that kind of transferability....

In the end, he said, the hope of such transferability “sort of got set off to the side... [among the] multiple mergers throughout the state” (Four). This issue of transferability played out even more negatively for some other community leaders, because they felt that TCSG had actually agreed—as early as a period prior to the announcement of the merger plan—to let their local college offer two new transfer degrees, and this was now gone.

Nine: But... to go back on that some more, we were already going down a path. I had pushed with ... [the previous president] for an associate degree program that the University System of Georgia, the Regents system, should accept a two-year

degree from every technical college with Associate of Science, Associate of Arts degrees. The programs ought to be set up to do that. For example, the only option that you have for an Associate's degree if you live in ... [this city] is to go to ... [a local private college].... The only other option you've got is to drive to... [a distance to several other cities in order to attend University System of Georgia institutions].

Nine: So ... [the previous president] had worked out, before all this happened... [with a couple of other institutions] to accept all of the two-year degree programs that we had [planned] here.... And you go online... and get your four-year degree.... So we were working on giving the people in ... [our city] access to higher education through the [technical] college because they had no other option. Well, that's dead. Hell, every bit of that's dead. It's been killed.

Newcomb: Was it killed because of the merger?

Nine: Yes.

This theme was repeated by a different respondent, except that he added the Governor as part of the problem and, too, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia.

Eight: One of the things that we worked hard on... [was] a commitment from them [TCSG] that they would work hard to create a two-year college credit... that would be transferrable to the other state colleges.... And still we are fighting that battle, even though they made the commitment.... And our biggest fighter of that is the University [System] of Georgia, because they don't want to lose the students.

Eight: And the Governor had given us the go ahead, but actually retreated on that because of the Board of Regents' opposition. And our argument was if we can provide the same education at 40 percent of the cost, why are we protecting the State rather than doing something for the citizens of the state, and those courses could transfer and a tremendous amount of money could be saved.

Eight: .... There were no negatives for that [associate degree] program for the people and for the technical college except the Board of Regents didn't want to lose that. So anyway, we're still working on that and we are offering some of those courses now, but we still probably won't get that done because of the Board of Regents' strength versus the technical college's strength.

He concluded that "It's like everything, it comes down to politics, whether it's local or state or federal"

(Eight).

### **A Mismatch or Poor Fit Between the Communities**

Community leaders believed that cultural differences between the colleges were reason enough to have caused a matchup with a different partner or to have stopped the merger. Sometimes those



differences were articulated in very specific terms, but other times it found expression merely as an unexplained *fit* which made sense to the community leader: “The communities coming together really didn’t make as much sense as some other communities, potentially. We probably have more in common with... [a different college] than we would with... [the current merger partner], but nothing ever came of that” (Five). There was a sense, too, that the failure to consider such issues mattered, as described by this respondent: “The vast majority of mergers are unsuccessful in accomplishing what they want to because of the cultural barriers that you face. They’re not the technology barriers, typically. They’re usually cultural barriers, and they’re very, very hard to undo” (Three).

One leader articulated several of those perceived differences—all at once in a single exchange—as she described how she initially got to thinking about cultural differences when talking to a friend.

Ten: I talked with... people here whose opinion I valued... to share with them what I knew and to get their thoughts, particularly the person outside this area, and it was that person [who] said... “That’s not going to work because of the different cultures... You can’t take... [this college in this county] and try to blend it in with... [that other college in the other county]. They’re two different cultures. That’ll never work.”

Ten: So I started thinking about that and I talked with several other people here about, you know, what’s the difference between the two campuses. And they said, “From our perspective (not theirs, but students up here), that’s a long way down there and no one from up here would ever go down to that school because it’s so far.” And I know all about that because people in Atlanta, when I’d go to meetings in Atlanta... they’d say, “Did you drive up today? Did you drive up this morning? When are you going back?” And it was so far to them. So I know about perception of distances.

Ten: I’ve never been on the... [other college’s] campus, don’t know that area, but as I’ve come to understand the population, the business is totally different down there. We’ve got much more manufacturing. They have hardly any down there. It’s more retail, offices, professions and such. So if you’re a student and you grow up in that environment, versus growing up in this environment, there’s great difference in the students, in the mindset, and again, the culture.

Ten: I’ve made two trips to... [a foreign country], one trip to... [a foreign country], and two trips to... [a foreign country], so I know a little bit about culture. Plus, living... in... [South] Georgia, where I saw the minority population grow from the low 40s to the high 70s, I know all about culture. So that resonated with me, a lot. Culture doesn’t have to be foreign countries...

Ten: Also the “us and them,” and you can put the “us” up here and you can put the “us” down there and you can transport to “them,” but in faculty, and I spent a

semester teaching at... [a university], so I got a taste of what academicians can be like, very parochial, territorial... looking down their nose at others, that nobody knows anything about anything other than they. So however this mix might ultimately come about, faculty might thwart it in some way because they prefer the students of one place or another.

This notion that there was a physical distance or difference which was distinguishable—and which mattered—was expressed more subtly by others. One leader defined the difference in terms of traffic patterns, and as importantly, to and from a community which was distinctively different and even isolated.

Newcomb: And when you first heard about the mergers, did it come out of the blue, did it catch you by surprise, was it news?

Fourteen: Oh, no, I mean, it totally came out of the blue for me, like I said earlier, it was a real surprise, I did *not* see this merger coming.

Newcomb: And your first reaction was good, bad?

Fourteen: Oh extremely negative, particularly if it was merging with... [the other college] because that is not the traffic pattern here. Our traffic pattern in our area is north south... [on a major local] corridor... we don't commute east west... and I guess that was my biggest thinking, is *why* are we merging with... [the other college]. First of all my *biggest* thinking was why are we merging, period, and secondly, why there....

Fourteen: Now, I am still kind of perplexed as to *why* the mergers are occurring. [Our college]... is located in a very unique area... kind of in an isolated area as it relates to postsecondary education.... The closest university school is... miles in any direction, so we're kind of isolated, and I kind of felt like... [our college] served this community and the surrounding area very adequately as it was.

Sometimes the issue of culture was clothed in a discussion of the size of the colleges and the population of the counties in which they were located. This was seen as both a cultural difference and as an advantage or disadvantage in the merger. As one respondent said, when she first heard of the merger of her school, which was the smaller in the matchup, that it would be a mismatch and the merger—if there must be one—should be with a different partner because “you don't get lost in, it's much better to be a big fish in a little pond than a little fish in a huge pond” (Fourteen). Another leader thought the difference in size between her school and the other was clear: “The only way I could think, is that the larger is going to swallow the smaller” (Ten). The natural reaction, said a third, is how to help the smaller county,

“knowing how the smaller counties sometimes lose when you pull together a merger with an organization within a much larger county” (Four). Sometimes the difference in size is tied up with other perceptions such as the difference in the economic bases of the communities, including the size of payrolls, or even with an historical rivalry.

One:                   And you have to know, too, let me set the table a little bit more for you, that there’s sort of... [the other town and my town] have always been communities that has gone after the same thing. We have [high school] football. We play each other on an annual basis. That comes into play. They’ll beat us, we beat them back and forth through the years. And that rivalry has built up.

“They’re growing faster than we are now... [and] they’ve built up a robust of commercial and retail business beyond what we have” (One)—and now they end up with the main campus for the new college.

### **A Sense of Loss**

Community leaders felt a strong and even emotional sense of ownership of their college, of a taking of their college, and of a loss—it was theirs, and the merger took it from them. The sense of ownership was described by community leaders in terms which often used the words ours, relationship, community fundraising, and a feeling: “We sort of had a feeling this was a community technical college that belonged to us, because in many ways, it did.... If you ask anybody... it was clearly owned and was for our community... it worked that way” (Five). Said another: “It was just a source of community pride that we had that college here and it was ‘our’ college” (Two).

Newcomb:           That sense of – you just said, “Our technical college.”

Sixteen:             Our technical college.

Newcomb:           Tell me more about that ‘our.’

Sixteen:             Ownership.

Newcomb:           I’m beginning to think that’s a big part of this. Talk to me about that.

Sixteen:             Yeah.

Newcomb:           What do you feel when you say that, our ownership?

Sixteen:             Well, it’s our technical college. We are part of it. We support it with our time and our fundraising efforts, if you’re on the Foundation. And it’s something that

stood for the community. It trained our citizens to be productive community members. And it's our technical college.

Newcomb: It's not the same college after the merger?

Sixteen: Well, not in my mind.

Newcomb: Why?

Sixteen: Because I know nothing that goes on at... [the other city and college], I guess.

And the merger was a *taking* of it: As one leader described the first time she heard about the merger of her school, she reacted with “creative trepidation, because I think it's normal the reaction is someone is *taking* something from our community. That's the immediate reaction, rather than anyone *giving* something” (Ten). Others in her community, she said, felt the same way: “Their reaction was, ‘You can't take our school. You're not going to take our school,’ very strongly. That's what I kept hearing over and over.... ‘Don't let them take it away,’ because it was the taking away” (Ten).

Underlying the simple sense of college ownership, however, was a complex relationship of interdependence between college and community which was seen as a college and community who were on a “two-way street” (Fourteen), or as another leader put it, in a trusting business relationship.

Twelve: It's no different than choosing a bank. You choose a bank because that's where you want your customer service to come from, and as that relationship goes and grows, it becomes natural that the attitude, the customer service that's expected, the customer service that is given, and at the end of the day, both parties are happy because they know each other, versus somebody that you don't know, that you're going to depend on that you don't know, don't know what you need unless they ask, don't know which direction you want to go in unless they ask. You're standing there killing time, and you're killing moving forward.

***A college there for the community.*** On one side of this relationship between college and community, the college was seen by community leaders an integral part of the community, its organizations, and its activities—and especially through its president.

Newcomb: That notion about [the college] serving the local community, do you have a sense that [it] changes in a merger, is there something about the feel of the school that is different?

Fourteen: Well, you know... I'm going to have to say yes, because we're a small community. Now, this may not be the feeling... in metro Atlanta, but we're a small community.... The school is very involved in the community, and... when

something is going on, and I'm going to use the Chamber, for example... and the president of the college was involved in all of the chambers, they [the chambers] like top dog [from the college], they don't want your second lieutenant, so they really want the president of the college to be involved in the community, and I think that's the reason the school got so much buy-in from the community. And yes, I do think that will be affected, because a president of... [so many counties now in the merged school].... I mean, I don't think you will get the buy-in from the communities from a *branch* of... [the merged college] as you would their own institution, their own technical college.

Another part of the college's side of this interdependence was seen in the responsiveness of the college—especially and personally by the president—to requests from the community.

Seven: We felt [from the merger] like we were losing, I guess, control of our local technical college.

Six: Right.

Newcomb: Expand on it.

Seven: Well, we had always been so involved. We could pick up the phone and call any number of people out there, "Hey, Linda. Hey, Johnny or whoever, we need help with this," or "I'm bringing someone out there." And then all of a sudden, who do you call?

Six: And particularly with... [the retired president]. We all had his cell phone number. He said, "Call anytime." He'd never take a message. You would always get through to him and he would help....

Newcomb: So if they [from the merged college] had given you the contact of whoever was in charge of that campus, then everything would have been okay?

Seven: No. No.

Six: No.

Newcomb: What else was –

Seven: It was the feeling in our minds.

Six: It's the relationship that you have, to begin with. It's not [just] knowing that someone is going to answer the phone, but that someone is going to help you. "We've got a [business] prospect coming today... [to the previous president], can you help us?" "Bring them out. We'll be ready for you." He'd have lunch, he'd have a presentation ready, he'd have his staff lined up. This would be like in an hour's notice. I've never had that feeling since then, ever.... It's just not going to happen [now], and we know that. We just know that.

Even as early as the transition during the merger, the leaders felt as though local personnel were already changing, and “We were beginning to hear less and less from our local people about anything.... [We heard instead that] ‘someone from the other school is going to be doing that now....’ We didn’t really know who to talk to” (Seven). These themes were repeated by others.

Fifteen: We’ve never had a meeting of community leaders in the past without the president being there, and now you just don’t have that. Very active in the Chamber and all its functions, and the PR folks that were there before, you never see them. They were always in the community. If there was any activity going on... [the old college] was always represented. That’s not there anymore.

Newcomb: So how does that matter? What does it matter if the president and the PR folks aren’t there as much?

Fifteen: Because in a small town, you’ve got a family that you can count on. You’ve got touch points. You’ve got support. That’s just a core that is always going to be there. I don’t care if you’re opening a hamburger stand, a ribbon cutting, or if you’re at a graduation or if you’ve got—the cities having some drug awareness—whatever’s going on, that group will always be there. It’s just kind of a fixture that... [the old college’s] folks were always part of everything. It’s not like that now....

He concluded: “I’m not faulting... [the new president at the other college’s main campus] or anything, or any of the folks... [over there], but it’s clear, that school... [over there] is their main focus” (Fifteen).

*A community there for the college.* The other half of the two-sided relationship between college and community was the inverse, that is, the community support for the college. This was especially visible through fundraising activities, and this support was motivated in large part by a sense of ownership of the college, namely: When a community has a sense of ownership, said one leader, “That’s the way you get donations for the Foundation is from people that think that they’re part of it, they have ownership” (Sixteen).

Newcomb: Let me play psychologist a little bit. Why are people mad? What is it, it can’t just be that you’re not sure you’ll get the call back [from the new president of the new college] when you call. You’re expressing more than that. What is it?

Seven: Well, we’re the ones that make the phone calls, need the help and all that. Other board members and other people that were involved felt like, “Here I gave x-number of dollars to *our* school and now *our* school is in... [a different city].

Newcomb: So what do you mean by *our* school?

Seven: The local community college that they had ownership in, because they had either been on one of the boards, they had been involved in committees and gave money, and everybody was right there, accessible, and we're losing that. I don't know how to explain –

Six: .... Everybody knows the power shifted up to... [the other city] and everybody knows that....

Newcomb: Why was it important to have the power here?

Six: Well, for the relationships that we've been talking about, the relationship that the school has had with all of the industries for all of the years. I'm not saying it's not there anymore, but it's certainly different when the guy that you have to talk to is not here anymore, living and working in the community, on the... [local boards] and just part of the fabric of the community.

Others echoed the same comments about how the community had raised funds for the college, not just to create it in the first place but in the decades since then.

One: And I think we were almost stunned [by the news of the merger] because if I go back, the college had just undertaken a couple of projects there. We had just built a new what's called the... [a person's name] building, which is a... [multi-million dollar] building.... We had just built that. We had done some other changes on campus. We had gotten a new president that seemed to be very anxious in moving the college forward. So we just felt like everything was in pretty good shape.

The other thing that really sort of, I guess, irked us to a degree, would be that this college was the very first one in this region of the state. We were sort of grandfathered in. We, as a taxpayer, we, as a community, had actually invested local tax money into the college. We had passed a bond and had actually built the first building, if I remember correctly, and paid for the property.

The loss of a community sense of ownership meant that fundraising in the future would be injured, or as one leader put it, it would now be a love affair gone bad.

Newcomb: How would you describe the relationship between the college and the community then versus now?

Eleven: Oh, boy. Back then it was a pure love affair. You know, how do you raise... [so much money] in a community this size without there being a love affair between [them], and them being proud of what we had. This school's been here a long time. It's gone through its bumps and grinds but....

Newcomb: Well, you don't have that relationship with the college now?

Eleven: No.

Newcomb: How is it now?

Eleven: I haven't been back down there in eight months now, maybe.

Newcomb: You stepped down from the Board of Trustees?

Eleven: I did.

Newcomb: Tell me again, though, how is it not the same with the college now?

Eleven: I think there's a standoffish feel from the community to the college. Too, the loss of the college mattered not just to the local community but also to the economic development efforts of the community.

Fifteen: We're going to continue to sell the community just like we did before, but when you don't have an institution with the... [previous college name] on it, there's no question that it does feel different.... [When] we were doing our dog and pony show [for industry recruitment] was the fact that this was one of the smallest communities to have... a technical school. You play up those little things.... So, yeah, it's not quite the same, saying you're the... campus of... [a college somewhere else]. It's a tangible thing for the folks around here. It's an ego deal.

Noted another: Before the merger, if you were considering moving to our city, "you look at it and you say, 'Well, they have... a technical college, wow, that's really good.' And now you say, 'Well... [they] have a campus of a technical college.' There's just not as much oomph" (Thirteen). In fact, rubbing salt in the wound for all of the communities who ended up as a campus instead of the main college was the fact that they had the status of equals prior to the merger and that they were often competitors. In one community, however, this was even worse; in a reversal that chafed local leaders, the college which ended up as the main college in the new merger had actually begun its life decades ago as a satellite—of the other college which now found itself relegated to the status of satellite. In short, the offspring came to dominate the parent.

A major part of the sense of a *taking* among community leaders was the loss of the presidency, which because of the merger would now be located at the other partner's main campus. One leader had some very pointed feelings about the downward spiral of the college leadership in his own community.

Two: Well, immediately you think that [before the merger] you would have had your president, the presidential connotation of president just has a certain ring of authority to it, and prestige, I would say, as well. You lose that, and then you come down with a Provost. Are we next going to find ourselves with a Sergeant Major? What are we headed toward, here? Again, it was just sort of a prestige blow to the community. Here we are, being relegated to being dictated to by an



authority that's way above us up here, and there's not anything we can really do about it, which was true. We just couldn't do anything.

That sort of helplessness was noted by another leader, who pointed out that it contributed in just one more way to some tough times and concerns about the future for his community.

Fifteen: And there are a lot of things wrapped up in that, but I think one of the things that you fight in a town this size is that kind of overarching negativism that people here feel. Like I said, any time you eliminate anything [such as the prestige of being the main campus], that kind of compounds all that. You do end up with folks kind of feeling powerless, and especially when our [legislative] representative folks in Atlanta kind of get their influences trumped somehow. And there's no good story. There's no good explanation. That's a bad thing because it makes people feel like where is our involvement? Where is our turn to stand up and talk about how we feel about this? It's kind of an embittering thing.

In the end, he adds, "I think we've lost a lot that we won't get back" (Fifteen).

### **The *How* of Their Resistance**

The findings as presented in this section focus on the second set of my specific research questions, that is, I seek to understand *how* community leaders expressed their concerns, resistance, or opposition, that is, in what venue or in what manner did they do so, and to whom did they do so? To help introduce this section, I list as follows the four principal themes by their titles, which begin to reveal the nature of my findings: First Conversations, Calls, and Meetings; A Reliance on Networking; Meetings With the Commissioner; and After the Fact. These four themes tend to follow an approximate chronological order.

#### **First Conversations, Calls, and Meetings**

The process of resistance for community leaders began with their hearing the news about the merger of their college, which took the form of a phone call from someone they knew, of a chance conversation on the street or at a regular meeting of a community organization, or of a story in the media; some had heard a prelude of it months earlier as they heard or knew about the study group looking at a Chattahoochee Tech and North Metro Tech merger. In each instance, the news triggered an intertwined dialectic of calls, networking, and meetings.

Newcomb: Can you trace back in your mind, when did you first hear about the merger, and can you reflect back to that point, and then we'll move forward a little bit from that, but reflect back to when you first heard it, what was your first reaction?

Fourteen: Well, I got a telephone call, a community person, asking me if I would attend a meeting here, a community meeting, and actually I believe that the meeting might have been sponsored by... [a local club], but they said that it related to the merger of the [our local] technical college with... [another technical college].... And that's probably my first knowledge. I could have read a little bit in the newspaper about a merger coming up, but attending the meeting was really my first knowledge.

Newcomb: That was last fall sometime, wasn't it?

Fourteen: Probably was.

Newcomb: And when you first heard about the mergers, did it come out of the blue, did it catch you by surprise, was it news?

Fourteen: Oh, no, I mean, it totally came out of the blue for me, like I said earlier, it was a real surprise, I did *not* see this merger coming....

Newcomb: How do you recall things, after that, unfolding, were there meetings you attended, did you express doubts at those meetings, how did events unfold?

Fourteen: Well, at this particular meeting to which I was invited to attend, which I told you was a community meeting... [someone there from our college] explained... [what the merger proposal was]... and yes, I... stood up and asked... [questions].

Newcomb: Were there other issues that you expressed at that meeting or at other meetings?

Fourteen: That was really the only public meeting that I attended.

Newcomb: Do you recall whether you made phone calls to other people, did you email, did you write a letter to the editor, did you walk with a placard... I am trying to gauge the extent of how you reacted and what you did.

Fourteen: Alright, I'll tell it all. I left the meeting that night, and to be honest with you, I just didn't like what I heard.... So I called... [another community leader] and I said... how do you feel about this merger, because he was at this meeting also and he *also* spoke up, and he and I were in agreement that as presented that we didn't feel that it was in the best interest of this technical college, and he and I both spent many years here and have our heart invested here, so that was our only agenda, we had no other agenda other than what was the best interest for the technical college.

Fourteen: So after discussing it with... [him] we decided that we needed to meet with some people to express our views... so we called... [a member of the local board of the college] and we met with... [that member]... and... [the member's] feelings were very similar to ours, and at this time we were more opposed to the merger with... [the other school], really opposed to the merger period... and then we

[all] made a telephone call to the chairman of the local board... [and he called] downtown [to TCSG]....

This pattern of surprise at the news followed immediately by phone calls to others was common, and as community leaders described this reaction, they reveal how strong their feelings were from the start.

Newcomb: Okay. If you would go back, please, and let's talk a little bit about the timeline. When you first heard about the merger, can you go back to that moment? When did you first hear about it, and what was your initial reaction? And I'll move on after that.

Thirteen: Okay. Anger, anger, anger, anger, anger. I do remember specifically I was called, I got a telephone call from the Chamber of Commerce director... who's my friend and obviously a civic leader.... He called me, and he said, "What in the world? I just heard," and immediately I was (I'm glad you're asking me because I've told this to everybody) I was angry. I was upset. I was mad. I didn't like it. I wanted it stopped.

Thirteen: And I basically hung the phone up, and picked it back up and called... my state representative, and essentially said, "What's going on, and what's happened?" He didn't even know it. And so it kind of went from there, and there was a lot of angst and a lot of bad emotions about the merger itself.

Others painted a similar portrait of how the resistance played out in the local community, including meetings, media, and letter writing campaigns.

Fifteen: We had a pretty active letter writing campaign, and of course, the Chamber was involved and did a good job, and there were several of meetings at the Chamber of Commerce, and the paper got behind it. But that was all just, I guess, it was just confined here to the local scene. Anything we did as far as letters or whatever else to Atlanta just kind of fell into dead space.

Occasionally community leaders reported that they spoke in public, that is, governmental forums in the local community: "I spoke openly at a [county] commissioners' meeting in my comments to notify the community of my distaste as to what was going on and how it was going on... and to the [TCSG] Commissioner... and in the Capitol" (Twelve).

### **A Reliance on Networking**

Noticeably missing from the descriptions of those early days and weeks is any mention of public protests, that is, visible and organized campaigns. From early in the process—when they first heard of the mergers—and throughout the process of inquiry and resistance, community leaders chose to quietly utilize a network of established relationships or known contacts rather than to engage in such public

protests. This reliance on networking began naturally enough as a first reaction to hearing about the mergers—picking up the phone and calling someone known to them—and this networking style continued throughout the merger process. The reasons for this are multiple—as will be explored in this chapter—but most importantly include the simple fact that networking is what community leaders do. As the networking progressed, however, community leaders grew increasingly frustrated as their efforts not only were unsuccessful in terms of outcomes but also were having difficulty getting past what they perceived to be a pattern of unresponsiveness from TCSG.

Newcomb: I'd like to explore the notion of how that opposition was expressed. Was it, you talked to folks? You wrote letters to the editor? You walked the street with a placard? How did you express opposition?

Three: Well, we sat down and talked about who we knew. For example, I don't mind naming names, we knew... [a member of the TCSG Board], for example. We called... and said, "Tell us what you know." Several people [also] had relationships with... [the] Chairman of the [TCSG] Board....

Three: .... One of the folks... [called the Chairman and he] said he wasn't going to talk about [it]. So it was kind of like, "I'm not going to." This is a guy... who said that he wasn't going to entertain dialogue with people in the community until several decisions were made. It just made people very angry, like, why wouldn't you be open about it? This is our community college, our technical school in our community, rather. Why would we not sit down openly and start talking about the whys, the whos, the whens, the process we were going to follow. Again, we just kind of felt like we were shut out of it, and when you're completely shut out of it, and you have no influence or control over what's going on with regards to an asset that you feel strongly about, it causes you to feel angry.

Three: We were contemplating writing letters, but we decided to be a bit more strategic and just use relationships that we had, when we started those phone calls, only to learn that the [TCSG] Commissioner made a commitment that on date x, he would come back and sit down and talk to us, and in essence, the message was kind of, "Buzz off, until we're ready to talk to you." That was sort of the message. And all you can do is just say, nothing is served by going to the media. Nothing is served by writing letters. We talked to the chairman of the [local college] board, and he said essentially the same thing.

Three: The sense was going through a process. We concluded that the [TCSG] Board was going through a process. We felt like they were being awful secretive about it, but there was really nothing we could do, so we just sat back and endured it. In the bigger scheme of things, it wasn't a long time frame, so we just continued to meet as a board, and bitch and moan about it.

The breadth of this networking could become extensive, and occasionally got a sympathetic ear.

- Newcomb: The opposition, how did it get expressed? Did people march in the streets or write letters or editorials or make phone calls to legislators? What happened?
- One: No. I think we made calls. We emailed people that sit on the Board. In fact, that's interesting that you ask that question. We have a State Board member who has... [a connection to our city].... And initially... was not opposed to the merger... and... was almost dumbfounded when we told... [the member] about our concerns.
- One: And suddenly in midstream... says, "Whoa, this is not exactly what I've been led to believe, this is not what I've been told," and... changed... support immediately. We contacted, I had several friends that I know that serve on that Board.... I emailed them, told them my concerns. We wrote a letter to... [the Commissioner]. We wrote letters for a local newspaper, and we made sure the local newspaper was aware of what went on.
- One: And we also expressed our concerns to... [our local legislators]. And... [one of them] actually introduced a couple of pieces of legislation that would have at least slowed down or hampered this merger. And I think they did not pass. So I think that we did all we knew we could do.

Community leaders felt that legislators were an important part of the network—and were trusted—but were not themselves being kept informed and could not turn the course of events:

- Newcomb: Did folks talk to legislators, do you think?
- Two: People did write legislators.
- Newcomb: Did you contact the legislators?
- Two: I contacted my legislators to let them know that that was not something that I favored. I didn't think it was good.... I'm presuming that with the State budget and the State in the disarray it was in, that there were big, big, big, big fish that people weren't about trying to fry, other than something like this. I don't know all the levels that the Governor operates on with budgets, Offices of Planning and whatever, but I would presume that somebody may have better information than... [we as community leaders were able to furnish legislators]....The information we discussed earlier about the hard, real savings, somebody may have had that information. Somebody may still have it. Somebody may know that hey, this is going to be a huge benefit to the State of Georgia. And if they know that, it would have been nice for us to have known it as well.
- Newcomb: Was it your sense... that the legislators were just as much in the dark?
- Two: Now, I don't necessarily know that. I don't necessarily think they was as in the dark as those of us on a lower level. I would tend to think that maybe they weren't absolutely clear as to what all was happening, going on, until it got again to a level, to a point where people started contacting them about that, because I think they would have come to us, quite frankly. The relationship that we have with our legislators, I think they would have come to us and told us in advance,

“Look. This is something that’s going on here that’s about to happen. We’re getting worried that this is about to happen, and what are your feelings?” I’ve had that happen from time to time.

Ordinary citizens in the community were also part of the networking, and this often occurred in the ordinary daily settings of community life:

Eleven: I think maybe I heard more of it because people knew my position, and I stood up in front of... people every year and thanked them for coming to... [a college fundraiser] and told them where this money went. So my identification was with the school. Everybody knows what I do but I had lent my name to the school. So I got a lot of questions about it. I got a lot of phone calls about it. Sitting around and playing golf with the guys or at a church meeting. “Hey, what’s going on with the school? Where are we going? What’s the name going to be?” So there was a ton of conversation about it in the community.

### **Meetings with the Commissioner**

As the sequence of networking and meetings progressed, community leaders ended up meeting with the TCSG Commissioner to discuss community concerns about the mergers; community leaders felt as though in the beginning such meetings were forced, but later the Commissioner seemed very ready to meet. In terms of the tone, community leaders felt as though the Commissioner was professional and was actively trying to reassure leaders, that is, he was saying that the mergers were necessitated by budgetary concerns, was maintaining that communities would not notice a difference in the colleges because of the mergers, and was entertaining some ideas about what could be done to soften concerns—but was slow to give specific answers or to make commitments. One leader wondered if the Commissioner was pushing the mergers or was being pushed to do so:

Nine: I think, in my opinion, and I don’t know factually, but I think a lot of this was probably dumped on the Commissioner. I found him to try to do the right thing in the arena that has been dealt to him... I’d have to defend him from that standpoint because I think the decision that was made was maybe more dictated to him than it was his, is my perception.

In the end, the leaders felt skepticism, but as one put it, no one called anyone a liar. They also felt that he was unyielding that the mergers would be going forward.

Five: We decided we needed to have a powwow with [the] Commissioner... to have a better understanding of what this merger would do... There were probably 15 or 20 people in there. [The Commissioner]... brought a couple of folks along and explained to us that this merger, everything was going to be transparent and we’d

never know the difference. But he also explained why it had to be done, that it was strictly a cost-saving issue. The money really wasn't there, the demand was up. And so he explained why he had to do it....

Newcomb: What was the tone of that meeting?

Five: From the Commissioner's standpoint, he was trying to show that there's not going to be an impact on the community. He was going out of his way to let us know that there would not be an impact. It was my take on it. I don't –

Seven: Yeah. That's what they kept saying. "You'll never know the difference." But almost immediately, we could see a difference....

Five: And also, we knew one other thing, and that was... we knew that if there was only one president, it's not going to be our... [recently retired president]. It's going to be somebody we didn't know. And that really went through my head a lot.

Newcomb: How was the tone of that meeting? Did folks seem to – "Well, it is what it is," or was there –

Seven: Well, I think a lot of us were still leery. We really didn't believe anything that was said.

Five: But there was not, I don't believe, from the community's standpoint, nobody went out and called anybody a liar or anything like that.

Seven: No. We just –

Five: We just absorbed as much as we could, and there were some questions asked during that. But I think we all, when we got together after the meeting, I think we all agreed, "Well, it's not going to be really as nice as it is projected to be"....

Newcomb: So after that meeting, did your feelings about it go more positive or go more negative?

Five: I'd say more negative....

Newcomb: .... And how did you, what were the next steps that you took? You talked to legislators. Did you talk to the Governor? What did you do?

Five: Legislators were already involved in the first step. The plan had been... to show that we could come up with the equivalent of the savings locally and then take that to the Governor to stop the merger. But for some reason, I'm not sure who actually said the final thing, that plan didn't go forward because we didn't feel we had any hopes of succeeding at that because the decision had been made, it had been signed and the blood had dried....

Five: .... And it would have had to been higher than the Commissioner because... [he] was clearly on board with "This is going to happen," so –

Another community leader described a leadership meeting with the Commissioner as professionally conducted, patronizing, and leading to no changes. There was also some passionate feelings, notably from local legislators.

Fifteen: We had a group from town.... We met with... [the TCSG Commissioner] and his folks. Very well treated, good meeting, but it was obvious that it was just out of courtesy to us that they were going through this process. They listened to us and then they went right on ahead with their plan. We were promised some things that never happened, but the writing was pretty much on the wall as far as what their intentions were. So, at some point, you kind of take the tack that, "Well, we've just got to make the best of a bad situation and be a happy camper, or otherwise, we don't want to cause any more harm, or we don't want the school to suffer because we didn't go along with the—" ....

Fifteen: .... It was kind of patronizing and it was pretty much just a wasted effort. Basically when we went up there, we understood that this was more than likely going to happen regardless of what we did locally, but we had wanted to have some meetings with everybody around the table so we could talk about things like which departments were going to be where, and even things like what the name of the institution was going to be. We would have liked to have had some input into that. Some things about existing contracts with the local vendors and if that could be protected, or if that could be accommodated somehow. None of that ever happened....

Newcomb: .... How passionate did it get?

Fifteen: Well, I'll tell you now. When we were dealing with, in the brief time we were talking [at the meeting], I don't think we were listening. Yeah, it got pretty heated. In that meeting with... [the Commissioner], I was proud of our, you know, they give Obama a hard time now because he doesn't get fired up, I don't know if you know... [our local legislator], but... [he] is not a real firebrand, but –

Newcomb: Did he get fired up?

Fifteen: Yeah, he did. He sat there and he shook his finger at... [the Commissioner], and... [our other legislator] did, too, and we came back home and we were ready to secede from the state. Like I said, it's kind of, all kind of calmed down now. I guess we have a tendency to maybe be not as vocal as we should be, because it still [today] doesn't sit well around here. But at some point, you have to say, "Let's make the best of it."

Newcomb: In hindsight, is there anything you would have done different, or you did everything that could be done?

Fifteen: I think so. I think anything else would have been an exercise in futility because... [the Governor] and a few others up there, I think, had their minds made up what they wanted to do.



## **After the Fact**

As the chronology of events advanced, at various points the community leaders came to feel that their attempts to halt or significantly affect the mergers were not being successful, and they came to accept the inevitability of the mergers. In retrospect, however, they individually ruminated on the process of expressing resistance. No trends emerged which could be fairly attributed to a composite of community leaders, but six vignettes give a flavor of the thoughts of the one or several community leaders.

*Should have been protests.* This view held that community leaders should have been more vocal and should have encouraged others to be so as well, and that perhaps TCSG intended to keep community leaders in the dark and out of the loop in order to keep this from happening.

- Newcomb: Go back to how vocal you were in expressing your concerns in the local community.
- Two: Not vocal enough. Now, hindsight is 20/20. In fact, it's 15/20. In hindsight, I probably was not vocal enough, but I think it was because there was sort of a defeatist attitude taken by all of us because of the way the whole thing got handled from the beginning. If in the very beginning, the Commissioner had come to us, or contacted us personally... I think if he had gotten in touch with us first and started getting the feelings of how do you feel about this, and how does the community feel, I think that would have been a whole other situation.
- Newcomb: What would that other situation have been? Would it have been that he would have drawn you in and you would have helped work out the details?
- Two: I think we'd have protested heavily. I think there would have been heavy protest and I think the protest could have been better organized. And again, I think that was all part of the [TCSG] plan [not to let us in early]. Here again, I think that was part of a very planned coordinated sort of an event, and that is they probably all went to the military college, the war college. Catch them by surprise. Don't give a whole lot of planning ability to these folks because the quicker we strike, if we can do it the dark of night, we're probably better off. Let's get this thing done clean and quick and over with. I think that's the way the whole thing got handled and it was effective. It worked.

*We acted as responsible leaders.* This view held that community leaders should have acted constructively as the community leaders who they are, that is, to use networking or other non-protest means to give input into the process where possible. This included a responsibility to do so even after decisions had been made about the merger of their school with which they disagreed.

Fourteen: I think it happened so quick that, I got the feeling, this is just a personal feeling, no one ever said this, but I got the feeling it was being crammed down their throats. That was just the feeling that I got, but the Chamber, when I spoke with them, they were trying to support the decision that had been made, because they thought that was the best interest of the county to support that decision....

*Acting responsibly allowed TCST to put us off.* This view held that community leaders were too patient and responsible, and while behaving as such they allowed themselves to come away without answers to questions they had asked of TCSG or to otherwise follow up on concerns which they felt.

Eleven: Our county commissioners, we got them involved to call or write or do whatever. They weren't happy with the answers they got, which was always, "I'll call you back," kind of thing. And we just never – it just started dying on the vine from right there....

Eleven: .... I wouldn't say it was all negative. It was just doubt and disbelief and, "Where were all the answers we were going to get?" No answers ever came. You just got a new directive. "Well, wait a minute. I thought we were going to talk about it." "No, no. Yeah we are, but we've got to do this right now to keep the wheels turning." It was a little bit like down your throat....

Eleven: .... I think maybe it was [intentionally] fed in small doses so that, "Yeah, that's coming. We're going to get together on that." "Well, what about so and so?" "Yeah, we're going to get together on that. We've got a lot of stuff out there right now that we've got to do. That's coming but we're trying to put out these fires and do this, this and this."

*Too complacent too long.* This view held that community leaders, in addition to allowing themselves to be put off, too readily allowed themselves to be complacent until it was too late. One particular example makes several subtle yet important points: It shows that the community leaders and legislators were distracted by pressures in the state budget and this distraction sheltered delay; it shows that in retrospect community leaders felt as though they could indeed have marshaled effective opposition; and it shows the passion felt by community leaders about having allowed themselves to be complacent.

Newcomb: Where do you think legislators were on this?

Eleven: I think any of us could have made a lot of phone calls [to legislators] and thrown as many wrenches into it as we'd have wanted to. Nobody wanted to. Nobody was that negative against it until it was too late. So it was almost like, golly, should I have called my friend... [a legislator] and said, "I want that stuff stopped? I don't care what you have to do." I think there was just bigger fish to fry at the time, too. With the way the economy was going this was maybe a

smaller blip on the screen so it probably didn't get enough attention. They were worried about can we fund technical colleges? It wasn't about we were worried about the name; we were trying to find the money to fund it. So it just got swept under the rug.

Newcomb: That's interesting, what you said. Nobody really was in opposition until it was too late.

Eleven: .... Yeah. Fully complacent and nobody knew when it got done. I can remember them saying, "Hey... [the name of the new president] is going to be the new guy." Wow. Well, wait a minute. When did that happen? And that's how it came. But anybody could have really made it ugly. Nobody wanted that. Everybody wanted it to be a good outcome for all, like we'd been led to believe. It was a little bit like taking you to the gas chamber. "Hey, take your clothes off. We're going to take a shower. We'll have a good time." ....<sup>6</sup>

Eleven: .... So a little bit of complacency but it would have taken one person about a week and they could have rallied the forces that would have shot it in the head. I wouldn't do that for fear that, gosh, maybe I'm firing too soon. I'm waiting [(sarcastically said)] to hear, because that's what I've been told to do.

***Fear of retribution.*** This view held that community leaders did not protest openly because of a fear of hurting the community or the college by doing so—in short, of retribution.

Newcomb: How did it play with you and others in the community when you felt like it was a done deal, it had already been decided?

Two: It was disappointing. It was disappointing. It was a little bit deflating and depressing, and it was agitating, as well.... You hesitate to get too vocal about things because of retribution that you feel can come down from people who have already exhibited that they have a certain amount of power. So you hesitate to get too vocal and to say too much negative because you don't want the people coming down any harder than they've already come down. Does that make sense?

***The protest of resignation.*** This view held that community leaders should not continue to be supportive of a decision and process which had played out as it had.

Nine: When it [the merger] first came up... [at one of the joint board meetings another member and I got to be friends]. We've liked each other, talked to each other. And there was a number of subsequent meetings while I remained on the board and... [he] called me when I got back to this office. He said, "... I saw what was going on there and I'm writing a letter right now to resign from the board." I said,

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<sup>6</sup> I recognize that the metaphor used by the respondent is a misappropriation—and regretfully not an uncommon one—of an odious history. As a researcher, I am conflicted: I am certain the respondent would phrase it differently upon reflection, and yet I want to convey to the reader an accurate tone of how leaders perceived events. Recall too, the analogies in the previous quotations from other leaders regarding the war college, and of a cramming down the throat—they tended to use metaphors that implied force.

“... I wish you wouldn’t but – .... Don’t be surprised if I’m not very far behind you.” And I said, “But I want to see it through to the merger actually takes place and see if I can influence some of the internal stuff. I don’t think I’ll have much, but I’ll try and get what I can for what we represent, and then I’m probably done with it.”

Newcomb: Why’d you resign?

Nine: It was a token board to start with. It’s even more of a token board now. And it had to be downsized so I just said well, hell, that’s a good excuse for me to go ahead and help them downsize it. But everything from the day... [I heard about the merger] was gradually going to be controlled more by... [the president at the other school], it was his show and so it is his show now. And so we’re just absorbed. In the end, that’s what’s happened. We were just absorbed. And what to them was worth keeping... was kept, a couple of other things. The rest of it’s gone, in my opinion.

As a different leader in a different merger told the president of the merged college when he himself resigned because he felt that the board was not being allowed input by TCSG, “I think I’ll take my toys and move on” (Sixteen).

### ***The Effectiveness of Their Resistance***

The findings as presented in this section focus on the third of my specific research questions, that is, I seek to understand the *effectiveness* of the community leaders’ resistance, specifically, to what extent, and why did they think so? To help introduce this section, I list as follows the principal themes by their titles, which begin to reveal the nature of my findings: The Successes; A Process Without Input; A *Fait Accompli*; and After the Fact.

#### **The Successes**

Community leaders noted three areas in which some effectiveness was seen, and the first was via the Chattahoochee-North Metro Merger Feasibility Task Force which was looking at the potential of a merger. As one community leader from that merger describes events, the task force created a list of items that it wanted the Commissioner to consent to do, and at least initially the task force got his agreement.<sup>7</sup>

Newcomb: There was a meeting when [the] Commissioner... came. Why do you think he came and how did that play into the discussions at the task force among the sense

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<sup>7</sup> I continue to err on the side of caution in protecting the anonymity of respondents. In the following two quotations, I identify respondents with the Chattahoochee-North Metro merger, and this in effect links all other quotations from him or her to the same merger. Taken as a whole in my small universe of respondents, this provides too many clues as to his or her identity. I therefore offer one-time pseudonyms of A and B to help protect his or her anonymity.

of unbalance [among the counties representing the two schools]? Did it help?  
How did it affect that?

A: I think for the task force, the first meeting he came to, which was really to kick off the task force but also to show his commitment of having this merger be a win.... He really reiterated that the task force was going to have a huge influence over, what the task force thought was really what was going to drive this merger....

Newcomb: .... Then he came back to a later meeting and there were specific requests that were asked of him and he agreed to them.

A: Correct.

Newcomb: And that helped to comfort... [a county that was concerned], would you say, at the time?

A: Definitely, yes.

Newcomb: It did?

A: Yeah, it comforted... [that county] but it also comforted everybody else... because a lot of those demands... dealt with really expanding the ability of students to be able to transfer hours from the technical college system to the local university system colleges or universities within our area.... There was a lot of requests there that were really focused on improving how we could serve our students better.

In this same merger, the second area in which some effectiveness was acknowledged was on the request of community leaders that Appalachian Tech be allowed to merge with a different partner, that is, that it be allowed to join the merger of Chattahoochee Tech and North Metro Tech. "I was thrilled to hear that downtown was very receptive to... [the idea of a switch], reviewed the merger proposal and decided that it probably was in the best interest... [to do so]" (B).

In a different merger, a third area in which some effectiveness was acknowledged was on the responsive of the Commissioner to requests that he come and meet with community leaders in various of the merging communities.

Newcomb: So that's how the opposition got expressed. Do you think the opposition was effective....

Three: I think it was. I think that when we got two or three people who knew... [the TCSG Board Chair] real well, I mean, knew him really well, including... [a local person], and I actually had breakfast with [him], I think it caused the Commissioner to sit down with us earlier than he probably wanted to. And he sat

down and told us some things that were obviously not, he let us know very openly that there were decisions to be made that weren't [yet] made. He thought they may happen this way in this time, and... I think, later regretted probably telling us as much as he did, but we put a lot of pressure for somebody to come out and sit down and talk to us. So he came out and talked to us. I appreciated that. I think he was trying to be as honest as he could, but it still left a lot of questions, just this sense that there was another story we weren't being privilege to. Again, when you go through change and things are happening to you, not with you and through you, you're going to be suspicious, when you think you have a right to be a part of it.

Newcomb: So it was effective in getting him to come meet with the... [the local college board], I guess is what you're talking about.

Three: Yes, it was. Yeah. And I think because we forced the issue, I think he went and talked to the other boards, too. I think it accelerated the pressure to get out and start talking to people.

### **A Process Without Input**

Community leaders felt very strongly that as the leaders which they were in their respective communities—and in a supportive relationship either formally or informally with the college—that they should have been participants in the process of the mergers rather than observers. They were frustrated to be left out, they faulted TCSG for a lack of inclusiveness, and they were critical of TCSG for a lack of candor. As one leader who is an elected local official and also a member of his college's board of trustees said, "Throughout this situation, I was never officially contacted by the Commissioner, especially for any form of an opinion. Never. It was all done through decision-making processes at that level, at the Commissioner level and the State level" (Two). As phrased by another who is a business owner and member of the board of trustees who regularly raised funds for the school, "It was all like a 'my way or the highway'" (Eleven).

One leader expressed those sentiments in much greater detail, and along with his frustration—in the weeks after the merger announcement—at having to seek information and with the pace of communication. His advice to TCSG would have been to build in time for discussion.

Three: I sat on the board of... [one of the colleges] when this whole thing started and we had a great deal of concern. As a board, we felt like decisions were being made that we were not involved in, and I'm sure that... [the other college] had the same feeling... there were decisions that were going on that we were not being privileged to, and we were having to force our way into the [TCSG] Board

process at the state level to try to figure out what was going on. So there was a huge void of information about what kinds of factors were being considered... when we as a board had a responsibility for success of the... [the college] campus. And we were concerned and even became pretty angry at times about our lack of involvement....

Three: The worst thing you do... is drag it out.... People are going to make stuff up if you don't give them answers... and they're always going to default to the most negative position. It's human nature....

Three: .... I'll generalize this at a high level, but most of the successful change efforts I've been involved in allow for input with a real clear understanding that it's an opportunity for input, that the decision is going to be based on input and a big perspective as you look at the process.... Generally, people are not going to like change even if it's good... and allowing people input is not going to keep people from being unhappy. But it minimizes a lot of factors.

Newcomb: .... I think you touched on it, but do you feel as though there was anything that... [TCSG] could have done differently to make somebody like you, and others that were opposed to the merger and had strong concerns, feel better about it?

Three: Yeah. I think that when the [TCSG] Board thought that it might do this from the very beginning, it should have come out and talked to its stake holders, which was a [local] board, and sat down and told them everything they knew at that point in time, and solicited inputs and thoughts and answered questions. Way too much time transpired before the rumors were leaking out and people start making stuff up. You're just a lot better off telling people what you know up front, ASAP.

Three: I think the Commissioner's office felt that the better thing to do was to keep a lot of this kind of secret, behind the scenes... [but] if a Board [such as TCSG] meets and they make a decision, it's just a matter of hours before everybody's got access to that information. You might as well assume that... So... communicate and share it, get out and be up front about it, talk to people, I think he [the Commissioner] could have done a better job about that.

Three: I think eventually he did that, but it's probably two or three months. It's a long time to go by without actually sitting down and talking. Our [local] board chair went and met with... [the Commissioner], but not the entire Board, and that's just not the way it should work. If you're going to go into a change effort, you need to assume up front you're going to have to... build time in which to do lots and lots of communication stuff. If you don't do it on the front end, you're going to pay for it on the back end.

Another community leader felt as though what little communication that he had with TCSG was untrustworthy because of something that he was told which subsequently was changed.

Eleven: So I called the Commissioner. I never got directly to him but I told them my great concerns... that I was told right to my face [about an issue that might identify this merger] and I believed the man when he looked at me and told me to

my face. And I told him some things, that we had kept our end of the bargain but it wasn't quite being a reciprocal agreement, and I didn't appreciate that. He could call me back if he liked. And a couple weeks went by, and he did, and he said, "Well, this [the change in what I said] is just something that's just come up." I said, "No, it hasn't. It's been going on about five months now" ... [and this is] "a ramming down the throat kind of thing." That's how it went from there. That's when I started backing off and it wasn't going to go well. No matter how many suggestions you made, they wasn't listening.

Other leaders felt that, even if it did not make a difference in the outcome, at least some input would have allowed them to discuss things that mattered to them.

- Six: When you announce something like that and it's not like, "Hey, we're thinking about this. What's your opinion?" It was, "We're merging these seven—at that time—these fourteen are to become seven." It's not like, "We're thinking about it" or "It's under review." To them, it was a done deal.
- Seven: Like I said, if we had just had a chance to say, "Would you consider us merging with someone else that we're working with already on the local level," instead of just, I guess we feel like it was just crammed down our throats.
- Five: It was. Or if we had had some sort of coordination time, even if it had the same outcome, at least we'd say, "We've got to worry about our... [a particular instructional] program. We've got to worry about our... [a particular] facility," and things like that, rather than it just being lost.
- Newcomb: So the process was a negative piece of it.
- Five: Absolutely, in my mind. Very negative.
- Six: I think the outcome was a negative piece of it, too, but the process certainly stunk.

Yet another leader, who was a locally elected official, took the tack of suggesting that a chance for input would have made his community simply feel better about it all, and perhaps helped its self-esteem.

- Fifteen: I think it would have been better because it would have at least—personally, or politically, it might not have been better—but I think it would have been better for the community, because it would have at least given the folks around here not as negative a feeling about this whole process. It would have given them the feeling that, "hey, at least we were involved, we've got faith in these guys that we voted for and we can talk to them and they can tell us how they feel and what happened." At least the community would have felt a little less un-empowered because we had a chance, and we did have some input, and hopefully some of that resulted in a positive. Even if we did lose the war, we may have won a couple of battles along the way. But you would have some give and take.

"I think it would have been much better that way" (Fifteen), he concluded.



## ***A Fait Accompli***

Community leaders felt as though the reason why TCSG was not interested in input from community leaders was because TCSG viewed the merger plan as a *fait accompli* from the moment TCSG quietly conceived the plan; this timeline included the proceedings of the Chattahoochee-North Metro Merger Feasibility Task Force, the announcement of the merger plan, and the merger process. The litany of such expressions is generous: “It was pretty obvious that this was a predetermined, pre-decided event” (Two). Once the “Board made the decision, the decision was done” (Three). “And word came about... that yes, the study committee is not going to really study anything, that it's just a sham” (Ten). “It didn’t make—excuse my crudeness—didn’t make a damn what we thought... or any other options that anybody had, including... [our local legislators]. It was done. It was a done deal... from the get-go” (Nine). The detail included a wistful hope that input from stakeholders could have mattered.

Five: In the corporate world, in my past life, I’d been involved in mergers and it means closing some and opening others. But what you do to make them successful, to avoid exactly the kind of thing you’re seeing now, is that you at least get everybody working together such that you get the best of both worlds. Yes, somebody’s a loser, but at least it’s not, it’s not a done deal. No company in the world would be stupid enough to merge two companies and just say, “That’s it. I’m in charge,” without getting the expertise and the knowledge of both companies.

Others focused on the same frustration that by the time they heard about it, the decisions were over.

Eight: I don’t remember the dates and things, timeframe, but one of the things, we didn’t hear about it until it was basically already a done deal at the State level. I don’t mean it had been voted on, but the decisions had basically been made, and that was one of my complaints was that we should have been involved earlier, so that we would have known and could have spread that decision out. And they knew that they were working toward that... But that was one of the things I think that most of the [local] board was just not pleased with, that the timing that we were informed, basically the decisions had been made.

It was also noted that even legislators had been kept in the dark and out of the decision-making process.

Thirteen: And like I said, by that day—when I called—again, I called my state representative, and he didn’t even know about it [the merger]. And his initial reaction was equal to mine, and he said, “Well, I’m going to get on the phone. I’m going to call this one. I’m going to call that one. I’m going to get something done. Don’t fret. Don’t worry about it.” Well, it was a done deal. It was over. I mean, it was flat over and there was no going back.

The linkage between, on the one hand, their belief that it was a done deal, and on the other hand their decision not to protest further, was clear. For example, community leaders left meetings with the Commissioner feeling, as one put it, increasingly negative, and believing that—despite this chance to have dialogue—things were too far gone and there was no going back.

Newcomb: So after the meeting, then, were folks resigned to it or did folks try to –

Nine: No. People just had to accept it.

Newcomb: Did they talk about ways to oppose it? Is there some way to stop it? Was there –

Nine: There wasn't any way to stop it. I told them that. I said, the DTAE board is appointed by the Governor. The Governor assigned... [a well-known member of the TCSG Board] and some other committee members of the Board to do a merger study. They did their merger study, went back to the governor and said we needed these four schools, primarily, in my opinion, because the presidents were retiring, if you want to get down to that, from that side. That's four presidents that are retiring; these schools are going to merge. The study came back. "These two are going together, these two are going together, these two are going together, these two are going together," and that was it. Slam dunk deal.

### **After the Fact**

As the chronology of events advanced, at various points the community leaders came to feel that their attempts to provide input into the merger decision and the merger process were hopeless—the input was not wanted because it was a done deal. If alternatively, TCSG had been open to a process of input, community leaders' opinions were mixed as to whether—looking back retrospectively—they would have used such an opportunity to provide such input or instead to marshal political opposition. No trends emerged which could be fairly attributed to a composite of community leaders, but several vignettes give a flavor of the thoughts of the one or several community leaders. Perhaps the most cogent response was this: "The fact that if it ain't broke, don't fix it, and our college was not broken" (Two).

*Input would have provided a welcome sense of voice.* This view held that community leaders would have welcomed the opportunity for input as an invitation to work together.

Newcomb: I'm curious... if they had... said to the community, "We're thinking about this. Come talk to us." Would the community have gone along with it, or would they have dug their heels in, and it just gave them a chance to be more opposed? How do you think that would have played out?

Fifteen: That would have changed the complexion of the whole process.

Newcomb: How so?

Fifteen: If they had brought us in early on before this consultant from... [a major corporation] had gotten the Governor's ear and convinced him that this was going to have to happen, before the Governor signed on and brought all his forces to bear, it would have been an entirely different process. At least we would have felt like we did have some impact, and we had had a voice, be it ever so meek and mild, in the process. We still would not have been in favor of it, but we would have felt like we were part of it. A one- or a two-hour meeting early on, when they told us what the problems were and this was the situation we had to deal with, and how can we do this, how can we work together, that type thing. But that's not what they wanted.

*Input would be a help to both sides.* This view held that community leaders would have seen this as an opportunity for both the community leaders and the state decision makers—even the Governor—to make the best decision, and for community leaders to have been on board with it.

Newcomb: What if they'd come and said, "We're thinking about this merger"? Would that have just led to a discussion about why not to do it? Or would it have led to a discussion how can we do it together? Would it have led to agreeing with it? Would it have led to disagreeing more with it?

Eleven: No. I think it's, you know how anything is, with your wife or your children or your business or your employees. You say, "I've been thinking about something. Let me run it by you all." That's what I do right here. I don't pass down any directives and beat the gavel on the desk and say, "That's it and if you don't like it there's the door." I always say, "Here's something I just woke up last night thinking about that we might could do that would really sort of enhance business. It wouldn't cost a whole lot. We already have the manpower to do this." .... It could be something so very simple, but it's a collective effort and you bring everybody in.... This thing [merger process], we all got left at the dock. Conversation was –

Newcomb: Waving the hand [goodbye at the dock].

Eleven: "See you later. If you've got a question give us a call."

Newcomb: So if they'd come to you, you think it would have found a way to make it acceptable or would it just have given a chance to , you know those calls you were telling me about, how you talked to the county commissioners and legislators and so forth? Would it just have given a chance for that to mount?

Eleven: Well, if you laid all this out on the table and said, "Hey, what do you think about this?" I'd say, "Well, I see some good and bad." [And they could say,] "Well, yours is just one opinion and we've got a thousand more to get but tell me what you think," and I'd tell you what I thought. Now, if you really were going to go get everybody's opinion, you could take that back to the Capitol and put it on anybody's desk you wanted to and you

could say, “This will work if we do it this way.” Or either you put it on the Governor’s desk and say, “I wouldn’t touch this with a ten foot pole.”

Eleven: So I don’t know the answer to that. Would it work? Yeah. Done the right way, everybody would have been on board with it.

Said another community leader: “All the team members need to be on the same team... [instead of] ‘This is the way it’s going to be.’ And a conclusion would be... work in terms of them buying into the idea and supporting the idea” (Sixteen).

***Input would give time to rally pressure.*** This view held that community leaders would have reacted to the opportunity for input as a chance to rally political pressure—and they were convinced that they could do so.

Newcomb: One of y’all mentioned earlier you wondered if they [TCSG] deliberately didn’t let you know ahead of time [about the mergers] because it would have given you time to –

Six: Rally the forces. More public outcry.

Five: Can’t prove it, but I believe that.

Six: Why else would they do it behind curtains, in the dark?

Newcomb: If they had brought it as, “We’re thinking about this” or “We need to do this, we need help,” would it have given folks just the chance to rally the troops?

Six: Yeah, I think they would have. They did anyway.

Five: They wouldn’t have said, “Well, we understand why [you want to do the mergers].”

Six: At least we could have gotten our issues out there in front, too, documented. To say, “Well, if this is going to happen, have thought about this, this and this. Have you thought about it this way or that way?” It was clear they didn’t care about our input or issues or concerns.

Five: A community that can rally and get together... million dollars of community funds [for a building renovation] would have rallied to preserve it. I promise you that.

***Input would give rise to both discussion and pressure.*** This view held that community leaders would have reacted to the opportunity for input as a chance to do both, that is, to have discussion on the merger and to rally political pressure—different people in the community react differently.

Newcomb: If they'd come out earlier... and said, "We're thinking about merging some schools," and involved people, would people have helped to get it done or would they simply have been given time to mount opposition?

Eight: Both those things would probably have happened because you have some people—I don't care what you do—that are going to be opposed to change. But I think, from the community standpoint, had it been handled upfront, "Truly, this is what we're looking at and this is why we're looking at it, and we need y'all's help, we need your input," and really meant that, then, and the people we were dealing with are businesspeople and leaders and they understand change, and I *think* we could have gotten a greater buy-in had it been handled in an involvement process rather than a directive process.

As for himself, he had "very, very openly" (Eight) opposed the merger—especially the process and the needlessly quick timeframe—but with an open process he would have moderated: "Over the long haul, with more involvement in the community, more buy-in in the community so you didn't lose that, I would have dealt with it without as strong an opposition" (Eight).

### Summary

This chapter presented the findings from my interviews with community leaders in three principal sections corresponding to the *what* and *why* of the resistance of community leaders, to the *how* of their resistance, and to the *effectiveness* of their resistance. I found that community leaders believed the mergers originated with the Governor, that they rejected the cost-savings rationale as being flawed and even disingenuous, and that they might have been more open to a merger rationale based on some higher vision, even if cost savings or a reduction in the number of schools were part of it. They felt that the plan overlooked a lack of fit between the merging communities, including cultural differences. Of great importance, they felt as though the community's sense of ownership of their local college was violated, and this created among leaders a sense of a loss by a taking. Community leaders expressed their opposition primarily through conversations, meetings, and letters, and they directed their efforts primarily through local and state networks of contacts; they avoided public demonstrations and avoided rallying others in such. Their resistance faded as they acquiesced to the inevitable and focused instead on making the best of the situation on behalf of their community and as the responsible community leaders who they were. I found that, with few exceptions, community leaders did not believe their resistance was

effective, and it was because TCSG had made up its mind about the mergers from the day of inception with the Governor's support.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of my qualitative case study is to explore, understand, and describe the perspectives of community leaders who resisted TCSG's merger of their local technical college, and its core research question is this: *What aspects of the mergers sparked resistance in the community leaders and why? How did they express their resistance and how effective was it?* In this final chapter, I answer with conclusions that are framed by my research as presented in the previous chapters, that is: (a) through the lessons of my review of the literature on higher education mergers; (b) through the conceptual framework which I derived from open systems theory, including the role of homeostasis as a source of resistance to change and the role of the psychological contract; and (c) through the all-important findings from the interviews with community leaders. As I do so, I seek to integrate those several frameworks with each other into a whole sense of the perspectives of the community leaders who resisted the mergers.

#### **Through the Literature on Higher Education Mergers**

As I noted in Chapter Two, my study is informed and framed by the literature on higher education mergers through definitions, trends among merges, and the issues associated with acceptance or resistance in mergers. I use these findings from the literature as the first step in answering my research purpose.

#### **Definitions: Degree of Autonomy**

In my review of the literature on higher education mergers in Chapter Two, I described a variety of ways in which different researchers define what is meant by a *merger*. Some use it as an umbrella to cover a variety of institutional relationships which differ according to the degree of institutional control given up during the merger (Martin, Samels, & Associates, 1994), while a number of other researchers (Chambers, 1983; Cannon, 1983; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Harman & Harman, 2008) use the term merger to refer to only the unique combination in which one partner gives up corporate control to the other.

From my findings, I conclude that the term merger is an appropriate term to use in reference to the TCSG

mergers. Nowhere in the facts of the case in Chapter Four does anyone refer to it as anything but a merger in the everyday sense of the word, and this is true as well for the interviews with community leaders in Chapter Five. The facts and the findings suggest further that the use of the term merger fits the dominant definition of merger in the literature, that is, of a corporate surrender of one partner to the other—yet, a few words on the notion of *surrender* are in order. On the one hand, the facts and findings show that TCSG did not announce the merger plan with that kind of surrender verbiage, and to the contrary, the announcement went out of its way to be reassuring to the colleges and their affected communities—as noted in Chapter Four, the Commissioner of TCSG issued an email to colleges within a day of the announcement indicating that “this should not be construed to be one college taking over another college” (R. Jackson, personal communication, September 5, 2008, p. 1). On the other hand, it is clear that the community leaders who were in resistance to the mergers certainly *felt* it to be the surrender of their college’s corporate identity, and the simple fact is that their institution did in fact give up its legal or corporate existence to the other—this is a huge part of the reason why those community leaders felt a sense of loss, a taking, and resistance. This surrender of corporate identity was probably not foreseen by TCSG in the beginning, but as the merger process unfolded, there were simple operational reasons for this corporate handover, as in these examples: It allowed one existing college’s data management system to be the host for the data of the second school, such as student, financial, and personnel records; and it allowed one existing college’s recognition from outside institutions—such as accreditation organizations, government student financial aid agencies, the state accounting office, or even the local bank—to continue unbroken. While this part of the loss of corporate identity may not have been visible to the community leaders, one part of it certainly was: The college which became the corporate entity to survive, so to speak, also ended up having its home campus become the home campus of the merged college, and too, the president resided at that location.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I did not study leaders in the non-resistance communities, but I would hypothesize that they were just as aware of their own community being the corporate *winner* in the merger as their resistance peers were about being the corporate *loser* in the merger—this would be a possible future study, including the extent to which this had something to do with their lack of resistance.



In summary, the *legal* reality of the TCSG mergers was that one entity in each pair (two in the three-college merger) ceased to exist as a corporate entity; the TCSG public *use* and *intent* of the term merger was as though it was a joining of the schools in an equal partnership; and the community leaders who resisted the merger *felt* as though the merger meant the disappearance of their school into another—the taking of their school, to be more precise.

### **Trends: Market-Responsive Rationales**

From my review in Chapter Two of the literature on higher education mergers, I identified market-driven rationales as the dominant conceptual theme—the *why* of mergers—and I adopted this as part of my conceptual framework for approaching my research. While this rationale is sometimes strategic positioning, better service to students, or economic and job development, it is clear that the dominant genre in the literature are resource-seeking rationales driven by the need to do more with less—the pressure of demand overload (Eastman and Lang, 2001). According to this view, institutions do not by nature *prefer* to form inter-institutional arrangements, but rather, they are forced to them as the financial status quo becomes “untenable” (p. 16); it is a coping strategy.

From the facts and findings of the case, I conclude that the merger plan proffered by TCSG fits the classic portrait of a market-driven rationale, or more precisely, of the resource-seeking or demand-overload genre. The evidence is clear: In the first phase of the merger process, TCSG was having internal discussions about the costs of operating its colleges and their programs—a full year before the announcement of the mergers—and in the months that followed, TCSG increasingly experienced the state’s intensified scrutiny on agency budgets. In the second phase of the mergers, any doubt of the financially-driven nature of the mergers was eliminated with the announcement of the mergers and its emphasis on saving costs, that is, the Governor’s Office was requiring big budget cuts, and the TCSG plan to merge seven pairs of schools would save an annualized \$3.5 million. Too, the headlines around the state echoed this rationale.

As to the other rationales discussed in the literature—strategic positioning, better service to students, or economic and job development—the TCSG merger plan mentioned these but almost as

though in passing. I conclude that there is little or no evidence that such factors played a motivating role in the merger plan. On the one hand, it could be argued that such motives were implicit outcomes of the mergers, that is, by combining schools and saving costs, the agency and its schools would be better positioned strategically, could provide better student services, or could better attend to job creation. On the other hand, however, this was simply not articulated by TCSG as the impetus for the mergers. Ironically, it was the community leaders themselves who looked for and even hoped for a rationale of this type, or from their perspective, a rationale of a higher order. While TCSG emphasized the saving of dollars, the community leaders instead lamented that TCSG should have included in its merger plan a vision—said one, “that *ought* to have been the conversation” (Ten).

### **The Who of Mergers**

My review of the literature found that the question of who had initiated mergers led to a variety of answers, that is, sometimes it was some level of government such as a legislative body, an elected official, an agency, or a board. Sometimes there was an individual champion such as an elected official, and there is little mention of a study group as having a significant role and certainly not one as an initiator of a merger.

From the facts and findings of the case, I conclude that the TCSG mergers fit this portrait with the exception of the role of a study group. My interpretation is this: The mergers were initiated by a state agency; the Commissioner can be viewed as the champion, so to speak, of the mergers; and the Chattahoochee-North Metro Merger Feasibility Task Force was a part of the merger process but not an initiator (and there were no other study groups for the other mergers). Curiously, those community leaders familiar with the task force viewed it as having provided an opportunity to talk and sometimes to work through concerns, and of course the community leaders in other mergers vigorously lamented their own lack of an opportunity to participate in some kind of discussions about their own mergers. Even the chairman of a TCSG Board committee expressed to his peers at a State Board meeting (December, 2008)—as he reaffirmed the need to proceed with the decision to merge the schools—that he would have preferred more opportunity to study the issue with affected community leaders; and TCSG Commissioner

also lamented to legislators (January, 2009) about the lack of time for additional study groups—and in so doing he implicitly signaled the value of such a group, that is, “We wanted to do this at the community level the way we did with Chattahoochee and North Metro... [where we] went through a six months process of reviewing whether this would be a reasonable thing to do” (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2009, January 22).

### **Factors Associated with Acceptance and Resistance**

Again from my review of the literature, I found a useful way to categorize characteristics articulated with acceptance or resistance in mergers, specifically, a two-category framework based on whether the factor being articulated in the literature was about something *substantive* about the merger (the content of something being done) or instead was about something *procedural* about the merger (the how or the way something was being done). As illustrations, if the purpose of a merger was to solve a financial problem for a college, then this is about substance and might have a positive effect on acceptance if participants saw that rationale as credible; communication in a merger would be about process, and if it was viewed as having been poorly handled then this might have a negative effect on acceptance, that is, encouraged resistance.

From the facts and findings of the case, I conclude that this two-part characterization of the factors affecting acceptance or resistance has the potential to be a useful tool for compiling simple lists—not a massive compendium—of helpful hints, or do’s and don’ts. I identify six examples. First, in the literature, the number one content factor associated with acceptance in mergers is the presence of a *market-responsive rationale* which serves as an impelling *raison d’être* for the merger—that is, if participants find credibility in it, then it promotes acceptance. From my case, I find that the cost-savings rationale lacked credibility in the eyes of community leaders, and this did promote resistance rather than acceptance. A different rationale—one based on a vision, for example—might have had greater credibility in the eyes of community leaders and therefore might have promoted acceptance. Second, in the literature, another substantive reason exacerbating resistance were *cultural or mission differences*, such as an academic versus occupational emphasis, the teaching methodology, or the role of faculty in

school governance. From my case, I find that the same sort of cultural perceptions were present among community leaders, that is, of an *us* and *them* as a difference between communities which mattered—the *fit* was off, and enough so that the mergers should be questioned or stopped. Third, in the literature, yet another substantive reason exacerbating resistance—and very prominently so—was a *sense of identity or ownership* felt by a local community for *its* college coupled with a *sense of loss* because of a merger. As an example, the proposed Pratt-Fort Hays merger was marked by concern about losing not only a community identity with the college but also as a sense of control—this encouraged resistance. From my case, I find a strong sense of college and community interdependence, of a community sense that the college is *ours*, and of loss through a taking—all of which encouraged resistance. Fourth, in the literature, a procedural issue which heavily influenced either support of or resistance to a merger was the degree of open *communication* and a *voice* in the merger process, including the planning and implementation stages. Eastman and Lang (2001) note that corporate executives in post-merger surveys said that in hindsight they should have done more to emphasize communication, while Martin, Samels, and Associates (1994) see it as a counterweight to the human need to know what is going on. From my case, I note among community leaders an overpowering sense of having been shut out of a process which in their eyes was a so-called done deal from the start. Because the sense of communication and voice was a negative, this encouraged resistance. Fifth, in the literature, the question of whether a merger was *voluntary or compelled* is articulated as a factor associated with, respectively, acceptance or resistance. An example of a voluntary merger is the successful merger that created a new University of Manchester, which was “achieved with comparatively little conflict and the kind of anxiety and disturbances that have characterized even many successful mergers” (Harman & Harman, 2008, p. 113). From my case, I note among community leaders a strong link between their resistance and the mandated nature of the mergers, and of course this link ties also to issues of communication and voice. Sixth, in the literature, acceptance or resistance is affected by the degree of *equality or inequality* perceived between the institutions, that is, the degree to which there is a sense (or not) of one institution being strong and the other weak, or one

taking over the other. From my case, I find among community leaders an overwhelming sense that it was not a merger of equals, that one college took over the other, and that this encouraged resistance.

### **Summary**

I used the principal lessons of the literature review on higher education mergers as a framework for understanding the case. It is clear that the mergers fit the typical definition of one school giving up its corporate existence to the other school; that they fit the trend of being driven by market pressure to save costs, and further, that other market forces could have mattered if they were part of the rationale; that they reflect the typical portrait of a champion-led merger through a state governmental body, with the exception that a study group seemed atypically significant in the TCSG mergers—or rather, it had the potential to matter more than usual—and that the typical issues of content and process which could affect acceptance or resistance did just that in predictable ways.

### **Through an Open Systems Conceptual Model**

The second way in which my case study is both informed and framed by the literature is this: I turned to the literature for an understanding of open systems theory and how it might provide a theoretical grounding as well as a conceptual model for the organizational change of the merger—especially for the role of resistance within that model. From the facts and findings of the case, I find that this framework does indeed assist me in analyzing and describing the nexus between the environmental pressures on TCSG, the subsequent decision to seek cost savings through mergers, and the subsequent resistance of community leaders.

### **Original Open Systems Model**

In my review of the literature on open systems, I found that an organization needs to import resources from its environment in order to produce the goods or services for which the organization exists, and further, that as the expectations of the environment change, the organization must be responsive to those changes if it is to continue to get needed resources. As Druckman, Singer, and Van Cott (1997) put it, “organizations must be compatible with their environments, which include all the external, social, economic, and political conditions that influence their actions” (p. 2). From the facts and

findings of my case, two important conclusions arise: First, an open systems model of organizational change sounds remarkable like what the literature on higher education mergers says is the principal reason behind such mergers, that is, a market-responsive rationale and more precisely a resource-seeking or demand-overload strategy. Higher education institutions face the pressure to do more with less, and mergers are a coping strategy in response to that demand. In short, open systems theory explains such behaviors. Second, the same model fits the TCSG mergers, which were tied by TCSG to the downturn in the economy, the decline in state revenues, and the subsequent scrutiny of state agency budgets, including TCSG's. The agency in turn perceived and responded to this signal from the state with its own internal discussions about the cost of operating the colleges and the number of colleges, with a study group to consider the feasibility of a merger, with the initial merger, and eventually with the other mergers. In short, open systems theory again explains such behaviors.

### **The Role of Resistance in an Open System**

In my look at literature on open systems, I had found two significant additions beyond the original open systems theory. First, an open system should be looked at not just as a whole but also in terms of its components, and “the change of one part will affect other parts, perhaps all parts eventually” (Burke, 2002, p. 45). This means that the parts are interdependent but not necessarily always configured with each other (Burke, 2002; Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997). Second, the homeostasis of an open system should be seen not only as the mechanism of needed change but also as the structural source of resistance to change because of the innate tendency of a steady state towards inertia—it has an inherent bias of continuing to do what it has done. “Part and parcel of equilibrium periods is inertia. One can begin to understand why it is so difficult for systems to change” (Burke, 2002, p. 66). From the facts and finding of my case, I find that these additions to an open systems model do help me to understand why higher education institutions resist change even when the market is telling the organization that change is needed—they do so because some of the college's internal components were in effect not configured with the external message, but rather, remained aligned with the institution's previous point of equilibrium. This model fits the TCSG mergers equally as well: It was the market pressures that caused TCSG to

consider costs, the number of schools, and mergers—and it was the resistance of the community leaders as components of the organization which sought to keep doing what had previously been done. In effect, the original open systems model says that the market pressures from outside the college should have caused the college and its components, including the community leaders, to accept the change, while the modified model says that the market pressures were countered by internal components which were not configured in such a way as to do so. In short, this modified view of open systems says that just because a college is being pressured to change by its environment, the internal components by the nature of an open systems' inertia-setting mechanisms may resist. This is truly a critical piece of understanding the resistance of community leaders to the organizational change wrought by the mergers.

Moreover, under this modified view of open systems theory, the lack of congruence between the market pressure to merge and the resistance of community leaders might be seen as a gap, so to speak, which has to be closed in order to regain an organization's ability to respond to market pressures. With respect to that gap closing, I would argue that the merger literature and my own findings speak clearly to the kinds of things, strategies, and tactics that can be done to do just that, for example, finding a rationale that has credibility with participants, ensuring good communication and a voice in the process, ensuring a sense of equality among the colleges, allowing the mergers to be voluntary instead of mandatory, and so forth.

### **The Mechanisms of Resistance**

If the homeostasis of an organization is the conceptual source of resistance in open systems theory, then the next piece of the puzzle is a better conceptual understanding of the mechanism underlying that resistance. As discussed in the literature review, there are a wide variety of schema on the nature of such resistance (Brehm, 1966; Gersick, 1991; Hambrick & Cannella, 1989; Kubler-Ross, 1966; Levinson, 1962, 1973, 1976; O'Toole, 1995), but of special interest to me are Levinson's (1962, 1973, 1976) three conceptualizations of a psychological contract, of individuals as systems, and of a sense of loss.

*Psychological contract.* He writes of a psychological contract that is unwritten and yet defines expectations between an organization and its members. In the context of open systems theory, I find that his view of this contract is in effect a statement of an open system in equilibrium, that is, the pressures from the environment and the pressures of the system's own internal components are in alignment with each other, or in configuration (Burke, 2002; Druckman, Singer, & Van Cott, 1997). In the context of the mergers, this equilibrium describes the pre-merger relationship between TCSG and its original technical colleges, including community leaders as an internal component of the system.

*Individuals as systems.* He writes of individuals as systems themselves, who as part of the multiple layers of systems and sub-systems within the organization have their own tendency to homeostasis. In the context of open systems theory, I find that his conceptualization of such layers—as in my own words, Russian matryoshkas or nesting dolls—is a critically important piece of understanding resistance in an open system, because it helps to explain why component sub-systems exhibit resistance when this may be contrary to the survival of its top system, that is, the system of which it is a part. In the context of the TCSG mergers, it fits well the spiral of systems and sub-systems that were part of the whole merger story, that is, the national economy affects the state economy, the state economy affects state revenues, the state revenues affect the state budget, the state budget affects the TCSG budget, the TCSG budget affects internal considerations and decisions of costs and colleges and mergers, the merger plan affects the local colleges, and the college's internal components include community leaders who themselves are a collection of sub-systems.

*A sense of loss.* He writes of a sense of loss that occurs when the presumed binding nature of the psychological contract is violated through change, and more so when change is imposed. I place great importance in his conceptualization of loss as a human reaction to a violation of the psychological contract, but I also re-state it in the open system terms which I believe offer a conceptual framework. His description of a contract and its binding nature is in effect a statement of an equilibrium; his couching of it in psychological terms is in effect a statement of how deep sub-systems can extend; and his description of a violation of the contract is a statement about market pressures upon the system which threaten the



equilibrium and therefore engender resistance. In the context of the TCSG mergers, the resistance from community leaders to the change of the mergers can be conceptualized in the same way, that is, as a reaction to change which produces a sense of loss and resistance in the same inertia-protecting way as found in all systems and sub-systems.

### **Higher Education Context**

Part of my review of the literature on open systems also includes a review of whether the organizational change lessons of open systems theory took on any special significance in a higher education context, and I had looked to Bess and Dee (2008). I find that they concur that both higher education institutions and individuals are open systems, and as such, they must be responsive to the pressures of the environment as does any open system. Of significance, they note that individuals have a split responsibility, that is, they must balance the “expectations of elements outside themselves against the requirement that their [individual] internal needs be met” (p. 93). Taking this to my findings, the view of open systems, of higher education organizations as open systems, and of the internal community of a higher education organizations as open systems parallels my earlier conclusions, that is, that colleges and their components should be expected to resist change when those components are not configured with the market pressures or even with the preference of their college leadership.

### **Summary**

I used open systems theory as a conceptual model for understanding the organizational change of the merger—especially for the role of resistance from community leaders—and I found that it does just that. The facts of the case indicate that there was pressure on TCSG to look at costs, the number of schools, and the possibility of mergers, and TCSG responded with a merger plan. To that point, events seemed to follow the classic portrayal of an open system model—pressure from the outside led to change inside the organization. Yet, when the merger plan in turn became the pressure upon the colleges and communities—of which the community leaders are a part—there emerged resistance instead of compliance. This reaction is not accounted for by original open systems theory (though there are hints) but it is explained well by modifications from other theorists, who note that the tendency of an open

system towards a steady state can not only facilitate needed change but can be a structural source of resistance to it—because of a lack of configuration and because individuals are themselves sub-systems with their own internal needs. In terms of the TCSG mergers, the agency was configured or aligned with the wishes of the state regarding needed budget changes, but the local community leaders were not configured with the wishes of TCSG—so how can this happen, that is, why is there no gap in one instance and yet a gap in another instance?

I believe the answer—and the significance of my use of open systems theory—lies in Levinson’s (1962, 1973, 1976) view of a psychological contract, of individuals as systems, and of loss, namely: The leaders of TCSG were acting as responsible persons of authority in a state agency or on a state board whose responsibility was not just to find cost savings but to be responsive to at least the budgetary wishes of the Governor; there was no sense of a contract being broken; they reacted not as internal components being adversely affected by outside pressures but rather as part of the cost-reviewing and decision-making process leading to the mergers; and there was no sense of loss and hence resistance. The community leaders, however, were acting as responsible persons of leadership but not authority at the community level, whose responsibility was not as subordinates to authority but rather as stewards to their community and their community’s college; they did have a sense of a contract being broken; they reacted as internal components being adversely affected by outside pressures and a decision-making process of which they were not a part; and there was a strong sense of loss and hence resistance.

### **Through the Findings from Community Leaders**

This section turns to the final description of the perspectives of community leaders on the core questions corresponding to the *what* and *why* of their resistance, to the *how* of their resistance, and to the *effectiveness* of their resistance. The descriptions are couched principally in terms of the all-important findings from the utterances of the community leaders themselves—it is about *their* perspectives, after all—but my conclusions or naturalistic interpretations are affected also by the facts of the case, by the literature on higher education mergers, and by open systems theory.

## **What Sparked Resistance Among Community Leaders, and Why?**

The question of what sparked the resistance, including why, is in two parts, namely: First, were community leaders familiar with the cost-savings rationale of the mergers, did they agree or disagree with that rationale, and how did their agreement or disagreement with the rationale affect their decision to resist the mergers? Second, what other substantive factors influenced the decision of the community leaders to be in opposition, why, and what mattered most? As a reminder, the principal themes which emerged from my findings on the what and why were these (by title): A Scrutiny Originating With the Governor; A Flawed and Even Disingenuous Cost-Savings Rationale; Give Us a Vision As a Rationale; A Mismatch or Poor Fit Between the Communities; and A Sense of Loss.

*The perspective of community leaders on the cost-savings rationale.* One of the principal substantive reasons why community leaders resisted the mergers was—on the surface—because of the low credibility which they placed in TCSG’s cost-savings rationale, and this low credibility in turn nurtured other concerns and suspicions which they harbored about the mergers. As one leader put it, “If you don’t buy the argument that it was for cost-saving, then it leaves you scratching your head as to what, and then that gets you into other notions of why it [the merger] was occurring” (Fifteen).

To understand this low credibility, there is, first, the rationale itself. On the one hand, community leaders were aware of the rationale, they understood why it had face-value appeal, they understood why TCSG couched the mergers in terms of the rationale, and they attempted to understand it. On the other hand, they found five reasons to make light of it, to be suspicious of it, or to reject it. First, they did not believe that the mergers would actually save costs, but even if it would, they questioned whether the one percent of the budget which it represented was worth the damage being created—surely, they argued, state leaders could see this, so there must be some other reason for the mergers. Second, they wondered, if it was about cost savings, why the rumor mill had swirled about possible mergers long before the downturn in the economy—it appeared as though someone had this as an agenda long before then. Third, they wondered why, if it was about cost savings, the potential new costs associate with the mergers were being ignored, which together with the lack of a business plan served to fuel their suspicion that the cost-

savings rationale was poorly thought out, or worse, was a ruse. Fourth, they wondered why, if it was about cost savings, that their efforts to offer local funds as a substitute were rebuffed, almost before they got started. They reasoned that, if the mergers were truly about cost savings, then these local funds were a solution that could make everyone happy, that is, the state could save its funds and the local college could remain as it was. Fifth, they wondered why, if it was about cost savings, that some of the mergers seemed to be targeted to places where there was a vacancy in presidencies; this criteria in choosing targets seemed to be an unsophisticated methodology (and further proof of why a business plan was needed).

Other perceptions nibbled away at the credibility of the rationale, and one was that the merger plan actually seemed to be more focused on reducing the number of colleges; community leaders wondered why this was not spoken of more forthrightly because they could empathize with why such a question might be asked. They came to the conclusion that it was not being spoken about because it would raise the question of how each school was chosen, and even more pointedly, who was behind the scrutiny. On this latter question, they believed it to be the Governor, and this perspective was a surprise to me. This view of the Governor's role was buttressed by several perceptions: First, community leaders had the sense that TCSG seemed so empowered if not emboldened to proceed with the mergers and with so little discussion—not just legally as the agency of governance over the colleges, but politically as well. Second, community leaders felt that their own political outreach to the Governor—as politically astute community leaders and through their politically connected local legislators—failed to garner any receptivity from the Governor in stopping the mergers. Third, the Commissioner of TCSG—who was known to report to the Governor—seemed to be such a champion of getting the mergers done, and too, so certain that they *would* be done. On the whole, community leaders admitted that they did not know for sure, but nonetheless they felt assured that the Governor's hand was in the mix.

Finally, the credibility of the cost-savings rationale was undercut also because it seemed to community leaders to be far too flimsy a rationale for such sweeping change, that is, the leaders earnestly wished that the merger rationale had included a vision for improving programs and services—if not in place of a cost-savings rationale then at least as part of one.

I went into my interviews with community leaders wondering whether I would find that the cost-savings rationale would be viewed by community leaders as the viable rationale which TCSG *meant* for it to be, which the higher education literature suggested it *might* be, and which open systems theory suggested it *should* be. As it turns out, the community leaders robustly rejected the credibility of the rationale as presented by TCSG, affirmed the higher education literature's point that a rationale—even a market-driven rationale—had to be credible in the eyes of participants if it was to have force, and affirmed the notion of an amended open systems model that said internal components can be non-aligned with market pressures upon an organization.

In terms of policy implications to others for the future, I came away with the distinct impression that—if cost savings was truly the objective—TCSG would have been better off if it had simply said there was a need for some improved economy of scale, if it had stated frankly that the purpose was a reduction in the number of colleges, and if they had stayed away from any discussion of a dollar amount of savings. This latter discussion was, I believe, a snare that TCSG walked into because it focused attention on how the specific amount of \$250,000 was determined. It was seen by community leaders as a statement that the preservation of their community's college was not worth such a paltry amount, and it was so small as to lead to a suspicion among community leaders that the mergers surely could not be about cost savings—there must be other motives. The saving of costs might have been welcomed as a side effect of a reduction in the number of colleges, but it should not have been the lead emphasis of TCSG. As part of this, TCSG might have considered an approach noted in my literature review as being an earlier merger trend among some countries, specifically, to adopt a minimum funding size for a college and then let the college find solutions, such as a partner. As I noted in the review, those governments initially mandated mergers but later turned instead to the “more subtle approach” (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 5) of requiring institutions to be of a certain size in order to receive some kinds of funding. “As a result, institutions sought out and merged with partners large enough to enable them to exceed these minimums. Governments provided powerful inducements; institutions then rationalized themselves” (p. 5). Additionally, as part of such a frank admission that the number of colleges was the true goal, TCSG could

have appointed a study group to look at its feasibility, to draw out a plan as to how a merger could be actually be structured so as to include a vision of improvements in programs and services to the communities, and as a mechanism for allowing local input. At the same time, it can be argued that the community leaders themselves—despite all their protestations about the lack of a TCSG business plan—should have done their own homework on a business plan which made the case as to why the colleges should have remained separate and how this could have been possible.

In the end, under such an admittedly idealized approach, TCSG could have achieved its savings, could have reduced the number of schools, could have promulgated a vision of improved programs and services, could have allowed local communities to find their best partner by their own choice, and could have allowed local communities to put in additional local funds as needed to establish a merged college according to a plan and vision of their own making. Alternatively as a fallback, of course, all of the above could be in place but with an additional stick as it might be needed, that is, that some merger must take place under some plan.

I realize, of course, that TCSG might reply that it was natural that cost savings were emphasized as the rationale because of the economic and budget realities confronting the State and TCSG; that TCSG did in fact speak in the merger plan about the importance of students and programs and economic development; and that the agency would have preferred to follow a study group scenario such as the one utilized in the initial merger of Chattahoochee Tech and North Metro. From the facts and findings of my case, I believe that all of those are true. Additionally, TCSG might add that there was the possibility that community leaders would have used any period of study not as an opportunity to work with TCSG to perfect the mergers, but rather, as an opportunity to marshal political opposition to the mergers. From the facts and findings of my case, I believe that such a scenario could be true.

Finally, I was struck by the plea from community leaders that there surely *must* be some higher vision for the future of technical education that should be a part of such sweeping change. It was clear to me that the community leaders wanted to be motivated by some higher calling—they were open to it. While it may have been a sincere desire in and of itself, it occurred to me that perhaps it was also part of

their almost desperate search to make sense of the mergers, to deal with the frustration it was causing them and their communities, and even to find a rationale which they could in turn embrace and articulate to others—beyond the mere saving of what was viewed as small sums of money.

*The perspective of community leaders on differences between communities.* One other substantive reason why community leaders resisted the mergers (beyond problems with the cost-savings rationale) was this: Community leaders believed that TCSG's merger plan was flawed—and would not work well—because it overlooked the negative impact of differences between the merging communities. They expressed these as cultural differences, as a palpable *here* and *there*, or *us* and *them*, and in a variety of terms such as travel patterns and distance, the different occupational natures of the communities, and even potential differences among the college personnel and students. They felt as though these differences were very obvious to those who lived in the community and who could easily see the lack of a so-called fit between the two communities, and too, who could see how a different merger partner would be a better selection—if there must be one at all. Additionally, where there was a difference in population size between the communities, this also mattered to community leaders and was seen as a disadvantage to the smaller school. Sometimes a sense of history or competition between the schools—and a rivalry between their respective communities—played a role as well.

While I found that this perspective was reminiscent of some anecdotal references to cultural differences in the higher education literature, I did not anticipate the specificity and variety of local perspectives (and I suspect that TCSG did not as well), such as travel patterns, different occupational bases, a size difference, a history of one college being spawned by another, a history of rivalry, or the other college simply being too close to Atlanta (read that as too much like Atlanta). My *initial* reaction on the whole was that this issue of cultural differences or fit was, on the surface, a relatively minor issue that seemed merely to be a talking point against the mergers. I came to realize later, however, that it really *did* matter to the perspectives of community leaders who had this perception of differences that is difficult for others to see or feel.

On the issue of a size differential between merger partners, this was an issue in, first, the merger of Chattahoochee Tech and North Metro Tech. There was a distinct awareness among community leaders that North Metro Tech as well as the county in which it was located were much smaller than Chattahoochee Tech and the county in which its main campus was located, and this was seen as a disadvantage for the smaller. Members of the Chattahoochee-North Metro Merger Feasibility Task Force attempted in their deliberations to assuage such concerns, but this negative perception was actually best altered when Appalachian Tech was added in as the third partner to the merger—it was seen as a needed balancing. Interestingly, on the role of perception, the issue of size also emerged in the merger of two small schools in less populous counties, where community leaders in the smaller of the two felt at a noteworthy disadvantage to the other—despite the fact that each of the two counties had populations in the range of 20,000 with less than 5,000 persons separating them.

In terms of policy implications to others for the future, I came away with the distinct impression that this issue of a fit should very naturally be part of any potential study group process as I suggested earlier, that is, as colleges are pressured to *consider* funding alternatives, including potential partners, then this is a part of the discussion within that process. Even in an instance where mergers are to be *required*, however, consideration of other merger partners will naturally arise as it did in the TCSG mergers. At that point, if I was part of the leadership requiring such discussions or mergers, I might feel relieved that the conversation had moved from *whether* to merge and instead had moved to *who* to merge with—but I admit that this could still be a minefield.

***The perspective of community leaders on the sense of loss.*** Another substantive and non-cost savings factor at work was this: Community leaders felt a strong sense of ownership of their local college, and consequently, a significantly emotional sense of loss because of the merger of *their* school with another—and especially so since it was seen as a *taking* from them. They felt as though they were losing things of community value in some combination of these: a community and college interdependence with each other, a community control and ownership of the college, a college responsiveness to the community and especially for business development, the active community presence of the college president and



other key personnel, and even the sense of having a college. This sense of ownership and loss was made all the worse because of decades of fundraising support for the college, and as salt in the wound, because the loss was to a college which in the past had been a competitor. This sense of loss was viewed as a taking because the community leaders had no input into the process and hence no voice on the outcome.

I was not surprised to find such sentiments, given the facts of the case including news clippings, given my review of the literature on higher education mergers, and given my choice of open system theory as a conceptual model, including the role of resistance, of subsystems, and of a psychological contract. On that latter point, for example, I recall from Levinson that violations of the contract occur when “the changing expectancies of one party are imposed on and threaten the state of interdependence” (1962, p. 104) between organization and individual, and this violation results in “mixed feelings of deprivation, helplessness, sorrow, and anger in varying degrees” (1973, p. 67). What did surprise me, however, was the strength and personalization of such feelings among community leaders, and also, the subtleties of how they perceived and expressed the interdependence between the college and the community which was being lost or taken. They spoke sincerely and passionately about the two-way bond between college and community, and they reacted just as strongly to what they perceived as the assault on that relationship. I came away believing that these sentiments were the strongest in the smaller communities, and I wonder if perhaps this was in part a natural reflection of the stereotypical life of a smaller community. This sense of loss and taking was articulated in even stronger terms in those communities which had literally invested substantial funds into the local college, either at the time of its initial creation as a locally owned and operated school in past decades, or through fundraising campaigns for an additional building or some other purpose—this gave literal meaning to the sense of ownership. As one community leader put it, the local college had originally been created several decades ago by local governments at their own expense, and “We had a prestige, if you will, we had a lot of community pride in our college” (Two).

In terms of policy implications to others for the future, the obvious recommendation is to acknowledge and take into account this interdependence, this sense of ownership, and this sense of its

history—and also to do everything possible to avoid treading on it. As perspective, my research as well as my own experience point out that a piece of the history of such local schools is this: The majority of technical colleges which today comprise TCSG were originally created long before the existence of a state agency, that is, by a local school board or by several school boards together—in short, they were birthed by their local communities (except for only two state-operated schools). When the state agency was created in the mid-1980s, each of these local colleges was eventually given up (over a period of two decades) by their respective boards (who thereby freed themselves of the cost of operation) and was absorbed into the state system. Even though all such colleges are now part of TCSG, a few of the names in fact continue to reflect the original place of parentage, for example, an Albany Technical College, an Athens Technical College, an Atlanta Technical College, and so forth (but the list dwindles each year). By whatever name a college was called then or now, however, this history of origin and of the transfer of governance to the state in previous decades remains vividly known to community leaders, and who now *felt* yet another degree of loss. Any leaders in the future who may contemplate mergers should be mindful of the differing perspectives—the different realities, to put it in social constructionist terms—of someone sitting in Atlanta who may think in the structural terms of legal governance, budgetary demands, and political clout versus someone living in a local community who may think in the affective terms of ownership, pride, investment, and history—and especially so in a smaller community where the college is a very prominent and active part of the community. As the TCSG plan *spoke* in the quantitative language of dollars saved—to the precise tune of \$250,000 per college, no less—community leaders *heard* it in the affective terms of a taking of something long cherished by them—at a cheap price. An insightful reminder from the findings is this: During an interview, I wondered aloud—as a rhetorical tickler—as to how they were able to say that the college in their community somehow ceased to be *their* college when the merger took place, that is, the state had taken over governance long ago and, besides, the college is still physically there in the community and still providing the same services and programs as before. The answer was reminiscent of the unspoken psychological contract, namely, as one community leader put it, “It was the feeling in our minds” (Seven).

On yet another topic, I went into the interviews thinking that the name of each merged school might have been a big issue, because the literature on higher education mergers spoke of this, and open systems theory would suggest it. I was surprised, however, to find out that it was seen by community leaders as a relatively minor issue compared to others—and the reason was that they came to terms on it, so to speak, during the merger process. I attribute this to some serendipity for TCSG, as follows: The tendency of TCSG is to name schools after their geographical region, and some of the potential names that bubbled up in some of the mergers tended to be begrudgingly accurate descriptors of the region served by the new merged college—even if the name was already used by one of the existing colleges. In others, a brand new geographically descriptive name was created, that is, it did not belong to either of the two original schools. These prescriptions can be seen in the names of the four merged schools in the study: In the Appalachian, Chattahoochee, and North Metro merger, the name of Chattahoochee was chosen; in the Flint River and Griffin merger, a new name of Southern Crescent was chosen; in the Southeastern and Swainsboro merger, the name of Southeastern was selected; and in the West Central and West Georgia merger, the name of West Georgia was picked. (In the two mergers not included in the study, the Coosa Valley and Northwestern combination became Georgia Northwestern, while the East Central and Valdosta merger became a new name of Wiregrass.) On this same subject of names, it was clear from community leaders that a college name which bore the name of a city was to be avoided, such as Griffin Tech in the mergers included in my study (and presumably Valdosta Tech among the other two mergers). In summary, the names did not blow up as a major issue only because no one was forced into a corner on this. Too, on this issue I believe that TCSG had a second bit of serendipity, that is, the constructive nature of community leaders. Once the decision on a merger was inevitable, then such leaders turned to the task of how to make the best of it and do what community leaders do, including the resolution of a name. It might not have felt like it at the time to the leadership of TCSG, but again, I would have felt relieved that the conversation had moved from *whether* to merge or *who* to merge with, and instead had turned to the selection of a name.

## **How Did Community Leaders Express Their Resistance?**

The question of how community leaders expressed their concerns, resistance, or opposition includes questions about the venue and manner in which they did so, and to whom. As a reminder, the principal themes which emerged from my findings were these (by title): First Conversations, Calls, and Meetings; A Reliance on Networking; Meetings With the Commissioner; and After the Fact.

*The perspective of community leaders on the manner of resistance.* Community leaders made a decision—sometimes quite explicitly—early in the merger process to express their concerns, resistance, and even opposition in a quiet manner through an established network of local and state contacts rather than through public displays or protests—and maintained this posture throughout their resistance. As one leader put it, “we decided to be a bit more strategic and just use relationships that we had” (Three). During the merger process, community leaders went through a sequence of reactions that reflected their low-key and yet focused approach: When they heard the news about the mergers, they first reached out to a network of contacts within the community in order to affirm what they had heard, to express surprise and concern among themselves, and to hold small-group meetings. In the weeks that followed, the scope of networking and meetings expanded in ripples to include local officials, state legislators, and later, the TCSG leadership. Community leaders found that legislators were also ineffective in their resistance on behalf of their communities, in part because, as one community leader put it, “It was sprung on them like it was on us” (Nine). Along the way, efforts to reach out to the Governor or to those who might be politically connected to the Governor were rebuffed. In the end, resistance faded as leaders acquiesced to what they felt was the inevitable.

As a shorter summary, I would lay out the chronology as this: a period of surprise and even shock at the news; a period of the unknown where information was thin, access to state leadership was scarce, and rumor flew; of improving access but a sense of disinterest, a lack of candor, and a done deal from TCSG, all of which exacerbated anger on the part of community leaders; and finally, of acquiescence, make-do, and withdrawal.

The finding of quiet networking initially surprised me given the depth of emotion felt by at least some of the leaders, but upon reflection I realized that this should not have been a surprise. In fact, I came to feel as though I had stumbled onto an important insight which I earlier alluded to, namely: This kind of networking is a hallmark of community leaders, that is, it reflects who they are and how they conduct themselves. It is the customary way in which most community leaders routinely share information, participate in community life, attempt to influence events in the community, and conduct themselves as the responsible work-within-the-system leaders who they are. It reflects a lifelong set of behaviors which helped them to become community leaders and successful business persons, and it usually works for them. In short, it would have been simply too far out of the ordinary for such community leaders to take a more aggressive approach to their expression of concerns, resistance, or opposition.

Although I believe that this natural behavior tempered their public displays of resistance, I do not think that it universally applies to how the community leaders as individuals reacted when they realized that, as the merger process moved forward, their resistance was futile and the outcome was inevitable. All of them were disappointed to varying degrees with the rationale for the merger, its process, and the outcome, namely: Nearly *all* by their nature as community leaders decided as a practical matter at some point to make the best of the inevitable and to pick up the pieces; *most* let their network of contacts know of their strong and even bitter feelings; *many* if not most withdrew quietly from a supportive stance towards the merged college; a *few* made public their strong feelings; and a *handful* resigned from formal relationships (or purposefully let it lapse) with the merged college, such as being a member of a college-affiliated board.

In my effort to understand their perspective, I came to realize that part of the explanation for their reactions during the chronology was this: First, I believe, was the obviously sincere feelings of the community leaders about the merger and the process—their sincere feelings about the school and its role in the community. Second, at the same time I believe that underlying their reactions was a sense of, as one leader put it, being un-empowered as community leaders. They were, after all, successful and well-

known leaders in their communities—especially so in the smaller communities—and considered by many to be very plugged in, so to speak, with the local and state political structures. On top of that, they were well branded in their communities as being affiliated with the local college and of being very supportive of it—many had asked their community peers to support it financially. With that as background, now the merger is literally sprung on them and publically undercuts them: They have to admit—even the local legislators—that they were not aware of this (or at least did not know it was this far along and that their local school was part of it); as the process unfolds, they do not have rudimentary information or updates which they can share with other community peers who look to them as leaders; and as the process concludes, they remain politically and publically unable to alter the course of the mergers. In short, while I want to be careful not to project what I think my own reaction would be in such an instance, I believe based on not only the verbiage but also the tenor of what I heard from community leaders that they not only felt un-empowered but perhaps even disrespected by TCSG—and everyone in the community knew it—and therefore perhaps community leaders were to some extent embarrassed.

### **How Effective Was the Resistance of Community Leaders?**

The perspective of community leaders on how effective they were includes an assessment as to what extent, and why did they think so. As a reminder, the principal themes which emerged from my findings were The Successes; A Process Without Input; *A Fait Accompli*; and After the Fact.

*The perspectives of community leaders on the effectiveness of resistance.* Community leaders felt very conclusively that, on the whole, their efforts to question, resist, or oppose the mergers did not make a difference—the merger plan proceeded substantially as originally announced by TCSG (with one exception). The successes were few: One was the concessions made by the Commissioner to the Chattahoochee Tech and North Metro Tech Merger Feasibility Task Force in order to encourage acceptance by the group and to assuage representatives of the smaller Bartow County. The second was the approval from the TCSG Commissioner for an alteration—at the request of community leaders—of the planned merger of Appalachian Tech and North Georgia Tech so that Appalachian Tech could meld instead into the Chattahoochee Tech and North Metro Tech merger (the three-college merger). The third

was the responsiveness of the Commissioner to invitations by local community leaders in the various mergers around the state in order to discuss the mergers.

With a great deal of certitude and passion, community leaders believed that the reason for their overall lack of effectiveness in modifying the merger plan was quite simple: The leadership of TCSG was not interested in receiving input, in considering or responding to input, or to changing the merger plan because the mergers were a *fait accompli* from the start. Community leaders felt this way not because of any TCSG declaration or smoking gun, so to speak, but rather, because of anecdotes, inferences, and suspicions related to perceptions such as these: The Governor wanted the mergers to occur; the cost-savings rationale was flawed and disingenuous; the merger plan was conceived so quietly; and the simple speaks-for-itself fact that the efforts of these well-connected leaders to provide input were rebuffed. At the same time, however, at least some community leaders wondered if some of the blame for a lack of effectiveness should be upon themselves for choosing to behave as the respectful and responsible community leaders who they were instead of turning to visible protests—throwing monkey wrenches, as one put it.

I found that perhaps the most universally held belief among community leaders was that their eager dissection of the cost-savings rationale, that their networking attempts to dissuade state decision makers, and that their heartfelt motivations were all to no avail—because there was not any real opportunity for input since the decision was foregone from the start. I believe that they slowly came to feel as though the chronology of evidence was too conclusive to believe otherwise, and that TCSG's actions all along this path were nothing more than dissemblers, whether intended to be so or not. I can understand why this belief naturally created emotions of frustration, anger, and hopelessness, why it exacerbated their resistance, and why it took them to acquiescence.

In fairness—and community leaders attempted to be so—they might add that perhaps TCSG was not interested in input because they *could* not be interested since the Governor directly or indirectly told TCSG to do the mergers; that TCSG was not interested because they did not *have* to be interested since they had the clout of the Governor; and that TCSG should understandably *not* be interested because to

show hesitation would invite not just tinkering but the false hope of a change in the decision to merge. Such questions would post an interesting research addendum with the TCSG leadership in the future, but I suspect that the data collection would be tough—looking behind the curtain works better in the movies.

Part of the question of effectiveness might require me as a researcher to rhetorically query whether the resistance was unsuccessful because the arguments offered by community leaders were weak; my belief is that the community leaders felt as though their arguments were strong, and I believe that an objective assessment would concur with that belief. Another research responsibility might require me to pose whether the community leaders pressed their concerns or points with enough vigor in general, or even on specific issues, for example, through a demand to see a business plan. My belief is, as I have indicated, that the community leaders themselves felt mixed about this. My assessment is that community leaders felt as though they well utilized at least one of their two principal lobbying skill sets, namely, they relied on networking—which usually works well—but they did not turn to public campaigns—which they certainly know how to do for any chosen purpose on any given day. With either path, however, community leaders were clear that they did not believe the decision to merge could have been changed. From a research standpoint, such questions do matter, because it informs our assessment of whether resistance in mergers matters. If community leaders are upset at a merger, but their resistance does not impact decisions being made at the state level, then it is important to know why not. As it turned out in this instance, local sentiment was merely the proverbial tree falling in the forest when no one was listening.

### **Summary of Perspectives**

This section of my conclusions examined the perspectives of community leaders on each of the core questions corresponding to the *what* and *why* of their resistance, to the *how* of their resistance, and to the *effectiveness* of their resistance. I couched my descriptions of those perspectives in terms of the themes emerging from the utterances of the community leaders themselves, but these were also shaped by the other contexts which I bring to the interpretation, including the facts of the case, the conceptual framework which I brought from the literature on higher education mergers, and the conceptual



framework which I brought from open systems theory. Of course, as a qualitative researcher, I note that I also brought the context of my own professional, intellectual, and personal experience to the mix.

***The what and why.*** The perspectives of the community leaders on the *what* and *why* of the resistance were these:

- Community leaders believed that the mergers originated with the Governor as a desire to reduce the number of schools, perhaps for unknown political reasons, and further, that this role of the Governor had significant implications to the failure of the resistance. This perspective of the community leaders was one of the most important findings—and surprises—of my research.
- Community leaders resisted the mergers because they did not put credibility in the core cost-savings rationale offered by TCSG, which they found to be so flawed as to be disingenuous.
- Community leaders may have resisted less if the rationale was one with higher credibility, such as one which inspired a vision of higher improvement for technical education programs or services, and further, even if it also included cost savings or a reduction in the number schools as a side effect.
- Community leaders resisted because the merger plan failed to take into account cultural mismatches or lack of fit between merging communities, and further, they believed that there were more compatible partners which may have softened resistance.
- Community leaders resisted because they felt a profound sense of ownership, of loss, and of a taking of their college. This perspective of the community leaders was the most important cause of their resistance and one of the most important findings of my research.

***The how.*** The perspectives of the community leaders on the *how* of their resistance, that is the manner and venue, and to whom, are these:

- Community leaders in the beginning turned to community-centered conversations, calls, and meetings primarily in order to garner information and to express concerns.

- Community leaders as the process unfolded turned to purposeful local and state networking, and to other restrained approaches, in order to express their resistance.
- Further into the process, community leaders turned to meetings with the TCSG Commissioner in order to express their opposition, and too, their frustration and anger.
- Community leaders by their very nature never turned to public demonstrations of opposition. The perspective of community leaders on this was one of the most important findings of my research.

***The effectiveness.*** The perspectives of the community leaders on their effectiveness—did it make a difference—were these:

- Community leaders felt as though their resistance was ineffective except for a few relatively minor successes.
- Community leaders felt that they were ineffective because they were unable to gain a voice in the process, and further, this was because TCSG would not provide a way to give input, would not respond to input, or would not follow up on input.
- Community leaders felt that TCSG would not do so because the merger plan was a so-called done deal from the start, and further, that this was in large part because of the Governor’s support of it. This perspective of the community leaders might be the single most important and unequivocal finding of my research.

### **Final Thoughts**

The conceptual frameworks which I brought to the study from the literature on higher education mergers, and too, from open systems theory, told me that it is possible for the resistance to organizational change to be able to stop the change from occurring, or at least to significantly delay or modify the change. From the standpoint of the literature on higher education mergers, stopping or modifying such change found traction when there was a perceived lack of credibility in the merger’s rationale, or perhaps when some other combination of substantive (the what or why) or procedural issues (the how) about the merger was an issue. From the standpoint of open systems theory, the lack of alignment between the

internal components of an organization and the environmental pro-change pressure upon the organization could lead to a gap of sorts—including a violation of the psychological contract—and then the organization had to seek strategies or tactics to close the gap if the change was to proceed. In my research case, however, the organizational change sought by TCSG moved forward absolutely unabated, despite a significant misalignment with its internal components—and it is important to understand why.

The short answer is, I believe, that TCSG was clothed in the legal authority and the political clout—both were needed, I believe—to simply make the change happen, and therefore, the agency did not have to be concerned with strategies or tactics to close the gap between the change sought by TCSG and the resistance of the community leaders. The longer answer is this: As I thought about the dynamic of resistance between TCSG and the community leaders, I realized that two factors were making it a very lopsided contest: First, on the TCSG side of the dynamic, the merger plan had behind it the legal governance of TCSG over the colleges, a Governor-appointed Board, a Governor-dominated process for setting the agency's budget (and in a zero-sum balanced budget legislative world), and a Governor-designated Commissioner—and if the community leaders were correct—the Governor himself. Additionally, TCSG had the merger momentum, that is, it had already quietly evaluated costs and the number of colleges, consulted quietly with the Governor (according to the facts of the case), quietly decided upon mergers, identified schools without presidents (for the most part), announced them overnight, and saw them headlined in newspapers as a decision already made—and too, as clothed in the righteous rationale of saving taxpayer dollars in tough economic times. From that point on, TCSG was able to respond to concerns, resistance, and opposition with polite but firm resolve—and on their own schedule—and to move forward with the details of implementation using the infrastructure of a state agency, an appointive power over a local college's president and hence other college leadership, the appointment of the local board members, the setting of the local budget, and oversight of the college's internal operations. To put it in terms of a card game, TCSG had in its hand a royal flush.

I mentioned that there were two factors making it a lopsided contest, and the second one is my equally frank assessment of the community leaders' side of this dynamic: As I discussed earlier in this

chapter, it is a characteristic of community leaders to rely on quiet networking, negotiating, and consensus building to get things done—and this usually works for them. It is simply what community leaders do. In this instance, however, it was the right skill set in the wrong game, because there were not any negotiations to be had. They had a second skill set, however, and it was their political acumen—they are no strangers to politics. Ironically, however, it was their own politically-astute assessment of what they were up against that also worked against them, that is, against a more intense and public lobbying effort. They knew or sensed everything that was stacked against them, they spoke about it, they picked up on it from others in their networks, and they took it into account when deciding how far and hard to push their resistance. In fact, even their own legislators knew of the uphill nature of the resistance, which tempered even the legislators' estimate of how far they themselves could get.

In short, the TCSG clout coupled with the community leaders' responsible approach all but guaranteed that the original merger plan would be implemented without significant change or even delay—the resistance did not matter. The combination also explains why the conceptual models from the merger literature and from open systems theory took such an unexpected twist in this case, that is, why even the most stark violation of, for example, a psychological contract between TCSG and the community leaders did not have consequences.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Position in the community

(a) As background, can you help me to understand your leadership role in the community?

2. The timeline and the factors that impacted the decision

(a) Let's talk some about how you first heard about the merger, and what your reaction was. Can you recall it?

(b) So what happened after that, do you recall how events unfolded?

(c) So tell me more about the main factors that led you to have concerns or to be in opposition to it; what mattered the most?

3. Expression of opposition

(a) I'm curious about how you expressed that opposition? Who did you talk to about it, or did you write about it; what did you do?

(b) How vocal would you say you were?

4. Effectiveness of opposition

(a) Do you feel as though you being against it influenced others to be against it; what makes you feel that way?

(b) Do you feel as though the people making the decisions listened to you; what did they say or do that made you feel that way?

(c) In the end, did your opposition change anything about the merger, that you know about?

5. Capstone question

(a) Do you feel as though there was anything that the state agency could have done differently to make you feel better about the merger?

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study project conducted as part of the requirements for the Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) at the University of Georgia. Your participation is very important to the successful completion of this project.

As you are aware, the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) has caused the merger of several sets of technical colleges around the state, including one in your own local community. Because you have expressed concerns about this merger, you have a perspective that is a valuable resource and which can inform researchers, college administrators, and too, state education policy makers. I will be conducting face-to-face, confidential interviews with community leaders such as you in several communities around the state, and these interviews will be a primary source for my research.

Let me assure you that your interview will be confidential, and too, that your views will be accurately represented. Regarding the confidentiality, the research will be supervised by my dissertation advisor, Dr. J. Douglas Toma, who will be the only other person to have access to the interviews as recorded, as well as transcripts and reports of the research; both Dr. Toma and myself will protect your privacy and the confidentiality of this material throughout the study. Further, in any references made to the interviews, you will be referred to only through the use of a pseudonym. Regarding the accurate representation of your words and intent (which is important not only to you but to me as a researcher), please know that you will be given the opportunity to review and correct the transcripts of your interview to ensure that you expressed what you intended to.

For this project, you will be asked to

- Participate in a tape-recorded interview. The interview will be approximately 60 minutes with you and I discussing your merger story and experiences.
- Provide basic information regarding your professional background.
- Share your story about your own experiences during the recent merger of the technical colleges.
- Participate in a brief follow-up interview either in person, via email, or by phone to review the transcripts from the first interview.

For this project I will

- Provide information and answer any questions you may have regarding the project, including this consent form.
- Schedule and conduct an initial face-to-face interview of approximately 60 minutes, in a convenient and confidential setting of your choosing in your local community.
- Possibly request follow-up information after the interview, either by phone, e-mail, or in person. (It should be noted that internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself, but once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed.)
- Assign you a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality both in the transcript and the research paper.

- Make sure that no individually-identifiable information about you, or provided by you during the research, will be shared with others without your written permission.
- Allow you to review the interview transcript to check for accuracy.
- Erase any interview tapes and destroy any master list linking pseudonyms to participant identities within 90 days after the completion of the research project.

Please allow me to point out other items that are part of a standard research protocol:

- Your participation is voluntary. You can, of course, refuse to participate or withdraw your participation at any time, should you become uncomfortable or for any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- No physical or psychological risks are expected from this study. Although I will tape record the initial interviews with you, there should be no potential psychological stress or discomfort experienced; such psychological stress or discomfort should be minimized by making sure you understand that this interview is performed strictly on a volunteer basis and by guaranteeing confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms.
- If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at 404-408-8312 or the dissertation advisor, Dr. J. Douglas Toma at 706-542-4836.

I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share your experiences and viewpoints regarding your experiences during the recent merger. Thank you very much for your help with my doctoral research.

Sincerely,

Ron Newcomb  
Dissertation Co-Investigator

Dr. J. Douglas Toma  
Assistant Professor, The University of Georgia

Please sign both copies, keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant Date

For questions or problems about your rights please call or write: Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, the University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address [IRB@uga.edu](mailto:IRB@uga.edu).

## APPENDIX C

### TRANSCRIPT EXAMPLE WITH THEME HIGHLIGHTS

- Five: Legislators were already involved in the first step. The plan had been – and we really need to get... [a certain local official] here because he was going to lead this effort, was to show that we could come up with the equivalent of the savings locally and then take that to the governor to stop the merger. But for some reason – I’m not sure who actually said the final thing – that plan didn’t go forward because we didn’t feel we had any hopes of succeeding at that because the decision had been made, it had been signed and the blood had dried.
- Seven: Well, during the transition, staff was already beginning to change. We were beginning to hear less and less from our local people about anything. It was a transition. “Someone from the other school is going to be doing that now...” We didn’t really know who to talk to or how to react to some of the things that were going on. I think I sort of sat back and just waited to see what was going to happen next.
- Five: And it would have had to been higher than the Commissioner because... [he] was clearly on board with ‘This is going to happen’. So –
- Newcomb: So you did feel like – did all of y’all felt like it was a done deal?
- Five: Yes.
- Seven: Yes.
- Six: I don’t – I think for all the efforts we went through, I don’t think we had a chance to turn things around. I don’t know.
- Seven: I don’t know.
- Five: You might want to get with the... [a local official]... he finally reached the conclusion, from the phone calls that he had made and from what he knows, that our plan B to go forth and show that we could get equivalent savings locally by... appealing to the governor, he just felt – and he knows the governor well. So we felt that it was not –
- Newcomb: So how did you feel about it when you felt like it was a done deal? Did you feel like –
- Seven: We felt like we were losing, I guess, control of our local technical college.

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Note: The theme code is this: Red is rationale or *why* related, green is expression of resistance or *how*, and the purple is *effectiveness*.

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