

2020

## Institutional Narrative as a Means for Evaluating Mission Alignment at Community Colleges

Paul Wesley Lundburg  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Paul Wesley Lundburg

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Walden University  
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Abstract

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for Evaluating Mission Alignment at Community Colleges

by

Paul Wesley Lundburg

MA, University of Alaska Anchorage, 1994

BS, University of Alaska Anchorage, 1992

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Education – Community College Leadership

Walden University

August 2020

## Abstract

Community colleges have expanded their goals and their mission statements to accommodate more students, introduce new programs, and respond to community needs. One result of this expansion has been the perception of mission misalignment: the idea that community colleges are struggling to fulfill their missions. Recent literature has focused on causes and problems presumed to be associated with mission misalignment; however, there is a gap in the empirical research on whether mission misalignment occurs. The purpose of this study was to examine mission misalignment in community colleges, thereby helping to fill the gap in the literature. The research question was the extent to which the discourse presented on an institution's website demonstrates an institutional narrative that aligns with the mission statement. The conceptual framework was Fisher's rhetorical theory of narrative fidelity as demonstrative of truthful institutional story. Using the institutional stories as presented on the college websites of 4 community colleges, 2 rural and 2 urban located in adjacent states, this qualitative study used critical discourse analysis as the method to perform in-depth textual and image analyses of the colleges' webpages. The findings were that the sample colleges demonstrate institutional narratives that align with their mission statements. Recommendations for research include further use of critical discourse analysis in the investigation of institutional story. Evidence of mission alignment can be leveraged for increased fiscal and social support for community colleges, and can contribute to positive social change through societal confidence that community colleges are doing what they claim to be doing and what society expects of them.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Tania M. Gavino, without whose support this project would never have been possible. For her sacrifice of our having time together and her taking care of so many details of our regular lives, I can never express my appreciation and gratitude. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my children: Alec Lundburg, Elijah Lundburg, Nikolas Gavino-Lundburg, Kat Cordoba, and Andres Cordoba. Without the love and support of my family, I would not have had the desire nor ability to complete this dissertation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **The Mission of the Community College**

The mission of community colleges was established by the Truman Commission in 1947 (Zook, 1947) and has remained the basis for the core mission of modern community colleges. The Truman Commission report was completed two years following the end of World War II and was triggered by the G.I. Bill (Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944), which provided an avenue for returning soldiers to pursue a college education. It was also a time of increased high school graduation rates and a sense of collective responsibility for egalitarian practices in society (Kim & Rury, 2007). The resulting core community college mission of increasing accessibility, providing a higher education at an affordable cost, and focusing on student success remains to present at the center of the widely accepted purpose of community colleges. These institutions have enjoyed increased appreciation for their role in the U.S. educational system due to their part in providing a workforce for the economy as well as their egalitarian roots (Ayers, 2015; Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Lake & Mrozinski, 2011). Community colleges provide equitable access to higher education with open door policies, developmental education options, transfer options into baccalaureate programs at universities, and technical and vocational programs for immediate use in the workforce (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017; Phelan, 2014). As these varied functions have increased, community colleges have responded by expanding their goals—and sometimes their mission statements—to accommodate more students, introduce new programming, and respond to community and regional needs.

Gilbert and Heller (2013) presented an overview of the mission of the community college as articulated by the 1947 Truman Commission, discussing the original community college mission and modern challenges to it for community colleges. Their argument was that the Truman Commission report moved higher education toward more accurately mirroring the social values espoused by society in general. Gilbert and Heller's study captured not only a useful overview of the roots of the modern community college but also assessed the impact of the Truman Commission report from its release in 1947 to the present. While not all of the Commission's report has manifested as community college policy, Gilbert and Heller reported that the core mission of the community college to provide access to higher education for all citizens has for the most part been fulfilled (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Over the decades since the Truman Commission, however, increased pressure on community colleges to broaden and expand their missions has presented them with higher risk of mission misalignment.

Some of the challenges to the mission of the community college, according to Gilbert and Heller (2013), that have threatened the core mission of equitable education are (a) the costs associated with new initiatives to fulfill newer mission components, (b) a continuous decrease in funding that triggers the need to identify new revenue streams, and (c) the onset of the concept of the comprehensive community college. Consistent with commonly accepted knowledge, Gilbert and Heller observed that the Truman Commission report recommended expanding access particularly in the areas of race, religion, gender, and socioeconomic status, which in recent years have taken on avenues for mission fulfillment that equate in resource demands to independent submission

components. The result has been even greater pressure on mission fulfillment—and conversely an increased risk for mission misalignment.

The expansion of higher education promoted by the Truman Commission, easily discernable in the report itself (Zook, 1947), specified that the new community college system should increase access to the number of seats available in higher education, and even advocated that this increased access should include geographic accessibility. Notably, the Truman Commission report determined that only the ability and interests of the student should limit enrollment (Zook, 1947). Additionally, the Truman Commission specifically intended that community colleges have multifaceted missions (Zook, 1947), laying the groundwork for the rise of the comprehensive community college as well as the capacity for them to take on increasingly demanding roles. Gilbert and Heller (2013) concluded that the Truman Commission’s recommendations could not have been implemented without significant expansion in the number of community colleges and their adoption of the findings of the Commission report as their mission. Nonetheless, this expansion in the numbers of community colleges has been accompanied by expansion in strains on the community college mission.

As community colleges have faced increasing pressure to fulfill a seemingly varied array of demands, there has been wide speculation that they are more susceptible to mission misalignment. A large portion of the body of literature on mission misalignment in the community college, to be discussed in Chapter 2, demonstrates the literature has been replete with studies assuming that mission misalignment actually occurs, when in fact it may not. Thus, prior to this dissertation, there was a gap in the

literature on whether mission misalignment actually occurs. In this study, I addressed that gap in the literature, exploring whether mission misalignment occurs. In doing so, the existing and future literature on the causes for and fallout from mission misalignment will be better served, and studies into mission alignment and fulfillment will have a more solid foundation regarding the existence of mission alignment or misalignment.

In Chapter 1, I present the background for the study, laying out the foundational understanding that guided this study. The problem statement precedes a section in which I discuss the purpose of the study and the research question. Following that, I briefly introduce the conceptual framework for its deeper discussion later in Chapter 2. I follow that with a description of the nature of the study. I have included definitions for the purpose of clarity on the use of terms associated with this dissertation, followed by a disclosure of the assumptions underlying the research and descriptions of the topic. I then present the scope and limitations of the study, followed by a succinct presentation of the significance of the study.

### **Background and Problem Statement**

The functions fulfilled by community colleges have increased significantly over recent decades. There is widespread reporting that the missions of community colleges have increasingly trended toward globalization, degree completion, accountability, and sustainability (Ayers, 2015). The resulting pressures from broadening trends, Conforth (2014) noted, can lead to mission misalignment in social enterprises, particularly because they have socially oriented missions but are expected to be successful in the marketplace in the same way businesses are successful in that arena. Echoing this theme, Ebrahim,

Battilana, and Mair (2014) found that mission effectiveness was affected by the pressures of hybrid missions imposed on social enterprises.

The problem of mission misalignment, however, may have roots that date back further than a collapsing of expectations placed on for-profit and social enterprises. Desai (2012) observed that the increased demand for community colleges to be increasingly comprehensive has put a strain on their missions, increasing the likelihood of mission misalignment occurring. There are indications that federal policy has affected accessibility and equity in community colleges, which presents additional potential for mission misalignment (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Adding to this vein of findings in the research, Gonzalez (2012) reported that the community college mission has drifted from focusing on accessibility to focusing on accountability. This has triggered an emphasis on graduation rates that may be detracting from community colleges' focus on the more substantive issues of learning outcomes and supporting student learning.

Economic pressures dominate the literature as reported causes for mission misalignment. Jaquette (2013), for example, found that economic pressures have led community colleges to consider becoming 4-year colleges as a means of both increasing revenue and retention. Performance-based funding has introduced the additional pressure of attending to fiscal matters, which further affirms Gonzalez (2012) as institutions find themselves considering strategies that place emphasis on revenues over education (Jones, 2016). In a study providing hope for solutions, Ramus and Vaccaro (2017) used case studies of two social enterprises to show how engaging stakeholders and social accounting can correct mission misalignment in social enterprises. The underlying theme



in much of the literature is that economic pressure has caused the greatest strain on the community college mission. Furthermore, nearly all relevant research has focused on the causes and fallout of mission misalignment without any reference to studies exploring specifically whether mission misalignment occurs through a systematic analysis or assessment of mission fulfillment.

This last point established the need for the research that I conducted in this study. The lack of academic inquiry into whether mission misalignment occurs represents a gap in the literature. While there are many ways to approach this gap, I employed narrative theory, specifically that of Fisher (1989), to conduct an analysis of institutional stories of community colleges. Subsequently, I used the institutional story of the sample colleges to determine whether it was aligned with the mission statement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of literature on mission misalignment at community colleges. My intent was to explore mission misalignment as the deviation of an institution from its stated purpose through examining the alignment between the institution's stated mission and its lived story. An institution's projected story provides an opportunity to use narrative theory—specifically Fisher's (1989) narrative paradigm—as a means for exploring mission misalignment. Existing literature reflects scholarly attention to the role of the mission statement and its use in strategic planning (Ayers, 2015; Desai, 2012; Lake & Mrozinski, 2011); however, a gap exists in the literature concerning the assessment of whether community colleges fulfill their missions and whether mission misalignment actually occurs. In this study, I explored

mission fulfillment, or conversely mission misalignment, treating the act of mission fulfillment as an institutional story that aligns what is done (fulfillment) with intentional purpose (mission statement). An institution's website and webpages are a reflection of its institutional story and I examined them as demonstrative of mission fulfillment. In particular, I used Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm and its concept of narrative fidelity as a means of examining the institutional story as an evaluation tool for determining mission fulfillment.

### **Research Question**

The research question (RQ) that I used to guide this study was: To what extent does the discourse presented on an institution's website demonstrate an institutional narrative as reflective of, or consistent with, the mission statement?

### **Framework for the Study**

I constructed the framework for this study around two primary concepts and theories: the narrative theories of Fisher (1989) and the rhetorical theories of Burke (1945). The conceptual framework for this study was Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm. This communication theory presents a new way of looking at narrative as a rhetorical feature and addresses believability and credibility in narrative contexts. Accordingly, the theory has been used in communication applications that study the effective use of narrative as a communication device. This approach focuses, more pointedly, on the elements of narrative fidelity and narrative cohesion, both key factors in building a story (narrative) that is convincing as a rhetorical device. Furthermore, the

theory has been applied in a variety of contexts, laying a foundation upon which to construct a study on the fulfillment of community college missions.

In this study, I used the theory of narrative fidelity as a means for determining whether the discourse presented on an institution's website is reflective of the mission statement. I applied this theory to the concept of institutional narrative to fill the gap in research on whether mission alignment or misalignment exists. I will discuss Fisher's (1989) narrative paradigm in detail in Chapter 2, along with an application of Burke's (1945) pentad and Bruner's (2002) explanation of pertinent narrative components because both complement Fisher's theory.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of the study was qualitative. A qualitative study is appropriate for studies that examine how language and rhetorical devices are used in a persuasive manner. Creswell (2013) made a distinction between literary narrative and narrative phenomenon, an example of which might be "a narrative of illness" (p. 70). Fisher's (1989) theory bridges the literary and communicative applications of the term *narrative* by looking at narrative as a rhetorical device within a communication context. In this study, I used Fisher's (1989) narrative paradigm to place community colleges in the context of "stories of individuals" (Creswell, 2013, p. 70). Therefore, a traditional literary narrative analysis would not be appropriate for this study because the narrative context of community colleges' institutional stories are not literary narratives. Rather, they are narratives of communication, or a type of literary phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In previous studies I have conducted, I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) with

newspaper texts (as I did in Lundburg, 2006c) and found it to be effective in conducting text and image analysis. In that research, I used CDA for close study of the types of communicative devices that I used in this project, as reflected on a website, and I noted also that CDA lends itself to examining common themes that emerge through an examination of how language, documents, and media are used to portray a communicative image of a community college. I used Gee's (2014a, 2014b) methodological approach because it provided a toolkit with questions designed to discover evidence of particular discourse elements, such as the claims of a mission statement, through close textual analysis of the documents and images on the websites that I examined in this study. A close study of the use of language and imagery through CDA allowed the subtext of the discourse to be revealed (Fairclough, 2010). I maintained a focus on the messages conveyed through the institutional story (narrative) as a means of demonstrating mission alignment or misalignment. The narrative context created by the community colleges' websites held what Fisher (1989) called *narrative fidelity*, and thus alignment existed between the colleges' intended mission and what they actually do, as revealed through the self-generated institutional narrative. I limited data sampling to the webpages and documents linked to the websites, and I purposefully selected four community colleges in one region to conduct a meaningful comparison of colleges with the same accreditation standards.

## Definitions

*Mission misalignment:* Mission misalignment is defined as occurring when an institution experiences a transition to a new organizational pattern without articulating it (Jaquette, 2013).

*Mission statement:* Mission statement refers to a brief sentence or group of sentences that articulate the intended purpose or mission of an organization (Conforth, 2014). A mission statement is developed when an organization articulates and publishes its intended mission for the purposes of publicly asserting its primary goal(s) and reason for existing.

*Narrative:* Narrative refers to all forms of story structure, whether fictional or factual. Narrative can also refer to communicative constructs that are intended to convey experience or meaning.

*Organization:* An organization refers to an entity that comprises people and physical, technological, financial, and other resources that are structured systematically to provide a service(s) or products(s) to address a particular purpose or mission.

*Story:* Story is a type of narrative in which the lived experiences or events in the narrative are the emphasis, and often the primary communication tool. The terms narrative and story are often used interchangeably.

*Transformational grammar:* This refers to a system of understanding language constructions at two levels: surface structure and deep structure (Chomsky, 1965). In linguistics, transformational grammar is used to study sentence structure and how the communication of meaning is organized into linguistic features.

### **Assumptions**

My assumption in this study was that a community college whose institutional story does not align with its stated mission may not be on track with its goals and is thus at risk of not adhering to accountability standards in their constituencies. The exception to this would be aspirational mission statement items; in such cases, I assumed that there is value for the institution in knowing whether it is aligning its institutional story with its intended, aspirational mission. I accepted these assumptions for the purposes of this study as a baseline for understanding the intended purpose of a community college, and also as a foundation for discussing whether mission alignment exists between mission statements and the lived institutional story of community colleges.

I also assumed that the mission statement of an institution is its collectively endorsed and intended purpose, and that mission statements suggest a set of values and goals. Furthermore, I assumed that the mission statements examined in this study were well-vetted at community colleges and approved by the institution's governing board. Because significant effort and multilayered review are involved in the development of mission statements, I assumed them to be accurate expressions of the intentions of the colleges. I also assumed that the mission statements that appear on college websites were the most recently approved versions, and thus reflect the current intention for the institutional story of the college. While it could be argued the possibility existed that a mission statement was an aspirational intention for the institution, and might be intended by the college to be more visionary and goal-oriented, in such cases misalignment nevertheless exists between the mission statement and institutional story. Where this

might be the case, the analysis revealing mission misalignment still proved useful in determining whether mission fulfillment has occurred.

I assumed that websites are like mission statements in that they are collective efforts on the part of the entire college community. I further assumed that the information, images, and symbols on a college's website were accurate reflections of the life of the college. I acknowledged that there might be some discrepancies from the assumption that websites are reflections of the life of the college; however, I assumed such discrepancies to be minor because the websites were created and maintained under a centrally controlled concept driven by the intentions and purpose of the college and captured by the mission statement.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was limited to examining mission fulfillment or misalignment within comprehensive public community colleges in a common region. The community colleges studied were all regionally accredited, state-sponsored, 2-year colleges. This approach to the study provided uniformity of mission statements as well as websites, as these tend to be similar with institutions that are alike in the same region. The result formed the basis for answering the RQ of this study, and I used the websites as the primary tool for assessing mission fulfillment. I selected the subject community colleges from within the same region to ensure that a common baseline existed and to limit the potential for variation that might go undetected due to sociolinguistic and cultural differences. I selected the study region because of the commonalities of the existence of key performance indicators (KPIs) used by their systems and common

mission themes, providing additional assurances that the base was uniform as possible. The institutions selected were representative of small and large, rural and urban community colleges.

In addition, I selected the region because I have been an accreditation evaluator there and am familiar with the statewide systems of the sample institutions. Websites are often updated and revised; therefore, I completed the data collection within a two-month timeframe to optimize the likelihood of consistency within each website. By identifying and applying these conditions, I conducted the study in a way that could be applicable to any community college of a similar type, as these institutions tend to use the common ground of the Truman Commission for the core elements in the college mission, which are reflected in the mission statement. Furthermore, the websites of such community colleges tend to be similar, drawing on approaches for types of information and organization used at all higher education institutions—such was the case with the sample community colleges used in this study.

### **Limitations**

I focused this study on a sample of community colleges in a region that represents the kind of variety typical of community colleges in terms of size and type of setting (e.g., rural and urban). The findings of the study may be helpful for institutions within that region or community colleges situated similarly to those studied. However, the findings may be equally useful to any community colleges espousing values, goals, or missions that are similar to those included in this study.



I adopted an approach to qualitative communication research that might be useful for researchers using similar approaches to CDA. This methodology is limited to linguistic features and imagery located in the mission statements and websites of the institutions studied and should not be interpreted more broadly than those contexts. It is possible that documents or images that each institution might consider critical to the college were not presented on the college website. While the absence of these documents and images might affect the impression presented by the institutional narrative, this study was limited to the life of the college as represented by the website. In other words, I considered the website the public portrayal of the institutional story; additionally, the website and mission statement are the two primary presentations available to the public of the entire institution. I therefore did not consider any omissions to be part of the institutional narrative.

I acknowledge that previous research I have conducted using CDA might have influenced the current study. I employed CDA during graduate studies in Communication Studies at North Dakota State University. These empirical studies were in the area of cultural communication and were all focused on the use of textual discourse as communication devices; one of these studies involved the rhetorical use of a website. I acknowledge that my background with CDA and rhetorical studies, as well as that in narrative theory, could have influenced or limited this study. However, I believe my background strengthened the study, and I made every effort to adhere to the standard practice in discourse studies to engage in self-reflective practices, including the use of a reflexive journal as a means of guarding against researcher preconceptions and subjective

interpretations, and particularly against any effect on the findings and conclusions of the study that might have emerged from researcher bias.

### **Significance**

Community colleges as they are currently understood continue to carry the original mission focus from the Truman Commission of accessibility and egalitarian service. As the literature reveals, there is concern that increasing demands under shrinking resources threatens that mission. Any researcher attempting to better understand the community college mission and ensure its fulfillment offers a significant contribution to the integrity of the community college's role in society. In this dissertation, I sought to contribute to a clearer understanding of mission fulfillment in community colleges by clarifying whether mission misalignment occurs and how the life of the community college contributes to the values of U.S. culture.

There has been a widespread perception that mission misalignment occurs at community colleges (Ayers, 2015; McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017; Phelan, 2014). The lack of research on the fact of mission misalignment presents the possibility that there is an intuitive perception of mission misalignment without a basis of actual studies on the topic. This research project was unique in that I intended it to fill a gap in the research regarding community college life. I wanted to study potential mission misalignment and the relationship between it and an organization's foci, in particular how the institution functions on a day-to-day basis, a phenomenon noted in Ayers (2015) and Lake and Mrozinski (2011). The outcomes of the study in part fill the gap in the literature by providing an enhanced understanding of mission fulfillment and whether mission

misalignment actually occurs. The results establish what is meant by mission misalignment while identifying a means through which mission fulfillment can be measured. Insights from this study provide a means for assessment that can be used by community colleges for measuring the degree to which their institutional story reflects mission fulfillment or mission misalignment.

I hope that this study contributes to the collective community college leadership's ability to determine the alignment of its stated mission with its day-to-day practices, particularly the adherence of the institution to the shared community college mission as outlined by the Truman Commission. This study is socially significant in that the results provide a means for colleges to determine if they are doing what they purport to do, and thereby improve services for students, staff, and the community. Building alignment between the mission statement and lived narrative of the college as demonstrated on the website can also strengthen the relationship between the college and the community it serves, enabling it to garner increased support for the college in terms of both positive image and fiscal support. Increased fiscal support will help community colleges acquire needed resources for mission fulfillment, thereby assuring the alignment between their mission statements and their institutional stories.

### **Summary**

The mission of community colleges has been built around the core mission established by the Truman Commission in 1947. As evidenced by the literature I will discuss in Chapter 2, the ability of today's community colleges to adhere to that core mission is of great concern. The concern centers around the pressures placed on

community colleges by increased demands while they face decreasing revenue streams. The perception has been that these increasing demands, expanding functions, and decreasing revenues have forced a misalignment between what colleges say they do—as captured in the mission statement—and what they actually do. The question of whether mission misalignment actually occurs has not been investigated in the literature. Since a college’s website presents the mission statement while reflecting the life of the institution, this study used the college website as a means for gauging whether mission misalignment actually occurs. This study represents an examination of community college websites that seeks to answer whether those websites demonstrate mission fulfillment or mission misalignment.

In this chapter, I outlined the approach to the study as well as the problem that I examined. I specified that the occurrence of mission misalignment must be demonstrated through empirical research, and that this study provided a replicable means for assessing mission fulfillment while emphasizing the importance of the link between the lived experience of the community college—its institutional story, as reflected on the college website—and its stated intended mission. In Chapter 2, I will examine existing literature as a means for establishing the context of the study and current literature on the topic of mission misalignment. In Chapter 3, I will describe the methodology and description of the steps used in the study. In Chapter 4, I will present the findings of the study, highlighting how the findings answer the RQ. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings of the study and describes how the study contributes to social change.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Since the 1947 Truman Commission (Zook, 1947) provided a clearly articulated focus on accessibility, the mission of the American community college system has been a model of egalitarian higher education. It is not difficult to find stories of students testifying that they could never have achieved a college degree without the existence of the community college option. Recently, however, there has been increased concern that the mission of the community college is threatened by the increased demands of legislators and other stakeholders. Such demands are forcing community colleges to respond to the needs of not only students and the general workforce but also specific business and industry expectations, community leaders' specific agendas, and legislative and state education boards' accountability standards (Gonzalez, 2012). This increase in expectations, coupled with a growing culture of accountability, has resulted in greater potential for mission misalignment (Ayers, 2015; Lake & Mrozinski, 2011).

Although there is ample research on the causes and effects of mission misalignment, a gap in the literature exists regarding whether mission misalignment actually occurs and very little research has been conducted on the assessment of mission fulfillment. Mission statements provide a clearly articulated intent of a community college in terms of its goals and purpose. They provide outsiders with a succinct definition of what the institution is—that is, who they intend to be—and at the same time capture the values of the college. Mission statements also provide a sense of purpose to those who work at the community college as well as articulate the culture and strategic

goals for all initiatives and efforts adopted by the college. The purpose of a mission statement, as David, David, and David (2016) put it, is to provide “a declaration of attitude and outlook” (p. 23), broad enough in scope to allow for specific strategies for accomplishing the purposive function of the organization. The inclusion of institutional goals is the common element in mission statements, but some literature on mission includes additional criteria for exemplary mission statements.

In addition to the traditional criteria, some literature suggests the mission should be reflective of the culture of the organization in a manner that not only demonstrates its core values but also serves as a reporting tool for how well the organization achieves its strategic goals (Babnik, Breznik, Dermol, & Nada, 2014). Furthermore, the mission statement should set the direction of the organization along with its intended purpose, clearly identifying whom the organization serves should be decipherable from the mission statement (David et al., 2016). These are the intentions of organizations when they develop their mission statements, and community colleges share these intentions with organizations in the private sector. Another similar feature is the usefulness of a mission statement as a reporting tool through which a community college may gauge how well it is fulfilling its mission and determine whether it experiences mission misalignment between its intentions and what it actually does.

In this chapter, I will outline the literature that formed the framework for this dissertation as well as recent literature pertinent to mission misalignment in public-serving organizations and in higher education. I drew the conceptual framework for this study from narrative theory to establish the basis for the study of community colleges’

institutional stories. Following the framework literature reviews, I conducted a review of current literature on mission and mission misalignment to provide an overview of recent findings as well as current foci on the topic in scholarly research.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I conducted an extensive search of the literature in preparing this review.

Although I included books in the search, the bulk of the literature consisted of peer-reviewed, primary research articles. Sources included those covering mission and mission statements both in higher education, private and public nonprofit organizations, and for-profit companies. The search terms I used in the library and database searches included: *mission, mission statement, purpose of mission statements, community college mission, mission drift, mission creep, mission misalignment, mission fulfillment, community college planning, strategic planning, institutional identity, community college focus, organizational focus, organizational purpose, organizational identity, organization structure, college mission, institutional goals, strategic planning, and organizational purpose*. The databases I searched included Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, SAGE, Business Source Complete, Education Source, and Research Library. The results of the search yielded varied articles, most of which were not empirical studies useful to this dissertation or not recent studies likely to inform this study. Most of the articles I found through the abovementioned terms were pertinent to the private sector outside of higher education; those that had a bearing on the interest of this dissertation are included in the review of literature in this chapter.

I used an iterative search process to find relevant literature regarding mission misalignment and how it was reported in various types of organizations, particularly community colleges, higher education, nonprofits, public organizations, and private corporations and organizations. In searching the databases, I used broad terms such as *mission statement*, particularly in terms of how that term and related terms appeared in the literature in each type of organization. With more specific terms, such as *strategic planning*, I used the same iterative process used to identify sources pertinent to types of organizations. I culled their reference lists for additional terms and potential sources, adding to the iterative script. Where additional terms were potentially applicable to previous database searches, I took them through the search process with the earlier databases as well.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I based the framework for this study on the communication applications of narrative theory as espoused by Fisher (1989) and dramaturgical theory as espoused by Burke (1945). In particular, Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm includes discussion of *narrative fidelity* as a necessary component for effective communication. For a story to be perceived by an audience as authentic or real, it must persuade them that it adheres to the rules of fidelity in the narrative of the story. Because Fisher is a communication theorist and leaves some important points about narrative unstated, I used Bruner's (2002) ideas in the discussion to help present Fisher's concepts clearly and succinctly. Bruner elucidated how stories can have an impact on the way we understand the world around us, and particularly on how a story's impact is carried heavily through narrative as



the lived experience of characters. This understanding was crucial to the application of narrative fidelity to the lived experience of colleges as evidence of mission fulfillment—or the revelation of mission misalignment.

In this dissertation, I examined the institutional story of a community college and whether that institution was true to its stated mission. To effectively evaluate this, I used Burke's (1945) theory of the pentad—the second component that provided the framework for this dissertation—to link narrative theory to a college's institutional story.

Researchers have used Burke's theory extensively in the study of rhetoric because it uses the components of theater (as in space or arena, not necessarily dramatic theater) to examine not only what is said or presented but also what the agenda and purposes of the discourse might be. When narrative fidelity is examined, it is prudent to have a theoretical system with which to analyze a story's fidelity, and Burke's pentad is suited to such an analysis.

### **Theory of the Narrative Paradigm**

Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm, drawn from the fields of communication and rhetoric, is concerned primarily with the elements of story and narrative as communication tools. As such, the context of narrative that interested Fisher was its potential for communicating effectively—meaning communicating convincingly and persuasively. Fisher presented narrative as a means for better understanding the world around us, observing that humans use storytelling as an approach to understanding each other's perspectives and experiences. Therefore, Fisher posited, narrative as a rhetorical tool must be constructed in a manner that adheres to crucial expectations in the

audience, or else it will fail to persuade as being representative of truth or reality. The critical components for building a believable narrative are narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Prior to delving into Fisher's theory, however, it is necessary to establish key elements in understanding the concept of story and its role in communication.

Foundational to understanding Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm is knowledge of how stories work as communicative devices. Bruner (2002) describes storytelling as a means for imposing order on otherwise random occurrences, such that they become meaningful experiences that contain insight and purpose in our lives. Stories impose a sense of cohesion and coherence on what would otherwise be unordered, chaotic events that simply happen without any meaning. Stories provide engaging ways of communicating our perspective and understanding to others. Careful attention to the role of narrative both at the individual and organizational levels can potentially help avoid the "perils" (Bruner, 2002, p. 107) that come with our natural inclination for storytelling and narrative construction. In other words, how the story is constructed can, in Fisher's (1989) words, cause it to "ring true" or false, depending on how well it adheres to the rules of narrative cohesion and narrative fidelity.

Narrative cohesion and fidelity in narratives are dependent on the believability of characters. Characters are the actors in a story, and are therefore where the story takes on the impression of representative of life. In terms of this dissertation, the life being lived is that of the community college as an institution; the college is the protagonist in the institutional story that is purportedly aligned with the mission statement, much like a

novel or short story aligns with the description on the back cover of the book. “Characters in a story are said to be compelling by virtue of our capacity for identification or because, in their ensemble, they represent the cast of characters that we, the readers, carry unconsciously within us” (Bruner, 1986, p. 4). This highlights the need for a narrative to have characters that seem real, act real, and have realistic motives and actions for the story itself to be believable or realistic. The narrative will lack the elements of Fisher’s narrative fidelity—they will not ring true—in terms of the actions and makeup of the characters of the story.

In Bruner’s theories, the link between narrative and argument (or rhetoric) is strong. This is a point that underlies Fisher’s (1989) theory, and it is therefore crucial to understanding the basic principles of how narrative works. “Efforts,” he stated, “to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought” (Bruner, 1986, p. 11). The two modes work powerfully together, with the emphasis of rhetoric (or argument) being on the logical, rational mind, while the emphasis of story is on the emotional. Story connects with readers’ hearts more than their minds, whereas argument appeals to the mind. When both work in conjunction, the end result can be powerful and compelling. The implicit argument presented in a narrative discourse, according to Bruner (1986), “must make it possible for the readers to ‘write’ his own virtual text” (p. 25). This is why rhetoric framed within narrative can be more powerful than logical argument.

Fisher’s (1989) narrative paradigm comprises two essential components: narrative probability and narrative fidelity. For a story to be valued by the audience, both of these

elements must be present. Narrative probability and narrative fidelity equate to Bruner's (1986) terms of the believability of characters. As Fisher (1989) put it,

The Narrative Paradigm implies that human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories or accounts of competing with other stories or accounts purportedly constituted by good reasons, as rational when the stories satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements. (p. 58)

Here, the introduction of a moral element of the rhetorical context alludes to the Aristotelian need for discourse to serve the higher purpose of presenting and promoting truth. When a person is telling his or her life story, it is crucial that those stories be perceived as truthful and accurate; thus, they must carry narrative probability and narrative fidelity. The same is true for institutional stories.

Again, Bruner (1986) provided additional insights into Fisher's theory on the need for a narrative to be trustworthy: "In the domain of narrative and explication of human action, we ask . . . that, upon reflection, the account correspond to some perspective we can imagine or 'feel' as right" (p. 52). Audiences need the narrative to feel true to their own experiences and observations. Stories need to feel like real life. Bruner's (1986) and Fisher's (1989) concepts run parallel in that narrative fidelity and the believability of characters are "compelling by virtue of our capacity for 'identification' or because, in their ensemble, they represent the cast of characters that we, the readers, carry unconsciously within us" (Bruner, 1986, p. 4). Fisher (1989) observed that an audience better identifies with stories and the characters in that readers learn

truths by dwelling in the characters in the story, by observing the outcomes of the several conflicts that arise throughout it, by seeing the unity of characters and their actions, and by comparing the truths to the truths we know to be true from our own lives. (p. 78)

When the audience identifies with characters in a story, they vicariously experience the discoveries made by the characters in that story; the audience applies the experiential truth a character undergoes as if it were their own. “In other words,” Fisher (1989) stated, “the story exhibits narrative probability and fidelity across time and culture” (p. 78). A simple story becomes far more than a mere story and is elevated to a high valuation in the audience’s perception. A story becomes a powerful rhetorical device, convincing readers of its presentation.

According to Fisher (1989), narrative as a tool for both the literary and the rhetorical has been in place since the classical times of Aristotle. Fisher explained that discourse has multiple roles that can be distinguished as argumentative discourse and aesthetic discourse. It was not until the Age of Enlightenment that aesthetic narrative began to be used as a tool for rhetoric, such as in scientific and instructional writing. Stories were not used to convey information until just a few centuries ago. “The narrative paradigm,” Fisher (1989) noted, “can be considered a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands that recur in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme” (p. 58). It is now widely understood that narrative, whether fictional or factual, can be a very powerful rhetorical device.

Fisher's development of the theory of the narrative paradigm has helped to articulate the tension in perspectives on narrative and move them onto a common playing field: the valuation of truth. This aspect of narrative was particularly crucial in the study conducted for this dissertation; the institutional story of a community college must ring true for the reader of the college's mission statement. Where it does not, mission misalignment occurs.

Fisher (1989) set forth five major postulates in the theory of the narrative paradigm, one of which has a prominent bearing on this dissertation and the use of his theory. The fourth postulate in the narrative paradigm states the following:

Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings – their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a story, and their constant habit of testing, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives. (p. 5)

It is noteworthy that Fisher (1989) referred twice in that brief statement to humans' tendency to use narrative as a way to make sense of their lives and form an understanding of the world around them. There is, he stated, an "inherent awareness of narrative probability" (p. 5). Furthermore, he framed narrative probability and narrative fidelity within "the nature of persons as narrative beings" (p. 5), operating out of a "constant habit of testing narrative fidelity" (p. 5). It has a bearing that the postulate preceding the fourth—the third postulate—places prominence on the construction of narrative as a means for reflecting on one's historical, biographical, and cultural contexts. While a person is in a constant state of constructing her or his view of reality with the help of

narrative, she is also able to gauge new stories against the backdrop of previous narratives and her own life story as a way of evaluating new stories against the narrative repertoire for determining how true they are. When we read a mission statement about a community college we are familiar with, we judge it based on the fidelity it demonstrates between the stated purpose and the actual story it lives. The next two sections in this chapter highlight the key components of Fisher's (1989) theory that are used in this study.

**Narrative Probability.** Narrative probability and narrative fidelity are the two most noteworthy elements in Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm, and they are crucial also theoretical pieces in this dissertation. The two concepts work together to address the primary narrative pieces that an audience needs to hear in a narrative for the story to be believable and perceived as valid. As Bruner (2002) indicated, a paradigm oriented toward the scientific method "relies on the verification of well-formed propositions about how things are... the narrative one is also directed at the [empirical] world, not toward how things are but toward how things might be or might have been" (p. 101). Narrative provides room for different interpretations of the truth and what is accepted as truthful. Therefore, the validity of narrative, because it is concerned with matters that Bruner asserted do not lend themselves to the scientific method (Bruner, 2002, p. 102), must rely on a separate set of propositions that establish a hypothesis to be tested, and the testing occurs not in a laboratory but at the level of recognition an audience experiences in terms of a story's probability and fidelity—Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm.

A second principle of narrative probability is “what constitutes a coherent story” (Fisher, 1989, p. 64). Narrative probability was defined by Fisher (1989) in simple terms as “whether a story ‘hangs together’” (p. 47), which at first glance may seem an oversimplification, but it is an accurate statement that also demonstrates the concept using the vernacular; the use of the phrase *hangs together* rings more true because it sounds honest and straightforward. Fisher (1989) went on to define narrative probability as being assessed by “argumentative or structural coherence” (p. 47) as well as “by its *material coherence*, that is, by comparing and contrasting stories told in other discourses” (p. 47), meaning that a story can be “internally consistent” (Fisher, 1989, p. 47) within its own context, but may not be consistent when juxtaposed with other external stories or experiences. It is a probable narrative because it holds true to itself in a way that the audience recognizes as consistently constructed, which gives it the feel of being truthful.

A third and important element of narrative probability is “characterological coherence” (Fisher, 1989, p. 47). This component of narrative probability draws a clear distinction between narrative rationality (the logical aspect of the narrative paradigm) and traditional logics. Furthermore, this component of narrative coherence is more complicated than the previous two. Fisher asserted that the characters in a narrative are the most persuasive pieces in a story’s believability: “Whether a story is believable depends on the reliability of the characters, both as narrators and as actors” (p. 47). A story has narrative probability when the audience can judge its reliability—its narrative coherence—by how clearly a character’s values are supported by the story and the extent



to which they reflect the familiarity of values that the audience holds (Fisher, 1989, p. 47).

**Narrative Fidelity.** Fisher (1989) defined narrative fidelity as “whether or not the stories [that audiences] experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives” (p. 64). Once again, Fisher used simple language to provide a succinct definition that is more complicated than it appears on the surface. He compared narrative fidelity to the concept of dramatic verisimilitude, a term that helps strike a balance between the believability of what the audience sees on the stage and Coleridge’s dictum that the audience needs to employ a willing suspension of disbelief. Bruner (2002) recognized that narratives may not be precisely accurate, and because of this an increased burden exists on the narrator to ensure verisimilitude. In other words, the narrative events themselves may not be precise, rather the essential truth behind the story must be. Even when an audience knows a particular story is fictional, there needs to be a semblance to what could actually occur in real life. The story has to be believable. This is accomplished when the events in a story follow the rules the empirical world imposes on it, and the characters must behave in ways that they might if they were real people. Verisimilitude refers to the alignment between expectations and the narrative. In the case of a community college, verisimilitude occurs when the mission statement and institutional story are aligned. When a narrative—fictional or institutional story—breaks from this, it fails the tests of narrative fidelity.

### **Theory of the Pentad**

The pentad, a widely known theory of Burke (1945) used extensively by rhetoricians for several decades, is part of Burke's collective theories regarding dramatism, of which he wrote in a three-book volume of acclaimed books. The pentad, named for its five interacting components, provides a methodical approach to analyzing a rhetorical context. It breaks down a communicative situation, providing a means for deciphering the meaning behind the actions of a person in the communication scene's context, with a particular eye on determining the agenda of the communicator. The pentad comprises scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose (or agenda). Similar to the use of the journalistic questions of who, what, why, where, and how, the pentad offers specific elements for examining a communication situation such as a speech. This allows the researcher to look deeply into the elements of the communication. One advantage of using the pentad in analyzing a communication event is that it lends itself to attending to the overall context as well as the details of the five elements contributing to the total message. Assuming that every action has a motive, referring to something that causes the actor to undertake the action/communication—and Burke does make this assumption, Burke's (1945) theory purports that a person's agenda becomes clear through careful analysis of the elements of the pentad. The actor's true purpose in the communication can be revealed through Burke's method. In this dissertation, through the analysis of community college websites, the pentad helped to reveal what the college's actions truly amount to. Just as the actions under the pentad align with the agenda of the agency, so too should the college's mission statement be aligned with its own action.

It is important to note that the theory of the pentad is part of Burke's (1945) discussion of dramatism—the study of dramatic theater. This conjures images of a stage, actors, a set, and a movement toward a purpose or agenda. For the purposes of this dissertation, it also places itself in a context of narrative because all plays performed in a theater tell a story. The use of the pentad provides a useful tool for the analysis of a living narrative, enabling the degree to which there is verisimilitude in the institutional story to be determined. In rhetorical studies, a communicator's motives (the purpose or agenda) can be determined through analysis using the pentad. As implied above, it is similarly true that an organization's motives may be identified by applying the pentad to its institutional story. Such an analysis can determine whether the institution's narrative is consistent with its mission statement. In other words, the pentad can help assess mission fulfillment by equating the purpose/agenda to the mission statement.

Burke's (1945) theory can inform the examiner about the agenda behind the communication. However, a complication exists in its application to an organization rather than to an individual that must be noted, as I explained in an earlier paper (Lundburg, 2015). The words *purpose* and *agenda* imply a conscious effort, which is far easier for an individual to accomplish than it is for a collection of individuals. This is a critical point because it underscores the need for an organization to pay careful attention to the story it tells about itself through its actions. As already stated, the application of the pentad can help ensure that the perception of an institution—the perceived narrative history it is developing—is aligned with the institutional mission.

Of the five elements of Burke's (1945) pentad, namely scene, act, actor, agency, and purpose, the element of purpose is more commonly understood as agenda. The first element in the pentad, which is the scene in a communicative context, is intuitive; it is what it sounds like. Scene refers to the place where an action occurs, whether it be a physical, metaphoric, or virtual space. Notably, scene can refer to "the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred" (Burke, 1945, p. xv). Including a communicative background and situation in Burke's (1945) definition is important for the use of the pentad in studying organizational narrative because it presents the scene to include a historical context, which all organizations have, and affords the ability to look more deeply into the role of the environment or situation that becomes the background for the communication. As Burke (1945) put it, "one could say that 'the scene contains the act'" (p. 3). Scene is where the communication takes place, but it forces attention to how it can affect the message of a communicative event. In this dissertation, scene refers to the websites of the studied community colleges.

The second element in Burke's (1945) pentad is the action itself, which as Burke noted occurs within the place of communication, or the scene. The act in terms of drama refers to the movement of the story within the scene. It includes the physical motion of the actors on stage, and also refers to the progression of the play's story or plot. Within the study of narrative, the importance of this is clear: if there is no action or setting in a play, then there is nothing to watch happen. In the application of an organizational narrative, perhaps the importance of action may not be as clear. Rhetorical studies focus less on the dramatic application and more on the message being communicated, and as

such focus more on the fact that Burke (1945) described act as “the human body in conscious or purposive motion” (p. 14) while clarifying that the word *act* can mean the “act of being, but [also] a means of doing” (p. 15). In Burke’s Pentad, there is always an element of intention behind any action. If this were not true, Burke asserted that there would be no difference between meaningful communication and what he referred to as magic or novelty (1945, p. 66). The intention of the action is what connects it to the agenda. In my study of community college websites, the action is that reported in the images and text of the webpages. This will reveal the life of the community college as it lives out its institutional story.

All acts in Burke’s (1945) pentad include an actor who carries out the action observed. In Burke’s terms, this is the *agent* or doer of the action. Notably, Burke presents the agent as a “person or kind of person” (p. xv), making it clear that the agent does not necessarily refer to a specifically identified individual. An organization, as a collection of individuals, can also be an actor. In rhetorical studies, the emphasis is on what is done and what the purpose behind the action is (in other words, the agenda); there, it matters less who carries out the action and more what interest is driving the action. In the analysis of an institutional story, this point cannot be overstated. The importance of the communication lies in the alignment of the action (how the institution lives out its narrative) with the agenda (the organizational mission, or stated story). It is possible for the presented story to be out of alignment with the intended story. In dramatical studies, an example might be that a playwright needs to examine and evaluate how well the story as written aligns with the story that he or she intends. More accurately,

the playwright needs to attend to how well the story says what s/he wants it to say. In looking at *actor* in the organizational context, the actor might be the organization itself, as well as the people within the organization together carrying out the actions that construct the organizational narrative, which becomes the institutional story. The agent in the analysis to be conducted on community college websites refers to the employees and students of the college as they carry out the intentions or agenda of the college, which is discussed as follows.

The most difficult element of Burke's (1945) pentad to apply to critical studies is agency, primarily because it does not intuitively lend itself to application and is the least common concept of the five. Described simply, it is "the means or instruments" the actor has used (Burke, 1945, p. xv). Agency is a critical piece of the pentad, however, as Burke returns to the concept of agency repeatedly throughout his three-volume discussion of dramatism. In that work, he even dedicated an entire chapter of the book to the relationship between agency and purpose (Burke, 1945, pp. 275-323). Agency, Burke notes, is a concept that is associated more with symbolic meaning rather than explicit, concrete meaning. It is also a concept that significantly differs from the types of communication features typically discussed, particularly in critical studies. The instruments Burke refers to "are essentially human, since they are the products of human design" (Burke, 1945, p. 283), as is narrative itself (Bruner, 2002; Fisher, 1989). In other words, agency might be viewed as the motivating force behind an individual's (or organization's) actions, and in some cases it can be what controls their actions. In Burke's introduction to the three-volume treatise on dramaturgy, for example, he oriented

understanding agency by setting it in question form with how the actor performed the action (p. xv), and later in the discussion presented the concept of war as an example in explaining the concept of agency: a country has the purpose (the agency) of achieving a particular end, such as acquiring another country. The means, or instrument, to achieve the goal of national expansion is war. In this case, war is the agency (Burke, 1945, p. xx). In the research conducted for this dissertation, agency refers to the strategic leadership of the college—the executive level and the board that governs the college. The agency, when all elements of the pentad are aligned, can be identified as the driving force or the impetus of the college.

The fifth and last element in Burke's (1945) pentad is agenda, which can be characterized as the *why* of the communication being studied with the use of the pentad. The acquisition of another nation is the objective in a war, for example, and in Burke's terms is an example of the agenda in a pentad communicative event. This is the purpose of the pentad, and the primary focus of Burke's theory on the relationship between actions, those carrying them out, and their purposes in doing so. In the case of institutional story, where the organizational narrative translates into fulfillment and alignment of its mission, a community college's mission captures the stated goal of the institution, and in public terms (for a mission statement is always intended to be the statement to the public of the institution's reason for existing) its primary means for self-promotion. This translates, in Burke's terms, into the purpose of the communicative event, which refers to the agenda. My intention with this dissertation is to reveal the

actual agenda of community colleges and determine whether it is aligned with the agency.

The mission of a community college embodies the core of the institution's justification for action, and it is intended to direct those actions in addition to communicating to outsiders the intended purpose of the college. As such, the use of Burke's pentad in studying the juncture of and interplay between a community college's mission statement and its institutional story is worthy of concentrated effort. Burke's pentad also serves to enhance the importance of Fisher's (1989) narrative theory, particularly the emphasis on narrative fidelity, as it provides a systematic means for examining how well an institution is fulfilling its mission, and also for teasing out where misalignment occurs. In the context of this dissertation, mission misalignment occurs where there is a lack of narrative fidelity in the institutional story.

### **Recent Literature on Mission Misalignment**

In my review of recent literature on mission statements and mission fulfillment, I noted a significant body of research on the causes of mission misalignment as well as on the results of unclear or bifurcated missions, particularly in public service organizations. I found ample research on the causes of and fallout from mission misalignment, but there did not seem to be any references to studies on whether mission misalignment actually occurs. I also conducted a focused search for literature assessing mission fulfillment, with no results. The lack of studies specific to whether mission fulfillment or mission misalignment occurs led me to conclude that a gap exists in the literature demonstrating the actual lack of mission fulfillment. Nonetheless, the body of literature discussing



potential causes for a lack of mission fulfillment as well as the fallout from mission misalignment did exist. Prior to reviewing said body of literature, however, it was important to establish the question of mission alignment and how it is defined.

### **Mission Misalignment**

Mission misalignment has been a topic of increasing interest in higher education. The literature indicates several reasons for this, with the greatest indication being that economic strains are forcing social mission enterprises—nonprofits and colleges—to seek new revenue streams that sometimes lead the institution to adopt strategic planning that goes beyond the institution's stated mission (Conforth, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Jaquette, 2013; Lahr et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2014; Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017). When there is a discrepancy between the institution's stated mission and what the institution does, however, the definition of mission misalignment is met.

Although I found ample research exploring the demands on institutions that would reasonably detract from the stated mission of organizations, I did not find any studies in my review that drew from previous research providing evidence that mission misalignment occurs. Further complicating the study of whether mission misalignment actually occurs were erroneous assumptions in some of the literature. For example, Hodara and Jaggars (2014) cited studies (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Brint & Karabel, 1989) that had concluded that students who had attended a community college are less likely to achieve a bachelor's degree than are those who begin at a bachelor-granting institution. The claim, as summarized by Hodara and Jaggars (2014), was that community colleges counter their own mission by contributing

to the stratification of higher education and minimizing the chances for low-income students to acquire bachelor's degrees. In my own review of the studies cited Hodara and Jaggars' (2014) research, I found a lack of evidence linking these claims to the conclusions of the research.

**The Causes of Mission Misalignment.** Mission misalignment was a common concept in the literature, often articulated using the term *mission drift* across the private and public sectors inside as well as outside of higher education. Outside of higher education, the literature focused on for-profit and nonprofit organizations, with the for-profit discussions in the minority and focused on organizational effectiveness or profitability. The literature examining mission misalignment in nonprofit organizations was broader and more plentiful, with the emphasis tending to be on the causes and results of mission misalignment as a factor of the actual mission not being fulfilled, as opposed to one preventing the organization from operating optimally or with full profitability. The literature regarding mission misalignment in higher education was more varied in terms of topics, which ranged across the various functions of the college studied (Bahr, Gross, Slay, & Christensen, 2015; Phelan, 2014; Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017). I am more concerned in this dissertation with mission misalignment at community colleges; therefore, I discuss the crisis of purpose in higher education institutions in more detail in this literature review prior to a specific discussion of community colleges.

*The crisis of purpose in higher education.* Multiple causes for mission misalignment at colleges were presented in the literature. The major theme that emerged through the literature review was that commonalities existed among the purported causes

and fallout of mission misalignment among organizations, both inside and outside of higher education. Nonprofit organizations share many of the same pressures on their missions that colleges face, such as the duplicity of mission (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2014; Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017), whereas for-profit organizations only remotely share such pressures. Increasingly, however, colleges have faced the same pressures to generate more revenue that drive for-profit organizations (Jaquette, 2013; Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017). The pressure to generate revenue has introduced an increased perceived likelihood that nonprofit, public service organizations such as community colleges might be forced to experience mission misalignment as they seek to alter their focus from public service toward fiscal self-sufficiency.

In addition, research represented in the literature reported pressures on the mission of the community college other than fiscal stress. The duplicity or bifurcated goals introduced in colleges has also had a perceived impact on mission fulfillment (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Hodara & Jaggars, 2014; Senie, 2016). Political agendas and community demands have added to the perceived likelihood of mission misalignment in community colleges, as has the pressure for these colleges to take on new, focused initiatives that may or may not be directly connected to the mission statement.

Further complicating mission fulfillment is the potential for an unclear sense of purpose, sometimes caused by the expectations placed on the institution. According to Hartley (2014), liberal arts institutions in higher education have undergone a crisis of purpose, as evidenced by multiple pressures being placed on the college mission. An aligned mission occurs when the institution is clearly focused on fulfilling its stated

mission, and has no discrepancies or detractions from that purpose. In academic settings, mission statements provide a sense of shared purpose that set the direction for an institution and serve as the catalyst for educational and/or research programming and planning (Hartley, 2014). Phelan (2014) also noted a crisis facing community colleges and their missions of open access, particularly due to changing funding models and the need for community colleges to respond through creative fiscal planning, or risk losing viability in higher education. As discussed later in this literature review, multiple demands placed on community colleges and the need for varied revenue sources have threatened to force such institutions into bifurcated mission focuses (Conforth, 2014; Jaquette, 2013; Jones, 2016).

Furthermore, the problem of gaps between the missions of different types of institutions has had an effect on the study of mission fulfillment in higher education. One of the primary and original intents of the community college system, as advocated by the Truman Commission (Zook, 1947), was to create pathways to a bachelor-level college education as well as an eventual possibility for graduate study (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Yet, even decades later, this component of the community college mission has been threatened by the differing missions between community colleges and transfer universities (Senie, 2016). According to Senie's (2016) study of rural and urban community colleges and state universities, community colleges have remained committed to and provided established pathways to universities, but universities have often presented significant obstacles to the smooth transfer of credits, and in some cases have not directly transferred community college credits. The result is that the component of the

community college mission to transfer students to bachelor degree-granting institutions has been at risk of not being fulfilled—in other words, mission failure in the area of transfer.

*Causes of mission misalignment outside of higher education.* The body of literature on the causes of mission misalignment appeared significantly more plentiful compared with that on mission misalignment itself. This was not surprising considering the point of many research studies has been to determine the cause for a phenomenon. In one comprehensive study of mission misalignment, for example, Conforth (2014) examined its causes in social enterprise organizations. In this overview study, using the data from previous empirical studies, Conforth found that social mission organizations had experienced increased pressure to focus on attending to revenue streams, causing a distraction from their core mission— to serve a social benefit mission for the community—and instead focus on developing an increased funding stream for the organization. Jaquette (2013) reported a similar finding on a less direct response to the need to increase revenues through expanding from a college mission to becoming a university, as did Ramus and Vaccaro (2017) among private social enterprises. Conforth (2014) found that social enterprise organizations were unable to establish an equilibrium between the disparate goals of social service in the community and the more business-oriented goal of building revenue streams. Conforth (2014) determined that attempting to attend to both of these endeavors created an environment of a split-mission and blurred the lines between organizational priorities. Ultimately, either the revenue-oriented goal or

social service goal took precedence over the other, with the necessity of economic security winning, resulting in mission misalignment.

*Revenue pressure.* The pressure to generate increasing external revenue is relatively new in public higher education, although it has been a factor for private institutions in higher education for much longer (Bahr et al., 2015; Phelan, 2014). However, in the for-profit world, generating revenue is usually the primary goal of the organization, as is implied by the nomenclature for this subcategory (labeled as for-profit). For the nonprofit organization, there are similarities with higher education in that they are public-serving institutions that are not primarily in existence to generate a profit. These institutions share some of the tension on mission fulfillment with colleges.

In their review of the literature, Ebrahim et al. (2014) observed that nonprofit organizations that face increased pressure to generate new sources of revenue found themselves having to hire professional staff with backgrounds in revenue generation—such as merchandising and service sales—as a means for increasing revenue. The problem of mission misalignment occurred when such staffing was focused on revenue rather than on mission fulfillment. Another cause of mission misalignment for some nonprofits reported by Ebrahim et al. (2014) occurred when the organization found itself selling services that assisted other organizations. This resulted in a new submission as the staff involved were forced to adopt the assisted organization’s mission to help them be successful and thereby fulfill their own mission.

In addition, the pressure to respond to economic pressures for alternate funding was well-represented in the literature (Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017). As already noted, this

pressure is not unique to community colleges. In a study of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and mission misalignment, Mitchell (2014) analyzed the roles of these organizations acting as an intermediary between benefactors and beneficiaries with a particular interest in the degree to which benefactors influence the organization's management. In other words, Mitchell's study examined how much organizational control was surrendered by the NGO's to ensure the financial resources required to accomplish their goals. A core research interest in Mitchell's study was on whether public enterprises must cater to the economic demands exerted over them by organizational funders. Respondents in the study described efforts to be adaptable as part of their fund-raising strategies, demonstrating a degree of giving in to pressures beyond the scope of the organizational mission. Another strategy Mitchell observed was avoidance, through which NGOs attempted to diversify funding sources as a means of protecting against over-dependence on any one source, and thereby becoming vulnerable to any special interests. Among Mitchell's (2014) conclusions was that NGOs were most effective when they were strongly mission-centric, undistracted from their purpose despite the economic pressure implied by being donor-dependent for resources. Ebrahim et al. (2014) came to a similar conclusion, adding that mission misalignment occurs when the organization alters its focus from the beneficiaries in favor of the benefactors' goals.

*Pressure for accountability.* Accountability presents another area of potential mission misalignment. Conforth (2014) noted that being held accountable to any outside source can create a situation where an organization must be responsive to the expectations of the entity they are accountable to. Jaquette (2013) reported that colleges

that shifted to becoming universities offering 4-year degrees did so largely to demonstrate action toward building new revenue streams through responding to a trend in network institutions in doing the same. Ebrahim et al. (2014) found that hybrid organizations experience mission misalignment as they respond to financial benefactors' expectations. Their study found that the added focus on pleasing financial benefactors could cause the hybrid organization to focus on allocating resources toward commercial activities rather than social efforts that are consistent with fulfilling the original mission. In other words, increased revenue expectations contribute to divergent goals created by serving multiple constituencies, with the result being a higher risk of mission misalignment. However, it is not only hybrid organizations that focus on revenue streams to drive their actions. Gonzales, Martinez, and Ordu (2014) observed that some high-aspiring universities focus their efforts in areas perceived to potentially help the institution yield a higher rank in such high-profile lists as the *U.S. News and World Report* annual ranking.

Another cause for mission misalignment related to accountability in community colleges is the way higher education systems are sometimes governed. Senie's (2016) study of a new state policy and legislation regarding community college transfer to 4-year institutions revealed numerous problems stemming from the different cultural perspectives and values at the two types of institutions. Senie found that legislators stepped in to effectively dictate that transfer pathways would be made seamless, triggering a policy change in the state higher education system that was largely driven by the university cultural perspective. As Senie noted, strengths of community colleges include accessibility, quality education, and transfer, which are among core mission



values that are stymied and underappreciated at universities. The result is that community colleges, while maintaining transfer as part of their mission, are not in control of their mission fulfillment. Due to the cultural perspective of the university side of the system, this aspect of the community college mission is blocked at the receiving institution's side. Among Senie's conclusions was that a lack of understanding of the cultures and missions of the two types of institutions result in governance mandates that do not accomplish the intended outcome and interfere with the fulfillment of the mission of community colleges.

*Bifurcated goals.* Funding models in organizations manifest in various ways, placing additional stress on mission focus. In an examination of performance funding and its potential impact on college mission, Jones (2016) found in a case study that significant concerns existed among faculty, staff, and administrators that the funding model was adversely affecting the institution's ability to achieve equity in higher education, a component of the college mission. Another study examining the impact of financial considerations on community colleges was by Lahr et al. (2014), who found that state funding models that introduce performance-based funding had adverse impacts on the institutions, most notably in the areas of restricting admissions (accessibility) and weakening academic standards.

Governing boards have been a convergence point between the organization and outside constituency, and can be an important integration mechanism between the two (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2014). However, governing boards have also led to an additional risk of mission misalignment, such as when state legislators attempted to force

their state's college system to adopt a seamless transfer model without considering the concerns of stakeholders or the different cultures and missions (Senie, 2016). In another example, also cited by Hodara and Jagers (2014), Bastedo and Gumport (2003) studied the academic policies in two state systems, particularly in regard to transferability from community colleges to public universities and student preparation for college studies. Included in their conclusion was that the differing missions of the types of institutions resulted in reinforced stratification in the higher education systems. This stratification, it was noted, runs contrary to the collective mission of community colleges.

### **Indicators of Mission Misalignment**

As indicated earlier, I discovered a gap in the literature regarding any assessment of whether community college missions are fulfilled. Instead, I found that studies tended to focus on either the causes for mission misalignment or the fallout from it. This was not to say that no evidence of mission misalignment existed. A metaphor might be a smoking gun: a person might see the gun, note the smoke, and presume that the gun was fired. The circumstantial evidence may be considered strong, but a direct, clear connection between the two has not been identified. Like the literature on the causes for mission misalignment, the literature on the fallout was replete. These studies varied in topic, but were at least in part related to the mission of the institution. Some of them focused on student retention and success (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Wirt & Jaeger, 2014), while others focused on issues of particular efforts on the part of the college, such as new initiatives or responses to recruitment or retention trends (Andrede & Lundberg, 2014; Gulley & Mullendore, 2014).

In a study on faculty–student interactions (FSI), Wirt and Jaeger (2014) conducted an analysis of the impact of FSI on student retention in community colleges. They cited several areas where community colleges failed to help students succeed, but never described this as an example of mission misalignment, and neither did they substantiate the claim. Instead, they highlighted that the literature was replete with statistics on student noncompletion at community colleges without linking this claim to mission misalignment. Martin et al. (2014) also focused in part on the noncompletion of community college students without describing this as a contributor to mission misalignment. Similarly with Wirt and Jaeger (2014), Martin et al. (2014) did not study mission misalignment directly, but instead conducted a study focused on the student and not the institution. Nonetheless, a lack of student success may be a component of mission misalignment if the institution includes student success in its mission statement, and there have been indications that all community colleges do this. This was an important point in understanding the gap in the literature on mission misalignment.

Although there was a gap in the form of a lack of research on mission misalignment in community colleges, a substantial number of studies have examined components that could also be linked to mission misalignment. Gulley and Mullendore (2014), for example, demonstrated how a lack of understanding between the student affairs and academic affairs divisions could lead to different systems and a lack of coordination between two key functions of a community college, opening the possibility of mission misalignment.

Sometimes a clear intention of mission is omitted from the mission statement, presenting another type of mission misalignment. For example, in a study of the mission statements of 70 Hispanic-serving community colleges, Andrede and Lundberg (2018) found that none of the colleges referred directly to Hispanic or Latino students, even though these institutions have clearly identified serving Hispanic and Latino students as a major focus. There were references to culture or access in these institutions' mission statements, however, indicating indirect allusions to themes within the service focus of these colleges. The authors observed that most of these community colleges are located where a nonwhite focus might not be well-received. This introduced to my study the possibility that mission misalignment could sometimes be caused not by a failure to carry out the stated mission, but rather by an omission in the mission statement of what an institution does. Once again though, the study failed to focus on whether the mission—even if unstated—was fulfilled. In the case of the colleges examined by Andrede and Lundberg (2018), it appeared the unstated mission was fulfilled, as evidenced by their continued federal funding as Hispanic and Latino serving institutions.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the existing literature, it appeared to me that the concern about how mission misalignment can impact community colleges has been well studied, particularly in terms of how community colleges might be distracted from their stated mission. I found there was wide speculation in the literature that the mission of the community college has been at risk as these institutions take on more expectations from their constituencies (Bahr et al., 2015; Conforth, 2014; Jaquette, 2013; Phelan, 2014). As

community colleges have been expected to fill increasing and widening needs in their communities, the risk of mission misalignment has also increased. What was not clear from the existing body of literature was whether community colleges have actually failed to fulfill their missions. I did not dispute the perception that mission misalignment could occur under such demands as those placed on community colleges, but studies focusing on the lack of mission fulfillment at community colleges were lacking.

My hope in undertaking the research for this dissertation was to help fill that gap. Employing the theories of Fisher (1989) and Burke (1945), I used the principles of narrative fidelity to establish whether the institutional stories of community colleges, as represented by their websites, represent mission misalignment. Whatever the pressures community colleges faced, and whatever outcomes they might have experienced in relation to their mission statements, this study was established to determine the likelihood of mission misalignment among community colleges as institutions of higher education serving comprehensive missions.

The method for examining the alignment of institutional story and mission statement, as represented on community college websites, was CDA, and in particular Gee's (2014a, 2014b) method for applying CDA to a discourse context. Gee's method allowed for the analysis of community college websites and how they have portrayed themselves in the form of institutional story. Using Gee's method allowed for the evaluation of whether there was alignment between community college mission statements and the colleges' projected institutional stories. My study helped fill the gap in the literature on whether mission misalignment does, in fact, occur.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore mission alignment between the published mission statement and the lived institutional story of the community college. The review of literature did not identify an actual study of whether the underlying assumption of mission misalignment occurs. I used CDA to reveal the implicit as well as explicit language on the sample community college websites as a means for revealing the unintended as well as intended meanings of the discourse on the websites. As Gee (2014b) observed, CDA is a method that allows the researcher to break written and spoken discourses down into their components to analyze the meaning of words, grammatical structures, and contexts of the discourse. As these meanings comprise the true institutional story, they were juxtaposed with the stated mission of the institution. Through this approach, potential gaps between the mission statement and the actual institutional story would be exposed. This interpretation of CDA, however, is somewhat broad and is better informed by Fairclough's (2010) definition. Fairclough's definition positions CDA as the most effective methodology for answering the research question in this study.

Fairclough (2010), considered one of the founders of CDA, observed that as the CDA method becomes more widely used by researchers, it runs the risk of becoming more likely to be used merely as a tool for analyzing the use of language. Instead, Fairclough asserted that CDA has three components that set it apart from other language analysis approaches:

1. It is not just analysis of discourse (or more concretely texts), it is part of some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process.
  2. It is not just general commentary on discourse, it includes some form of systematic analysis of texts.
  3. It is not just descriptive, it is also normative. It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them.
- (Fairclough, 2010, p. 10-11)

While the intent is to allow for freedom in application, these principles are three crucial components that set CDA apart from other analyses of discourse. In particular, CDA is intended to be used systematically in the “analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process” (Fairclough, p. 10). With this dissertation, I intended to analyze the discourse on community colleges specifically to explore the relation between the website and the college’s institutional story as presented on the website and the intended purpose—or *agenda*, in Burke’s (1945) terms—or mission statement. The application of Gee’s (2014b) toolkit fulfilled the second element in Fairclough’s (2010) clarification, that there needs to be a systematic analysis of the text. As I intended to provide a social impact element by providing a tool for gauging mission alignment, the study was best served through CDA as the most appropriate method of discourse study.

My intent in using CDA, particularly Gee's (2014b) toolkit, was to examine the discourse of the sample community college mission statements and the contexts within which they were written, with particular attention to their relationship with how they presented the institutional story. According to Gee (2014a), meaning is conveyed through the way ideas are constructed into sentences. The choices of words, as well as choices not to use different words, can reveal much about the underlying perspective of the speaker or writer. Similarly, the way sentences are constructed also carries meaning because grammar involves the placement of words and clauses in a manner that emphasizes different parts of the sentences while de-emphasizing others. In the background of language use is the context in which it is written. When discourse is considered within the context, additional meaning presents itself. It is possible, then, to determine the real meaning—whether intended or not—that is communicated in a discourse. Through careful analysis using tested methods of CDA, the researcher can discover implied, albeit unintended, meaning.

This study contributes to the literature on mission alignment and mission fulfillment in community colleges while providing insights into how mission fulfillment can be assessed. In a culture of assessment and accountability, scholarly attention to the alignment of community colleges' mission statements and their institutional stories is both timely and necessary.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

In this study, I sought evidence of mission fulfillment through discourse analysis of the websites of community colleges because an institution's website is an accurate



reflection of what the institution invests its efforts in, as well as how it characterizes itself and its efforts and activities. In pursuit of this aim, I conducted a discourse analysis to examine the alignment between the college mission statement and its institutional narrative. As stated previously, this study's RQ was as follows: To what extent does the discourse present on an institution's website demonstrate an institutional narrative as reflective of, or consistent with, the mission statement?

Gee (2014a) noted that in discourse contexts there are interrelationships between the act of saying (informing), doing things (action), and the state of being (identity). To understand anything most completely, Gee asserts, consideration must be given to who is saying it and what they are trying to accomplish. In other words, close attention to the saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity) of the speaker can help identify the agenda behind why they are speaking. This was what Burke's (1945) landmark rhetorical theory of the pentad described as the agenda. Once one understands the other elements in the pentad (act, scene, agent, and agency), the purpose—or agenda—of the context can be better understood. Gee's approach to discourse analysis taps into this theory and provides a toolkit that is useful for researchers using discourse analysis to examine and analyze communicative contexts (Gee, 2014b).

As Gee (2014b) asserted, the structure of language coupled with the explicit and implicit definitions of words communicate meaning within the contexts of the social, cultural, and political. Because of this complexity, it is important for the researcher to use a systematic approach to discourse analysis, drawing from the array of tools available for that purpose. Communication studies often delve deeply into discourse meanings, but

those branches that adhere to sociolinguistic contexts are traditionally interested in the social, cultural, and political implications of discourse that a communicator (e.g., a speaker or writer) chooses when communicating. Gee's (2014b) toolkit was designed to assist with such discourse analysis, providing specific approaches to examining a discourse and extracting the multi-layered meanings embedded in it.

True to Burke's (1945) theory, discourse analysis is concerned with the details of discourse (including the speech, the gaze and gesture, and the actions of a communicator) that are considered relevant to the context in which it is used (Gee, 2014b). In Burke's view, the aggregate impact of discourse contributes to a larger argument that purports an action, perspective, or underlying agenda. This view of communicative contexts establishes that discourse presents more than surface communication.

Discourse communicates beyond the explicit surface meaning to include subtext and background. A website, as a discourse medium, communicates under the same principles; furthermore, the website of a college is a discourse constructed by a host of individuals representing every aspect of that college. Therefore, the websites of the colleges sampled for this dissertation represented excellent discourse contexts for analyzing as reliable representations of what the college has actually been doing, and served as a reliable gauge of mission alignment or misalignment.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The goal of any research project is to observe and report on the phenomenon being studied, with the intention of answering the research question(s) identified for the study. In a qualitative project such as this dissertation, the role of the researcher is to

report on the lived experience of an individual or group, particularly a subset group of a larger collective body of individuals with a shared experience. I focused this study on the lived experience of community colleges represented on the institution's website as a reflection of the mission statement. I designed this study to focus on that juncture and what it revealed about mission fulfillment or mission misalignment.

I designed the study using established methods in CDA, a qualitative research approach that I became familiar with and used in previous studies while at North Dakota State University. In this study, I used Gee's (2014a, 2014b) discourse analysis toolkit to ensure a systematic approach to communicative features. Using Gee's toolkit assisted me in maintaining objectivity and guarding against linguistic and rhetorical preconceptions on the part of the researcher. I used NVivo software to assist me with the objective identification and collection of data, including terms and phrases associated with the themes and specific data, such as word frequency, useful to the analysis of the websites in relation to their respective mission statements.

My formal education in narrative studies and its inclusion throughout my teaching and research career have contributed to my understanding of what makes an effective, believable story, which is directly tied to Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm. These experiences contributed to my understanding of the role of narrative fidelity and the alignment of stated purpose and narrative, as well as a deep understanding that any lived experience of any entity—whether individual or collective—is an experience of narrative.

I had no relationship or background with any of the colleges selected for the study. My background as a former community college professor and current community college administrator introduced the possibility of bias; I used a reflective journal to identify where this might have occurred.

### **Methodology**

The research method I used for this study was discourse analysis of the websites of community colleges, which included the written texts posted as well as the images included on the websites. Discourse analysis also provides a tool for the researcher to examine the organization of a communication context. In this study I was able to examine the organization of the websites in addition to the text and images located on the websites. As all of these website components contribute to the institutional story; therefore, they contributed to a reliable assessment of the alignment of the institutional story and the mission statement. I used several approaches from Gee's (2014b) toolkit to conduct an analysis of the explicit and implicit meanings, as well as the cultural and political subtexts embedded in the discourse context. Specifically, I culled the websites for text and imagery that indicated the foci of the college.

CDA applies a close, critical eye to a communicative context. It provides a structure for the researcher to examine the explicit, implicit, rhetorical, and connotative meanings of a text (which includes texts of written words, spoken words, images, and any impressions or communications of action, such as body language). My intent was to bring to the surface the subtle communication taking place on the websites, whether intended by the speaker or not (Fairclough, 2010). As part of the CDA method for conducting such

a study, it is common to use thematic coding during the early stages of the examination as a means for discovering subsurface meaning as well as for revealing patterns. The process for coding has been well-established and is frequently used in any grounded-theory approach to qualitative study (Patton, 2015). My intent was to adhere to a process that follows the guidance of good qualitative practice, as outlined below, and I did so throughout each stage of the study.

I performed an initial reading of the text on websites and made observations of images and website design. In this stage, I took notes on my observations as a means of following Patton's (2015) advice to record notes in a manner that tracks the different parts of data and their relationship to each other, using NVivo software to assist in the process and begin organizing the data. I found that NVivo did not suit the purposes of the study to the extent originally intended, but it did assist with objectively searching the webpages for term/word frequency and location. My goal for this stage was to become familiar with the website and begin the process of organizing the data according to the topic of mission statement and mission alignment. My intention was to track the data in a manageable way, following Rubin and Rubin's (2012) suggestion that such approaches help to "recognize and identify concepts, themes, events, and examples" (p. 192) that could be used in a qualitative study. In the next review of the website, I continued to make notes of observations and to label the notes, and I continued to import data from the websites into NVivo. This effort allowed me to index the codes in a way that continued to build the organizational structure of data collection while building on the pertinent data

that were of interest to the study. In this stage, I attached codes to passages in the text or to the images in the website, tracking them in NVivo.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) discussed the importance of defining the codes as the researcher identifies and labels the data. It was my intention to do this as a means for ensuring clarity of what the codes meant and how the data were being categorized. This ultimately had an important impact on the analysis of the data. Specifically, Rubin and Rubin (2012, pp. 201-202) suggested the following for defining the codes:

1. What am I going to call it (label it)?
2. How am I defining it?
3. How am I going to recognize it in the interviews?
4. What do I want to exclude?
5. What is an example?

As I worked through the websites, I coded the material consistently following this method of code definition while remaining attentive to the codes that had been assigned. During this stage of reviewing the websites, I continued looking for themes among the data and was attentive to salient examples of each code to use in the analysis and discussion of the findings. As I did so, I again followed Patton's (2015) advice and looked for convergence of the data, particularly looking for which data fit together and for internal and external homogeneity. This is a component of what could be termed as being between the lines of meaning. Echoing this advice, Creswell (2013) urged the researcher that it is important during the coding process to give attention also to what is not said, as such instances can reveal elements that are important to the study as well.

Throughout the coding process, I therefore attended to what might not be communicated on the websites as well as information that might be missing.

By coding in an established, systematic way, I conducted a careful study of the use of language, imagery, and design of the websites included in this research project. I conducted multiple readings, and I classified the data by working back and forth between them and the coding system. In addition to the traditional process of data collection and coding described above, I used a systematic approach to both data collection and analysis, leveraging the observations of the researcher with the computerized abilities of the software, even though NVivo proved less useful in the actual study than originally planned. NVivo allowed for the importation of data, images, video, and files of different types, including web text, .doc, and .pdf. This approach provided me an additional and powerful means for mining the data in ways that would not depend entirely on the ability of the researcher to track and remember specific instances of data. While the limited usefulness of NVivo in practice reduced it from a primary to a supportive role, my use of NVivo nonetheless helped identify themes and trends in the data that assisted in preventing crucial information being overlooked.

I fully reviewed each college's website individually, beginning with my reading the text and reviewing the images, and noting any themes that appeared related to the college's mission and goals. As described above, I identified themes and codes established from this review of each website. I then read and reviewed again the pages of the website to identify any artifacts that might not have been identified according to

themes in the initial review. I added these to the thematic tracking and then coded accordingly. I repeated this process until saturation was reached.

Pertinent to this stage of the study was Patton's (2013) advice to test for the completeness of data collection and coding. In testing for this, Patton recommended the following criteria:

1. The set should have internal and external plausibility.
2. The set should be reasonably inclusive of the data and information that do exist. This feature is partly tested by the absence of unassignable cases.
3. The set should be reproducible by another judge.
4. The set should be credible to the persons who provided the information which the set is presumed to assimilate.

Patton's system assumes no use of data management software, and the use of NVivo software provided an overlay for the data collection and coding as a computerized set of additional eyes for some aspects of the study. Using this approach helped me ensure that I did not overlook pertinent patterns and themes. I developed a data set using NVivo from a similar T step-by-step process. My use of NVivo during data collection and coding affirmed the thematic reading and coding and provided a means for recognizing how to organize and manage data for the thematic analysis. I imported text from each of the college's websites into NVivo to be categorized and analyzed. I ran a word analysis report, which identified the most frequently used words and terms on the website. I compared these with the core themes previously identified in the college mission statements, and I assigned codes to previously unidentified themes. I used terms



associated with the emergent themes and codes again to conduct a search of the data in NVivo. I followed all these stages systematically for each college website until completed. Common themes among the colleges were also coded for broader themes indicative of shared mission elements among the colleges. I repeated this process until saturation was reached. Once it appeared that saturation of the pertinent themes had been reached, I considered the data sets ready for analysis.

Gee's (2014b) toolkit contains a large and widely varied set of tools for the CDA researcher. I applied these tools in my analysis of the data sets that were coded and organized by themes, thereby providing an additional layer to the NVivo word frequency queries for theme and code identification and analysis. This approach allowed me to determine the major themes that emerged from the text efficiently and also helped me identify which of the tools in the toolkit were most appropriate for each item of website imagery, text, and subtext. I conducted a regular review of the tools listed to refresh my grasp of them and then applied the tools to assist me in determining what was being communicated through the college's website. This helped me determine how the messaging conveyed either support for the mission statement or if they revealed areas of divergence from the mission. In the analysis stage of the study, I used only the tools from Gee's toolkit that were appropriate to the findings of the study.

To establish the foci of the college during the analysis, levels of meaning were assumed by how deep in the website the information appeared. Information and images that appeared on the main pages were among those I considered high contributors to the institutional story because they are in the most prominent place, while pages supportive

of the main pages were considered secondary. In this manner, I gave appropriate weight to the consideration of communicative features in terms of how central the themes are in the institution's lived narrative. I considered images to be equally contributive to the institutional story as text. Because images are implicit communicative tools, I conducted detailed textual analysis of the images and tracked them for use in the data collection and analysis activities for this dissertation.

To help ensure a systematic and consistent interpretive approach through and across the websites, I used Gee's (2014b) toolkit to guide me to explicit and implicit messaging found on each institution's website. Instances of explicit and implicit messaging were applied to the grouping of coded text and imagery as the means for grouping the data thematically for analysis. I identified the following tools from Gee's toolkit as being the most appropriate for the approach used in this study.

### **The Fill In Tool**

The Fill In Tool is Gee's name for examining the context of the discourse and deciphering what is not said overtly. I included items that appeared to be assumed, as well as assumptions that appeared to be imposed on the reader, in order for the communication to be known or inferable.

### **The Deixis Tool**

The Deixis Tool focuses on words and phrases that point to something else that must be determined from the context. Pronouns such as I/me, you, and he/she are examples of deictic markers. As Gee asserts, these words are also called *shifters* because their meaning shifts according to the context in which they are used.

**The Making Strange Tool**

The Making Strange Tool refers to the act of the researcher making himself a stranger to the discourse. In other words, it involves the researcher looking at the text as though he were an outsider, with a particular eye for what might be unclear or confusing if the discourse were not embedded in its cultural and political context.

**The Subject Tool**

The Subject Tool refers to attending to choices by communicators of what to communicate. It is widely known in communication studies that what is not said is often just as important as what is said. In using the Subject Tool, the researcher asks what the communicator has chosen to say, which topics are focused on, and why the topics were organized the way they were.

**The Doing and Not Just Saying Tool**

The Doing and Not Just Saying Tool is closely tied to Burke's (1945) pentad, as the researcher using it asks not only what the speaker is saying or writing but also what s/he is trying to accomplish through the discourse. In Burke's terms, this is the agenda behind the discourse. Gee asserts that it is always important to be aware that the communicator may be trying to do more than what is explicit in the discourse.

**The Vocabulary Tool**

Probably the most obvious of the tools, The Vocabulary Tool focuses on the choice of words in a discourse. It is important to remember that it is not only the implications of words that can affect the meaning; the level of the vocabulary also can

reveal much about the intended audience as well as the context for the discourse, leading to more information about the intended agenda.

### **The Why This and Not That Way Tool**

As indicated by some of the other tools, what is left out of communication can be important. The Why This and Not That Way Tool, however, focuses more on the grammar of the discourse and why it was constructed the way it was. The phrasing selected, to include the order of words and phrases, can frame the meaning of a sentence in a particular manner that potentially controls how the meaning is perceived by the listener/reader.

### **The Topic and Theme Tool**

Connected to the This and Not That Way Tool, this tool examines the themes embedded in the clauses of the discourse. Particular attention is given to themes that are not the topic or subject of the discourse as they may reveal meaning that is not explicitly communicated through the surface-level discourse.

### **The Context is Reflexive Tool**

The Context is Reflexive Tool could be considered a cumulative tool among Gee's toolkit as it pulls together several of the other tools, urging the researcher to attend to how the communicator might be crafting the discourse to manipulate how listeners focus their attention, perpetuate previous discourses (as in propaganda or the party line). Notably, this type of implicit discourse is not necessarily intended, and can reveal subconscious values and perspectives.

**The Significance Building Tool**

Words and grammar can be used to build or lessen the significance and relevance of some things while de-emphasizing others. This tool is similar to others that focus on words and the construction of sentences, but differs in that using it places particular emphasis on which components of a discourse are presented as most significant, and conversely, which are less significant.

**The Activities Building Tool**

On one level, a college website is a dissemination device and a mechanism for reporting on the activities of the institution. In this view, the researcher using the Activities Building Tool views the discourse as a means by which a person or entity seeks to promote its activities. In the case of a college, these activities should align with the mission statement and should be reflective of the college's efforts toward fulfilling that mission. This tool focuses on how social groups and culture are presented and communicated, or in other words, how the entity is positioned toward an identity.

**The Identities Building Tool**

The Identities Building Tool examines how the communicator positions her/himself. The Identities Building Tool looks specifically at how language is used to build an identity that is recognizable to the audience and how the discourse builds relationship with them. In this research study, I used this tool to examine how the college's identity has been built as the protagonist of its own institutional story and how that aligned with the stated mission of the college.

**The Politics Building Tool**

The Politics Building Tool examines how discourse is used to contribute to a larger context. In this case, the larger context is the political arena. This does not necessarily mean political in the way normally referred to, but rather anything that could be considered as contributing to the social good and the distribution or withholding of that social benefit. In particular, this tool analyzes how discourse is used in this type of political context, and what the overall message is, both in explicit and implicit terms.

**The Cohesion Tool**

The Cohesion Tool focuses on pieces of information in a discourse context and how they are textually connected to each other. Of additional interest are pieces of information in a discourse context that are not connected, and why.

**The Situated Meaning Tool**

The specific meanings presented in a discourse are situated in intended meanings that the audience is expected to attribute to the words and phrases used. Simply put, this is where the overall context is constructed through the language used. The Situated Meaning Tool emphasizes that the researcher should be attentive to meanings that are outside of the explicit dictionary meanings and look holistically at the way language is used to build the larger context in which the discourse is situated.

**The Social Languages Tool**

The Social Languages Tool is designed to analyze how social contexts are signaled, and what meaning this introduces to the discourse context. Grammatical features, vocabulary, types of colloquial phrases, and catch phrases unique to a particular

social group are examined. Two or more social languages might be mixed as a device for switching between social contexts.

### **The Intertextuality Tool**

Whereas the Social Languages Tool looks at how social groups are invoked and utilized through language, the Intertextuality Tool analyzes how these discourse features are linked to other outside discourse contexts, or how these external contexts are alluded to.

### **The Figured World Tool**

The Figured World Tool examines the assumptions made by the communicator as well as those the audience is invited to assume. Unlike other tools in Gee's toolkit, this one is focused on how language is used to situate the discourse, speaker, and listener within the figured world that contains the context of the discourse. In this research study, I used this tool to analyze the way the sample community college websites presented themselves within the figured world of community colleges in general, and how that aligned with the individual college mission statement.

While all the above tools provide the researcher opportunities for a broader, societal context, the three below offer ways to specifically look at the discourse within the context of its society, culture, or political surroundings. From my own reading of Gee (2014a, 2014b), the intention is to employ all the tools singularly to their approaches, leaving the broader scope of how they fit together to a summative analysis and discussion. The following tools serve this more comprehensive function, and in my

estimation are the intended place for putting all the pieces together that were previously broken down through the singularly-focused tools in the toolkit.

### **The Big D Discourse Tool**

As a summative tool, The Big D Discourse Tool and The C Discourse Tool (below) take a broader look at the discourse and how it fits into a larger, societal context. The Big D Discourse Tool includes most of the previously discussed tools, but takes them in the larger context of cultural environments it might engage with and what it says about—or responds to—them.

### **The Big C Discourse Tool**

The Big C Discourse Tool is a summative tool designed to assist the researcher in analyzing what issues and claims the discourse assumes and those the audience needs to have knowledge of to fully understand the discourse. This tool looks at the historical and social issues in the broader context that help situate a full understanding of the discourse. In this dissertation study, I applied this tool to the context of community colleges in general and the role they are understood and expected to serve within U.S. society. Looking at that context was important for understanding the context of the mission statement and the individual community colleges' institutional story as representative of the stated mission.

### **The Frame Tool**

Even though The Frame Tool is discussed relatively early in Gee's toolkit, Gee stated that it is intended to be used after the analysis work is completed. It urges the researcher to find out any information that might inform the context of the discourse. For



my research on community college websites and their alignment with the mission statement, this involved the discovery of anything that potentially increased the understanding of the college's culture, its community values, and its goals. Where a new context was discovered, the analysis was renewed with the new information applied to the previous understanding of the discourse.

An important component of discourse analysis that Gee discussed but did not offer as one of the tools in his toolkit is foregrounding. Foregrounding is implied in a number of the tools, but bears being extracted as an individual discourse component. Although Gee did highlight this important element, he only discussed it in the context of clause placement within a sentence. In that commentary, Gee stated that information is *foregrounded* when it is placed at the beginning of a sentence, positioning it to be emphasized over what follows, even though what follows may be the main clause grammatically. Foregrounding can also be used in paragraphing and even in the chapters of a written text, and also in the stanzas of a spoken statement. When foregrounding is used, it anchors the audience's mind to that piece of information and sets a context around which the rest of the discourse becomes framed, even when it is not the primary piece of information being communicated. Fairclough (2010) discussed foregrounding as a rhetorical device that, in application to Burke's (1945) terms, sets the agenda for how a text is to be positioned in terms of context. Therefore, it can have a significant impact on how a communication is perceived, but equally important is that it can be examined as an indicator of how the speaker/presenter understands the context of the text.

In my analysis of community college websites, foregrounding was demonstrated in how the website was organized, although it should be noted that some foregrounding is culturally driven. For example, the placement of the college's mission statement was generally organized into the *About* page on each college's website or was under the President's Office pages. It was not, as foregrounding would expect, the prominent information displayed on the homepage of each website, even though it is arguably the most important item in terms of making explicit the plot and theme of the institutional story. It is the equivalent of placing a novel's synopsis on the inside sleeve of the dust jacket as opposed to it being prominently displayed on the book's cover. This is because culturally, the potential buyer of the book knows where to find the synopsis, and thus it is not necessary to foreground the synopsis. Instead, an image and the title—perhaps with a tag line—are foregrounded as a means of engaging the potential buyer.

It is important to address foregrounding as an element to be included in my research method. Foregrounding can have a significant impact on the messaging of a website as well as a traditional text. Because of this potential impact, I gave individual attention to foregrounding as if it were one of Gee's tools. The toolkit offered a reliable and systematic approach to analyzing the findings of the data review, using the coded themes in the data as the basis of the discourse analysis.

### **Sample Selection**

I sampled four community colleges within the same accreditation region to ensure similar standards among the colleges. To ensure diversity of types of colleges, I selected the four colleges located in different environments and having different sizes. Diversity

in the type of institution refers to the size, location (e.g., rural or urban), student body, and broader comprehensive mission as well as particularly focused mission. My intention was not to focus on a representative sample, however, my sampling was in keeping with the tradition of a qualitative study focused on the lived experience of community colleges seeking to align their institutional stories with their mission statements. Therefore, traditional saturation of data was not a goal in the sampling and I determined that four community colleges were sufficient for the study.

I identified the colleges randomly based on the abovementioned criteria of type and size, and then I reviewed them for elements common among community colleges: accessibility, diversity, affordability, community and/or economic/workforce development, and student focus. I used two methods in determining the common base among community colleges: a review of The Truman Commission (Zook, 1947), which is well-established as being the foundation of the modern community college, and my own comprehensive review of community college websites in the same region, all of which exhibited the common elements on their websites and/or in their mission statements. Only two of the elements were not exhibited at all colleges: those of community and economic/workforce development, which were nonetheless on the majority of college websites, and therefore valid for inclusion on this list.

I determined the types of institutions by the inclusion of at least one institution with fewer than 5,000 students, as well as one with more than 10,000 students. I selected a rural college that was remote from the metro areas of its own state, as well as at least one that was from metro areas. Comprehensive community colleges were identified as

those that have large transfer student populations as well as career-specific programs (vocational degree and certificate programs designed to prepare students for a specific industry career), whereas focused-mission institutions were identified as those emphasizing vocational and workforce development programs, such as the technical colleges in many states.

I selected the region for this study based on the states it included having strong, unified systems for community colleges, providing a baseline that was founded on the concepts of the Truman Commission. My selections in sampling provided for the representation of systems that offered an optimal environment for a community college to have a mission statement supported at both the institutional and state levels. I selected the region where I served most of my time as an accreditation evaluator, and therefore a region of systems I was familiar with as well as well-versed in the levels of similarity and dissimilarity between institutions. Furthermore, this region served as a good sample pool because it was a tightly structured accreditation region that also allowed a high degree of autonomy for each college, resulting in a sample that included truly individual colleges that also shared an element of commonality. Additionally, this region had a significant number of diverse institutions under strong central systems. The sample institutions' state systems affirmed a statewide mission consistent with the Truman Commission core components, which have become what is considered the hallmark of the community college mission.

### **Instrumentation**

Researchers who use CDA do so because it involves close reading and analysis of a text or discourse context in a manner designed to disclose implied and subtextual meaning. In particular, the CDA researcher takes discourse analysis into the realm of cultural values and introduces a critique of a given text or discourse context as a normative approach (Fairclough, 2010). As community colleges have all adopted a mission—to varying degrees—based on the Truman Commission (Zook, 1945), the cultural values of equal opportunity, accessibility, and the social obligation to provide egalitarian pathways to higher education were used in this study as the baseline, which provided a normative value set by which to analyze the sample colleges.

I used Gee's (2014b) toolkit as the systematic instrument for language and image analysis. Chomsky's (1965) transformational grammar diagramming was used to reveal the surface structure and deep structure of the mission statements of each college, which provided a reliable and systematic means for identifying the core components of the mission statements. This allowed for the establishment of the key themes of each college, which were based on the identified core components. These themes and concepts comprised the basis of the analysis of each website, and I applied the elements of Gee's toolkit (2014b) to extract language that indicated the actual activities and functions of the colleges. I analyzed the results in relation to the mission statement as a means for determining whether the values expressed through the institutional story aligned with the stated mission.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted data collection according to established practices for discourse analysis. My selection of community college websites in the sample provided a cross-section in diversity of community colleges, providing samples of large and small urban and rural community colleges. I selected the colleges from two state systems within the same accrediting body to ensure they were operating under the same accreditation standards. I used NVivo (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) during both the data collection and analysis stages. During the data collection, I used this software to conduct word and phrase frequency queries that helped identify not only the presence of themes identified in the mission statements of the four colleges but also to reveal where to conduct analysis of how the terms associated with the themes were used. In the data analysis, I used NVivo to systematically find and assess references in the data where the themes emerged on the websites. Additionally, this use of the software provided a means for quantifying terms and phrases associated with the themes, thereby providing valuable information on the quantifiable presence of the mission themes throughout the websites. These methods would be transferable to any similar study and offer a high degree of dependability within similar parameters.

I drew data from the mission statements and websites of the sample community colleges. Overarching themes were extracted from the mission statements to determine the key values of the institution and the core of its intended institutional story. I analyzed these as the building blocks for the institutional story, and then reflected back on the mission statement to determine the mission alignment. I used the data management

software (NVivo) to compile and track linguistic features, language use, and word or phrase frequency.

I extracted data from the information, statements, reports, descriptions, and images on the college websites. The data included the college About pages, including where the mission statement was housed and any explanatory or expanding commentary. Pages that represented the life of the college were the focus. These included any pages pertinent to the life of the college, such as student activities pages, college events, and athletics. Additionally, pages representing the college's academic offerings and special programs such as honors programs, services for students with disabilities, and student activities were examined as important pieces of the institutional story. Imagery used in addition to text was analyzed as well, again to ensure a holistic view of the institutional story. Presidential statements and minutes from administrative and Board of Trustees meetings were also viewed as contributive to the institutional story, with the expectation that they were reflective of the mission statement.

The complexity of each college website, coupled with the number of available tools in Gee's toolkit, resulted in a substantially large the data set. Because messaging can take place on multiple levels, I included in this study not only the words and phrases on the websites but also the larger chunks of language, the images selected, and the organization of information communicated (whether foregrounded, back-grounded, highlighted, or de-emphasized).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The purpose of this study was to examine the alignment of community college missions and their institutional stories. There was a widespread assumption in the literature that mission misalignment occurs, but a gap existed in the literature between this assumption and empirical research that established whether this mission misalignment had occurred, as assumed in the literature. My intention with this dissertation was to help fill that gap by using institutional story as evidence of alignment or misalignment of mission fulfillment. I accomplished this through the systematic study of community college websites utilizing Gee's (2014b) toolkit for discourse analysis.

Once I completed data collection, I culled the website discourses for salient concepts using Gee's (2014b) toolkit, and then coded using the terms identified in the college mission statements, referred to in this study as mission themes. The toolkit was comprehensive and I reviewed it frequently to ensure that I was being attentive to all appropriate tools as a means of extracting as much pertinent data as possible. I applied each tool that appeared applicable to a given webpage independently, with themes and subtext extracted for use in the data analysis. I used The toolkit in conducting the primary analysis of the websites for mission statement themes. For each college website, I worked through the webpages applying each of the tools that were appropriate to the site—text-based tools to webpage text, and contextually-oriented tools to imagery, color choices, layout, and other nontextual elements, including the types of links included on each page. Items related to the themes, either directly or indirectly, were coded accordingly along with notes on how the item was presented on the webpage. This allowed for the analysis



of both surface and embedded messaging while tracking intertextuality across webpages and colleges. For imagery, Gee's (2014b) toolkit was instrumental in this stage of the analysis due to the rhetorical subtlety of imagery in messaging. The Fill in Tool and the concept of foregrounding were particularly useful in assessing the role of imagery on the websites. I used Gee's Fill in Tool to examine what was not overtly communicated, looking for assumptions underlying the explicitly communicated messages. On the surface, images are usually assumed to capture a singular message; the Fill in Tool was instrumental in discovering such instances. The choices made in how the subject of the picture was captured and how it was portrayed can carry powerful implicit messages, and this was further affirmed in this study.

After I identified the mission themes, I extracted the data using multiple passes through each of the four college's websites, coding them according to the mission themes identified from the four college mission statements. I coded these both independently for each college and in aggregate for all four colleges. Using NVivo, I began the study using the mission themes for word queries conducted to identify text located on the websites that was pertinent to the identified themes. Because there was potential for some themes to be unique to a particular college, I conducted the initial word queries by individual college websites as well as collectively. Terms and phrases associated with the words used in the NVivo queries were identified both by the software's database as well as through my own reading of the webpages, and were used to conduct further word queries. NVivo was also used to help organize the data into themes, and then were compared with the individual mission themes. I established levels of alignment through this activity

based on the frequency of evidence from the individual college pages of the websites demonstrating alignment with the mission statement of each college. I then compared results with the aggregate mission themes to determine whether discrepancies occurred in individual college mission statements from the aggregated mission themes. Types of institutions were also examined to establish whether there was variance in alignment among the institutions that were single- or multicampus, rural or urban, or small versus large institutions.

Additionally, I reviewed the websites' pages for visual impressions, imagery, and overall structure and organization for evidence of institutional stories that align with the mission statements of the colleges. Although I found some mission themes were not strongly aligned, I concluded that there was enough evidence presented on the websites to suggest that a lack of attention to these areas was likely due to presentation choices or web organization rather than mission misalignment.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In a qualitative study, several potential issues must be attended to as a means of ensuring that the study is both credible and reliable. There are natural safeguards built into a quantitative study that, due to the fundamental difference between quantitative and qualitative studies, are not present in a qualitative study. Therefore, it is necessary that the qualitative researcher builds means into the study for guarding against the influence of bias, previous experience and perspectives, and oversights. In other words, evidence must be provided for credibility, reliability, transferability, and confirmability.

The beginning of such safeguards includes representation from the researcher on his own background and potential for interpretation that may be influenced by such biases. I met the criteria for confirmability in this study as it presents an appropriate level of self-awareness in the researcher. Particularly in terms of the phenomenon to be studied, the fact that I was not affiliated with the institutions included in the sample, and that transparency of all aspects of the study were included, and thus the research can be replicated. Throughout the study, I have provided samples of the coding system used and how it was interpreted. I have presented and discussed potential influences on the study, and therefore the study has presented objective data collection and handling appropriate to a qualitative study. Self-awareness in the researcher is an important component of qualitative research, and thus I maintained a reflexive journal to maximize my awareness of my own thoughts and responses to the research. Doing this enabled me to establish a record that demonstrated the level of subjectivity that might influence the study, but simultaneously kept me attentive to guarding against such subjectivity to the highest degree possible. I have demonstrated objectivity through self-identifying potential influences on my study and reporting it in the dissertation as appropriate so that readers may determine the level of confirmability.

Furthermore, I applied the systematic approach to discourse analysis developed by Gee (2014b) consistently and with awareness of how my own background may have contributed to the analysis. For example, my previous successful experience with CDA, as evidenced by publication in a juried journal (Lundburg, 2006c) and presentations accepted for juried conference presentation (Lundburg, 2006a, 2006b), demonstrates

previous affirmation in the field of my research using CDA. My previous experience with CDA has contributed to the credibility of the research, and therefore also to that of the study.

I have addressed reliability of the research through the inclusion of detailed explanations of the analysis with discussion of the varying implications of, for example, the language used on a particular page of the website. By weighing the choices made of words, phrases, and organization of ideas, the reader is able to observe the analysis conducted and compare it with the text analyzed. This approach allows the reader to determine the degree to which I have adhered to the standards of CDA and qualitative research.

My approach to conducting this study helped ensure the potential for transferability where conditions lend themselves to a similar approach. I conducted data collection according to established practices for discourse analysis, and the context for the study has been clearly articulated. To establish dependability of the analysis, I adhered to a high level of transparency regarding community college website selection along with a clear demonstration that the sample provided a cross-section of a diverse set of community colleges within a singular state system. The methods for all of these components have been disclosed accurately.

### **Ethical Procedures**

No human subjects were studied in this research; therefore concerns stemming from incentives or power differentials did not exist. Furthermore, no institutions in the sample were ones I have been affiliated with in any way. Nonetheless, I am a community

college professional who was conducting research on community colleges, and there was the potential for bias to be a factor in the sampling, data collection, data analysis, and conclusions made about community colleges. My experience as a community college professional may have provided important insights into the sampling, handling of data, and conclusions, but it may also have represented an ingrained perspective and set of expectations—such as a strong belief in the values represented in the Truman Commission—that might have caused me to view an institution more favorably if it appeared to emphasize those values in its mission or institutional story.

I believe an awareness of my experience helped curb the influence of potential bias on the study. To help with curbing bias, I maintained a reflexive journal and reviewed it with attention to revealing discrepancies in objectivity. Salient examples of the journal were reviewed closely throughout the development of this dissertation. I believe that being aware of potential bias and seeking to capture it in the reflexive journal heightened my ability to remain as objective as possible in the data collection and analysis, and also in how I represented the findings and drew conclusions.

### **Summary**

The research presented in this dissertation is a study of community college websites as indicators of mission fulfillment or mission misalignment. I followed the construction of a qualitative study that used CDA as a means of analyzing the linguistic, imagistic, and rhetorical features present on the website as the actual lived experience of each college, and of using the website's representation of the institution to determine whether narrative fidelity exists. I determined whether these institutional stories were

aligned with their mission statements by using CDA to analyze the websites of the sample community colleges.

Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit for CDA provided a systematic approach to critical discourse that helped ensure objectivity in the study. In addition, the research design, methodology, instrumentation, sample selection methods, data collection plan, and data analysis plan all adhered to standard practices in a qualitative study, including the use of a reflexive journal. I guarded against researcher bias by following accepted standards for qualitative, and the inclusion of a systematic tool with Gee's toolkit coordinated the effort for objectivity that made me confident that the data analyzed and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 are reliable and replicable.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **The Search for Evidence of Mission Fulfillment or Misalignment**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of literature on mission alignment or misalignment at community colleges. The website of a college is a reflection of its institutional story, and as such can be used to determine mission fulfillment or misalignment. Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm, particularly the concept of narrative fidelity, served as a basis for narrative veracity as a rhetorical device in communicating a story, providing a scaffold through which the use of the narrative story of the colleges' websites can be viewed as evidence of mission fulfillment or misalignment. I examined the websites of four community colleges representative of large, small, urban, and rural institutions to determine whether their mission statements—as stated intentions of service—were supported by the activities and efforts of the college as demonstrated on their websites.

### **Research Question**

The fundamental question embedded in the study was whether community colleges appear to be fulfilling their mission statements. To address the gap in the literature, I developed this study to find evidence of alignment between the stated mission and the actual life of the college. Because the website of a community college is a reflection of what the college does, I developed the following RQ to guide this study: To what extent does the discourse present on an institution's website demonstrate an institutional narrative as reflective of, or consistent with, the mission statement?

In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the study's setting and demography, data collection, and data analysis, and discuss the issues of trustworthiness presented in Chapter 3. In addition, I provide a discussion of the results of the study with details and examples that are representative of the study's findings. I have presented a summary of the findings at the end of the chapter in preparation for Chapter 5.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was limited to the websites of the four sample community colleges and did not include documents or materials from any other sources, whether publicly published or not. There were no communications with the subject colleges, no interviews, no special access, nor any contact with the institutions other than what could be observed by anybody accessing the college websites. To ensure no influence nor harm to any of the colleges or their staff, faculty, or students, anonymity has been maintained to the greatest extent possible throughout the reporting on the study in this dissertation. To that end, the institutions included in this study are referred to as follows: (a) Institution A, a large, urban college, State of X; (b) Institution B, a large, urban college, State of Y; (c) Institution C, a small, rural college, mid-state, State of Y; and (d) Institution D, a small, rural college, at state line, State of X. More descriptions of these institutions is provided in the next section.

While the structures of the college websites were very similar, there were significant differences in the ways they were designed and organized, including where information was located and the relationship of that material in regard to the core values and mission statements. For example, only the websites of Institutions A and D contained



published program reviews, and only those of Institutions A and C included student profiles—Institution A with only a half dozen profiles, and Institution C with over 50 student profiles spanning the last several years. Institutions B and C contained all information directly on the webpages published on the websites, while Institutions A and D provided links to some of the information referenced on the website. All four of the websites included college publications (e.g., community information pamphlets, student newspapers) that were linked to the websites but housed at other locations. While these materials were included in the study, they tended to have little bearing on the outcome as they tended to replicate what was already on the main website. For example, most brochures located off the website were documents that were printable or could be linked for promotion purposes or for electronic recruitment but contained no information that was not already presented on the website itself. Student newspapers tended to feature stories that might be of interest to students, but they were not reflective of the college mission or life of the college; one example was an article on a recent state bill on higher education funding.

### **Demographics**

I selected the four colleges identified for this study because they were all community colleges in two states within the same region and accreditation body. Selecting the same region ensured similar guidelines for mission statements and performance indicators. Curriculum pathways were developed across the region to help students understand in clear, simple language and diagrams how to achieve their degrees and identify supportive resources. These curriculum pathways were organized around

broader discipline areas. For example, biology and botany were grouped into a pathway labeled as life sciences; English, art, and music, were grouped together in a common pathway labeled as the humanities). Based on my review of available government data, the colleges represented a demographic composition of students consistent with the communities and regions within which they were located, particularly in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

### **Institution A**

Institution A was a large, multicampus institution whose campuses were the only community colleges in the large city in which it is located. The college was the largest community college in its state, with 67,000 students and multiple campuses and satellite extensions. The demographics of this college were consistent with the metro area in which it is located (listing college demographics / then city demographics): (a) White, 55.0% / 77.0%, (b) Asian, 8.0% / 8.0%, (c) Black, 4.7% / 5.7%, (d) Hispanic, 12.2% / 9.7%.

The mission statement key terms for Institution A, in order of appearance, are:

1. Student Success
2. Access
3. Quality Education
4. Economic Development
5. Equity, Diversity, Inclusion

**Institution B**

Institution B was a large urban institution with a single campus among several in the large city in which it was located and served a wealthier demographic than the other three colleges. This college was large, with 14,600 students, but it was not the largest community college in its state. The demographics of this college were consistent with the metro area in which it is located (College/City): (a) White, 71.0% / 66.0%, (b) Asian, 16.0% / 14.0%, (c) Black, 4.0% / 7.0%, (d) Hispanic, 9.9% / 6.6%.

The mission statement key terms for Institution B, in order of appearance, are:

1. Student-Centered
2. Innovative
3. Teaching Excellence
4. Economic Strength
5. Student Success
6. Accessible
7. Pluralism and Diversity

**Institution C**

Institution C was a small, rural college located some distance from the other three colleges and represented a significantly different climate. The dominant economic engine in the region was farming. The college was reported to attract an unusually higher Asian demographic than was represented in the surrounding community and enrolled a significantly lower number of Hispanic students proportionally compared with the number of Hispanics in the community. The demographics of this college were as follows

(College/City): (a) White, 30.0% / 49.0%, (b) Asian, 60.0% / 1.6%, (c) Black, 2.0% / 1.5%, (d) Hispanic, 9.9% / 46.0%.

The mission statement key terms for Institution C, in order of appearance, are:

1. Community
2. Accessible
3. Student-Centered
4. Diverse
5. Learning Opportunities

#### **Institution D**

Institution D was a small, rural college located a significant distance from any urban center. Unlike Institution C, Institution D was a significant distance from any major population centers and was sealed off by geologic features to the east and west that further isolated it from the urban centers and rest of the state. Institution D, unlike the other three, reported American Indian/Alaska Native numbers, as did the city. The demographics of this college were as follows (College/City): (a) White, 66.0% / 85.0%, (b) Asian, 4.0% / 1.0%, (c) Black, 2.1% / 4.2%, (d) Hispanic, 10.2% / 8.2%, (e) American Indian or Alaska Native, 3.0% / 2.0%.

The mission statement key terms for Institution D, in order of appearance, are:

1. Student Achievement
2. Access
3. Lifelong Learning
4. Community Engagement

While Institutions B, C, and D had extension sites located geographically apart from the main campus, only Institution A was a fully multicampus college where each campus was a fully functioning, independent campus with its own campus president. I conducted the study strictly based on observations of the college websites; the study included no other form of data collection.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted data collection from all four community college websites with attention to consistency and uniformity. All data collected were publicly available and collected electronically and comprehensively one college at a time over a 2-week period for each college for text material; data for imagery were collected by detailed hand notes using Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit following text data collection. Text from each college website included text on homepages and all pages linked to the homepages. Department subpages were included where they contained information pertinent to the study, or in other words any information that included references or material related to the key terms from the mission statements. By reviewing all content with systematic attention to evidence of mission alignment or misalignment, I was able to ensure no pertinent information was omitted from the data. I determined what was pertinent text and imagery through careful attention to the implications of words and images that might demonstrate a connection to the mission themes.

Textual content not retained in the data for analysis tended to be within academic department pages, where I found that department pages contained information about the discipline area and contact information for faculty and staff in the department. This type

of information was not pertinent to mission themes except in terms of providing resource information for students, which is supportive of, but not focused on students. These pages did not contain language, imagery, or references to values or goals contained in the missions of the college and were therefore deemed unrelated to the focus of this study. Because academic department pages were in support of the educational mission in general, however, and were placed deeply within the academic pages, they were not considered evidence of misalignment with the mission. I included departments that were largely student support and student services oriented; these pages did contain information directly pertinent to the study, such as references to student access, clubs related to student life and the life of the college, and supports available to students of identified diversity.

Where the colleges were composed of more than one campus or had sites geographically separated from the main campus, I included in all data collection the webpages linked to the extension/campus sites along with any individual pages that were located under that site, regardless of the replication of similar pages among the campuses. I included these because each represented some variation from other sites within the college and were individually maintained as separate websites and webpages. Some of the satellite or extension sites contained mission statements that were distinct from the main college mission statement, although some included specifically focused, additional mission statements for particular functions; for example, Institution D's extension site had a multifaceted page providing information and resources available to students with disabilities, and the downtown campus of Institution A, a multicampus college, provided

extensive webpages for multicultural student clubs and activities as well as pages dedicated to LGBTQ students, which included local events in addition to the resources available at the campus, such as counseling and student clubs. I included text from all these webpages along with the general textual data from the college.

I collected electronic data directly from the website, using temporary Word documents for consistent formatting, and then moved the data into files prepared for each college within NVivo. The data included HTML/Java data as well as PDF files linked to the webpages. Additionally, I maintained hand notes throughout the process for purposes of organization and observation regarding themes and categories. I also used a reflective journal for these observations and then transcribed to hand notes for inclusion in coding and theme identification. Throughout the processes where data collection required my judgment for inclusion or exclusion, I used appropriate tools from Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit to guide observations and decisions regarding what was pertinent to the study.

I collected by hand notes data for imagery on the websites based on direct observation; all notes were restricted to description at the data collection stage and were not interpretive. I made decisions regarding observations based on Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit. I linked the data for imagery via reference notes to the pages from which they were extracted to ensure they were included appropriately in the area where they appeared on the website during the data analysis stage of the study.

I organized the data such that they could be analyzed by individual college, webpage type, webpage content, or mission statement key terms. I used key terms from the aggregate college mission statements to code the data according to themes. I

established subfiles for text data were established in NVivo to assist with organization and later analysis, and linked image data on the coding notes to those files by name and location. I ran word frequency queries in NVivo to identify files common to all four colleges and saved as queries under headings named for the mission statement terms. This was done so that the text could be coded according to the key terms from the mission statements as well as according to the organization of the websites.

No major changes in data collection were made, except that most of the academic department pages and the athletics pages did not represent material that had a bearing on the study; therefore, department pages that did not present material pertinent to the study were not independently imported or categorized for later analysis. Similarly, Institutions A, B, and C had honors programs, although only Institution A was a full program with acceptance criteria and a clearly distinguished curriculum. I included all of these programs in the data, but did not independently import or categorize them as separate programs because the data would be redundant with other departments' data. Additionally, the colleges did not directly link the minutes from board or administrative meetings to the webpages, nor did those minutes appear to contribute directly to the mission statements; therefore I did not include these texts in the data set.

### **Data Analysis**

My process of analysis for this study was focused on obtaining a clear picture of the institutional story as it was presented on the college websites. I articulated this focus in the research question (To what extent does the discourse present on an institution's website demonstrate an institutional narrative as reflective of, or consistent with, the



mission statement?), which guided me as I sought evidence of alignment of each institutional story with the college's mission statement. Thus, I began the data analysis by extracting themes from the four college mission statements to use for organizing the material located on the college websites. I used these overarching themes to code data from the websites in a way that could then be examined for the presence of the themes in the institutional stories told by the colleges' websites. Rubin and Rubin's (2012, pp. 201-202) questions were used as a means consistent with CDA for identifying codes:

1. What am I going to call it (label it)?
2. How am I defining it?
3. How am I going to recognize it in the interviews?
4. What do I want to exclude?
5. What is an example?

These questions helped establish a coding process that minimized the potential for bias.

I also used Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit to identify text and imagery that aligned with the mission themes in addition to being using it as the primary analysis tool. I used the toolkit later to analyze the data to discover significant discrepancies from the colleges' mission themes as well as to determine levels of importance of the themes as presented on the websites. Throughout these processes, I organized the analysis around the themes both in aggregate as well as independently for each college.

### **Identification of Key Mission Themes**

I identified key mission themes using the terms of the mission themes common to all four of the sample colleges. The themes below are drawn from the terminology used

in each college mission statement. I interpreted the terms Student Success or Student-Centered and Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and/or Global Awareness as being related because they were presented as such on the college websites. In other words, the colleges presented global awareness on their websites as being associated with diversity and equity.

I identified five mission themes as the core values common to the four community colleges. They were (a) access, (b) student success or student-centered, (c) learning and education, (d) equity, diversity, inclusion and/or global awareness, and (e) economic development. I identified through sentence analysis that these five mission themes were the core values common to these four community colleges, and were therefore the norming results I used as the basis for analysis when making comparisons among the colleges. For hand coding the data, I identified these five mission themes as T-1, T-2, T-3, T-4, and T-5, where T represented theme. I did not use the non-normed themes, discussed later in this chapter, in the aggregate analysis because they were part of the analysis of individual colleges' mission alignment only.

I worked through the data by college using standard thematic analysis, following the initial identification of themes contained in each college mission statement. I used NVivo to identify terms associated with the dominant themes on each college website, and these themes were examined to establish levels of relevance to the overarching key mission themes. I also hand-coded text and images according to mission themes. I determined relevance as being directly related, indirectly related, or unrelated to the mission themes. Additionally, I examined organization of the websites separately along

with the quantity of material related to the mission themes as a means for corroborating the focus of the institutional story as related to the mission. I then worked through the data again, using Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit to systematically expose implicit as well as explicit messaging independent of the intended presentation of the institutional story. I juxtaposed my observations from both the standard thematic analysis and toolkit analysis and then compiled into categories under the toolkit, which were coded for mission statement themes.

### **Discrepancies in Key Mission Themes**

Subsequently, I observed and coded the imagery and organization of the websites using Gee's toolkit to identify messaging that aligned with the mission statement themes, as well as to note any discrepancies from those themes. I discovered discrepancies in mission alignment during this data analysis phase, revealing mission themes that had no dedicated pages. In particular, two institutions identified community and economic development as mission themes, but demonstrated little evidence on their webpages that these themes are focused areas of the life of the institution. In these cases, the themes were not highlighted in the mission statements and were located at the end of the list of themes in said mission statements. In the case of one of these colleges, the discrepant theme was subverted at the tail of a sentence at the end of the mission statement, implying that it was not considered a primary mission objective. For that reason, I did not consider these discrepancies significant enough to deem the colleges were out of alignment with their mission statements. I discuss these findings in more detail in the Results section of this chapter.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

I began the data collection after Walden University's Institutional Review Board approved the study (IRB approval number 08-20-19-0348868). Throughout the study, I followed the strategies for trustworthiness presented in Chapter 3, reviewing them periodically to ensure adherence to the approved plan. Through this I was able to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, each of which are detailed in the following subsections.

#### **Credibility**

I maintained credibility through the use of established qualitative research methods and the systematic use of CDA procedures. The use of NVivo for identification of themes and the frequency of terms and concepts provided means for objective data collection and analysis that were not dependent on my own linguistic and contextual filters, thereby helping to maintain a guard against bias and interpretation. Additionally, I used Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit to provide a systematic process at all stages of the study. To help maintain a high awareness of potential bias and interpretation, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis stages of the study. I found that using both traditional critical discourse data collection, coding, and analysis with NVivo software is an effective means for increasing trustworthiness of a critical discourse analysis study.

#### **Transferability**

The data and results of the study are not transferable to other community colleges due to the potential for misalignment in mission statements and website design. The

approach to the study and methods used, however, are transferable and represent a unique means for studying community college mission alignment or potential misalignment.

### **Dependability**

I attended to concerns of dependability through the systematic use of Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit. Use of the toolkit thoroughly established a reliable pattern of the themes, as I reviewed and analyzed each page and theme multiple times to apply Gee's multiple questions to the data. I confirmed the presence of mission themes through the preliminary review of the mission statements as well as the use of systematic analysis with the toolkit. Periodic reviews of the methodology described in Chapter 3 provided a clear guide for conducting the study and kept the research project focused.

### **Confirmability**

I achieved confirmability in the study through an appropriate level of self-awareness in the researcher, particularly in terms of the phenomenon to be studied, the fact that I was not affiliated with the institutions included in the sample, and that transparency of all aspects of the study was ensured to allow the research to be replicated. Samples of the coding system used and how it has been interpreted have been provided. To further assist with confirmability throughout the study, I maintained a reflective journal as a means of capturing observations, thoughts, and reactions to the data as I conducted the data collection and analysis. I also kept notes in support of my observations in terms of what was present on the websites and the connections among them. In my notes and observations, I ensured objectivity through self-identifying

potential influences on my study and have reported them as appropriate to enable readers to determine the level of confirmability.

I found that maintaining the reflective journal was instrumental in maintaining clarity and objectivity, particularly during this stage of the study. It also proved effective in capturing my own thoughts about what I was finding in the data and helped me identify where I might be influenced by bias as well as reactions to the data. For example, when I discovered that there was little on the websites to support the mission theme of community, the reflective journal provided a place for writing about this phenomenon and to exploring thoughts about the implications without giving it undue attention in the data collection and analysis.

### **Results**

In the remainder of this chapter, I present the findings in the analysis that provided evidence for the conclusion that alignment existed between the mission statements and institutional stories of these colleges. General observations about the sample colleges had a bearing on the study, and thus I began this section with a discussion of those observations. I continue this section with the findings of the mission statement themes in the context of that content on each of the websites, and then in an aggregate summary. Subsequently, I discuss the findings regarding the organization of the websites, as a review of the organization and layout of the four colleges' websites contributed to the conclusions of whether the websites were largely aligned or misaligned with the mission statements.

## **General Observations of the Four Colleges**

I observed that differences existed in the websites of the four colleges. While they were all similarly organized according to services for students and information on academic programs, how these were arranged beyond the homepage varied. Institutions A and D, for example, arranged their academic programs by grouping them under broad academic pathways designed to guide students through general studies, whereas Institutions B and C organized them by individual academic disciplines; in both cases, the difference can be accounted for by differing system-wide pathways requirements. While that difference resulted in more layers to the website, it also presented the information in a manner that might be more user friendly for those outside of academia—such as an incoming student or parent, for example. Another example of a difference in organization of the website was that Institutions A, C, and D all housed their athletic programming, events, and student engagement events on separate websites that were linked to the main college website. Again, this website design created an additional layer for web navigation and for deciphering the website for this study's data collection. Nonetheless, it appeared to have advantages for the colleges and athletic divisions. The About pages also significantly differed among the colleges, with some of the websites organizing this material around the history and makeup of the college, while one in particular (Institution B) organized its About page around the president and board of trustees, giving it a very different focus and making it difficult to organize the four websites similarly. None of the differences in organization, however, interfered with the substance of my research; they

did have an impact on the organization of this section of the dissertation, however, as I could not organize the results according to theme or webpage sections.

More significantly, the websites contained considerable differences in the amount of information and the number of additional subpages. Intuitively, one might think this had been a natural result of the larger urban institutions having more complex websites because they contain more material compared with smaller rural colleges. This was not the case, however. The most complex website with the most information belonged to one of the two large institutions (Institution A), but the website of the other large urban institution (Institution B) was the smallest in terms of information contained in it—although it was complex. Institution D, the smallest of the four colleges, was the other institution with the most material on its website, with much comprising a higher number of published program reviews for academic programs and degrees compared with those on the other websites. Even with the program reviews extracted, the website of this institution itself was one of the two largest.

The variance in size of the websites and amount of material on them did have a potential impact on the results of the study. Gee (2014b) described this in his discussion of the *Context is Reflexive* tool, which places emphasis on communication as reflective of the time and place in which it takes place. In this study, I noted observations regarding size where the variance seemed to have a bearing on the study, and the analysis was conducted with continuing awareness of these differences. It is important to note that choices made by the colleges regarding what material and how much to publish on their website does provide insights into what the college values and how it creates the



institutional narrative as reflective of the mission statement. These differences, while deviating from each other, presented the institutional story according to the values of the college, and as such were directly contributive to answering the research question.

### **Mission Statement Themes**

I observed clear commonalities among the four colleges' mission statements. These terms and concepts established core themes, which provided the basis for the study to seek evidence of the themes present in the institutional life of the college as reflected by the websites. The terms that emerged in the analysis of the mission statements were: (a) access, (b) student success or student-centered, (c) learning and education, (d) equity, diversity, inclusion and/or global awareness, and (e) economic development. The themes in the fourth item in the list, which concern diversity, were grouped together because they were broadly related and none of the websites provided no clear definitions. All four colleges included a list of Core Values or Core Themes on the mission statement webpage, apparently to elaborate, enhance, or clarify elements in the mission statements; no explanatory notes for the core value lists were offered on the websites.

**Institution A.** Institution A presented its mission statement under the About (the college) section, located among the top menu bar options. Because a linguistic approach to CDA is common, I began the analysis of this webpage by mapping out the elements of the mission statement following the rules of diagramming sentences using Chomsky's transformational grammar system (Chomsky, 1965). This mapping resulted in highlighting the operative terms of the mission statement, which provided the framework

of key mission themes I used to conduct the analysis for mission alignment or misalignment.

For Institution A, the mission statement key terms, in order of appearance, were as follows:

1. Student Success
2. Access
3. Quality Education
4. Economic Development
5. Equity, Diversity, Inclusion

Evidence that the life of the college supports and reflects these mission themes was ample in four of the five key mission themes: Student Success, Access, Quality Education and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. The theme of Economic Development was present, but was not found to be prominent. Furthermore, identifying the theme of Economic Development on this institution's website required some induction.

The mission theme of Student Success was in evidence in the life of the college on most every page on the website, but was most prominent in the pages dedicated to student life as well as the academic department and program pages, which were arranged within the pathways system the college has adopted. The student life pages provided ways for students to become involved in social activities that reinforced the academic life of the college as well as provided avenues for students to successfully build networks and a sense of belonging to the college. Additionally, the program review pages linked to academic departments contained frequent references to student achievement of learning

outcomes as well as student success rates—either through standardized tests appropriate to a given discipline or graduate and job placement rates.

The mission theme of Access was most prominent on webpages dedicated to financial assistance and resources for academic support. Additionally, the Admissions pages emphasized accessibility for students of all backgrounds, and provided links to resources for advising and counseling that articulated a desire in the college to help students gain admission and take classes in the programs they wish to study.

The mission theme of Quality Education was also in evidence throughout many of the webpages, particularly the academic webpages. Profiles of faculty were linked to department pages, which were again laid out for ease of access for students to explore the requirements of each program. More importantly for demonstrating mission alignment was that the websites placed an emphasis among academic department pages on the learning outcomes for degree programs and on the quality of faculty teaching in the department. Program reviews for many of the academic programs were linked to the degree program pages, providing evidence of the achievement of program learning outcomes and the success rates of graduates of the programs.

I found little direct evidence of the mission theme of Economic Development could be found anywhere on the website, which appeared to be a potential misalignment between this mission theme and the life of the college. While a web visitor could inductively conclude that providing graduates for local and regional workforce needs is in support of Economic Development, the website did not provide clear and direct evidence of this. My observation was that the academic program reviews of the website provided

more evidence of direct references to economic development than did the economic development pages. Economic development was unlike the other mission themes, which all presented direct evidence that the life of the college is aligned with the mission. Economic Development appeared to be assumed, and therefore not intentionally attended to as a unique mission theme.

The theme of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion was perhaps the most fully supported mission theme both in terms of direct content reference and the amount of text and imagery presented. There were ample examples of student life, resources, activities, and in some cases formal academic support that represented sufficient variation of diversity to clearly demonstrate the alignment of the life of the college with the mission theme. Moreover, there were individual pages for various ethnic groups, some faith-based groups, and LGBTQ groups. Furthermore, there was evidence that the mission theme of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion has been infused into all areas of the college. For example, there were music and theater events that reflected this theme, as well as a page promoting local area events for a wide range of groups of students. The faculty and staff appeared—as far as could be determined using names and images—to represent a diverse population.

I concluded that Institution A was a website that reflected an institutional narrative that is substantially aligned with its mission, even with the lack of direct evidence found for the mission theme of Economic Development. Even in that area it seemed likely that the college views itself as a major contributor to the economy of the

region. Evidence to this end was found on the About page, which positions the college as preparing students for future careers and providing a well-educated workforce.

**Institution B.** Institution B presented its mission statement under the About (the college) section, located among the top menu bar options. Institution B's mission statement was situated with the college president's webpage, the page regarding accreditation, and the pages dedicated to the Board of Trustees. This placement of this information was unique in that the college presented the mission statement as part of the larger umbrella of college administration, as opposed to a central component of the college and suggested the possibility of a lack of clear focus on the mission statement of the college as a centerpiece of the strategic planning as well as the institutional life of the college. As with Institution A, I began the analysis of this webpage by mapping out the elements of the mission statement following the rules of diagramming sentences according to transformational grammar. Again, the result was that the operative terms of the mission statement were highlighted, providing the framework of key mission themes I used to conduct the analysis for mission alignment or misalignment.

The mission statement key terms for Institution B, in order of appearance, were as follows:

1. Student Centered
2. Innovative
3. Teaching Excellence
4. Economic Strength
5. Student Success

6. Accessible
7. Pluralism and Diversity

Institution B had the most mission themes, with a total of seven. The mission theme of being Innovative was unique among the four colleges studied, and Institution B was among only two colleges—the two large, urban colleges—that had economic contribution as a mission theme. As was the case with Institution A, direct evidence for this economic theme was weak throughout the website, but it seemed implicit that the college views itself as a contributor to the Economic Strength of the community by educating a workforce. The mission theme of being Innovative was supported in the life of the college, as reflected by the website highlighting newly developed programs that are clearly innovative, such as an interior design program and several bachelor of applied science programs—a degree which itself could be considered innovative. The terms innovative and creative were used frequently on these as well as other webpages.

The mission theme of being Student-Centered was supported on most pages of the website, but I found the website significantly smaller than the other websites, regardless of the size of the college. Coupled with the fact that Institution B presented a much larger webpage area that was focused on the executive and board leadership of the college, the life of this college seemed less focused on the mission themes in general, particularly in the area of being Student-Centered. Visitors to the website are left to draw conclusions based on less evidence than is provided by any of the other three colleges, an imbalance that led me to conclude that Institution B's institutional story as presented on the website is not fully aligned with its mission statement. Images of students are, however,

prominently featured throughout the webpages, and there are pages dedicated to student activities, student learning, and student access that substantially support the mission theme of being Student-Centered.

The mission theme of Teaching Excellence was also represented among the webpages in the same manner that was found among the other colleges in the study: positioning academic degrees as guided and taught by well-established faculty who keep abreast of their fields. The mission theme of Teaching Excellence was clearly connected to the theme of Student Success and appeared to be viewed as contributive to the success of students academically. The theme of Student Success could be linked to students' completion of academic programs, achievement of learning outcomes, and graduation or transfer to universities to continue their studies. I found little evidence of these elements on the webpages, however, resulting in another area where it was difficult to determine mission alignment or misalignment. Ultimately, I concluded that these elements were present on the website but with less direct references in terms of content text to support a clear conclusion. Imagery, however, included ample evidence of student success and academic achievement in the form of multiple pictures from graduations and students engaged in learning activities in classrooms.

The mission theme of Accessibility was well-represented on Institution B's website. The links to financial aid were prominent and easy to navigate. Furthermore, the pages for applying to and enrolling at the college were the most visible and, like the pages for financial aid, were easy to navigate. The college had clearly given careful attention to helping students see on the website how to be admitted and enrolled with

payments for the term or payment plans arranged. For this college, it appeared that the mission themes of Pluralism and Diversity are linked to Accessibility, as the imagery for being admitted and paying for college represented the highest degree of ethnic diversity among the college website's images. In keeping with a CDA approach to researching communicative contexts, this suggested to me that a perception exists at the college that the students requiring the most help with accessibility were those from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Institution B's website was less aligned with its mission statement compared with those of the other colleges, although it should be noted that the apparent de-emphasis on the mission statement and the increased attention given to the college's executive administration could account for how the website presents itself; if there is a lesser focus on the mission statement, it would follow that the website might also be less focused on the themes of that mission statement. The lack of representation of the mission themes on the website could be further exacerbated by the smaller website size, accentuating the lesser degree of focus on the mission themes. Even with this lack of evidence of an institutional story that reflects the mission statement, Institution B was still more aligned with the mission statement than not.

**Institution C.** Institution C presented its mission statement under the About (the college) section, linked directly from the top menu bar of the homepage, as was the case with Institutions A, B, and D. As with all the colleges, I began the analysis of the mission statement webpage by mapping out the elements of the mission statement following the rules of diagramming sentences under transformational grammar. As with the other



colleges, this resulted in highlighting the noun phrases that present the operative terms of the mission statement, providing the framework of key mission themes I used to conduct the analysis for mission alignment or misalignment.

The mission statement key terms for Institution C, in order of appearance, were as follows:

1. Community
2. Accessible
3. Student Centered
4. Diverse
5. Learning Opportunities

All five mission key terms were evident throughout the college's website. The mission statement theme of Community was unique to Institutions C and D, and both colleges lacked the theme of economic development that both the larger, urban institutions had. The other four themes for Institution C were common among all of the colleges studied, and all were supported throughout the webpages. Unique to this college's website was a considerably large section of student profiles—nearly 100 of them—providing a picture and several paragraphs telling the students' story and experience at the college. The focus on students provided a clear message of a strong community among students, not only by featuring them but also by including in the profile a high number of testimonies alluding to the students feeling like they belonged there and had made good friendships.

I found that there was ample evidence on Institution C's website that the college supports open access and provides clear avenues for students and potential students to gain access to the college through admission, enrollment, advice, and financial assistance. All these pages were prominent and easy to find, and navigating them was a simple task even for students who are unfamiliar with college systems. The mission theme of Learning Opportunities was also represented throughout the appropriate pages; I would add that the choice of the term Learning Opportunities provided a means for placing nondegree programs in the same area as the more traditional academic programs and degrees, although the more traditional programs were organized according to the pathways that were common among the colleges studied.

Institution C's website provided substantial evidence for the mission theme of Diversity. There were pages under Student Life that included images reflecting the significant diversity that also exists in the community around the college. Additionally, the abovementioned student profiles reflected the level of diversity in the college and the surrounding community. The student activities at the college include clubs and events that are consistent with diversity programming, but perhaps the prominence given to international students and the support provided to them was most telling of the college's commitment to both its students and diversity. There were, for example, several videos of the students involved in events designed to promote global awareness, including a Thanksgiving meal that featured foods from the cultures represented by the international students.

Institution C presented an institutional story that was—among the four of the colleges in this study—the most clearly aligned with the college’s mission statement themes. The mission statement was present throughout the website in a way that indicated an institutional narrative infused with the five mission statement themes. I found Institution C’s narrative story to be substantially aligned with the college’s mission statement.

**Institution D.** As was true of the other colleges, Institution D presented its mission statement under the About (the college) section, located prominently on the homepage along with Student Life and Academics. Keeping with the approach used for the other colleges, I began the analysis of this webpage by mapping out the elements of the mission statement following the rules under transformational grammar by diagramming sentences and then extracting the noun phrases that established the key mission key themes. This approach provided the framework of key mission themes I used to conduct the analysis for mission alignment or misalignment.

The mission statement key terms for Institution D, in order of appearance, were as follows:

1. Student Achievement
2. Access
3. Lifelong Learning
4. Community Engagement

Institution D was the only one of the four colleges not to include a mission theme of diversity. It did, however, have strong elements of diversity and support systems

clearly identified for that theme on the website pages. Additionally, cultural diversity and global awareness were among the visionary goals of the college, which are listed immediately below the mission statement. Because there were no explanations offered for this, I was unable to draw any conclusions that would tie the visionary goals directly to the mission statement. Doing so would have been beyond the scope of this study. I do believe it is a significant component of a community college mission, and therefore note it as a part of the value of Institution D. It is worth noting that diversity is indeed represented in the institutional life of this college through the choices in imagery, student activities, and cultural programming presented on the website.

I found that the mission key theme of Student Achievement was significantly more prominent than the other three mission themes at Institution D. The choice of the word achievement in this mission theme places a slightly different context for the concept of student success, which may imply success in obtaining a degree and/or transferring to a 4-year university or entering the workforce. The word achievement implies an inner accomplishment and a sense of internal satisfaction in addition to the successful completion of a program or set of courses. Through how this was framed on the webpages, I inferred that the college was interested in a more meaningful outcome for its students than simply moving on to future studies and a career. Furthermore, the theme of Student Achievement was well-represented throughout this website in terms of presenting academic programming under the pathways, providing clear guidance and information that supports student achievement of learning outcomes and degree completion. The presence of program reviews for half the academic programs provided additional

evidence of an academic emphasis at the college, demonstrating the successful acquisition of intended learning outcomes through the presentation of researched data on student performance in those programs.

The positioning of the theme of Student Achievement was linked in a number of instances to the theme of Lifelong Learning. The webpages for community interest courses such as sailing and backpacking, noncredit self-improvement courses, and workforce development programs were located in a common launch point following the link from the homepage. The language used on this webpage further connected degree programs and noncredit programs by treating them with language that equated their value, such as “for those who don’t need a college degree for their career choices, [Institution D] offers an array of classes that....” This choice of language affirms choices other than degree programs as viable and valuable, instead of relegating such coursework to a subsequent or completely separate website location. The Community Education page, where the nondegree and noncredit programs are individually presented, is linked to the opening academic page, but it is also accessible independently for web visitors who might be looking for this programming directly.

The prominent treatment of the Lifelong Learning programs at Institution D supports the theme of Community Engagement in terms of course programming, but the college’s website also had links with information to events in the community that are not college-sponsored. While Community Engagement did not have any dedicated webpages, the idea of Community Engagement was demonstrated with every reference or invitation to the community at large.

The mission theme of Access was also present in the institutional narrative for Institution D. As with the other colleges, information on how to be admitted to the college, enroll in classes, and access college resources such as tutoring centers and support personnel was easy to find. How to Pay for College led the web visitor to information on financial aid and how to contact the financial aid office for assistance. Direct links to the federal sites for filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) were provided, along with information on what FAFSA is and how to fill out the forms. Of all the colleges studied, the financial aid pages for Institution D were the most thorough and user-focused; they provided thorough explanations for understanding what information must be provided on the FAFSA and why, along with information on the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing student loans, and even explained the differences between the types of loans.

The institutional story presented on Institution D's website indicated substantial alignment with the college's mission statement. The imagery of the website features ample pictures and videos of students, faculty, and staff interacting, but this college's homepage most prominently features video images of the campus situated in a scenic outdoors environment. In my review of the community surrounding Institution D, I found evidence that living an active life in the outdoors is valued and indicates a community that is collectively interested in and appreciative of natural beauty such as that displayed front-and-center on the college's homepage. This provided further evidence that the college is well-connected to the community in which it is located through community

engagement and in ways that clearly align the values of the college with the values of the region.

**Aggregate Findings.** Following the analysis of independent colleges, I conducted an aggregate analysis to determine whether the common mission themes among the four colleges were supported in aggregate by the websites to determine whether there might be observations to be made across the colleges. While there were common themes among the four colleges, I noted that the two small, rural colleges included community as the first core value, while the large, urban colleges did not list that term at all in the list of core values; one of the larger institutions did, however, include community in the mission statement phrase as follows: "... strengthens economic, social and cultural life of the community."

I noted additional differences between the larger urban and smaller rural institutions. The smaller colleges used the term learning in contexts where the larger colleges used the term education, suggesting a difference in emphasis within the same activity. Learning is a verb that emphasizes the action taking place within the learner, whereas the term education is a noun that suggests an item to be used, or a commodity. Another noted difference between the larger urban colleges and smaller rural institutions was the use of the term economic and its derivatives. Although the reason for this particular difference between types of institutions is beyond the scope of this research, it seemed to me that the imbalance was countered by the smaller institutions' use of the term community, which was not present at the two large institutions.

Another significant contrast between the small and large institutions was further evidence of differences in how the institutions view their roles: word choices that are either internally focused or externally focused. The two smaller colleges (Institutions C and D) both tended to use terms such as supports, enhances, enriches, and provides, all of which are terms that are internally oriented, meaning that the terms emphasize that the primary action takes place in others, such as students or the community, and that the college's role is to assist with these actions. The two larger colleges (Institutions A and B) tended to use terms such as advances, promotes, delivers, and committed to, all of which are externally oriented, meaning that the terms emphasize direct, independent action that does not depend on achievement in the recipient to be completed. In other words, a term such as enhances places emphasis in accomplishment on the recipient. For the cited action to occur, there should be a student who is taking action that is *enhanced* by what the college does. By contrast, a term such as delivers is a self-contained action that does not depend on the recipient. Education, for example, might be *delivered* by the college, but whether the student does anything with it does not affect the achievement of delivery conducted by the college.

Despite these noted differences between large and small, urban and rural community college mission statements, the unity in thematic focus is strongly in evidence. Regarding the common themes, all four college mission statements are aligned and consistent with the key elements of community colleges, as set in motion more than 70 years ago by the Truman Commission (Lahr et al., 2014; Senie, 2016; Zook, 1947). The common themes of the community colleges in this study were consistent with the



recommendations set forth by the Truman Commission. Given that said recommendations have formed the basis for the modern community college and provided the core elements of the modern community college mission, there was sufficient commonality among the four community colleges in this study to provide evidence of a lived collective narrative that is aligned with the broad community college mission.

**Most Salient Mission Themes.** During the aggregate analysis, I conducted three different assessments to determine the presence of evidence for the most salient mission themes across all four colleges. The first assessment I did was through NVivo, using word frequency queries to determine which of the mission themes appeared most frequently. The second assessment I did was conducted by working through the college websites to determine whether there were individual webpages established that were dedicated in whole or in part to the mission themes. The third assessment I did was conducted by reviewing all imagery and visual appearances (such as color and placement of images) to determine how prominent the mission themes were in terms of visual evidence presented.

In my review of the NVivo word frequency query, the term most commonly used on the websites was the word student and its derivatives. In close analysis of the instances where the term student appeared, however, it was found that the variations in the terms was too wide to establish it either or among or separate from the mission statement contexts. The term was used most frequently to refer to students with no clear connection to the mission statement. For example, every instance where the word student appeared in contexts such as the student handbook (e.g., “. . . students who wish to appeal their grade

...” or “. . . reported a high instance of student debt . . .”), it was counted in the word frequency query. The results placed the word student at the top of the frequency list with 6,863 appearances; this and the term program (5,163 instances) appeared nearly twice as frequently as the next term on the list, and nearly six times as often as the first indirect mission theme term learning (1,195 instances). Other unrelated instances of the term student included references to student numbers or demographics, or directions for students navigating the webpages. Because student is implicit in the other mission themes, and because the saliency of the concept of students could be established through other means, I determined that sifting through the unrelated uses of the term would not only be cumbersome but also unnecessary. I therefore decided the appearance of the term student did not need to be included in the frequency searches for the mission theme terms.

In an NVivo query for the frequency of the words of the mission themes (including associated terms, such as equity and equality for the mission theme of diversity), the three most salient terms were as follows:

1. Diversity, 730 instances
2. Success, 569 instances
3. Economic, 538 instances

The purpose of running this query was to determine a baseline for the weight of attention given to the mission terms relative to each other, consistent with one of the questions in Gee’s (2014b) toolkit. As described in the methodology presented in Chapter 3, all instances of the mission theme terms were subjected to Gee’s toolkit in a manual review

of the data. Unexpectedly, two terms did not yield significant frequencies. The term community and its associated words returned 0 instances beyond the mission statement pages, and the term access only returned 12 instances, although both concepts were present in the manual process of reviewing the webpages discussed in Chapter 5. The remainder of the terms appeared as follows:

4. Inclusivity/inclusive, 209 instances
5. Equity/equality, 187 instances
6. Access, 12 instances
7. Community (and derivative terms), 0 instances

I found that differences existed in the large/urban and small/rural colleges in the ranking of these terms, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5 as part of the recommendations for future research.

I conducted the second assessment for salient mission statement themes by working through the college websites to determine whether individual webpages had been established that were dedicated in whole or in part to the common mission themes. This approach affirmed the decision not to include the term student in the NVivo queries, as all four of the community college websites featured secondary webpages dedicated to the mission themes of education and learning. In all cases, large portions of the websites were clustered under the umbrella of Programs, Programs of Study, Academic Pathways, and Search Programs. Despite the variation of labels on the home page, all four subsequent pages were either a list of degree programs with links (three colleges) or headings with images linking to lists of degree and certificate programs (one college).

From that point, each of the four college websites presented curricular details—such as courses required for degrees—following similar designs.

Furthermore, all four colleges had secondary pages for student life or student resources collected under a link on the home page. Three of the four colleges (Institutions A, B, and C) used the same label of Student Life and presented this link at the top of the page. Use of the label Student Life appeared to be an all-encompassing umbrella categorization for various components of the colleges, invoking perhaps the mission theme of community, but also capturing some of the resources that might be associated with the mission theme of access; both interpretations would require some degree of speculation and assumption, however, as a clear link to those mission themes was lacking. The fourth (Institution D), deviant college required at least two additional clicks to find pages related to student life, as well as additional steps in finding learning resources. This college was the same one that listed the academic programming as Academic Pathways with an image located further down the home page, suggesting that this college has taken a different approach to organizing its webpage and given it a different emphasis, which is discussed further in Chapter 5. In the deviant college case, the website in general could be viewed as focused on students already at the college, an audience likely to know how to navigate the information located on the website. For those not familiar with the site, there was a Getting Started link prominently displayed on the home page.

As noted in the discussion of individual colleges, none of the colleges had pages explicitly designed for the mission themes of Access or Economic Development.

Information or resource links indirectly related to these themes that did exist were located deeper in the websites and were not given prominence. The theme of Community could be construed as implied throughout the four websites, but only one—Institution D, a smaller rural college—gave it the prominence of being linked from the home page under the heading of For the Community. This heading contained a drop-down menu with eight links to pages for community and adult education classes, the foundation, the library, the Preschool and Family Center, the recreation center, and the small business development center. As with the previously noted discrepancy this difference was with the college website that deviated in its academic and student life pages. The lack of webpages dedicated to economic development, or to economic considerations of any kind, has no explanation other than the colleges likely assuming that it is broadly accepted that educating students contributes to the economy.

For the third assessment of salient mission statement themes, I reviewed all imagery and visual appearances (such as the color and placement of images) to determine how prominent the mission themes were in terms of visual evidence presented. Gee's (2014b) toolkit was instrumental in this stage of the analysis due to the rhetorical subtlety of imagery in messaging. As noted in Chapter 3, on the surface images are assumed to capture a singular message. The choices made in how the subject of the picture is captured and how it is portrayed, however, can carry powerful implicit messages.

For example, one image on Institution A's website featured a cardboard cutout being held toward to the camera, bearing the words No CO<sub>2</sub> handwritten in green and black painted lettering. The hand of a younger person is holding the cardboard cutout,

and his or her torso is wearing a black jacket, slightly out of focus behind the cardboard. The background behind the sign-bearer is shaded in a medium-dark gray, allowing the cars and a motorcycle in traffic to be visible—albeit out of focus—in the distant background. The image appears on a page promoting leadership in today’s world among students. In applying Gee’s (2014b) Fill in Tool, the overt communication in this image would be the words No CO<sub>2</sub> in the image and the phrase Leading the Change superimposed onto the image. The textual connection was between a message that takes a stand against humans’ impact on the environment and a message that indicates leadership in changing said impact; the connection between them is clear for the reader to conclude. The underlying image of a young person holding a cardboard sign, traffic in the background, and colorization using shades of gray and black with only the word No in green, implies youth—presumably college-aged—in a potential leadership role in the midst of a dark, oblique future. In terms of mission themes, the image carries a powerful statement in support of the sustainability theme, which appears second among the stated themes in this college’s mission statement. Simultaneously, the image places student life and the potential outcome of an activist education into a specific context, reinforcing other elements among the mission themes, such as student success and quality education—the first and third stated themes in this college’s mission statement, respectively.

Foregrounding, as a crucial component in CDA, emphasizes the positioning of information as a means of subconsciously highlighting it and placing it in the foreground of the audience’s attention. As such, foregrounding implicitly sets the context through

which audiences are to receive and interpret the information. In the case of college websites, images are usually the first thing a web visitor sees, and they present a first impression as well as focus the audience on a desired conclusion before the communication occurs. Such choices place the messaging of the images and home page texts in the foreground, funneling the remainder of the website through the contexts presented there. In keeping with CDA research, the foregrounding used on the websites contributed to the evidence of the institutional life of the colleges, as presented by the web designers and representative of the actual life of the college.

Examples of image foregrounding are taken from the two small rural colleges in this study. One of them, namely Institution C, presented a revolving cycle of images on the homepage. The first image was of the campus with the sun's angle low and the campus empty of people. The impression was of early starts in a peaceful, desirable setting. Of the next 10 images in the cycle, seven had what appeared to be students and occasional staff or faculty, all looking cheerful and engaged. In all images with more than one person, all parties were deeply involved in learning, discussions, or research activity. In all imagery, there was clear diversity in ethnicity, gender, and age. The colors were brighter and vibrant and the design of the images were in keeping with trends that would appeal to college-aged young adults. The images on this college's homepage therefore provided a foregrounded message of student engagement, learning, and cultural diversity with positive reinforcement of upbeat, engaging designs. A website controls the order in which a visitor is exposed to text and imagery through the way a visitor navigates the webpages by clicking; the only way to see subsequent information is by selecting to,

resulting in a guided processing of information. The information first encountered is therefore concretely foregrounded in a way that forces the visitor to process subsequent navigation through the foregrounded message. In the case of this particular college's homepage image cycle, the foregrounded messaging embedded in the choice of persons included in the imagery reinforced the themes of diversity and student engagement articulated in the college mission statement.

Institution D featured videos rather than still photographs in its homepage cycle. The pictures featured the same kinds of images, with sweeping aerial shots of the campus and shots of students working in a lab, in videos with the camera moving from left to right while capturing students and faculty or staff interacting. Before the webpage visitor has a chance to read any text on the homepage, these commanding videos pull him or her into a rhetorical context that foregrounds the college mission themes with compelling imagery that demonstrates students' engagement in learning in a climate of diversity. My overall impression of the video clips was that the college is a living, active place where students are engaged with their learning environment. As with the previous example of the homepage image cycle, the use of video clips on this college's website supported the theme of active student learning, diversity, and inclusivity.

**Least Salient Mission Themes.** I found that two of the mission statement themes yielded little evidence of being present on the webpages when using NVivo word and term frequency queries and an analysis of the webpages' organization. Those terms were access and community. The application of Gee's (2014b) toolkit, however, provided a different result. True to a CDA approach to qualitative research, Gee's toolkit guides the



researcher to consider not only explicitly presented material in a communicative context but also the implicit meanings within a given context. While word queries in NVivo provide a perspective on specific word usage, the subtlety of implicit meaning can only be captured through the use of approaches such as CDA. In the case of the evidence of mission statement themes in the institutional story of the subject colleges, Gee's methods proved to be crucial in revealing that the themes of access and community were in fact present. Each term merits its own discussion.

The term access yielded 12 results when searched as an independent term using Nvivo; even when I extended the term to include root derivatives, there were few instances of the term appearing on the websites. Broadening the word query to include a search of program reviews, which were linked to but not located on the websites, the term access yielded 679 instances—a significant increase. This suggested that when these community colleges were reporting on themselves, the concept of access was more explicitly presented using the term access, whereas the websites themselves were less metacognitive and more focused on usability for students and visitors. In other words, the websites for these colleges were a tool for access rather than a venue for discussing it. Observing this prompted me to look more closely at how access might have been present on the websites without direct references using the term. I found that the concept of access in action was more salient.

All four of the colleges demonstrated evidence of facilitating access to the educational programs and services offered by the college, suggesting mission alignment. The pages of the academic programs were easily accessed from the main page, as were

direct resources for applying to the college and securing financial assistance. Additionally, support services were easily accessed and identifiable on the home pages. Gee's (2014b) Doing and Not Just Saying tool calls attention to what the communicator—in this case the colleges—is doing in addition to what they are saying, particularly as a piece of evidence that the communication is genuine. In Burke's (1945) theory of the pentad, this refers to the agenda and act in a communication context. I found the agenda and act of the colleges in this study to be aligned in terms of the concept of access. The messaging by all four colleges through providing access points helped to direct students to the resources and procedures they might need to be successful in their studies. In other words, alignment existed between the colleges' stated intention (agenda) and what was provided on their websites (act) to help students access resources.

The converse side of the Doing and Not Just Saying tool is that the act may not follow the agenda. In such cases, Gee (2014a, 2014b) suggested, the action points to what might be an ulterior agenda. For example, Institution B demonstrated such an ulterior agenda in a major section of its website, as was discussed in the section on this individual college. Unlike the About pages of the other three colleges, Institution B dedicated a significant amount of web space to its About Us page. On this page, extensive biographies were provided about the president and all trustees. The pages dedicated to the president and the board of trustees were located at the top of the page, above the information regarding the history of the college, accreditation, public safety, and the college's values. The result was a misalignment of focus from the stated mission, placing the executive leadership of the college in greater prominence than the core values of the

college. Additionally, the amount of web space allotted to these pages exceeded some of the other pages on the website that are specifically aligned with the mission statement themes, such as diversity—presented by this college’s website as pluralism, inclusion, and global awareness. Therefore, the About area of this college’s website suggested a misalignment with the college’s purported emphasis on student learning and student life.

The second mission statement theme that was not supported by the websites in aggregate was community. I searched the websites of Institutions C and D for explanations or definitions of what community might mean to each of the colleges, but I was unable to identify any information beyond what was stated in the mission statement. There were no webpages directly dedicated to this theme. Institutions A and B, while they did not include the theme of Community (or derivations of the term) in their mission statements, did include the concept of community in their visionary goals. Again, I could find no further direct references on the webpages for these colleges. It seemed likely that all four colleges have made assumptions that the meaning of the term community would be intuitively understood and clearly linked to what the college does. However, no direct evidence of this was found. If, however, the intent behind the mission statement component of community is that a sense of community is provided in terms of student life and activities that promote community among students, faculty, and staff, then it could be concluded that mission alignment occurs at all four colleges. If the intent of community is a reference to providing for the community beyond the campus, then the two larger community colleges appeared misaligned with this component of their missions. The two larger, urban colleges presented no explicit evidence on their websites

that community or serving the broader community beyond their campuses is a major part of their institutional story, suggesting mission misalignment in this area.

The two small, rural colleges contained material specifically targeted at the community at large, implying a connection between the term community—which appeared in the mission statement—and the community beyond the college campus; however, it was left to me (and all visitors to the website) to make this connection. While implicit messaging can, under CDA, lead to reasonable conclusions regarding the communication, this particular instance seemed to me to be connected unclearly to what was stated in the mission statements. Nonetheless, these two colleges dedicated prominent web space to programs and services marketed to persons other than the for-credit students (e.g., to the community at large), which thus led me to conclude that the intention was to connect these resources to the concept of community. Although the mission statements did not provide a clear use or definition of the intent behind including community in the mission, it is reasonable to view the noncredit component of community.

Related to community is the element of economic development, present at the two larger, urban colleges, and missing from the two smaller, rural colleges. One of the smaller colleges, Institution D, had a link to its small business center, but no references or programming as presented at the larger institutions, and it was not included in the mission statement. By contrast, economic development was explicitly included in the mission statement and programming for workforce development and business partnerships was present in several locations on the websites.

**Website Organization.** In a speech communication context, CDA would typically include discussion of the order of topics and statements in addition to specific statements (Fairclough, 2010); in other words, the organization of a communication is an important component, and the context can have a significant impact on the messaging. To explore this factor, I conducted an analysis of the websites' organization using Gee's (2014b) toolkit, particularly using the Activities Building Tool and the Identities Building Tool, which look at how the activities of a communicator situate the message to build an identity that should align with how communicators want to present themselves. I also used the Figured World Tool in this phase because it looks at how communicators seek to situate themselves in a particular context, which in this case was how the institution sought to situate itself among community colleges and their associated mission themes.

I found all four websites were organized similarly, with a main page that provided links to pages for information about the college, academic programs, support services for students, college calendars, athletics, and general interest and events pages. All of the college websites also had links to pages unique to their college, such as student profiles and college events. Located at the bottom of all four college websites were small font links to website maps, contact information, and credits regarding the website. All four pages presented text with imagery that supported the text, such as pictures of the college campus or students. While each webpage had different imagery and text, all were identifiably similar with links to main pages organized across the top of the page. Each of these had drop-down menus guiding visitors to subpages. Below this band of main page links were primary images, visible on any web browser at the opening of the website such

that the images located there carried prominence. Appearances, information or links, and organization below the primary image sections varied: some had visually oriented links to calendars or events, whereas some had links to student life pages or upcoming athletics and college events.

While I found that the college websites were not organized according to the mission themes, the themes were nevertheless present on the main pages. This was particularly true in terms of the prominence of academic programming and student life, as evidenced by the dominance of academics and students at the first impression made by the homepages. On all four college websites, the mission themes were present in the organization of the website, guiding students to key information regarding student learning, access into the college, and student resources. One dominant theme present on two of the four college webpages, which was not immediately recognizable as being directly related to the mission themes, was the prominence of the messaging regarding enrolling, registering for courses, and paying tuition. While this messaging could be viewed as indirectly focused on student access—one of the themes among all four college missions—it could also be perceived as focused on sales (e.g., getting students committed to generating tuition revenue). Use of terms such as Pay for College and Pay Your Bill present an emphasis on monetary transactions rather than on student access.

In a CDA study, an important point regarding web organization is the amount of attention given to a particular message (Fairclough, 2010). In my previous experience as a CDA researcher, I have found this to reveal subtextual meaning that may not be explicit speech, text, imagery, or organization. In my review of the four college mission

statements, this phenomenon revealed subtext in some of the college websites reviewed. For example, I found significant support for the mission themes of quality education and student support, but there was little explicit attention on the websites provided to areas of student access (12 direct references in the NVivo word query) among all four colleges) and community (0 direct references in the word query among all four colleges). While it should be noted that student access contained significant peripheral and indirect referencing, community in the context of connections to the local and regional community outside the college contained no references, either indirect or direct. This was a surprising finding considering that the community theme was present in all four missions and additionally included explicitly among the core values of two of the colleges.

In terms of how they were organized, all four college websites presented pages and content in a manner consistent with the themes of the mission statements. While there were materials not directly linked to the mission statement themes, the main pages were found to be at least implicitly associated with at least one mission theme.

### **Summary**

With a plethora of research discussing mission misalignment in higher education and explorations into its causes, there is a lack of inquiries into whether mission misalignment actually occurs. CDA is designed to investigate the explicit and implicit meanings of a communicative context. The evidence found through CDA in this study indicated that the key mission statement themes of the four colleges were supported by the content, focus, and language and imagery choices used on the websites. This finding

was particularly strong when each college was analyzed individually for evidence of alignment with their own mission statements. The four community colleges in this study represented large and small, urban and rural colleges with the results of the study demonstrating institutional stories that provided substantial evidence of mission fulfillment rather than mission misalignment.

The use of data analysis software, NVivo, provided an objective and efficient means for examining explicit language use on the websites that corroborated the findings from the CDA states of the study. More traditional linguistic and imagistic means for conducting CDA provided methods for performing in-depth rhetorical analysis of the messaging that comprised the institutional narratives of the lives of these four colleges. While there were areas of differences from the stated missions, I identified significant evidence to suggest the presence of the mission statement themes across the entirety of the websites, indicating consistency between the mission statements and the actual, lived experience of the colleges, particularly when each college was examined individually. Notably, the aggregate analysis also provided significant evidence not only of common core themes among the colleges but also of institutional narratives that demonstrated alignment with those core themes. The inclusion of a concept of community in all the mission statements also indicated an area of common ground, although there was evidence that the colleges had not clearly defined this theme and how it should be reflected in the life of the college.

The CDA analysis results of the data collection indicated an alignment between the life of these four institutions and their individual mission statements, as well as



alignment with the common mission themes shared between the four colleges. This positioned the colleges as consistent with the community college aspirations promoted by the Truman Commission (Zook, 1947). In Chapter 5, I will provide a summary of the ongoing discussion in the research of community college mission alignment or misalignment. It will then present conclusions about the role of the mission statement in the life of the community colleges in this study, and further discuss the implications of Fisher's (1989) theory of the narrative paradigm and Burke's (1945) pentad as lenses through which institutional story can be examined for alignment of the colleges' purported life story and the narrative actually present on the college websites. Furthermore, I discovered potential areas for future research, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Discoveries Regarding Mission Alignment**

The purpose of the study was to address a gap in the existing literature regarding whether community colleges are experiencing mission misalignment. The literature is replete with studies exploring the presumed causes of mission misalignment and institutional responses in colleges to pressures that may threaten mission alignment, but no empirical studies have determined whether the assumed mission misalignment occurs. I developed this study to probe the concept of mission misalignment by examining the institutional narrative of four community colleges and whether those lived narratives align with the colleges' mission statements.

Key findings were that the four community colleges demonstrated mission alignment, with some areas of potential misalignment at two of them. In the common mission theme of accessibility, all four colleges demonstrated significant attention on their websites to ensuring students have easy access to enrollment, financial aid, resources for educational support, and student life activities. Access was closely associated with the common mission theme of student success, or being student-centered. On all four websites, there was evidence that the institution is conscious of its purpose of being a student-oriented college, with nearly all images having students prominently focused and nearly all pages dedicated to items of interest to or for the purpose of promoting student success. All four colleges had an image of graduation among the rotating images on the home page, introducing an implicit message of students achieving academic goals.

As institutions of higher education, all four colleges had quality education or student learning as one of the key mission components. This common mission theme was found to be not only present but also prominent on all four community college websites, supported by clear and easy-to-find pathways to graduation and transfer, as well as academic department pages that outline the curriculum for each program of study. Additionally, two of the websites provided full PDF copies of the program assessment reports for most of their academic degree programs, demonstrating the level of quality outcomes for those programs. Significant resources were highlighted at all four colleges for educational services available to help strengthen student learning.

Two colleges' websites demonstrated substantial alignment in the areas of equity, diversity, and/or global awareness, while the other two college websites presented relatively weak narrative evidence of these elements compared with the other mission components. In those two cases, however, there were demonstrations of diversity and/or global awareness in the form of images used throughout the websites, and appropriate attention to demographics of ethnicity in images. This suggested that while these are areas of weakness, the themes are nevertheless present, and therefore rise to a level of alignment with the mission statement theme. Two of the college mission statements included economic development, but little was on these colleges' websites to demonstrate that this mission theme is integrated into the life of the college. Interestingly, the one college that did have a webpage dedicated to community economic development—for example, pages designed to assist with small business development—did not include this as a component in the mission statement.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The gap in the literature of empirical studies inquiring into community college mission alignment was a strong impetus for me to conduct this study. The literature is replete with studies on the causes of mission misalignment (for example, Ayers, 2015; Conforth, 2014; Jaquette, 2013; Lake & Mrozinski, 2011; Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017), but there have been no empirical studies into whether misalignment actually occurs. Contrary to the implication in the literature of widespread mission misalignment, findings were that mission alignment exists at the community colleges selected for this study.

### **Findings Regarding the Literature Review**

The majority of literature I reviewed for this study focused on economic pressures on mission alignment (Bahr et al., 2015; Conforth, 2014; Jaquette, 2013; Jones, 2016; Phelan, 2014) and external pressures such as political expectations ((Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Hartley, 2014; Hodara & Jaggars, 2014; Senie, 2016) and increased expectations for output (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2014). In all of these studies, the researchers present conclusions regarding the perceived and explored pressures on mission alignment without reference to empirical studies having established any degree of misalignment in community colleges. While it could be argued that the presence of these pressures suggest possible mission misalignment, the literature does not articulate such an argument, leaving it to the consumer of the literature to assume there is a basis for the conclusion of mission misalignment. The results of this dissertation suggest that there may not be such a basis. The existence of pressures on community

college missions does not prove that mission misalignment occurs, only that challenges are present.

### **Conceptual Framework and the Findings**

Mission statements articulate the intended life of an institution, presenting a means for determining whether mission alignment is achieved. Because the life of an institution can be articulated in terms of narrative, I have established through this dissertation the groundwork for using narrative theory. More specifically, narrative serves as a powerful rhetorical tool (Björninen, 2019; Bruner, 2002; Fisher, 1989) and is therefore useful for determining mission alignment due to the position of a mission statement as a rhetorical assertion. Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm sets a firm applicative foundation for examining the veracity of a narrative and whether a story effectively communicates its intended message; or, in cases of intentional misleading, it provides a means for determining whether a narrative missive contains enough elements that align with the real experiences of the audience. Of particular interest, as outlined in the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2, is whether the narrative provides narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1989) for the recipient of the narrative communication. In the context of community college mission alignment, Fisher's question translates into whether the lived story of the community college is aligned with the stated purpose of the college's existence as reflected in the narrative it presents.

Burke's (1945) theory of the dramatic pentad breaks narratives into five components that reveal the real intention (e.g., agenda) of a narrative. Obvious to any story are the elements of scene, action, and agent (actor); less apparent may be agency

(how and by what means the narrative is told), and purpose (sometimes stated as the agenda behind the narrative). It is the agenda, or purpose, of a communication that often piques the interest of rhetoricians. Through examining the other four elements, the fifth element of agenda often becomes clear because it requires alignment of the other elements in the pentad. In this dissertation, using Burke's pentad helped me to attend to the various elements of the narrative context presented on the four community college websites, and thereby served as a tool to understand the application of Fisher's (1989) goal of determining the veracity of a narrative context. The two theories align the components of narrative in a way that reveals the underlying messaging of the story. I used this approach in this dissertation to establish whether what was presented on the college websites as the institutional story is aligned with the mission statement—the underlying message, or agenda in Burke's terms.

This conceptual framework provided me the basis on which to conduct the study and establish the conclusion that the four community college websites demonstrated alignment between their mission statements and institutional narratives. The lived stories of these four colleges as presented on the websites holds, to use Fisher's (1989) term, narrative fidelity with the college mission statements.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was based on a sample of community colleges within a single region of the United States. I selected these colleges as representative of typical community colleges in terms of student population size and type of setting (e.g., rural and urban). Although the colleges were located within a common geographic region, the findings of

the study may be helpful for institutions that are classified as comprehensive public community colleges. The findings may be equally useful to any community college espousing similar values, goals, or missions to those included in this study.

I used CDA in this study, an approach to qualitative communication research useful for researchers seeking to determine underlying and implicit messaging within a communicative context. The use of this approach in the analysis of websites—a communicative context—is common in rhetorical and communication studies and is therefore replicable in research studies similar to this dissertation. This methodology in this context is limited to linguistic features and imagery located in the mission statements and websites of the institutions studied.

Other communicative contexts—such as perceptions and lived experiences of the faculty, staff, and students of the institution—could have a bearing on the outcomes of the study. Because this study was limited to how the colleges presented their institutional narrative on their website, including such approaches would be beyond the scope of this study. The website is considered the public portrayal of the institutional story, and therefore defines the communicative context for the goals of this dissertation. This is particularly true considering that the lived experiences of faculty, staff, and students are not directly observable to the public to the degree that the website is; therefore, including them might be useful for determining an aspect of the institutional story, but not in terms of how the college story is presented to the outside world. Additionally, because the website and mission statement are the two primary presentations of the whole of the institution, these two components can be expected to align in support of narrative fidelity

in the institutional story. Any omissions of other communicative contexts were thus not considered part of the institutional narrative for the purposes of this study.

### **Recommendations**

This study marks a good starting point for further research into mission alignment as well as for examining the lived institutional narratives of community colleges.

Together with the existing body of literature exploring the pressures and challenges that face community colleges as they work toward mission fulfillment, continued research into the degree to which community colleges' institutional stories align with their mission statements could provide further evidence of community college mission alignment and possible misalignment. The use of the college website as the context for a study is rich with data that reveal much about what the college is doing, where its priorities are, and how it allocates its resources. Such data can be used to determine not only mission alignment but also the degree to which community colleges are serving their communities as well as academia. The presence of program studies and reviews on two of the college websites included in this study promises the potential for a data-rich area that is as yet untapped.

This study can be replicated at similar institutions both inside and outside of academia. The use of CDA provides a reliable means for close examination of the nuanced messaging of an institution that it presents on its website. My use of Gee's toolkit (2014a, 2014b) provided me with a systematic and consistent set of tools for applying the principles of CDA. A future study could apply the same approach to other community colleges to establish the degree to which their actions and foci are aligned



with the mission statement. The approach I used in this study can be used as an assessment tool for any community college seeking additional methods for benchmarking mission fulfillment. It could also be used to help identify potential institutional goals that align with the mission statement.

Further research might include additional tools for studying elements that appear in the institutional life of the college but are not captured in the mission statement, or for exploring comprehensively any mission statement themes that do not appear to be strongly supported on the college website. Such a discovery can help a community college identify ways to better align its projected image with its mission statement. Furthermore, this type of study can reveal areas where resources can be reallocated to ensure mission fulfillment.

Additional research is required to provide a broader understanding of whether community colleges are fulfilling their missions. Given the lack of empirical studies reflected in the literature on this topic and the complexity of mission alignment with the lived narratives of community colleges, empirical studies with different approaches and methods are required to establish triangulated assessments of the performance of community colleges in general. Such assessment is particularly necessary as the current body of literature includes significant attention to the causes of mission drift without evidence that such misalignment occurs.

### **Implications of the Study**

This studied resulted in several implications for community colleges, particularly for their role in contributing to positive social change. There were also implications for

improvements that could be made by community colleges to improve alignment with their mission statements as well as for research methods and analysis in future studies of a similar nature, particularly using CDA.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

This study represents an early indication that alignment exists between the key components of mission statements and the lived institutional narratives of community colleges. These findings potentially contradict the implication in the existing literature that the pressures on mission fulfillment at public institutions lead to mission misalignment. If these findings are affirmed by future research, there will be some assurance that community colleges are doing what they claim to be doing—and what society expects of them. Potential exists for positive social change in the form of evidence that can bolster societal confidence in community colleges and help with revenue supports from legislative action and private partnership support from industry and workforce employers, thereby providing security in revenue that can be used toward sustainability of the community college mission.

The findings in this study included some areas of weakness in alignment between the mission statements and institutional life presented on the websites of the four community colleges. Both areas of weakness, namely economic development and community, are critical junctions between the community colleges and communities they serve. These areas of weakness thus represent opportunities for attention to significant positive social change. The identification of areas in need of a strengthened alignment between the mission statement and life of the college can lead to a strengthened

relationship between the college and the community it serves. The result could be increased external support for the mission of the college. Moreover, providing evidence of mission fulfillment in the areas of economic development and connections to the community could lead to increased fiscal support for the college, thereby enabling the college to leverage more resources toward mission fulfillment.

Two of the colleges included the theme of economic development in their mission statements, and all four contained themes of supporting the community. None of the four colleges defined these terms in any way that clarified how they viewed either concept, nor did any provide explanatory terms that could lead to measurable assessment. Colleges presenting themselves similarly should clarify these terms, as well as demonstrate on their website how they implement these mission themes. Doing so would present potential tools for having a positive social impact on the community at large as well as the community within the college itself.

### **Implications for Economic Development and Community**

The lack of clarity regarding the terms economic development and community on the websites was severe enough that it would be speculative for me to state what the intentions are beyond generic assumptions drawn from the use of these terms on the websites and in the mission statements. Such generic assumptions are that these colleges are educating students for the workforce as a form of economic development and providing a means of access to higher education that serve the members of the community—particularly the underprivileged who might not otherwise have such access. Community colleges that share these anomalies would likely discover immediate ways to

improve alignment between their mission statements and either their institutional story or how they present it. Any college leadership undertaking an exploration of why they have included these elements in their mission statements will help them define for themselves what these terms mean and how they fit their intended missions. Increased mission alignment could result from either adjusting the mission statement or allocating resources more toward mission alignment with what the college actually does.

Another factor that should be considered regarding these two terms is that they might be reflections of the way geography affects linguistics. Again, each institution could explore its intentions and clarify how it might focus more pointedly on economic development and contribute to the community around it, as well as that within it. Such analysis and action could lead to clear improvements in mission alignment as well as positive impacts on economic development and service to the community. Geography can be a factor in that the location of the four colleges, with two being large urban institutions and the other two being smaller rural colleges, and it is possible that economic development and community are merely reflective of different ways of seeing the local surroundings; in other words, large cities may tend to view the common element in community as the economic engine that ties the community together, whereas a small town may tend to view community as a collection of persons with more intertwined lives.

An additional subtlety found in this study that carries implications regarding mission alignment, at all these institutions and for future studies, is the type of institution they are, particularly when coupled with the abovementioned point about geographical location. The size of the institution and size of the population center it serves can be a

crucial difference in mission statements among types of institutions. I believe this had a likely minor impact on this study, and thus future research into this difference among types of community colleges is warranted. Although there are significantly more similarities than differences among all the colleges included in this research, this variance in mission statement language presents an unanticipated and intriguing invitation to future research. Studies on variance in mission statements at community colleges of different types could yield a better understanding of the link between community colleges and the needs of the communities they serve. Strengthening that connection has the potential to solidify the role of a particular community college, as well as that of community colleges in general.

### **Implications for Methodology and Analysis**

Researchers using CDA in future research on websites would be well-served by using the methods employed for the study I reported in this dissertation. Using Gee's (2014a, 2014b) toolkit proved to be an important tool for analysis of the use of language, imagery, and organization on the four college websites studied. An updated toolkit would be useful in expanding to specifically include elements of a website, such as how it is organized in terms of foregrounding and the volume of material presented on specific topics; my use of the toolkit did guide me in exploring these website elements, but I would have benefited from insights into how the organization of a website, in particular, might differ from other communicative contexts. As it was, I relied heavily on my reflective journal to help me track the implications of how the material was presented in a communicative context that might be absorbed by website visitors in different

chronologies—due to being able to move to different webpages at different times than other visitors—than when, for example, guided by a speaker in a speech or writer in a text-based format.

In the planning stages for this study, I expected to find NVivo to be a major tool for conducting my study. I had planned to run queries as a means of identifying major themes in the mission statements. The opposite occurred, however, and I had to adjust my approach to identifying mission statement themes through sentence diagramming the mission statements, following Chomsky's (1965) transformational grammar to identify the deep structure of the mission statements that revealed the mission themes. The word queries I ran in NVivo were useful for several applications, such as the frequency of occurrence of the thematic elements from the mission statements; however, I did not rely on these reports due to the possibility that different terms might be used for themes throughout the webpages.

### **Conclusion**

Websites are not only a tool for information in the 21st century but they are also the primary means for communicating what a community college does for the entire community—both internal and external. The transition of websites from being minor, online reflections of the printed presence of the college has been slow, presenting the risky possibility that community colleges have evolved without realizing the significance of their websites in demonstrating alignment between their mission statements and how they portray themselves to their stakeholders. Community colleges run the risk of misrepresenting themselves or experiencing mission misalignment if they do not dedicate

a heightened attention to the information they present on the website, the words and phrasing they use, the images portrayed in support of the themes and messaging, and how the website is organized. These elements provide the basis for the narrative fidelity of the institutional story. It is crucial that the explicit and implicit messaging on the website aligns with the community college's mission statement.

Community colleges should be selective in how they decide what to place on their websites, with particular care given to the alignment between their mission statements and how the website serves as a reflection of what they are actually doing. Conscious attention to the website as the college's presentation of its institutional story to the public can lead to clarity of purpose as well as a powerful justification of its role in the communities it serves. Giving careful attention to the website could lead to alleviating some of the pressures discussed in the literature, such as strained revenue streams and the perception that the complex, comprehensive nature of the community college has stretched them too broadly to fulfill its mission. Careful attention to how the website is designed can have a critical impact on whether the community college will continue to experience increased pressure on mission alignment or be valued by its community.

Because the perception of the life of the college can have an impact on the support the college enjoys in the community, associated revenue sources could potentially be affected as a result of clear and consistent alignment between mission statement and lived narrative. Therefore, the alignment of the college's institutional story presented on the website to the college's mission statement could itself be a tool for helping the community college achieve mission fulfillment. At the core of the Truman

Commission, widely considered the foundation of the modern community college, was the formation of a type of institution of higher education that would specifically address the need for positive social change. It is my hope that the study presented in this dissertation will identify ways in which community colleges can position themselves to better align with the intent of the Truman Commission for an egalitarian avenue into higher education, thereby showcasing specific ways that the modern American community college can help bring about positive social change.



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