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Community Perceptions of a Rural Community College After a Replacement Levy Failure

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Stephanie Saunders

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Walden University
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MHA, Walden University, 2011

BS, University of Rio Grande, 2003

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The study site, a rural community college, placed a property tax levy on the ballot in November 2017 to provide much needed additional funding to the financially struggling institution. The problem of the study is the levy failed. College administrators have determined that the levy proposition should be reissued, yet administrators do not have a clear understanding as to what went wrong in 2017. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition. Lewin's change management model and his force field analysis were used as the conceptual framework for the identification of the positive and negative forces affecting the outcome of the tax levy proposition. The research question focused on community member perceptions about the tax levy vote. A basic qualitative design using purposeful sampling was used for semistructured interviews of 12 participants to examine community members' perceptions about the tax levy proposition and its outcome. The study criteria consisted of a minimum age of 18, and an address within the study site's in-district region. Emergent themes were identified through causation coding. Findings were developed and checked for trustworthiness through member checking, rich descriptions, and researcher reflexivity. Findings revealed specific areas of improvement focused on strengthening ties with the community. A white paper project was created to present to college leaders with a summary of findings and recommendations for organizational change and community outreach. Community colleges needing to pass a levy could use study results and project recommendations to increase the likelihood of passing a levy campaign and generating funding needed to meet community educational needs.

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Dedication

I like to dedicate this journey to my mother, father, husband, brother, and children. To my mother who has always been my biggest fan and number one supporter. Thank you, Mom, for loving me unconditionally and for always being available when I need someone to talk to. I cannot imagine getting to where I am today without you. Your love and nurturing throughout my life has given me the strength and determination to follow my dreams. To my father that has been a rock in my life. Thank you, Dad, for keeping me entertained, caring for me when I needed it most, and always making me aware that I make you proud. To my husband for taking the brunt of my frustrations and for the constant encouragement that kept me going when I wanted to give up. Thank you, Anthony, for your love, patience, and unwavering support. To my brother that is not just a sibling, but a friend and role model. Josh, I am so proud to call you my brother. You represent the best of our family, and although you are my little brother, I look up to you more than you know. And finally, to my children, Brandon, and Hope. Since becoming a mother, I have completed four college degrees. While there were times that I felt guilty for working on schoolwork instead of spending time with you, I want you to know that you were my motivation to continue to better myself, and a large part of my journey has been for you. Brandon and Hope, you are my world and I love you more than you will ever know.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

In November 2017, the four-county district community of a community college in rural Appalachia voted against a replacement property tax levy. According to the 2018 chief financial officer (CFO) of the study site, the levy would have generated an additional $1,000,000 in funding annually and an 11% increase in non-operating revenues for the financially struggling institution (Study Site CFO, personal communication, July 25, 2018). The CFO stated that the failure has left the leaders of the study site without a clear understanding of what went wrong (Study Site CFO, personal communication, July 25, 2018). According to the meeting minutes of the study site's Board of Trustees February 27, 2017 meeting, the board voted to place the replacement levy on the November 2017 ballot after a feasibility study conducted by an external agency indicated that a replacement levy campaign should be successful. The problem for this study is the failure of the replacement levy.

According to the meeting minutes of the study site's Board of Trustees December 4, 2017 meeting, the current chief operating officer of the study site explained that to see a successful replacement levy through, the institution's leaders need to "take a very serious look at where we went wrong and fix it". Prior to the failed election, the 2015-2018 college president stated, according to the meeting minutes of the of the study site's Board of Trustees April 24, 2017 meeting, that the institution needed the additional funding that the replacement levy would generate for reasons including the following: the increasing reliance on institutional reserves to maintain operations, the ability to fund basic investments, and the ability to fund faculty and staff vacancies. Additionally, the 2015-2018 college president stated that as resources become more and more scarce for higher education, especially for vulnerable institutions located in rural and impoverished areas, the need for administrators and policymakers to better understand the sentiments and perspectives of the community is critical (Study Site president, personal communication, July 22, 2018).

The relationship between institution and community is critical as institutional finances, specifically community college finances, are often dependent on local tax support (Phelan, 2014). While most public institutions, including community colleges, are financed through a combination of state appropriations and tuition revenues, local tax support is critical for community colleges in approximately half of the states (Baime & Baum, 2016). The study site is in 1 of 30 states that depends on local funding, in addition to state support and tuition revenue, to maintain operations, with local funding contributing an average of 11% to community college financial support across the country (Baime & Baum, 2016). The critical need for local tax support or other funding mechanisms is gaining importance as total state appropriations for higher education declined by 16 % between the 2007-2008 and 2013-2014 academic years, translating to a decrease in spending of $2,026 per student (Klein, 2015). When state funding is decreased, public colleges are forced to eliminate educational services, raise tuition, or both, to bridge the funding gap (Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2015). Local tax support obtained through successful mill levy campaigns allows community colleges to improve the physical campus, update campus technology, improve academic programs, and maintain operating expenses without transferring the financial burden to students through tuition increases (Ohio Higher Ed, 2017).

Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition. The study site is a unique and complicated institution due to its existence as a community college that feeds directly into a private university, sharing a physical campus, faculty, and support services (Study Site Dean of the College of Health & Behavioral Sciences, personal communication, March 12, 2019). The study site, the community college with a main campus and three off-site academic centers, and the private university are also tied together through institutional accreditation, listed as a combined entity accredited through the Higher Learning Commission (Higher Learning Commission, 2018). The 2017-2018 combined enrollment of the community college and private university was 1,812 total students that were predominantly commuters and enrolled at the community college level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Although this study's focus was at the community college level, the statistics and background of the institution were relevant due to the complicated contractual agreements between the two entities (Study Site CFO, personal communication, July 25, 2018).

According to the study site's December 4, 2017 board of trustees meeting, the 2015-2018 president of the study site indicated that with state of the institution's finances, the replacement levy needed to be placed on the ballot again, and it needed to pass. Per the January 10, 2018 board of trustees meeting minutes, there was extensive discussion amongst board members and the college administrators regarding the failed levy and numerous opinions were shared about what the board members and administrators believed contributed to the failure. During the same meeting per the minutes, one board member inquired if any research had been conducted about the levy failure, such as surveys. The 2015-2018 college president answered that no research had not been conducted, and it was her opinion that the potential reasons discussed, such as competing levies and inadequate campaigning in the rural communities, were the reasons for the levy failure. While the levy failure is a significant concern for the study site, the business and industry leaders of the region are also concerned due to the implications for their future workforce and pool of qualified applicants (Study Site Advisory Board, personal communication, February 25, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition, to potentially provide an improved understanding of levy failure based on research, as opposed to opinion.

Definition of Terms

Community college: Colleges that offer two-year programs leading to the Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree, with close relationships to secondary/high schools, community groups, and employers in the local community (Education USA, n.d.).

Property tax levy: The collection of taxes charged on the value of property (Ohio School Boards Association, 2018).

Replacement levy: A renewal levy is imposed at the original millage rate of the levy that it replaces, as opposed to the original levy's effective rate, allowing the district to benefit from any growth in local property value that occurred over the life of the previous levy (Ohio School Boards Association, 2018).

Rural-Serving community college: Associate's colleges physically located in areas other than the Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs) or Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) (Rural Community College Alliance, n.d.).

State Appropriation: An "authorization by the General Assembly to make expenditures and incur liabilities for specific purposes" (State of Connecticut Office of the State Comptroller, n.d.).

Significance of the Study

In November 2017, a replacement levy proposition for the study site failed. The levy would have generated additional funding for the financially struggling institution, and the leaders of the study site do not have a clear understanding of why the levy failed (Study Site CFO, personal communication, July 25, 2018). By examining the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition, initiatives may be created by institutional administration for the potential improvement of the community's perceptions of the study site. Additionally, the research may help administrators plan for a more successful replacement levy campaign in the future. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition to potentially gain a better understanding of this event with the intent to provide insight for improved planning for a future replacement levy.

This qualitative study, while focused on a local level, may have applicability to community colleges across the country that are also located in states that allow local funding of higher education through property tax support, specifically rural community colleges with characteristics similar to the study site. A common problem facing rural community colleges is a lower tax base and fewer local workforce opportunities than their suburban counterparts (Thornton & Friedel, 2015), creating a greater financial strain to overcome (Bennett, 2014). When seeking new or additional funding from the community from property tax support, the findings of this study may provide insight into potential issues or challenges that other rural serving community college leaders may want to consider when planning a tax levy campaign to secure funding for an improved financial status.

Improved finances secured by a future successful replacement levy may have positive social change implications for multiple institutional stakeholders at the local level including; students, student dependents, faculty, board of trustee members, college administration, community businesses, employers of future graduates, and the study site in terms of its institutional viability. The additional funding that a successful replacement levy would contribute may allow for maintaining operations at the study site, basic investments such as improvements in technology and the physical campus, and the funding of faculty and staff vacancies. The improved financial support of the institution may translate into improved student outcomes, including degree completion and improved employment opportunities. Improved student outcomes may translate into positive changes in the local economy, a decrease in local governmental assistance for individuals and families, a stronger community college better equipped to meet the needs of its community served, and a decrease in local crime and poverty rates (Levin & Garcia, 2018).

Research Question

To provide potential insight into why the study site's replacement levy failed in November 2017, the community members' perceptions that contributed to the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition were examined and the following research question guided the research:

What are the community members perceptions (positive and negative forces) about how community members voted on the replacement levy?

Review of the Literature

An extensive review of the literature that pertained to local funding of community colleges through property tax support yielded very little research that was current or relevant to this study. According Johnson (2015), the existing body of literature focuses exclusively on property tax referenda for the K-12 system, with research suggesting that there are differences in preferences for tax allocation spending on public goods, such as K-12 and higher education, based on the generation of the voter, as well as their racial, ethnical, and cultural background. To address the significance of community college local funding, the review of the literature has been divided into eight sections. The first section provides information on the conceptual framework used for this study. The second section provides an overview of the key historical events that led to the creation of the community college, in terms of both mission and funding. The third section explains local funding of community colleges, including the variation in funding laws across the states. The fourth section describes characteristics that the K-12 system and community colleges have in common as they relate to local tax referenda. The fifth section provides an overview of the recent research conducted on local tax referenda at the K-12 level. The sixth section discusses higher education as a public good. The seventh section summarizes the various state funds that are in competition with higher education for state appropriations. The eighth section discusses the implications of university and community engagement.

Research for the literature review was conducted by searching the following databases with relevant key words: Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis Online, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar. The key words used for this research included: *community college local funding, property tax support, mill-levy, voter perceptions, community college funding, state funding higher education, school levy campaigns, community college history, higher education public good, community college mission, community partnerships, community engagement, town and gown relationships, and local tax appropriations.* The peer reviewed research generated by the previously described search method provided articles and textbook chapters that were both relevant, current, and applicable to this doctoral study.

Conceptual Framework

The study site, a rural community college, placed a replacement property tax levy on the ballot in November 2017 that would have provided much needed funding to the financially struggling institution. The problem for the study was the levy failure. The college administrators have determined that the levy needs placed on the ballot again, and it needs to pass, yet the administrators do not have a clear understanding as to what went wrong in 2017. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition.

The conceptual framework for this qualitative study was based on Lewin's change management model (Wojciechowski, Pearsall, Murphy, & French, 2016). Lewin's model suggested three steps for the successful orchestration of organizational change (Rosenbaum, More, & Steane, 2018). In terms of this study, the desired change is a future successful replacement levy campaign. The first step in Lewin's model is unfreeze, which consists of identifying and evaluating the change inhibitors and change enhancers (positive and negative forces) affecting organizational change through the process of force field analysis (Rosenbaum et al., 2018). The identification and examination of the change inhibitors and change enhancers (positive and negative forces) provides the necessary research for identifying organizational issues or problems, the fundamental basis for challenging the status quo (Wojciechowski et al., 2016). The second stage, change, consists of demonstrating the benefits of change and decreasing the negative forces that serve as change inhibitors (Wojciechowski et al., 2016). The third stage, refreeze, serves to integrate the changes and stabilize the organization into a new state of equilibrium (Wojciechowski et al., 2016). Lewin's change management model and his force field analysis have been used by researchers from many different organizational fields, including education, to identify the positive and negative forces affecting change (Phillips, 2013). Recently, Blanco-Portela, Benayas, Pertierra, and Lozano (2017) utilized Lewin's force field analysis to identify the positive and negative forces affecting organizational change and sustainability in higher education.

This purpose of this study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition. Through the utilization of Lewin's force field analysis, the positive and negative forces that potentially contributed to the replacement levy failure were identified and examined. Force field analysis, a component of Lewin's change management model, was used as an analytical tool to identify the positive and negative forces that shaped the community's perceptions that potentially contributed to the replacement levy failure, consistent with Lewin's first stage of orchestrating organizational change, unfreeze (Wojciechowski et al., 2016). The process of force field analysis begins by identifying the positive and negative forces that have a direct impact on the desired outcome (Weiss et al., 2017). Negative forces are factors that create resistance to the desired outcome and positive forces are factors that help in reaching the desired goal (Weiss et al., 2017). In addition to identifying the influencing forces, the forces are weighted in terms of significance or strength (Swanson & Creed, 2014). In summary, force field analysis helps to identify areas for improvement, identify areas of strength, determine the feasibility of the change, evaluate opposing forces to change, and develop a strategy for change (Cohen & Hyde, 2016). Through the use of force field analysis, this study has identified the positive and negative perceptions of the institution as perceived by the community that could serve as the basis for the creation of initiatives and a strategy for a more successful future levy campaign.

The History of the Community College

The history of the present-day American community college reaches back to the 19th century with the passage of federal legislation known as the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 (Palmadessa, 2017). In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Land-Grant College Act, commonly known as the Morrill Act of 1862, which granted land to the states for the endowment of institutions, later known as land-grant colleges, to educate and prepare workers for jobs in agriculture and mechanics (Goolsbee & Minow, 2016). In 1890, the second Morrill Act was passed to provide a means for the creation of 18 black land-grant colleges in the former confederate and border states (Lee & Keys, 2013). While the Morrill Acts did not directly fund community colleges, the Morrill Act of 1862 was the first legislative act to address vocational training of America's workforce, paving the way for the establishment of publicly supported institutions of higher education in every state (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014).

The 20th century brought an increased demand for higher education and vocational training. In 1901, America's first community college, Joliet Junior College, was created by J. Stanley Brown to provide higher education opportunities for high school graduates that wished to remain within the community, and experienced growth through the 1920's and 1930's by meeting the "challenge of a growing technological society" (Joliet Junior College, n.d.). When American soldiers returned home from World War II to find limited economic opportunities and the need for formal education and training, a need for rapid expansion of community colleges was realized (Goolsbee & Minow, 2016). The large influx of American veterans in search of jobs and coupled with the federal government's desire to advance the country's technology and weaponry, prompted the passage of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill of 1944, leading to a tremendous growth in higher education (Palmadessa, 2017). In 1946, the rapid growth in higher education in America prompted President Harry Truman to appoint the President's Commission on Higher Education (Stevens, 2018). The Commission published the report *Higher Education for American Democracy* in 1947 which addressed many issues in higher education, one of which was the need for the expansion of community colleges (Truman, 1947).

By the 1960's, community colleges were opening at a rate of one new institution per week, in response to the growing demand for vocational training that existing colleges could not meet (Glasper & Kisker, 2016). These community colleges were established with consistent missions that hinged on transfer education, vocational education, and community service and were financially supported through revenue streams from the federal government, state government, local property taxes, and student tuition and fees (Phelan, 2014). 457 new community colleges opened their doors during the 1960's, more than doubling the number of community colleges in existence in the 1950's (Bass, 2017).

Currently, there are 980 public community colleges in operation in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges & Association of Community College Trustees, 2018), with 553 (56%) of those institutions categorized as rural by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (ruralccalliance.org). Significant to this study, 625 (64%) of the public community colleges in America are in states that allow local tax revenue as a funding source (College Simply, n.d.). Local funding as a source of community college revenue and its significance will be discussed in the following section.

Local Funding of Community Colleges

Community colleges, like most public institutions of higher education, are funded by revenue streams generated from state appropriations and student tuition (Baime & Baum, 2016). Additionally, community colleges in approximately half of the states, receive significant funding from local tax appropriations (Mullin, Baime, & Honeyman, 2015). As of the 2013-2014 academic year, there were 207 rurally designated community colleges that received greater than 10% of their revenues from local appropriations (Katsinas, Malley, & Warner, 2016). During the 2011-2012 academic year, local tax appropriations contributed 17.3% of the revenue for community colleges located in locally funded states, compared to state appropriations of 23.2% (Mullin et al., 2015).

The contribution of local funding to a community college allows for an institutional identity as a state-assisted community college with less reliance on state funding, versus an identity as a state community college that does not receive any local funding and is more reliant on state funding (Mullin et al., 2015). This differentiation is significant as local funding can help offset the decreases in state funding that are often compensated for by increased tuition rates in the 25 states that do not have local funding opportunities (Katsinas, D'Amico, Friedel, & Adair, 2016).

While local funding does have its benefits in terms of bridging the institutional funding gap, there are challenges as well. Local funding has received backlash in terms of its propagation of educational and racial inequality due to the variance in wealth across the districts of each state (Romano & Palmer, 2016). Within each state that allows local funding, property tax support varies due in part to differing property valuations, yielding higher levels of tax support for institutions located in wealthier districts (Phelan, 2014). In states such as Ohio, the funding provided by mill levies does not adjust with property reappraisals or triennial updates, resulting in a consistent dollar value that does not respond to inflation and can only be increased with voter approval (Sullivan & Sobul, 2010). Multiple states, including Ohio, Texas, Missouri, and Alabama, prohibit single elections for tax appropriations across multi-county community college districts, requiring institutions to compete with other levy initiatives at the local level (Katsinas, Malley, et al., 2016).

Another issue, and perhaps the most challenging, is that local funding is dependent on community voter approval. Voter approval of local higher education funding, as it has a direct impact on community members' finances, is in competition with other local funding initiatives on the ballot, such as K-12 education and emergency services (Weerts, 2015). Research has also indicated that community members' perceptions of higher education may influence the extent to which they are willing to contribute to the financial support of the local community college (Phelan, 2014). Additionally, community colleges are facing public demands for accountability and transparency in terms of how tax dollars are being spent, providing proof of the taxpayer's return on investment (Smith, 2016).

Competing Funding

Local funding of community colleges can help bridge a gap in funding, a gap that has increased significantly since the 2008 recession, forcing college administrators to do more with less, or transfer a portion of the burden to students through increased tuition rates (Phelan, 2014). The gap in funding can, in part, be blamed on the increasing competition for state funding (Webber, 2018). In addition to local appropriations, community colleges, like other public colleges and universities, are highly dependent on state tax dollars for funding teaching and instruction (Mitchell et al., 2015). The issue with a heavy reliance on state tax dollars hinges on the fact that higher education is in competition with other state-funded operations and programs that unlike colleges and universities, cannot raise revenue through alternative sources (Klein, 2015). State funding of higher education competes with six different funding categories; Medicaid, K-12 education, transportation, corrections, public assistance, and a category labeled as "All Other" (NASBO, 2018). In addition to competing for the state's funds, historically, higher education has been one of the first funds to be cut in response to state financial hardships (Morris, 2017), with state funding decreasing by approximately 25% per student since 1987 (Webber, 2018). The two biggest competitors that higher education has for state funding are the K-12 system with average state spending increasing 41% per resident from 1987 to 2015, and Medicaid with average state spending nearly tripling from 1987 to 2015 (Webber, 2018). Although state spending on higher education is strongly linked to better student outcomes and faster economic growth, there has been a continual decline in state appropriations for higher education over the past three decades, resulting in an increasing reliance on local tax appropriations and tuition revenues to keep community college doors open (Glasper & Kisker, 2016).

The K-12 Comparison

To fully explore the implications of tax referenda for the funding of community colleges, researching issues effecting tax referenda for K-12 is advantageous, as there are parallels between the two that are increasing in significance (Melguizo, Witham, Fong, & Chi, 2017). Community colleges located in states that allow local funding face similar challenges as K-12 school systems in securing or increasing local tax support necessitated by decreasing state funding, an endeavor described as a "politically challenging task even in good times" (Leachman, Masterson, & Wallace, 2016, p.2). A similarity between community colleges and K-12 with tax referenda implications, can be appreciated with the recent adoption of outcome-focused performance funding in the community college system, a higher education sibling to the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures (Kogan, Lavertu, & Peskowitz, 2016) a product of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Hodge & Welch, 2016).

The NCLB Act of 2001 was designed to improve K-12 educational outcomes in the United States by creating mechanisms for holding school districts accountable for their students' progress and achievement (Hodge & Welch, 2016). While failure to meet

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures has multiple associated sanctions with increasing severity based on the length (in years) of deficiency, the issue with NCLB that resonates with higher education is the reality that school district funding can be increased or decreased in response to their reported AYP outcomes (Hunt, 2015). Similarly, states are shifting away from traditional enrollment-based funding in higher education, to performance or outcome-based funding, to increase accountability through outcome metrics such as degree completion rates, graduation rates, job placement rates, and retention rates (Li, 2017). As of 2016, 32 states have shifted from enrollment-based funding to performance-based funding in varying degrees (Ziskin, Rabourn, & Hossler, 2018), with states such as Ohio and Tennessee tying 100% of state appropriations to community colleges based on performance (Dougherty et al., 2016). While the idea of using performance-based funding as a stimulant for improved community college outcomes makes sense on the surface, community college completion rates are only around 36%, and the associated decrease in funding is forcing community colleges to continue to try to bridge the funding gap, further eroding funds necessary for improving outcomes (Melguizo et al., 2017).

In addition to direct funding issues resulting from AYP measures, deficient AYP scores for a K-12 school system may undermine the community's support of the local school district by emphasizing inadequacies. In recent research conducted by Kogan et al. (2016), the probability of passing a local school district tax levy decreased by more than 10% when districts failed AYP measures, measures made public and reported to the community, "resulting in a large financial penalty that disproportionately affected districts in impoverished communities and only widened the resource disparity between districts" (p.24). Although research has not been conducted on performance-based funding implications on community college tax referenda, it would not be unreasonable to question the potential existence of a similar phenomenon in the public community college property tax levy campaign.

Similarly, research by Thompson and Whitley (2017), suggested that the assignment of fiscal stress labels, the subsequent mandatory state sanctioned financial recovery plan, and community voters potential lack of accurate information or complete understanding of the causes of the school district's financial stress, may lead to sub-optimal voting decisions. While community colleges are not assigned fiscal stress labels by the state, the financial records of public colleges and universities are part of the public domain and accessible by the public, providing yet another potential parallel between K-12 and community colleges in their pursuit of a successful levy campaign.

Another area of recent research pertaining to the potential challenges of passing K-12 school property tax levies is the issue of open enrollment. A study conducted by Pogodzinski, Lenhoff, and Addonizio (2018) sought to identify the implications of school district open enrollment policies on voter support of local tax referendum. The research findings of Pogodzinski et al. (2018) were consistent with the findings of previous studies suggesting that open enrollment policies and local tax support for the education of non-residents was not significant in terms of levy passage. Open enrollment is yet another area of similarity between the K-12 and community college systems due to the open enrollment status of most community colleges, with admissions open to not only out of district students, but to out of state and international students, as well (Cohen et al., 2014). Although K-12 research has implied that it is insignificant, open enrollment and the effects on community college tax referenda has not been studied.

Strategies for Successful K-12 Tax Referenda

In the United States, the funding for K-12 curriculum and instruction are strictly regulated by the state and federal government, however, the funding of capital facility finance and construction has historically been left to the local school districts and their communities (Bowers, 2015). With the declining condition of primary and secondary schools throughout the U.S. and an estimated price tag of $322 billion to build and repair American schools, the need for raising money for capital projects has gained critical importance, and school administrators are seeking strategies for successful tax referenda campaigns (Gong & Rogers, 2014).

There has been extensive research conducted on how to pass school tax levies or bonds at the K-12 level, with emphasis on voter turnout, election timing, levy or bond proposal wording, and community characteristics, however, recent research "has begun to describe the complex political nature and local strategies of bond and levy campaigns in districts" (Bowers & Chen, 2015). The research on voter turnout has led to one campaign strategy that has proven effective, a strategy that involves targeting "Yes" voters instead of the general public, to augment "Yes" voter turnout and decrease the general voter turnout by minimizing advertising or campaigning (Johnson, 2015). A second strategy that has demonstrated success is scheduling levy or bond elections for special elections that do not coincide with national or state elections and have a lower voter turnout, allowing the targeted "Yes" voters to swing the vote in the school districts favor (Gong & Rogers, 2014). Another strategy for a successful campaign is the wording of the levy or bond proposal on the ballot, with renovations of existing structures, as opposed to a proposed increase in non-academic programs or facilities, being more successful (Sampson, Roberts, Glenn, Radford, & Gautam, 2016). Additionally, community characteristics have proven significant in tax referenda campaigns with a rural school districts having greater challenges in successfully passing tax levy or bonds, compared to their suburban counterparts, due to low voter turnout and farmers within the community that are large land holders who are in opposition of increasing their property taxes (Bowers, 2015).

While community characteristics may present challenges in passing school tax referenda, the community can also be a source of great support with the employment of well-constructed tactics (Johnson, 2015). Research has suggested that by including the community from the beginning of the campaign through townhall meetings, school tours, weekly updates of progress, and newspaper and radio ads, the community is more likely to support the school levy or bond, whether they have children attending the school or not (Frantz, 2014). Recent research has also found that by organizing a grassroots campaign, led by numerous volunteer community members, there is a greater chance of campaign success (Johnson, 2015).

Community College Education as a Public Good

While K-12 education is mandatory in the United States, higher education is not, which may have implications on community support of local community colleges. To gain community support of local community college tax referenda, the question of how community members view modern higher education as a public good versus a private commodity may prove significant (Williams, 2016). Research on community willingness to pay property taxes for services has identified a greater willingness to pay taxes for services with higher ratings of quality (Reese & Zalewski, 2018).

Higher education as a public good can be traced back to the 17th century when the first colleges in colonial America were established with missions of serving the people (Sandmann, Jordan, Mull, & Valentine, 2014). While public institutions of higher education have a tradition of promoting public good through the teachings of cultural tolerance, social justice, economic equality, and civic duty (Letizia, 2017), research indicates that they also contribute to the greater good of the students and communities served through improved life and social outcomes (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). According to recent research, the benefits of higher education are not limited to four-year and advanced degrees, with the attainment of an associate degree having been identified as a key driver in increased lifetime earnings, higher tax revenues, a reduction in costs of public services, and a more educated and productive workforce (Levin & Garcia, 2018).

While research supports the value of higher education, the American public may not be convinced. A recent study by the Pew Research Center revealed that only 55% of Americans believe that higher education has a positive effect on America and 56% of Americans have minimal confidence in colleges and universities (Salovey, 2018). In terms of community support of the local college through property tax dollars, the issue of the value of higher education is further exacerbated in the rural setting where students are more likely to come from families that did not attend or graduate college (Schafft, 2016). According to a recent poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal*, "those most likely to call higher education a good investment includes those with a college degree (61%) or a post-graduate degree (66%), high-income earners (60%), and non-whites (56%)" (Dann, 2017). To gain the support of the skeptical public in terms of tax referenda, research suggests that the benefits to tax payers should be demonstrated consistently, not just during tax referenda campaigns, as individuals are more willing to pay additional taxes if they perceive a direct benefit" (Mullin et al., 2015).

While the possession of a college education appears to be significant in the willingness of community members to support higher education, recent research has also uncovered another component that may prove significant in local community college tax levy propositions. According to Brunner and Johnson (2015), older generations of voters are "significantly less likely than younger voters to support a tax increase to fund higher education" (p.74). Additionally, home ownership has proven significant in local elections pertaining to property tax increases for the support of local higher education with research indicating homeowner preference towards lower taxes (Oliver, 2012). Regardless of the various research findings, the primary challenge in gaining community voter support for increasing property taxes for higher education may hinge on the issue of self-interest, with voter behavior a product of their own demographics, education level, preference for public services, and personal finances (Rausch, 2016).

University-Community Engagement

Seeking local funding through a property tax levy or renewal levy indicates that a community college needs resources from its community, creating a dependent relationship between the college and its community served. This dependency, however, does not constitute a true partnership, with both parties benefiting from the relationship, unless measures are taken to develop the partnership, supplying added value to the community (Ofek, 2017). The lack of a true partnership, or evidence of a mutually beneficial relationship, may negate the premise that higher education is a public good (Mtawa, Fongwa, & Wangenge-Ouma, 2016), and may have negative implications at the poll. To augment community support of the local community college, college leaders must strive to engage in communication and collaboration with community partnerships that "are better equipped to address the specific needs of the community while efficiently using the resources of both the university and community partners" (King et al., 2017, p.15).

Community partnerships and community engagement come in different forms including, but not limited to, "service, clinical practice, teaching, advocacy, or research" (King, et al., 2017, p.15). Effective community partnerships are fostered by boundary-spanning leaders who serve as bridges between the partners working towards a common goal (Adams, 2014). According to Purcell (2014), these boundary-spanners must be spread out through the college, not centralized in one department, and must possess advanced communication skills to foster collaboration. Additionally, colleges must utilize the expertise of the existing faculty and staff, strengthen internal awareness of community engagement, foster autonomy amongst faculty leaders, and create opportunities to bring stakeholders together to promote community engagement (Palombi, LaRue, & Fierke, 2018).

Effective university-community partnerships may lead to long-term support in the presence of aligned missions and mutually beneficial outcomes, and may foster opportunities for growth, additional support, increased exposure to target audiences, and the improved fulfillment of community needs (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2018). But for true and effective university-community partnerships to occur, there must be a system of trust, the demonstration of respect for community resources, regular communication, and the development of common goals (Barrera, 2015).

In summary, the literature review that was conducted flushed out multiple themes that are relevant to the historical underpinnings of community colleges, as well as trends currently effecting the funding and support of community colleges. The community college, from its infancy as land-grant colleges in the 19th century, through its rapid growth in the 20th century to the contemporary community college of today, has focused on the delivery of higher education through increased accessibility and affordability, while predominantly addressing the current vocational training needs of the American workforce (Cohen et al., 2014). While the majority of community colleges were once funded by the communities that they served, only half of the states continue to allow funding from local tax appropriations (Mullin et al., 2015). Now the majority of community colleges, like other colleges and universities, are dependent on state tax dollar allocations and student tuition (Mitchell et al., 2015). With a dependence of state allocations, community colleges are now dealing with the reality of fluctuating revenue streams that are a direct result of competing funds at the state level (Webber, 2018) and funding trends such as performance-based funding (Ziskin et al., 2018).

While local funding is a viable source of revenue for many community colleges, securing local support at the polls can prove to be a challenge (Phelan, 2014). Although the literature review yielded outdated research regarding community college tax referenda, the research of K-12 tax referenda provided a substantial amount of contemporary literature in terms of voter behavior and voting trends that may prove significant. Additionally, higher education as a public good and university-community engagement were explored as potential contributors to local voter behavior.

Implications

By examining community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition, a white paper outlining those perceptions of the community members will be shared with the study site's board of trustees for the potential creation of initiatives with a goal of improving the community's perceptions of the study site, and for the planning of a more successful replacement levy campaign in the future. This qualitative study, while focused on a local level, may have applicability to community colleges across the country that are also located in states that allow local funding of higher education through property tax support, specifically rural community colleges with demographics similar to the study site.

Summary

In November 2017, the study site, a financially struggling rural community college, placed a renewal levy proposition on the ballot in its four-county in-district service area that failed. The failure left the administration of the study site with a lack of understanding of the failure, leaving them with more questions than answers, and the future of the institution in question due to continued financial risk. Although community college tax referenda have existed as long as community colleges have, there is minimal recent research on community college levies. The largest and most current body of literature pertains to K-12 tax referenda, and although there are parallels between the two, the body of literature is lacking. Utilizing Lewin’s force field analysis for the examination of possible positive and negative forces that possibly contributed to the way community members voted on the levy derived through personal interviews of voter age community members, this study contributes to a better understanding of the levy failure. The application of Lewin’s change management model provides the framework for sharing valuable information for creating initiatives for a more successful future levy campaign and contributes to the sparse body of current literature specific to community college tax referenda.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

In Section 2, I describe the methodology for this basic qualitative study used to examine community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition. Additionally, I explain the qualitative approach utilized, how the problem and research question grounded my research approach, and the process of data collection and analysis.

Description of Qualitative Research

A basic qualitative design was used to examine community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy. A basic qualitative inquiry was an appropriate methodology as it embodies the characteristics of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), yet provides for broad exploration of a topic that is poorly understood (Kahlke, 2014). According to Merriam, unlike other methodologies such as grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative methodology, a basic qualitative approach allows for focused attention on the discovery and understanding of a particular "phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (Merriam, 1998, p.11).

Justification of Research Design

The use of basic qualitative design was determined to be the appropriate methodology for this study through the process of elimination of other methodologies. Grounded theory methodology was determined to be a poor fit for this study as it does not support the purpose of this research. Grounded theory serves two primary functions:

new theory generation and promotion of research innovation (Howard-Payne, 2016). Grounded theory methodology was not an appropriate choice because this study was not concerned with theory generation, but a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Ethnography methodology was not an appropriate choice as it requires people to be studied in their natural environments through observations (Hoolachan, 2015), and observation of community members would not have contributed to the examination of the community members' perceptions. Narrative methodology was determined inappropriate for this study because it focuses on the experiences of individuals expressed through story telling (Schwandt, 2014).

Basic qualitative design was the best fit for this study because of its alignment with the goal of this research, gaining a better understanding of the levy failure through the exploration of the perceptions of community members. Qualitative data analysis "involves identifying recurring patterns that characterize the data" that contribute to the "researcher's understanding of the participants' understanding of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.25). The phenomenon of interest, the levy failure, was explored through the perceptions of the community members to identify recurring patterns contribute to a better understanding of the levy failure.

Participants

Participants for this study were chosen through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.96). The selection of participants through purposeful sampling provides a strategy for selecting cases that are in alignment with the study's purpose and best suited for answering the primary questions of the study (Patton, 2015).

The minimum criteria for research participants consisted of a minimum age of 18 years old (for voting eligibility) and a verified physical address within one of the four counties that make up the study site's in-district service area and where the study site's tax referenda are voted upon. A minimum of 12 research participants were chosen to be interviewed through purposeful sampling, a strategy aimed at gathering rich data from a small sample size (Patton, 2015). The 12 participants provided a sample that was relatively homogeneous with common experiences and perceptions (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in-depth information gathered from a small sample size can be just as valuable as information gathered from a large sample size if the information is rich. The sample size of 12 was chosen because previous research by Guest et al. (2006) indicated that when studying a relatively homogeneous sample of interview participants, saturation is typically achieved by the twelfth interview.

Initially, potential participants were recruited for the study through multiple recruiting tools including posting flyers on community bulletin boards at the five local public libraries that service the four-county district for two weeks, a recruiting advertisement in a local newspaper that was free for consumers and distributed in all four counties for two weeks, and a recruiting advertisement on Facebook for two weeks. This recruitment strategy provided an adequate opportunity for community members to participate in this study because it employed recruitment efforts in multiple public locations (the five libraries), in printed community-specific media (newspapers), and in social media (Facebook). The use of multiple recruitment advertising tools decreased the potential for researcher bias by providing reasonable access to the study across the population of interest. The flyer provided my personal email address and phone number for initial contact.

To establish a researcher-participant working relationship after the 12 participants were chosen, I first sent out letters of invitation to each volunteer participant, by mail or email depending on participant preference, that explained the study, who I was, the rationale for my research, the measures I took to insure confidentiality and fairness, their protection from harm, and my appreciation for their participation. According to Rubin & Rubin (2012), "being seen as honest, open, fair, and accepting helps build trust". Additionally, I provided a detailed description of the measures that I took to protect their rights and confidentiality, including: the use of pseudonyms instead of their names, the storage of all hard-copy participant-derived research and documents in a locked filing cabinet, and an explanation that participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants were provided with an informed consent in the mail or by email along with their invitation to participate in the study that included an explanation that their participation was voluntary, an explanation of the measures that were taken to maintain confidentiality and their safety, and an explanation that they did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. The consent form was also provided to the participant the day of their interview and was signed in my presence prior to the start of their interview, after I verbally explained the study in detail and answered any questions that they had.

Data Collection

The goal of any qualitative research interview is to "see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee, and to understand how and why they have come to have this particular perspective" (Amaratunga, Baldry, Sarshar, & Newton, 2002). Additionally, according to Patton (2015), "the purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective" (p.426). Also, according to Seidman (2013), "the purpose of an in-depth interview study is to understand the experience of those who are interviewed, not to predict or to control that experience" (p. 54). The information that was collected consisted of the participants' perceptions about the way community members voted on the levy, not the participants' personal voting behavior. The use of interviews as the form of data collection was deemed appropriate as interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative research, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews are utilized extensively for collecting data from individuals (Jamshed, 2014).

Interview participants were recruited for participation through flyers posted at the five local libraries in the four-county in-district region, through advertisements in a local newspaper that has a circulation in all four counties, and advertisements on Facebook. The recruitment flyers and advertisements provided my contact information for prospective participants to make initial contact with me. I contacted the first 20 respondents that responded to the advertisements that met the study criteria for participation in the study, with the intention of securing a minimum of 12 participants. The study criteria consisted of a minimum age of 18, and a physical address within one of the four counties of the study site's in-district region. As potential participants responded to the recruitment advertisements, I mailed or emailed participants, depending on participant preference, an invitation to participate in the study. It was expected that some of the first 20 respondents may not return their paperwork or may change their desire to be in the study. The letter explained the study, who I was, the rationale for my research, the measures I would take to insure confidentiality and fairness, their protection from harm, and my appreciation for their participation. The letter also informed potential participants that, there would be no compensation for participating in the study. In addition to the letter of invitation, I included a copy of the informed consent for the potential participants to review for the purpose of informed participation. The letter asked participants to contact me by email or telephone if they chose to participate in the study. As participants contacted me agreeing to participate, I scheduled them for their personal interview based on their availability and preferences. According to Seidman (2013), “in considering the time, dates, and place of interviews, in addition to considering the safety of the arrangements for both participants and interviewers, the prevailing principle must be equity” (p. 53) and the interviewer “must be flexible enough to accommodate the participants’ choice of location, time, and date” (p. 53). Of the 20 initial study participation respondents, I secured 12 participants that met the study participation criteria and completed 12 interviews.

The interviews were conducted in a private conference room at the public library within the study site’s in-district region of the participants’ choosing. Prior to the start of each interview, I provided a hard copy of the informed consent for the participant to read, ask questions, and sign if in agreement of participation. The interviews were conducted with the meeting room doors closed, and a "Do Not Disturb" sign was placed on the outside of the door. If I conducted more than one interview in a day at the same location, I scheduled each interview a total of two hours apart, to allow for a one-hour interview and an additional hour to avoid participant-participant interaction. Additionally, I took all interview notes, forms, and recordings with me if I left the room.

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview script designed by me that consisted of predetermined structured open-ended questions and prompts (Appendix B). The semi-structured interview was guided by a list (Appendix B) of questions or issues to be explored, that I created, using a combination of more and less structured questions that "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.110).

The interviews were conducted in the participant's home county, at the local public library of the participant's choosing, in a private conference room, to provide a local, private, neutral location for accurate and unbiased research, as well as providing a measure for safety. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview script with predetermined open-ended questions (Appendix B), with each interview lasting approximately one hour. The interviews were recorded with a Sony ICD-PX370 audio recorder with the participant's assigned pseudonym (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) voiced at the beginning of the recording, along with the date, location, and time. In addition to conducting the interviews, I maintained a researcher's journal. My researcher's journal consisted of a reflective commentary used to record my "initial impressions of each data collection session, patterns appearing to emerge in the data collected, and theories generated” (Shenton, 2004). The notes and impressions within my researcher’s journal that are participant specific were labeled with the participants’ assigned pseudonym (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) for protection of participant privacy.

Upon completion of each personal interview, each participant was asked if they would be willing to review the transcript of their interview and the researcher’s interpretations of the participant’s responses for the purpose of assuring credibility. The participants that agreed to participate in member checking were asked their preferred method of reviewing their transcript and the researcher’s interpretations (email or U.S. mail). The participants were informed that they should expect my email or mail communication within five to ten business days. Upon interview completion, participants were also asked if they would like to receive a copy of the results of the study when completed.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, there is an understanding that the “researcher is a central figure who influences the collection, selection, and interpretation of data” (Finlay, 2002). According to Mehra (2002), the degree of connection that a researcher has with the population under study, including membership of the population themselves, can present the opportunity for bias in a research study. Regarding this doctoral project study, the concern for researcher bias is valid due to my roles and relationships with the population under study and the study site.

My relationship with the study site began in 1992 when I started my higher education journey as a college freshman at the study site. I completed 3 years before transferring to another college to earn an associate degree in sonography. In 2002, I returned to the study site for another academic year and completed my bachelor's degree in 2003. In 2006, I was hired by the study site as the Diagnostic Medical Sonography Program Director, a position I still hold today. In addition to my status as a graduate of the study site and an employment history of 13 years at the study site, I am also a lifelong resident of the study site's four-county in-district area. My extensive experience with the study site, as well as my own membership of the population under study, presented significant opportunities for researcher bias because of the strong opinions that I had about the study site and the levy failure.

Specifically, it was of my opinion that the levy failed for a number of reasons including: a lack of explanation to the community by the study site's administration as to what the levy funds would be used for, historical lack of transparency by the study site's administration, a significant history of mismanagement of funds by the study site's administration, local farm owners and property owners with significant quantities of land or high property values that are against increases in property taxes, community members that do not see a direct benefit of supporting local higher education, and community members that consistently vote against any levies.

Additionally, prior knowledge of participants would have presented challenges when selecting participants from the pool of respondents, especially if I had prior knowledge of their opinions regarding the study site and the failed tax levy. To further minimize researcher bias, I only selected research participants who did not know me personally; or professionally. Employees of the study site were not eligible to participate in the study.

Data Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed using Express Scribe Pro transcription software. The transcripts were first coded for concepts that demonstrated significance to the study, followed by the identification of themes or patterns, through the connecting of concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Causation coding was the primary type of coding used for this study due to its relevance to the study's purpose. Causation coding attempts to answer the question "Why?" by focusing on "people's intentions, choices, objectives, values, perspectives, expectations, needs, desires, and agency within their particular contexts and circumstances" (Saldana, 2016, p.187). While causation coding does not typically lead to a definitive answer to the "Why?", it does provide a coding method for linking potential causes with outcomes that may lead to plausible causes of a particular outcome (Saldana, 2013).

The concepts and themes mined from the interview transcripts are maintained on my personal laptop that is password protected, in addition to my researcher journal, scanned copies of research notes, and scanned copies of all participant documents. All research generated transcripts, coding, notes, consent forms, and research journal entries were anonymized with each participant's assigned pseudonym (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). All original hardcopy documents are stored in a locked filing cabinet in my personal office that is always locked when I am not physically present.

Evidence of Quality

Dependability

Dependability is achieved when outsiders agree that when “given the data collected, the results make sense - they are consistent and dependable” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.251). Dependability focuses on the process of research and the researcher’s responsibility for confirming that the process is “logical, traceable, and documented” (Patton, 2015). To increase dependability, I used peer debriefing by soliciting feedback from a colleague (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The peer debriefing consisted of a colleague scanning some of the raw data and assessing whether my findings were plausible, based on the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility is achieved when research data or the participants’ views are truthfully conveyed by the researcher through the researcher’s interpretation of the data and representation of the participants (Polit & Beck, 2017). There are multiple methods of supporting credibility in qualitative research including the demonstration of engagement with the participants, documentation of observation methods, and providing an audit trail (Cope, 2014). Other methods of improving credibility of qualitative research, and considered by some to be the most appropriate, is member checking and peer debriefing (Schwandt, 2014). In addition to peer debriefing, I conducted member checking. Member checking is a process that allows participants to validate the researcher’s conclusions by verifying data, findings, and interpretations (Patton, 2015). Member checking was conducted with the research participants that agreed to participate. A copy of the participant's interview transcript and my interpretation of their responses was emailed or mailed to each participant, based on the participant's preference, within 10 business days of the completion of their interview. All participants that participated in member checking chose to participate by email. Eight of the 12 participants provided timely feedback to me regarding their interview transcripts and my interpretations. All participants that participated in member checking agreed with my interpretations of their interviews, confirming credibility. I also maintained a researcher's journal. My researcher's journal consisted of initial impressions and significant findings from each interview. The utilization of a researcher's journal contributed to the credibility of the study by improving internal validity by assuring that the coded data was congruent with the actual data mined from the participant interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability

Transferability is achieved when research findings can be applied to other settings or groups (Polit & Beck, 2017). According to Cope (2014), "researchers should provide sufficient information on the informants and the research context to enable the reader to assess the findings' capability of being "fit" or transferable". According to Connelly (2016), I ensured this study's transferability "with a rich, detailed description of the context, location, and people studied, and by being transparent about analysis and trustworthiness" (p.436).

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when the researcher can provide evidence that the reported findings represent the "participants' responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints" (Cope, 2014, p. 89). There are multiple methods that can be used for ensuring confirmability including an audit trail, peer debriefing, keeping a researcher's journal, and member checking (Connelly, p. 435). To ensure confirmability, I maintained a researcher's journal, and conducted peer debriefing and member checks.

Data Saturation

Data saturation, or theoretical saturation, is achieved when "additional analysis no longer contributes anything new about a concept" (Schwandt, 2014). When interviews are used for data collection, saturation is realized when the "interviewer begins to hear the same information reported" and "he or she no longer learns anything new" (Seidman, 2013). In planning for achieving theoretical saturation, I chose to interview a minimum of 12 participants based on research conducted by Guest et al. (2006). According to Guest et al. (2006), for most research studies "in which the aim is to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous individuals, twelve interviews should suffice" (p. 79). After completing 11 participant interviews, data saturation was achieved. Confirmation of data saturation was evident when the twelfth interviewee did not provide me with any new information, and the information provided was consistent with prior interviews.

Reflexivity

As a graduate of the study site, an associate professor/program director at the study site, and a resident of the four-county in-district region with personal opinions about the levy failure as described under "Role of the Researcher", there was a potential for researcher bias. By acknowledging my roles and relationships with the study site and its community, I acknowledged that my own characteristics could affect what I heard and how I interpreted it (Babbie, 2017). To minimize researcher bias, I used reflexivity, “the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth” (Schwandt, 2014). According to Finlay (2002), “through the use of reflexivity, subjectivity in research can be transformed from a problem to an opportunity” (p. 531).

Discrepant Cases

When analyzing research, researchers may encounter discrepant or deviant cases, “cases that depart from the regularities that emerge in the data analysis or give rise to contradictory classificatory results” (Mauceri, 2014, p. 2779). According to Booth, Carroll, Ilott, Low, and Cooper (2013), “actively seeking the disconfirming or deviant case is properly regarded as a hallmark of trustworthiness in primary qualitative research” (p. 126). Therefore, to further improve trustworthiness of the study, discrepant cases or outliers were coded and reported to resist the temptation to “neatly package theorizing and simplistically coherent conclusions” (McPherson & Thorne, 2006, p.9).

Data Analysis Results

The problem for this study was the failure of the study site’s property tax replacement levy. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members’ perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site’s replacement levy proposition, to better understand the levy failure. Based on the 12 personal interviews that I conducted, community members are tired of paying additional property taxes that levies generate, especially for levies that do not provide a clear and direct benefit to the taxpayer. Community members either did not know about the levy, or if they did, they did not understand the levy. Community members knew too little about the community college and its offerings and felt that the study site maintained a “quiet” presence in the community. Multiple community members discussed the benefits of having an active community college in the local community. Those benefits included close-to-home options for their children and non-traditional students, economic benefits from better education opportunities close to home, and opportunities for economic growth of the community. Although those perceived benefits were acknowledged, the benefits were overshadowed by the community members’ limited knowledge of the community college, and the services that it provides. The limited knowledge that the community possessed about the study site resulted in a lack of priority in comparison to competing levies. Community members felt that the timing of the levy was wrong with multiple competing levies on the ballot, especially in one county where another controversial levy garnered a lot of attention. Community members felt that placing the levy on the May Primary, as opposed to the November Election Day, or holding a special election may have proven to be more successful. While community members do not feel that putting the replacement tax levy on the ballot again in the near future would have a different outcome, they did state that with actual improvements made by the study site in programming, community services, and a significant increase in information dissemination, a replacement tax levy campaign in a few years, could prove more successful.

In this section, I describe the major themes and findings from my analysis of the data gathered from the personal interviews of community members. The major themes and findings are discussed in relationship to the conceptual framework and research question of the study. The research question was as follows:

RQ1: What are the community members perceptions (positive and negative forces) about how community members voted on the replacement levy?

An analysis of the data derived from the research question yielded the following four themes: (a) value of higher education, (b) community involvement, (c) knowledge of the levy; and (d) levy prioritization.

Coding Process

According to Babbie, coding is the "key process in the analysis of qualitative social research" that contributes to the identification of patterns that "point to a theoretical understanding of social life" (Babbie, 2017, p. 397). Coding is conducted in stages, with the first stage consisting of the researcher identifying a word or short phrase that represents the data, providing an interpretive meaning for future coding purposes of "pattern detection, categorization, assertion or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic processes" (Saldana, 2016, p. 4). The second cycle of coding leads to the development of "higher-level themes, concepts, assertions, and theory" through further analysis of interview transcripts, analytic memos, and evaluation of first-cycle coding results (Saldana, 2016, p. 232).

To begin the coding process, I first transcribed each interview by playing back each interview at a reduced speed while typing the interview using Express Scribe Pro software. During the first transcription process, I transcribed the entire interview verbatim. Upon completion of the first transcription, I then edited out unnecessary words and verbal identifiers (e.g. “um”, “you know”, occupations, employers, gender pronouns, and age). I also removed additional conversations that were off topic. Once the transcripts were cleaned up, I printed hardcopies and read through them, highlighting significant responses that aligned with the research question.

From the highlighted transcripts, I made a list of the common responses of each interview question. By reviewing the transcripts, listening to the recorded interviews repeatedly, and reviewing the list of common responses, I completed the first cycle of coding utilizing causation coding. According to Saldana (2016), causation coding attempts to reveal “what people believe about events and their causes” (p.187). After developing 14 codes from the first cycle of causation coding (See Table 1.), I then completed the second cycle of coding by reviewing the resulting codes and categorizing them based on similarities. For example, most participants discussed that the rationale of the replacement levy was *poorly communicated,* and that the community members had limited *knowledge of the levy*, resulting in a *distrust* of the college and its administration. *Poor communication, levy knowledge,* and *distrust* were transitioned into the theme of *Knowledge of Levy.* This process of categorizing codes based on similarities resulted in four themes (See Table 2).

After establishing the four themes as a result of causation coding, I compared the codes and themes against the study’s conceptual framework. The conceptual framework for this qualitative study is based on Lewin’s change management model (Wojciechowski et al., 2016). Lewin's model suggested three steps for the successful orchestration of organizational change (Rosenbaum et al., 2018). In terms of this study, the desired change is a future successful replacement levy campaign.

The first step in Lewin's model is to unfreeze, which consists of identifying and evaluating the change inhibitors and change enhancers (positive and negative forces) (Rosenbaum et al., 2018). Each of the 14 identified codes are in alignment with the identification of change enhancers and change inhibitors (positive and negative forces), that can be used in the process of Lewin's forcefield analysis, "a model for change that shows the relationship between the driving forces for positive change and the constraining forces against change" (Swanson & Creed, 2014, p. 31). For example, the code *value*, was derived from multiple participant's perceptions, that community members may have voted in favor of the replacement tax levy, because they value higher education. Conversely, the code *lack of value,* was based on the perceptions of several participants who believed that the community members who did not support the levy also did not value higher education. Based on Lewin's forcefield analysis, the participant's perceptions that community members who voted "YES" in the election valued higher education, is considered a positive driving force, while those who voted "NO" because they did not value higher education, is a negative driving force. The community's perceptions represented by the code *value,* a code identified as a change enhancer (positive force), could be strengthened through community college initiatives "to direct forces away from the status quo" (Swanson & Creed, 2014, p.30). The community's perceptions represented by the code *lack of value,* a code identified as a change inhibitor (negative force), could be addressed by community college initiatives that would "decrease restraining forces that hinder move" (Swanson & Creed, 2014, p.30). Both *value* and *lack of value* are examples of codes with potential implications for change that may contribute to a more successful future levy campaign.

Table 1

Comparison of Research Question and Codes

Research Question	Codes
RQ1: What are the community members perceptions (positive and negative forces) about how community members voted on the replacement levy?	1. Value 2. Lack of value 3. Outreach 4. Services offered 5. Community presence 6. Success stories 7. Program offerings 8. Better marketing 9. Levy knowledge 10. Poor communication 11. Distrust 12. Competing levies 13. Poor communication 14. Timing

Findings

Four themes were identified through causation coding and by categorizing the 14 identified codes based on their similarities. The four resulting themes are as follows: (a) value of higher education, (b) opportunities, (c) knowledge of the levy, and (d) levy prioritization. All four themes align with both the research question and the conceptual framework (Table 2).

Table 2

Themes and Relevant Codes

Themes	Codes
1. Value of Higher Education	Value Lack of value
2. Opportunities	Outreach Community presence Services offered Success stories Program offerings Better marketing
3. Knowledge of the Levy	Levy knowledge Poor communication Distrust
4. Levy Prioritization	Competing levies Poor communication Timing

Theme 1: Value of Higher Education

The majority of the community members who participated in the study, shared a common perception that those who voted “YES” in support of the study site’s 2017 replacement tax levy, valued higher education. Participant 8 stated that the people who voted in favor of the levy, “probably have a college degree and have jobs, and understand the connection between college and what your future finances look like”. Participants were also in agreement that community members who had children or grandchildren attending the study site, or family members employed by the study site, may have supported the levy because they had a personal connection to the study site, and the study site's success would have a direct impact on their family.

Codes. The two codes that formed this theme are (a) value (b) and lack of value. Value was consistently mentioned in participant responses. Whether participants discussed the value of higher education as a whole or the value of the study site itself, all participants discussed that recognizable value was important in the levy vote.

Value. When discussing community member's willingness to support the levy, most participants felt that the support was based on community member's perceptions that there is value in higher education as a whole, there is value in having a successful community college in their community, and there are social benefits to the community regardless if members have a direct tie to the college. Participant 8 said "If your community is filled with educated people, hopefully, things are better for everybody". Participant 7 explained that with education, "there is a better opportunity for jobs and better opportunities for advancement and an improved social structure".

The study site has three academic centers in addition to the main campus, providing educational access in all four counties that comprise the study site's in-district region. The study site's physical presence in all four counties was significant. Participants felt that having that convenience was instrumental in the perception of value to the residents of the communities that are located a significant distance from the main campus. All participants believed that the academic centers provide local access to higher education which is instrumental in addressing the needs of students with limited financial resources and support, as well as the needs of non-traditional students. Participant 9 said

“Personally, the academic center helped me immensely”. The convenience of high school College Credit Plus (CCP) students having the opportunity to take college courses close to their high school, for free, was also perceived as a significant value.

Lack of value. All participants believed that those community members that did not support the tax levy did not value higher education, did not see the value of the study site, or did not have a personal connection with the study site. Participant 9 also felt that “there’s been a big switch to an animosity towards higher education” and that there was a local resident, who is an influential member of the community, “who was very vocal against college education” telling high school students that they could “go to a trade school and not waste their money on college”. Participant 4 stated that “This is a tough community to sell education to, and that is sad. In this area, a lot of people do not value higher education, or see the need for college, because they are making it and they are fine with that”. Participant 10 explained that “Improving educational services benefits the community as a whole regardless of whether or not you, or your children, are going to attend the college; but, most people just see the levy as more taxes, not a benefit to them. Participant 3 stated that “just because a person does not have a child that may attend the college, they are still going to benefit from the college’s success. It benefits the community, as a whole, to have that, and to have people staying in the area, and it creates a snowball effect of economic growth that I do not think people understand”. Participant 10 said “I think the biggest reason for the levy failure was that people do not want to shell more money out for something that they do not see a benefit from”.

The lack of community services provided to the communities, outside of tuition-based services, as perceived by the participants, was thought to be significant by the participants in the determination of value. Participants could not provide a single example of a community service provided by the study site. Therefore, participants felt that if you were not directly connected through the college as a graduate, a parent of a current or future student, or an employee of the college, or if you did not understand the social and economic benefits of higher education in your community, it may have been difficult for some community members to find a reason to support the levy.

Theme 2: Opportunities

Aside from the study site's presence in local parades and booths at the local county fairs, most participants could not provide examples of how the college maintains a presence in the community or supports the community outside of tuition-based activities. The participants discussed multiple methods that could be employed by the study site to increase community members' perceptions of value of the study site. Participant 2 stated that "There needs to be a whole different presentation of what the community college can do for the community". When Participant 9 was asked if there were any community benefits or services that the college provides that may have contributed to community members voting "YES", they responded "I do not really know if they are responsible for anything, and I'll be honest, I think that's another part of the levy failure".

Codes. The six codes that formed this theme are (a) outreach, (b) services offered, (c) community presence, (d) success stories, (e) program offerings, and (f) better marketing. While trying to draw out examples of community involvement that may have contributed to levy support, it became obvious that the majority of participants were not aware of any opportunities or services that the college offered outside of tuition-based education services. Participant 8 stated that the college is “quiet in this community”.

Outreach. When asked about community outreach, or opportunities that the college provides to the community, Participant 6 answered “I do not know of any off the top of my head”. The response of Participant 6 was not unique, as only one of the remaining 11 participants were able to name an opportunity or service that the college provides outside of tuition-based academics. Participant 6 went on to explain that if the college offered enrichment courses or workplace training, those opportunities would “go a long way in gaining community support”. Examples of potential opportunities that Participant 6 provided included “Lunch and Learns” on topics that would be useful in the workplace, such as Excel and Word, or courses offered at discounted rates through employers that would lead to earning a certificate.

Participant 10 discussed an opportunity that was given to them by another college years ago that they felt would be beneficial not only to the community, but also beneficial to the study site in gaining community support and recruiting students. The opportunity that Participant 10 discussed was a course offered to potential college students to learn more about college and how to get started. Participant 10 did not think that college would ever be possible for them. Their parents did not promote college, or even discuss college with them. Years later, as a working adult, Participant 10 was encouraged by coworkers about the possibility of going to college and proceeded to contact the college. At that time, the college was offering the introductory course free to the community, and students that completed the class were given their first college credit for free. Participant 10 said “That meant a lot to me”.

Services offered. Participant 9 was able to discuss one community outreach program that is offered on the main campus, a program that provides lunch to senior citizens on campus in the cafeteria, and stated “that is a great program on campus with the aging population”; however, they could not name any other programs or services provided on the main campus, at the academic centers, or in the community. Other participants were not able to name any services offered to the community by the study site. Participant 10 stated “I do not know if they have any programs or services that they offer, and if they do, I am not aware of it”. Participant 10 discussed programs offered by other area colleges such as after-school programs for children and summer programs for children to learn about science and actively participate in educational science projects.

Community presence. Multiple participants discussed that the study site is lacking a presence in the community. While multiple participants mentioned the college being in parades and having a booth at the local county fairs, Participant 9 said that was insignificant because other colleges were there, as well. Participant 2 added that in their home county, the study site is also at Job and Family Services events, and that leads to a perception that the college is “targeting the welfare population”. Participant 2 said “so they are at the county fair and the welfare events, but nowhere else, and that leaves a bad taste in the mouths of the working, tax-paying population”. Participant 5 also discussed the connection between government benefits and the study site. Participant 5 stated that through their employment they saw “a lot of people relying on it. They would get enrolled at the [study site], receive their school money, and pay their court fines with the money, with no intention of paying it back, or finishing their courses". Participant 5 also explained that due to recent limitations on government assistance, recipients run out of cash assistance after approximately 36 months. Participant 5 believes that case workers tell recipients that although no longer entitled to more cash, with enrollment in college, additional money is available. Participant 5 said "There is definitely a perception that there is a connection between the [study site] and the welfare population".

Multiple participants also discussed that the study site needs a greater presence in the local high schools. Participant 2 stated that they just became aware of the College Credit Plus (CCP) options offered to area high school students by the study site. Participant 2 said the only way they found out about it was through a letter sent to their child, a junior in high school, from the study site, not from the guidance counselor. Participant 6 explained that the high school guidance counselors do not promote the study site or the CCP offerings, and their child said, when they were a senior in high school, "I wish I had known about that option". Participant 9 stated that another college, that is over 60 miles from any part of the study site's four-county service area, "has more of a presence in the high school" than the study site. Participant 4 said "I do not think that there is enough information out at the high school level that is enticing students to look at the [study site] first, and that is big."

Participant 2 also discussed how the study site does not routinely send representatives to the various community organizations' meetings or political meetings, such as the Rotary Club meetings, Chamber of Commerce meetings, or the County

Commissioner's meetings. Participant 2 discussed that the study site needs to send a representative to the various meetings in the four-county district "just to let us know what the college is currently doing". In addition to meeting attendance providing a venue for information dissemination, Participant 2 explained that "the newspaper is always there and that is free advertising!". Participant 8 also discussed that if the college would offer to send guest speakers to civic club meetings, like the Rotary Club, to do presentations on programming or faculty research, it would increase community presence and would lead to promotion of the college through word of mouth like "Oh, we had this really interesting speaker from the college".

Participant 10 discussed that the study site could improve its community presence by offering different community education nights, college department events, speaking events, activities for children, and activities for senior citizens. Participant 10 stated "There is a lot of need in the community, and it would not be that hard to search out what is needed, or even what other colleges are doing". Participant 2 stated that "we need to see them as partners in our community".

Success stories. Participants discussed the potential impact of the study site publishing success stories of local students in marketing material and on the institution's website. Participant 5 said "I think seeing more local individuals that have benefited from an education from the [study site] and have had life-changing experiences because of that education, sharing their personal stories would be very beneficial". Participant 9 stated that "Some of these children do not believe they have a future to begin with. So, when you tell them that they can go to college and do this or that, they do not believe you. So, put out some success stories and show them that they really can".

Participant 8 discussed billboards that used to be in the area that made a huge impact on their decision to go to college for the first time as a working adult with a family. The billboards depicted children of Appalachia that had succeeded in earning a college degree. Participant 8 said "I always wanted to be on one of those signs, because for me, as a kid, to even think about going to college, I might as well have said I was going to the moon". Participant 8 and Participant 9, both said that children and adults alike, do not realize that a college education is possible, and they need to hear real stories about real people from their community succeeding.

Program offerings. Participants discussed that the study site needed to update their program offerings to better address the current market demands. Participant 4 said with so many high school students taking vocational programs, "I would love to see more of the type of programs that are offered at the high school level that require further training or credentials, to be offered at the [study site], especially considering most of our vocational students that do go on to college, go to another college that is not in our county". When I asked Participant 4 what vocational programs would work well with the high school's offerings, they said that the [study site] needed to offer a degree in welding to compliment the high school's vocational/technical welding program offerings. The significance of this response is that the study site "has offered a welding certificate since 2005, and an associate degree in welding since 2013" (Study Site School Chair, personal communication, February 7, 2020).

Participant 2 said that their child wants to major in computer forensics, but the closest program is at least 2 hours away. Participant 2 also said that in addition to more relevant degree majors, "community residents also want to see rigor in the programs". Participant 2 said "I wish my kid could go to the [study site], but that is just not an option right now". Participant 11 stated that "If the [study site] offered something that I needed; I would go there. But they do not offer anything that I need".

Participant 3 said "We need more local education opportunities. I am an alumnus of the [study site] and I think it needs a booster shot to get more variety of things that a local student coming out of high school is going to look for. Adult students also need programs that are going to help their career and their future". Participant 4 said that the study site needs to offer more programs for "people that are going to stay in the community but are not going to go for a four-year degree". Participant 3 also said "I think the traditional liberal arts programs are not as important in this area as career training, and I think that needs to be the focus".

Better marketing. Multiple participants discussed that the study site is substantially lacking in marketing their programs, services, and student outcomes. Participant 8 said that it is important to let people know the good things that are going on at the study sight such as "graduation rates compared to other local colleges, and program success stories". Participant 12 said that family members that live in a neighboring county of the study site's four-county district, do not know anything about the study site, and the study site needs to "put information out there! Put up fliers, advertise, do whatever you have to do to get that information out there!". Participant 9 said "That is the thing with the [study site], it is not marketed well". Participant 9 said, the study site has "a lot of good things happening. But who knows that? It is the best kept secret and that is not a good thing". Participant 2 said "I think that it is a really good time to rebrand the [study site] and make it more of a community partner, and a better option for local students. That is how the [study site] will win a replacement levy campaign".

Theme 3: Knowledge of the Levy

The knowledge of the levy, or lack thereof, proved to be a significant issue as perceived by the study participants. Prior to starting their interview, the majority of participants asked me to explain the levy and how the levy would have worked in each of the four counties. Most of the participants did not understand that the replacement levy had to pass in all four counties for the replacement levy to go into effect. A few participants thought that the replacement levy was different in each of the four counties, with their property tax dollars contributing to the campus in their county, not the entire institution.

The participants described a levy campaign that poorly communicated the purpose of the levy and what the generated funds would be used for, leaving community members with a sense of distrust in the study site and its administration. Additionally, participants discussed that the study site does not communicate with its communities served on a regular basis, which added to the community's limited knowledge of what the study site offers to its students and its communities.

Codes. The three codes that contributed to this theme include (a) levy knowledge, (b) poor communication, and (c) distrust. Participants believed that the lack of levy knowledge and poor communication of the levy's purpose, contributed to distrust, even in those community members that were supporters of higher education.

Levy knowledge. The majority of participants explained that most people did not know anything about the levy. Participant 9 stated that "no one understood what the levy was for" and felt that those who voted in support of the levy, were probably those who knew more about the levy through being a student at the college, or having someone in their family going to school there, or from working there. However, Participant 9 also revealed that in 2017, the year of the tax replacement levy, they were a student at the study site and "I had no clue that there was even a levy or even understood what it meant". Participant 5 explained that "there was not much communication about what the levy would mean dollar-wise". Participant 10 asked "Where was the levy money going? To improve the conditions of the college? To improve the technology of the college? Because those are the things that taxpayers want to know." Participant 2 stated that "The bottom line is that the community did not know anything about the levy. There was not enough education put out for the community".

Poor communication. In addition to the study site not providing enough information to the community about the tax levy, all participants discussed that the study site does not communicate well with its community in general. Participant 12 stated that community members do not know anything about the [study site] or the programs offered". Participant 12 also said "I do not even know what goes on over there! Do they have a volleyball team? Because if they did, I would go watch their home games." The significance of Participant 12's lack of knowledge of a volleyball team is that Participant

12 has lived 10 minutes from the main campus for 8 years, has lived in the four-county district their whole life, and the study site "has had a volleyball team since 1976" (Study Site Archivist, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Participant 11 added to the perception of poor communication when they commented that they had no idea that the study site had collegiate sports or residential dormitories. Participant 11's statement was significant because they had lived in the four-county district their whole life, and I confirmed with the study site's archivist that the college has been a residential campus since 1876, and the study site has offered collegiate sports since 1911 (Study Site Archivist, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Participant 10 stated "I think that they need to show what the college is doing in some manner". Participant 9 said that if "you do not take the initiative to check out the [study site] on your own, you will not know what they have to offer, because the communication is just not there".

Distrust. Participants were of the opinion, that due to the poor communication by the study site to the community about the intentions and logistics of the replacement tax levy, that community members were skeptical about the levy and how the funds generated would have been used. Participant 1 discussed that they had heard from community members that the levy-generated funds would most likely increase administrators' salaries. Participant 4 stated that "people want to know where their hard-earned money is going, and they are not going to just trust that the right things are going to be funded".

Participant 11 discussed that prior to the replacement tax levy proposition, the study site purchased land in one of the four counties, put in a driveway, and a sign that advertised that a facility was coming soon. Participant 11 stated that community members of that county believed that a new building would be built, eliminating the need for the academic center to be housed in an old high school building that has limited space and resources. Participant 11 said that community members looked at that land acquisition as a promise for better opportunities, but construction was not started, and then the study site put the tax levy on the ballot. Participant 11 said community members felt like the study site made it look like “We had money to start this project, but now we need more money”. Participant 11 said that regardless if that is actually what happened, that is how the community perceived it. Participant 11 stated that the land acquisition appeared to be a campaign ploy of false promises to get those community members to support the levy. Participant 11 said that “it did not look like good planning on the college’s part, and it was timed wrong in relationship to the replacement tax levy proposition”.

Participant 2 also discussed that after the levy failure, the study site “has fallen off of the map and slid behind the big curtain. Even for those that supported the levy, I do not think that the [study site] strongly said thank you for the support. The [study site] also did not ask for feedback about the levy failure, to figure out what was done right and what was done wrong. And that is a real problem”.

Theme 4: Levy Prioritization

Participant 12 provided a response that was a good representation of all participants’ responses. Participant 12 stated “If they did not know anything about the school, or the classes offered, then the levy was not a priority. The counties are poor around here, and people do not have the money to spend on more levies. People are just sick of paying taxes and feel taxed to death. Then you have to prioritize if you go to vote, and then there are six levies on the ballot? That is a very personal thing".

Codes. The three codes that formed this theme are (a) competing levies, (b) poor communication, and (c) timing. Participants believed that with multiple levies on the ballot in November 2017, community members had to prioritize which levies were important enough to them to justify the allocation of their limited resources. With limited knowledge of the study site's levy intentions, limited knowledge of the study site, limited appreciation of the value of higher education for the community, and multiple levies competing for funding, the participants believed that the study site's renewal levy was not a priority for community members.

Competing levies. Participants discussed that people do not like paying more taxes, and that it takes a clear demonstration of value to the taxpayer to garner support. Participants explained that community members may prioritize the levies on a ballot in terms of the perceived value to the individual. Participant 10 stated "For example, an adult that does not have kids, and the schools are trying to raise taxes to help pay for a new school or new buses, they may not see the benefit for that if they do not think it affects them". Participant 6 explained that "there were too many levies on that ballot! People will ask themselves what is the most important one? I will vote for one, or maybe two, and that is enough!". Participant 8 said that when prioritizing competing levies, the study site's replacement levy "would be down there on the bottom because it does not seem that important in comparison".

Poor communication. Participants did not believe that there was enough information presented to the voting community about why the replacement tax levy was needed and what the funds would be used for. Participant 1 said “They may have thought there was not enough information being provided for what their money was going towards. What is their goal for the money? People may be suspicious if enough information is not provided. People may not see something good about putting money into something that they do not know enough about”. Participant 1 stated that in the event that the study site attempts the replacement levy again, they need to “make sure the levy is worded well with complete start date and end date information. They also need to provide goals and explain what the generated money will be used for, and the results that they hope to see”. Participant 4 explained that “there are a lot of times that the first time someone reads a levy proposition is when they are in the voting booth with the ballot in front of them. If they do not know any background behind the levy proposition, and if the levy is worded poorly, or the first few lines are not well written, the voter will not support the levy”.

Timing. Participants discussed that the timing of the levy may have had an influence on voting behavior due to the number of issues on the ballot at that time. Participant 5 explained that at the time of the study site’s replacement levy, there were four or five levies on the ballot and most of them failed, and that it was probably a “cumulative effect. No more damn taxes!”. Participant 3 explained that there were several levies on their ballot that election and “I think people were just overwhelmed by it”.

Multiple participants also discussed a controversial levy that was on the same ballot in their county that drew a lot of attention, and Participant 4 felt that it “hugely affected the outcome” of the study site’s levy. Participant 10 explained that the controversial levy was heavily campaigned for in the community, and the community was provided extensive information about the levy’s intentions, leading to the study site’s levy being overshadowed because “everybody was so focused on the other levy and did not know about the [study site’s] levy at all”.

Participant 2 explained that through personal experience, putting issues such as levies on the May Primary, as opposed to Election Day, results in more favorable outcomes because there are fewer races on the ballot and there is less of a “likelihood of people coming out and organizing against you”. Participant 12 said “I always think things do better in the May Primary, rather than November, because everybody throws everything on in November”. Participant 7 felt that the November election is “too close to the holidays and the end of the year, when people are trying to pinch their pennies a little harder”. Participant 1 stated “I do not know if there is an ideal time to put a levy on, but maybe in the springtime, people are feeling more optimistic and may be more likely to support a levy.” Participant 11, on the other hand, felt that it does not matter when you put an education levy on the ballot because “educated people are more likely to support an education levy regardless of the timing”.

Participant 6 also discussed a local levy that was finally passed after multiple failed attempts by holding a special election. Participant 6 stated that it “took a ton of work, but it finally passed with a special election”. Participant 5 discussed their experience with special elections and said “If you are willing to pay for a special election, then you can just get the word out to the people that it means a lot to, and the anti’s are not usually that strong about getting out there to vote if there are no other things to vote on”. Participant 1 felt that holding a special election may prove beneficial because with regular elections, “there is too much, and voters become focused on one thing”. Participant 2 stated that with the current opinions of the study site in the community, a special election would not have a favorable outcome for the study site, but if the study site “was busting at the seams with new program ideas, and new promises to the community, then a special election would absolutely work for them”. Participant 1 stated that regardless of when the levy is placed back on the ballot, “The college needs to have somebody that is able to explain the levy to people in-depth, and be able to answer any questions that they may have, because that did not happen the last time”.

Conclusion

A basic qualitative design was used to examine community members’ perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site’s replacement levy. Twelve participants were secured through purposeful sampling. The selection of participants through purposeful sampling provided a strategy for selecting cases that were in alignment with the study’s purpose and best suited for answering the primary questions of the study (Patton, 2015). From the data that was mined from the 12 participant interviews, I was able to provide thick and rich descriptions of the community members’ perceptions of the study site’s replacement levy failure, providing detailed answers to the study’s research question.

RQ1: What are the community members perceptions (positive and negative forces) about how community members voted on the replacement levy? Findings suggest that there are a few positive forces that may have contributed towards community support of the failed replacement tax levy including convenience of the academic centers, community members that value higher education, and community members that have personally benefited from their education received from the study site. Findings were more significant regarding the negative forces that may have contributed to community members' lack of levy support including a lack of levy knowledge, a lack of perceived value of the study site, a lack of perceived value of higher education, poor communication from the study site, a lack of marketable program offerings, a lack of marketing of the study site, competing levies, and a lack of community presence by the study site.

Based on my findings, and the application of Lewin's forcefield analysis, the study site has multiple weaknesses, or negative forces, that need to be addressed before another replacement tax levy should be considered again. Conversely, the study site has a few strengths, or positive forces, that need to be strengthened through better marketing strategies. Additionally, the strengths and weaknesses, or positive and negative forces, need to be addressed, not only for future levy campaign purposes, but to strengthen its ties with the community for improved student enrollment, improved student retention, and overall improved community relations. The project deliverable is a white paper to be shared with the college leaders, to provide a summary of the findings of the study and recommendations for positive organizational change.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In November 2017, a financially struggling community college located in rural Appalachia placed a replacement tax levy on the ballot in its four-county service area. The decision to propose a replacement tax levy was based on a feasibility study conducted by an external consulting firm in the four-county district, that suggested that the tax referendum would pass with minimal campaigning. The replacement tax levy proposal failed in each of the four counties, leaving the community college's administration with a lack of understanding as to why the levy failed. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition.

Based on the findings of this research study, community members that supported the levy may have chosen to do so because they value higher education and realize the societal benefits that the presence of a local institution of higher education can bring to a community. However, many community members are tired of paying property taxes for services that do not demonstrate a direct value to the taxpayer. Community members described the November 2017 levy campaign, as conducted by the college leadership, as inadequate in informing the community about the levy and its purpose. Community members may be more inclined to support a future tax levy if the community college improved its marketing practices, increased communication and transparency with the community, offered more marketable programs of study, demonstrated a stronger presence in the community and local high schools, and offered more services to the community outside of tuition-based education. Community members also suggested that placing a future tax levy on the May Primary, as opposed to the November Election Day, or holding a special election, may prove more successful due to a decreased number of propositions on those ballots.

In alignment with my research findings, I chose to write a white paper that summarized the findings of my research and provided recommendations to the community college's administration, for the purpose of strengthening community relations, and planning for a more successful future replacement tax levy campaign. In this section, I will provide the rationale in choosing a white paper for my project, a review of the literature in alignment with my research findings, the description of my project, an evaluation plan for my project, and potential implications of my project.

Rationale

In November 2017, the study site, a financially struggling community college in rural Appalachia, experienced a significant disappointment when a proposed replacement tax levy failed in the election. The administration did not understand what contributed to the significant failure because a feasibility study, conducted by an external consulting agency prior to the election, led college leaders to believe that the levy would pass. By conducting interviews of community members at the local level, I found that the value of higher education may be in question at the local level, in both theoretical and applied contexts. To improve community members' perception of the value of higher education, specific to the local community college, participants suggested that the community college increase their community outreach efforts, provide more services to the community, and increase their presence in the community. Study participants demonstrated a desire for the community college to improve their marketing efforts, with specific references to the sharing of student and graduate success stories. Additionally, research findings suggested that the community college need to offer more programs that are more relevant to the local industry demand. Study participants discussed how the proposed tax levy was poorly communicated, with the lack of communication contributing to distrust in the purpose of the levy, which ultimately led to community members ranking the levy low in priority when compared to other levy proposals on the ballot.

The findings of this study could be beneficial to the administration of the community college in future planning efforts to improve community support of the community college, and in planning for a more successful future levy campaign. To share the findings of this study, the presentation of a white paper to the community college's administration and board of trustees would be an appropriate project genre. The purpose of a white paper is to advocate for certain solutions that address specific problems (Purdue University, n.d.). Through my research, I have identified problems and potential solutions to those problems, that may prove beneficial to the community college in improving community support of the college and in planning for a more successful future levy campaign. The synthesis of current literature and research in alignment with my study findings, will provide a mechanism for ensuring the appropriateness of the solutions proposed in my white paper.

Review of the Literature

In this literature review, I have provided a review of the current literature and research to expand on the community members' perceptions of the levy failure and their recommendations for the community college to increase community support, and plan for a more successful future tax levy campaign. I began my literature review by searching EBSCO, Education Source, ERIC, and SAGE Journals databases. The search terms that I used included *community engagement, higher education marketing, community partnerships, community college funding, K-12 tax referenda, voter behavior, community engagement, and election timing.*

In addition to conducting a literature review to expand upon the research findings of this study, I also reviewed the literature specific to the benefits and purposes of the white paper in guiding institutional change. The literature review of the white paper provides evidence of the appropriateness of a white paper as the genre of this project study. I began my literature review of white papers by searching EBSCO, Education Source, ERIC, and SAGE Journals databases. The search terms that I used included *white paper purpose, white paper benefits, white paper in education, white paper in higher education, and white paper initiatives.*

In this section I provide a synthesis of the current literature. I begin with a review of the white paper to demonstrate that it is an appropriate choice to address the research problem, share research findings, and provide possible solutions. Then I discuss the current research that addresses the four themes generated from this study: (a) value of higher education, (b) opportunities, (c) knowledge of the levy, and (d) levy prioritization.

White Paper Genre

According to Kolowich (2018), “a whitepaper is a persuasive, authoritative, in-depth report on a specific topic that presents a problem and provides a solution”. White papers are commonly used in multiple disciplines to “discuss challenges and issues faced in the industry and provide solutions on how to overcome them” (Corporate Finance Institute, 2020). The use of a white paper to convey the research findings and provide recommendations to college leadership is consistent with current practices in higher education research and policy development as demonstrated by current white papers in the higher education industry. Examples of recent white papers in higher education are described as follows: In 2019, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (Tandberg, Bruecker, & Weeden, 2019) published a white paper on the state’s role in ensuring quality and consumer protection in higher education. McAlvage and Rice (2018) published a white paper for improving digital accessibility in K-12 education and higher education that provided definitions for concepts that related to digital accessibility, practical and policy perspectives, and helpful references and resources. In 2019, Sullivan and Stergios published a white paper with the goals of increasing education options available to parents and students, driving system-wide reform, and ensuring accountability in public education.

A white paper is an “in-depth report that focuses on a specific problem and the solutions to that problem” (Medina, 2017). In terms of this study, the problem was the levy failure. The problem was exacerbated by the college administrators not having a clear understanding as to what went wrong in 2017. The white paper that has been written as the result of the research findings provides valuable insight into the problem, including the problem's contributing factors as perceived by community members, and a list of potential solutions based on the research participants' feedback.

Value of Higher Education

Community members believed that one of the key contributors to the voting behaviors of community members was the value of higher education as perceived by community members. Participants felt that the perception of value was personal, with community members' voting behavior affected by their beliefs about the value of higher education as a whole, and their beliefs about the value of the community college. The concept of the value in higher education has been a common platform in American politics linking education to "economic strength, social justice for society, and a better life for individuals" (Novakovic, 2019, p.758). To clearly demonstrate value to the community served, community colleges are charged with a mission to provide access to higher education, equity in the delivery of higher education, and demonstrate responsiveness to the needs of the community served (Soto, 2019). The demonstration of value by institutions of higher education is often evaluated in terms of their relevance and the contributions they make to the communities that they serve (DePrince & DiEnno, 2019). Tomlinson (2018) explained that the purpose of higher education, and the perception of benefits to both the individual, and society, contributes to the concept of value.

Opportunities

To increase the perception of the value of higher education in the community, and the value of the community college, study participants provided numerous suggestions for the community college's administration. Those suggestions included improving community outreach, increasing the college's presence in the community, increasing services offered to the public, sharing success stories of local students and graduates, providing more relevant and marketable programs of study, and developing a better marketing strategy.

Outreach. At a time when higher education institutions are "encountering greater competition, cutbacks in public financing, and a more heterogeneous body of incoming students, the need to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the process of recruiting and retaining students is evident" (Trullas, Simo, Fusalba, Fito, & Sallan, 2018, p.266). Students often desire to go to college, but even qualifying for college is not always enough to see their dream through. Students commonly face barriers that may prevent applying to college such as finances, a lack of college-readiness, a lack of college information, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities (Rosecrance et al., 2019). One recommendation made by participants for improving the college's outreach, student recruitment efforts, and student support included offering a free "Introduction to College" course. There was a common feeling amongst participants that many potential students in the community college's service area do not believe that college is an option for them. Whether it is due to financial constraints, lack of family support, lack of confidence, or a lack of knowledge about how to get started, it was believed that offering a free course could potentially open doors for potential students that would fall through the cracks otherwise. According to a Public Agenda Report (2017), well-constructed community outreach can “help unearth critical internal and external obstacles to student success and generate solutions that can be collaboratively pursued” (p.3). Spearheading a similar initiative, Chattanooga State Community College, has developed a successful project that provides a 15-hour, two-week program to students where they “develop a self-reflection inventory, explore career options and pathways, and get connected with a mentor from a local business” (Finley, 2016, p.16).

Another recommendation made by study participants would be for the community college to offer “Lunch and Learns” or other educational opportunities in the workplace that could lead to new certifications. According to Nagele, Neuenschwander, and Rodcharoen (2018), completing further education and training “helps an individual to advance his or her career, gain access to employment, and sustain and develop skills needed for innovation and sustainability in a changing and competitive labor market” (p.265). One example of a topic for workplace learning provided by a participant was Excel software, a practical skill that is important in their workplace. The participant stated that most of their coworkers struggled to use it correctly. According to Uncles, (2018), Excel proficiency, as well as other software program proficiencies are practical skills, and meeting the educational demand of the workforce is in tune with meeting “the expectations of major stakeholders who are looking for the realization of social benefits” (p.188). Rural community colleges have the responsibility to “anticipate and respond to the evolving, and often niche, workforce needs of the companies that support regional economies" by "partnering with workforce organizations, adult basic-education, and a variety of other community-based organizations to provide adults and non-traditional learners with supportive, streamlined, educational pathways toward family-sustaining jobs" (Buckwalter & Togila, 2019, p.2).

Services offered. It has become a common practice around the world for higher education institutions to explore "new strategies to improve the quality and strengthen their potential to offer greater value to both institution and the communities in which they engage" (Holland & Malone, 2019, p.1). Unfortunately, my research findings indicated that the community college study site is lacking in offering services to the community, as only one participant was able to provide an example of a service offered to the community by the college: a lunch program for senior citizens on the main campus of the college. It has long been recognized that university-community engagement and collaboration is an important role for institutions of higher education, "and more important, and more impactful, when such engagement occurs in regional settings; between regional communities and universities with regional campuses" (Murphy & McGrath, 2018, p.321). Additionally, developing community services that allow for the sharing of limited resources and student collaboration, leads to "the creation of strong, functional, long-term relationships within a community or government directly and immediately provides visible and tangible benefits to the citizens" (Shelton, 2019, p.62). The lack of existing community services provided by the college not only provides an opportunity for the college to improve its relationship with its community, but also in achieving one of higher education's important goals, "for students to learn to be responsible civic participants" (Li & Frieze, 2016, p.775).

Community presence. Another issue that presented itself during the participants' interviews was the common perception that the community college does not have a significant presence at various community and civic group events. One key concern as conveyed by research participants, was that the community college sends representatives to participate in local parades, county fairs, and events sponsored by Job and Family Services, but their presence at civic or political organizations is limited. Participants also stated that the community college does not have a significant presence in the local high schools as compared to other colleges located outside of the four-county community college service area.

The community college's presence at events sponsored by Job and Family Services was presented as an area of contention by a few research participants. The perception was that the community college was targeting the "welfare" population, but not the general population, contributing to opinions that the college was not a good option for the working class. To contextualize this issue, the community college is located in a socioeconomically depressed region of Appalachia, with high poverty and unemployment rates. According to national data, the percentage of students from low-income households enrolling in college has been increasing over the past several decades (United States Government Accountability Office, 2018). While participants seemed offended by the community college's attentive nature to the "welfare" population, by almost every sociological measure "college has been shown to provide economic and social advantage" (Mannon, 2018, p.280) to those completing a college education. There was also a common perception that government aid recipients were using college enrollment as a means to “get a check” with no intention of completing a degree or seeking gainful employment. However, while the “blame for the low success rates of the welfare-to-work population is placed squarely on the welfare-to-work participants themselves” (Pizzolato & Olson, 2016, p. 572), community colleges are charged with the goal of addressing adult education and literacy, helping residents transition from public welfare to self-sufficiency (Iowa Department of Education, 2016). To address current insufficiencies in the transition, innovative strategies should be employed to “create pathways and provide integrated services to improve students’ academic, employment, and financial stability in the short-term, while laying a foundation for long-term economic success” (Sullivan, Price, Fox, & Person, 2018, p.1).

One method suggested by participants to offset the community college’s “welfare targeting” and improve community relations would be to increase the college’s presence in the local high schools. Research has found that community colleges serve a large percentage of at-risk students, and in terms of the high school graduate, these students may be from low-income families, potentially first-generation college students, and may require remedial coursework in English and math (Page et al., 2019). To help address potential barriers, high school administrators are strongly encouraged to implement best practices that include “encouraging academic achievement, building students’ college aspirations, informing students of college options, helping students with the admission and financial aid processes, and providing access to college counseling” (Duncheon & DeMatthews, 2019, p.270). Current research supports that “student’s college-related social capital is enhanced through social relations with college admissions offices and college tours" (Clayton, 2019, p.1423). To augment the development of a college-going culture, community college leaders should host "community conversations with K-12 school districts to develop a common understanding of college readiness and success" (American Association of Community Colleges & Association of Community College Trustees, 2018).

Success stories. Many study participants suggested that the community college publish student success stories. Participants believed that by sharing success stories, the college could promote positive outcomes and improve the college's reputation in the community. Additionally, it was also suggested that sharing success stories could provide much needed encouragement to the underserved student considering a college education. In current college marketing research, the use of success stories has proven effective in recruiting and retaining students and are considered a cost-effective marketing tool for colleges with limited resources (Talarico, 2017). Additionally, research conducted by Martin and Martin (2018) indicated that the use of success stories was especially meaningful to students when stories "featured people with whom they shared a common background or people or places that they could relate to on a personal level" (p.21). According to Polkinghorne, Roushan, and Taylor (2017), "the future marketing of higher education will therefore be dependent on the ability of individual institutions to demonstrate levels of teaching excellence delivered to past and existing students" (p.214).

Program offerings. Study participants discussed the need for more local educational programs of study that were marketable and would translate into gainful employment. Participants stated that aside from the community college's allied health and manufacturing technology programs, the college's program offerings were outdated. Per the study participants, the increase in relevant and marketable programs could address local workforce needs, appeal to the community's non-traditional or underserved students, and provide an incentive to local high school students to attend college close to home.

The mission of community colleges has always included an emphasis on occupational education and training, however, in today's highly technological world, the workforce demand for graduates with competitive technical skills has challenged community colleges to update programs of study, offer new marketable programs of study, and deliver curriculum to prepare students for today's workforce (Jacoby, 2019). Additionally, students are steering away from a more traditional liberal arts education, "seeking direct financial, rather than broader experiential benefits from their educational pursuits" (Hoskins & Brown, 2017, p.188). The increased competitive nature that exists in today's higher education industry, has led higher education institutions to "increase their market share by expanding and diversifying their offerings and their scope of their recruitment to attract and serve new subgroups that have not been tapped" (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 316). Recommendations for college leaders include an emphasis on ensuring that new curriculum is developed that emphasizes the training and development of knowledge and interdisciplinary knowledge, and the formation and development of professional competencies, to augment student personal and professional success (Tudor, 2017).

Better marketing. The research findings identified a significant need for the community college to develop a marketing plan and aggressively market the community college. In addition to participants knowing very little about the programs that the college offered, they identified other key characteristics of the community college that were not well known, such as residential housing options on the college's main campus and the existence of numerous collegiate sports. Participants demonstrated an eagerness to learn about program outcomes, graduation rates, and job placement rates, especially in comparison to competing area colleges. Research findings also suggest that the community college needs to evaluate its brand and consider rebranding as a mechanism for improving institutional viability (Dholakia, 2017; Erdogmus & Ergun, 2016).

According to Li, Granizo, and Gardo (2016), institutions of higher education "have become a highly competitive market, where consumers (i.e. students) are highly involved in their choices, and managers need to focus on competitive edges" (p.855). While branding of higher education institutions has been met with resistance from academics, marketing and branding strategies are becoming more commonplace in higher education due to the increasingly competitive world, with those institutions engaging in internal brand management experiencing greater financial success (Dholakia, 2017). The successes of institutions of higher education attributed to branding has resulted in branding being "increasingly used as a mechanism of differentiation among competitors to attract prospective students" (Stephenson, Heckert, & Yerger, 2016, p. 489).

According to Erdogmus and Ergun (2016), “branding has become an important tool to leverage a university’s position in the market, increase number of student applications, step up its position in rankings, improve graduate career prospects, or gain institutional support of the authorities” (p.141).

In light of current trends in higher education that include decreasing enrollments, decreasing retention rates, and increasing competition for students, colleges are encouraged to take “a services approach to marketing higher education” (Cao, Foster, Yaoyuneyong, & Krey, 2019, p. 134). A few marketing strategies suggested by current research include the use of slogans, engaging stakeholders through social media, and utilizing alumni to target various stakeholders by sharing their experiences. Colleges are encouraged to develop slogans as part of their marketing plan because slogans “usually target all college stakeholders without differentiation, even though these stakeholders may have quite different connections to the organization” (Kovalenko, 2019, p.653). In addition to utilizing slogans, social media marketing can be a valuable tool for higher education institutions as it can target multiple stakeholders, not just current students (Brech, Messer, Vander Schee, Rauschnabel, & Ivens, 2017). Through the strategic use of social media, colleges have the opportunity to “amplify psychological engagement with students and to increase influence impressions by following student(s)-to-student(s) conversations and stories” (Bolat & O’Sullivan, 2017, p.742). According to Fujita, Harrigan, and Soutar (2017), “given the communal and altruistic nature of universities and because students are often at the forefront of the social media phenomenon, social media brand communities provide a significant relationship marketing opportunity for higher education institutions" (p.149). Additionally, the development of alumni relations should be an important component of college marketing plans as "students' loyalty to their university is a multiphase concept that stretches from enrollment to graduation and beyond" (Koenig-Lewis, 2016, p.59).

Knowledge of the Levy

The lack of knowledge of the community college's levy proposition was presented as a major issue with the study participants. The levy proposition was described as being poorly communicated, with vague information presented to the public. The lack of information and poor communication contributed to feelings of distrust about the administrative practices of the college leadership and the intentions of the proposed levy.

Levy knowledge. The general consensus of the research participants was that most community members did not have enough information about the levy proposal to make an educated decision at the polls. Research findings indicate that community members did not know the purpose of the levy, what the increase in funds would finance, the terms of the levy, or how supporting the levy would benefit the community. Current research of K-12 school levy failures indicates that the most significant reason that school levy propositions fail is a lack of communication between school systems and the voters (Rominiak, 2018). According to Braidwood (2016), "propositions providing more information to voters increases the likelihood of support for those measures" (p.29). Additionally, in today's election environment, providing high-quality, ongoing and targeted communication throughout the year is imperative to a successful school levy campaign (Lifto & Nichol, 2019). To enhance communication with the public, and increase the potential for levy success , Holt (2017) recommended that the school administration should form a levy support group, made up of local citizens with differing demographics, to disseminate accurate information; utilize multiple forms of media advertising to reach stakeholders; and utilize door-to-door personal campaigning tactics.

Poor communication. In addition to a lack of communication about the proposed tax levy, research findings also suggest that the community college does not consistently communicate with the residents of the community it serves. Participants conveyed a desire to know more about the community college events and activities. Participants felt that if the college included its community more, the community may be more likely to support college initiatives, including a future tax levy. According to Gavazzi (2018), “higher education leaders should take co-responsibility for engaging their host communities, especially before major problems arise” (p.8). Based on recent research, to gain greater community support, colleges should “engage in volunteer activities that increase visibility in the community, hold more events on campus, and generate more publicity about campus news and events” (Gavazzi, 2015).

Distrust. Research findings suggest that due to the lack of information made available to community members regarding the tax levy proposal, community members did not trust that the funding generated by the tax levy would be used appropriately. Research participants described the lack of information and transparency as contributing to community distrust of the community college administration and the intentions of the levy. According to Lindgren (2018), political pledges and propositions should be well articulated so that voters can easily grasp their intentions. Recent social psychology research supports that even "very modest alterations in how a decision is described or structured can have outsized effects on the choices that people make" (Gerber, Huber, Biggers, & Hendry, 2016, p.7112). Improving communication with community members through multiple channels, including social media, can contribute to the feeling of membership in the college community, and the development of loyalty and trust (Nevzat, Amca, Tanova, & Amca, 2016).

Levy Prioritization

Research findings describe the community college replacement tax levy proposal as being poorly communicated to the community members, which contributed to a lack of prioritization by voters when compared to competing levy propositions. Participants recommended that a future levy campaign should provide comprehensive information about the levy purpose and the community college's plans how the generated money would be used. Additionally, participants discussed the timing of the vote and made recommendations for the timing of a future tax levy that may have implications for a more successful future campaign.

Competing levies. Participants described their November 2017 ballot as having multiple levy propositions for their consideration. The primary concern, based on research findings, was that community members have limited financial resources, and the decision to support a levy is based on their personal finances and a levy proposal's demonstration of direct benefit to the taxpayer. Current research has shown that taxpayers are more likely to support tax levies that are earmarked, specifically those that support emergency services such as police, fire protection, or emergency medical services

(Martin, Lopez, & Olsen, 2019). Furthermore, when multiple levies are on a ballot, decisions are often made in sequential order, which may contribute to choice fatigue, when the act of decision making becomes exhaustive to the voter and may contribute to abstention in voting on propositions (Augenblick & Nicholson, 2016). However, Matsusaka (2016), proposed that in terms of taxation proposals, choice fatigue may not be as relevant as the likelihood that voters "have a target budget in mind and will only tax themselves (or approve spending) until that target budget is depleted" (p.274).

Poor communication. Research findings suggest that the community did not have enough information about the levy proposal to feel comfortable about supporting it. Improved communication can assist in taxpayer prioritization of levy proposals as the dissemination of information about a proposal can increase "certainty about the consequences of a proposition" (Stutzer, Baltensperger, & Meier, 2018, p.1). According to Alvord and Rauscher (2019), while there may be a number of reasons why voters are not aware of local ballot issues, information and perceptions have importance in how voters choose to support propositions. In addition to needing more information about the proposal prior to the election, study participants conveyed the need for better wording on the ballot. Recent research suggests that the quantity and type of information presented on the ballot may influence voting behavior, with shorter more concise ballot statements gaining more support (Kreye, Adams, & Kline, 2019).

Timing. Research findings of this study regarding the timing of a future tax levy proposal suggested that placing a future tax levy proposal on the May Primary, or conducting a special election, as opposed to the November Election Day, could contribute to a more favorable outcome. While extensive research exists on the timing of elections and the potential impact on outcomes, the consequences of timing are not straightforward because as turnout changes, voter characteristics such as partisanship, ideology, demographics, and occupational background also change" (Kogan, Lavertu, & Peskowitz, 2018, p.638). However, "off-cycle elections were designed to increase the influence of informed voters in local elections" (Benedictis-Kessner, 2017, p.120). According to Holt (2017), one strategy that has proven critical to the success of school levy campaigns and could be invaluable in strategically timed campaigns, is the use of citizen support groups that are charged with the primary responsibility of informing and educating the public.

Conclusion

The demonstration of value to the community served by a community college can be improved in a multitude of ways including community outreach, an increased presence in the community, and by offering more services to the population served. Community college recruitment and retention efforts can be improved by offering more marketable and relevant programs of study, sharing student and graduate success stories, and by implementing a strategic marketing plan that targets all stakeholders. To improve the success of a levy campaign, college administration needs to plan a campaign that emphasizes communication with the community to enhance knowledge of the purpose of the levy and decrease community distrust. While the different timing strategies of levy campaigns have both pros and cons, community college leaders can weaken the impact of competing levies on the ballot through concise ballot wording that clearly explains the levy proposal and implications.

Project Description

After conducting the literature review specific to my study findings, I have written a white paper (Appendix A) to be presented to the community college administration and board of trustees. My white paper explains the background and rationale of my study, key points from my literature review, an explanation of the study population and sample size, and descriptions of the data collection method and analysis. The white paper also describes the main findings of my research, recommendations to address the findings, and a description of the potential implications of my research.

Resources Needed and Existing Supports

The resources needed for this white paper project are minimal. The white paper will be shared with college leaders by email. To share my white paper with the college leaders, I will need internet access and access to the college leaders' institution-specific email addresses. After the white paper has been distributed to the college leaders, I will need access to different communication methods for answering their questions or having discussions regarding the study's findings. The different communication methods that I may need access to include Microsoft Teams, Skype, email, and the telephone.

The supports needed for the execution of this project are already in place. I have access to reliable internet service daily, both at my home and in my personal office at the community college. I currently have access to the community college administrators' institutional email addresses as a current faculty member of the college with an institutional email account. To send the white paper by email to the community college's board members, I am required to submit my email to a specific administrative assistant at the college who will then forward the email to the board members. The process of submitting an email to the administrative assistant for dissemination to board members is an established practice at the college. For answering any questions that the college leaders may have, or for facilitating further discussion of the research findings, the required technologies are already available and in place. As a current faculty member at the community college, I have Microsoft Teams and Skype subscriptions provided by the community college on my personal laptop and on my personal computer located in my personal campus office. Additionally, for telephone conversations, I have a personal cellphone, a landline at home, and a landline in my personal office on campus.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions

While I originally planned to present my white paper to college administrators and board members at a community college board of trustees meeting, I have encountered a barrier. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the board of trustee meetings are no longer an option due to social distancing precautions that have been put into place by government leaders and college leaders at the study site. To address this barrier, I will send a copy of my white paper to all college leaders and board members by email as soon as I have approval from Walden University. Included in the email, I will offer to present my white paper at a future meeting, either in person or by virtual technology, such as Skype or Microsoft Teams. Additionally, in the email, I will invite questions and feedback via Skype, Microsoft Teams, telephone or email.

Timeline for Implementation

The findings of this research study, and an exhaustive review of the current literature and research, contributed to the development of my recommendations. The goals of my recommendations are to provide research-based guidance for improving the community college's relationship with the community it serves, and for planning for a more successful future levy campaign. The majority of the recommendations involve the creation of initiatives or the development of programs that would need to be put into action six months to one year before another replacement tax levy was proposed. In the following sections, I describe the recommendations and recommended timelines for implementation.

Student success stories. The recommendation to publish local student success stories is based on the study's findings that student success stories are valued by community members. To implement this recommendation, college leaders would need to direct a plan for collecting and publishing student success stories. While the collection of success stories may fall under the marketing department's responsibility; students, graduates, and faculty will play a vital role in providing these stories for consideration. While future published student success stories may contribute to more successful marketing and community support of the college, the use of the success stories as a campaign tool for a future replacement tax levy would need to be implemented at least six months prior to the future election. The six-month time period would allow for dissemination of the success stories through multiple channels including social media, institutional marketing materials, and the institution's website. Therefore, this initiative would need to be started at least nine months prior to the election to allow for story collection, publication, and dissemination to the public.

Summer programs for local youth. The recommendation for the community college to offer summer programs for the local youth is based on the study findings. Participants recommended that the community college offer summer programs to children of the four-county district to provide educational opportunities to the local youth. The summer programs, per the research findings, could be perceived as a value to the community, potentially affecting how community members would vote on a future levy proposal.

Because this initiative would occur in the summer months, the program would have to be offered the summer before the future levy proposal vote. If college leaders chose to place the replacement tax levy proposal on the May Primary ballot, the program would need to occur the summer of the prior year. In addition to running the program the prior year, the college would need to be advertising for the current year's summer program, even though it would occur after the election. If the levy proposal was put on the November Election Day ballot, the program would have to be offered, at minimum, the summer leading up to the election. By offering the program at least once before the levy vote, and advertising for another session to occur after the levy vote, the community members' support of the levy proposal may be augmented, especially by those community members with school-age children. The college's increase in providing services to the community it serves, and the demonstration of consistency may have positive implications on a future levy campaign.

Enrichment courses. The research conducted for this study found that community members were interested in taking enrichment courses through the community college. Research findings suggested that community members may be more willing to support a future replacement tax levy if they could personally benefit from services offered by the college. To realize a potential positive contribution to a more successful future levy campaign, enrichment courses would need to be offered to the community throughout the academic year leading up to the election.

Community services and outreach. The research findings suggest that the community college needs to increase the number of services offered to the community, as well as conducting more community outreach to improve community support. Research participants specifically mentioned the need for the college to provide more services and outreach to the senior citizens and youth of the four-county service area. To provide community services and outreach that may be considered valuable to the community members, the college would need to conduct research. Additionally, the research may help in the college leaders' decisions in determining what services and outreach measures are feasible for the college to offer. To realize the potential benefits of this initiative in planning for a more successful future levy campaign, the community services and outreach would need to be started six months to a year before the levy election. Research, planning, and implementation of the community services and outreach would need to be conducted 12 to 18 months before the levy election.

Improve programs of study options. A consistent theme that emerged from the research findings was the need for the community college to improve their academic program offerings. Community members conveyed the need for local programs of study that are more reflective of the community's needs and interests. To improve program offerings, the college would need to conduct assessments and feasibility studies of the local industry needs to determine which programs would be the most beneficial in terms of local industry demand.

There are many steps involved in offering new programs of study that are time intensive, for example, creation of the program and accreditation approvals. Since the process is lengthy, my recommendation would be to start this process as soon as possible. At the minimum, the programs would need to be in place and accepting students at the start of the academic year that precedes the future levy campaign and election.

Improve and increase marketing. Research findings suggest that community members do not know very much about the community college, the academic programs it offers, what services it provides, or what events happen on campus. Community members conveyed a desire to know more about the college and recommended that the college improve and increase marketing of all things related to the college. Community members believed that by improving the college's marketing strategy, or by re-branding the institution, more community members would be aware of what the college contributes to its community served.

Re-branding the community college, or improving the marketing strategy of the community college, would need to be initiated by the leaders of the college as soon as possible. While the re-branding, or improved marketing, may contribute to a more successful future levy campaign, it may also be beneficial to the struggling community college in terms of improved student enrollment rates. In terms of a future levy campaign, this initiative would need to be in place approximately one year before the levy election. Due to the research and planning involved in re-branding and developing a new marketing strategy, to contribute to a more successful future levy campaign, this initiative would need to be started approximately 18 months prior to the levy election.

Increase presence in local high schools. Research findings suggested that the community college does not have a strong presence in the high schools that are located in the four-county district of the community college. Research participants felt that this perceived lack of presence not only contributed to the 2017 levy failure, but also to the declining student enrollment at the community college. Research findings suggest that many local potential students, or their parents, do not know enough about the community college, its programs of study, or how to pursue a college education.

This initiative could be implemented quickly by the community college by coordinating outreach with the local high schools. Some examples of outreach could include college professors guest speaking in high school classes, providing more program-specific marketing materials, providing assistance to students and parents for FAFSA completions, and inviting students to events on campus. In terms of improving student enrollments, the community college should consider implementing this initiative as soon as possible. For potential future levy implications, this initiative needs to be in place and operational at least six months before the next levy election.

Representation at community meetings. The research findings also suggest that the community college needs a greater presence at community and political organization meetings throughout the four-county district. This initiative would be one of the easier ones to implement of the recommendations. Since the lack of representation at local meetings was significant to participants, this initiative should be implemented as soon as possible. In terms of a future replacement tax levy campaign, this initiative would need to be implemented at least six months prior to the future tax levy election.

Campaigning for a future levy. The most significant finding of this research study was that community members did not know enough about the replacement tax levy proposal to make an informed decision. The research findings also indicated that the lack of information available about the levy proposal also contributed to community members' distrust in the proposed levy. To address these issues, in the event of a future tax levy proposal, the community college leaders need to execute a more informative and transparent campaign. The community college should begin a campaign that is both informative and transparent nine months to one year before the election.

My Roles and Responsibilities

As the author of the white paper, it will be my responsibility to share my white paper with college leaders and board members. It is also my responsibility to respond to any feedback or questions that may arise once my white paper has been distributed. Additionally, it will be my responsibility to participate in future meetings for the planning of initiatives, if asked by college leadership, that have direct ties to my research findings.

Project Evaluation Plan

Outcomes-based Evaluation

In the event that the community college attempts another replacement tax levy, the findings of my research and the resulting recommendations will be evaluated. Utilizing an outcomes-based evaluation, the recommendations of this study can be assessed in terms of the effectiveness of the study's recommendations in planning for a more successful future levy campaign. In this section, I describe the method for evaluating the recommendations that were developed based on the research findings.

Justification for Outcomes-based Evaluation

Outcomes-based evaluation is a "systemic way of assessing the extent to which a program has achieved its intended result" (New York State Library, 2017). In higher education, outcomes-based evaluation is a process that can be used for "collecting information that will tell the college whether the services, activities, or experiences it offers are having the desired impact" (San Diego Mesa College, 2017). An outcomes-based evaluation is an appropriate method of assessing this project because of its proven usefulness in "aggregating individual measures for the purpose of discovering group strengths and weaknesses that can guide improvement actions" (Banta & Palomba, 2015, p.1).The ultimate assessment for this study would be the results of a future levy campaign, if the recommendations of this study were implemented. However, to accurately assess this study's impact on a future tax levy campaign, I will need to conduct an evaluation following the election, based on the following questions: Did the community college increase marketing to the community, including student success stories? Did the college create marketing initiatives to strengthen their existing brand or did they implement a re-branding strategy? Did the college create and offer any summer programs for local youth? Did the college add enrichment courses to their offerings at all campus locations? Did the college increase community services and outreach efforts specifically to senior citizens and children? Did the college update their program offerings in response to local industry demands? Was a free "Introduction to College" course offered to the public? Did the college increase its presence in the local high schools? Did the college increase representation at community organization and community political meetings in all four counties? Did the college increase their communication with the public, improving transparency, regarding the tax levy proposal?

The evaluation of the outcomes can be conducted through communication with the key departments on the college's campus, including admissions and marketing. Additionally, assessment of the college's presence in the local high schools can be achieved through communication with the administration and guidance counselors of the local high schools. In communicating with local high schools and departments of the college, I will ask for evidence of these activities. The evidence can be presented in narrative form by staff or administrators, or through documentation of activities (website announcements, newspaper articles, etc.).

Overall Goal and Stakeholders

This section provides a description of the overall goal of the project in relation to stakeholders of the project.

Overall goal. The overall goal of this project is to provide the community college administrators and board of trustees with direct feedback from the community it serves to improve community relations, improve institutional viability, and contribute to a more successful future levy campaign. The goal of the evaluation plan is to determine what recommendations were implemented, if the implemented recommendations were effective, and to determine how the recommendations affected the future replacement tax levy campaign outcome.

Stakeholders. There are multiple stakeholders that may realize a benefit from the findings and recommendations of this study. The stakeholders of this study and its resultant project include current students at the community college, potential community college students, the local community, local businesses, community college faculty and staff, community college administration and board of trustees, and the community college itself. The following section provides a description of each stakeholder and the potential for positive social change.

Students as stakeholders. Current and potential students may benefit from the findings and recommendations of this study. The current student body is made up of both traditional and non-traditional students. While the current student body is predominantly made up of commuting students, a portion of students are residential and live in the dormitories on the main campus. Potential students include adult students and current high school students. The potential benefits to current and potential students may include improved programs of study choices, improved student support services, improved financial support of programs, campus technology, and the physical campus, in addition to an improved connection with the community.

The local community as a stakeholder. The community college district is comprised of four counties in rural Appalachia, with a physical campus or branch campus operating in each county. The community college's community is comprised of residents living in the multiple villages, towns, and rural areas within the four counties. The community member composition includes farmers, local industry employees, K-12 students, college students, retirees, unemployed residents, and government assistance recipients. The local community may benefit from the findings and recommendations of this study through increased community services and outreach, summer programs for local youth, and a strengthened community college better able to serve educational and career needs of its local residents.

Local businesses as stakeholders. The community college's four-county service area is home to numerous types of businesses and industry. Types of business and industry present in the community include farming, timber harvesting, manufacturing, electric generation plants, health care, grocery/retail supply chains, restaurants, state parks and forestry services, and trucking. The four-county district is also home to numerous grade schools, middle schools, and high schools. Local businesses and industry may benefit from the study's findings and recommendations through new programs of study and new community services. New programs of study may better prepare graduates in addressing the needs of local employers when hiring new employees. A community service recommended by this study was offering workplace training or "Lunch and Learns". This community service may benefit local business and industry by providing an opportunity for employees to receive occupational training while on the job.

Community college faculty and staff as stakeholders. As stakeholders, the community college faculty and staff can be described in terms of current employees and potential future employees. The current faculty and staff can be described as a heterogenous composition of members that are native to the area and members that moved to the area for employment. Many of the employees have substantial years of service with the institution. The college's increasing financial strain has resulted in a lack of salary raises for several years, and significant increases of out of pocket expenses for health insurance, for the employees. Resources for conference attendance and professional development have been scarce. Additionally, faculty members have had to deliver courses and programs with shrinking budgets, limiting their abilities to stay competitive with other colleges.

For current employees, the study's findings and recommendations may contribute to more secure and stable employment through improved finances generated by a future successful levy campaign. Current faculty members may realize increased financial support of their programs leading to improved classroom technology and educational resources. With an improvement in finances, current faculty members may have an increased opportunity to attend conferences and continuing education events. Additionally, an improvement in the fiscal status of the college may allow for employee pay increases and an improved benefits package.

In the future, potential employees may be attracted to the community college as a potential employer as a result of improved finances. The passage of a future replacement tax levy may allow the college to offer better benefits and competitive salaries. The opportunity to teach in programs that are adequately funded and supported may prove significant in the faculty recruitment process. Additionally, the community college's ability to demonstrate professional development support to prospective employees may also prove conducive to the recruiting process.

College administration and board members as stakeholders. The community college administration is comprised of multiple members from many different backgrounds. The composition includes members with prior experience as professors at the institution, to members that were recruited by the institution to serve in leadership positions. The board of trustees consists of members that were appointed by the county commissioners of the four-county district. The board of trustee members must live within the four-county community college district. The board is comprised of local business and industry leaders, as well as members with leadership roles in community services.

The past decade has been rife with financial troubles that has led to the community college administrators and board members making difficult budgetary and staffing decisions. The improved finances and community support that may be realized with the implementation of the recommendations of this study, may have significant implications for the college leaders. College administration and board members may be able to make better decisions for the college if finances improve. College leaders may find their roles to be more rewarding and less stressful if resources are not as scarce.

The community college as a stakeholder. The community college is a small college located in rural Appalachia that has a main campus and three branch campuses. The student body of the community college consists primarily of commuters; however, the community college's main campus does offer residential housing. The community college has numerous programs of study including, but not limited to, nursing, diagnostic medical sonography, radiology technology, welding, manufacturing technology, psychology, social work, business management, and communications. The community college's on-site partnership with a private university allows for seamless transfer of community college students into the private university after associate degree completion. This partnership allows students to complete bachelor's degrees in programs such as teacher education, psychology, social work, business administration, and nursing.

The community college is perhaps the most significant stakeholder in this research study. Every recommendation made based on the research findings has potential implications for improving the community college's relationship with its community and contributing to a more successful future levy campaign. By implementing initiatives that lead to improving the support of current students and attracting future students, the community college may realize a growth in enrollment that will generate additional tuition revenue. Through the creation of initiatives for increasing community services and outreach, the college may gain additional voter support in a future levy campaign which may contribute to better financial stability of the institution. By improving support of local business and industry through more relevant college programming, and by offering workforce development opportunities, the college may strengthen these relationships. A strengthening of relations with local industry and business may provide more opportunities for mutually beneficial college-community engagement and partnerships. Improvements made to the college's finances may lead to the retention of current employees through improved salary and benefits, thus reducing the expenses associated with job turnover. Additionally, the potential improved finances may contribute to a more favorable institutional reputation, which may improve the recruitment of future employees. Finally, the potential increase in available funding and resources may allow college leaders to make administrative decisions that will support the future growth, stability, and longevity of the institution.

Project Implications

Implications of the project are presented in terms of general social change, local stakeholders, and in the larger context of higher education.

Social Change Summary

Improving the community college's relationship with its community served through the implementation of the recommendations may contribute to improved stability and viability of the college. By improving the community members' perception of the college, the institution may realize increased community support in a future levy campaign. A more successful future levy campaign may provide the institution with the additional financial support to improve its financial viability.

Improving community relations in general, may lead to an increase in future local student enrollment, which may contribute to the financial viability of the college through additional tuition generation. Local businesses and industry may benefit from this study through a potential increase in qualified job applicants and with new opportunities to provide workplace training and education. Current and future students may realize the benefits of an increase in institutional viability through improved students support services, the availability of new programs of study, improved campus technology, and better financial support of courses and programs. The community may benefit from new services and outreach which may foster an improved relationship with the college and the community it serves.

Local Stakeholders

In terms of a more successful tax replacement levy, the additional funds secured by a future successful replacement levy may have positive social change implications for multiple institutional stakeholders at the local level including; students, student dependents, faculty, board of trustee members, college administration, community businesses, employers of future graduates, and the study site in terms of its institutional viability. The additional funding that a successful replacement levy would contribute may allow for maintaining operations at the study site, basic investments such as improvements in technology and the physical campus, and the funding of faculty and staff vacancies. The improved financial support of the institution may translate into improved student outcomes, including degree completion and improved employment opportunities. Improved student outcomes may translate into positive changes in the local economy, a decrease in local governmental assistance for individuals and families, and a stronger community college better equipped to meet the needs of its community served (Levin & Garcia, 2018).

Larger Context

In a larger context, in a broader sense, I believe that this white paper project will provide useful information to college leaders across the country that are seeking more community support of their respective colleges and universities. Although the intention of this research study was to gain a better understanding of the levy failure, the research findings suggested that the levy failure was a result of a greater problem. The greater problem being the community college is not connected with its community served. Therefore, this white paper project may also be helpful to other colleges and universities that are not necessarily trying to pass a levy but are interested in improving town and gown relationships. The larger applicability of this white paper is supported by the review of current literature that I conducted that confirms that the challenges faced by the local community college, are not unique challenges, but common across the country. In a narrower sense, I believe this white paper will provide useful information for other community colleges that are considering a tax levy proposal. While my review of the literature indicates that passing a school levy can be a daunting task, my recommendations based on community member interviews, may provide useful strategic considerations for planning for a more successful levy campaign.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition, to better understand the levy failure. Based on the 12 personal interviews that I conducted, community members are tired of paying additional property taxes that levies generate, especially for levies that do not provide a clear and direct benefit to the taxpayer. Community members either did not know about the levy, or if they did, they did not understand the levy. Community members knew too little about the community college and its offerings and felt that the study site maintained a "quiet" presence in the community. Multiple community members discussed the benefits of having a more active community college in the local community. Those benefits included close-to-home options for their children and non-traditional students, economic benefits from better education opportunities close to home, and opportunities for economic growth of the community. Although those perceived benefits were acknowledged, the benefits were overshadowed by the community members' limited knowledge of the community college, and the services that it provides. The limited knowledge that the community possessed about the study site resulted in a lack of priority in comparison to competing levies. Community members felt that the timing of the levy was wrong with multiple competing levies on the ballot, especially in one county where another controversial levy garnered a lot of attention. Community members felt that placing the levy on the May Primary, as opposed to the November Election Day, or holding a special election may have proven to be more successful. While community members do not feel that putting the replacement tax levy on the ballot again in the near future would have a different outcome, they did state that with actual improvements made by the study site in programming, community services, and a significant increase in information dissemination, a replacement tax levy campaign in a few years, could prove more successful.

I used the research findings of this study to write a white paper to be presented to the community college's administration and board of trustees. The white paper includes a summary of my research findings, a summary of the current literature that provided support to those findings, and my recommendations for strengthening community support of the community college and for planning for a more successful future levy campaign based on current research and suggestions made by the research participants. In this section, I describe the project's strengths and limitations, make recommendations for alternative approaches, discuss my learning through the doctoral study process, discuss my personal growth as a scholar, describe the potential for positive social change, and make recommendations for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this project include research findings that were achieved by collecting data and conducting research by adhering to the conceptual framework that grounded this study, the development of a white paper that connected research findings to straightforward recommendations, and the ability to provide the community college leaders with relevant feedback from the community for decision making. The limitations of this study include that my opportunity to present my white paper in person at the community college's board of trustees meeting has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, and that my project's evaluation plan is dependent on a future levy campaign that has not been planned thus far.

Strengths

One strength of this research study was the use of Lewin's forcefield analysis as the conceptual framework to ground this study and guide the research, data collection, and white paper recommendations. According to Bjursell and Engstrom (2019), this theory has proven useful in finding "solutions for societal and economic problems that are too complex to be tackled within one sector alone" (p.129). The conceptual framework provided me with the tools and guidance for developing and conducting a research study that allowed for the identification of the positive and negative forces that may have contributed to the levy failure. Additionally, the conceptual framework provided the basis for determining recommendations that may strengthen the positive forces and weaken the negative forces that were extracted from the research findings.

A second strength of this project is the white paper project that connected my research findings with recommendations. The recommendations provided in the white paper are for improving the community college's relationship with the community it serves, as well as for planning for a more successful future levy campaign. The white paper as the delivered project is in alignment with the conceptual framework of the study, as well as the goals of the study, since they are commonly used to "discuss challenges and issues faced in the industry and provide solutions on how to overcome them" (Corporate Finance Institute, 2020).

The third strength of this project may be the greatest strength. Before I conducted my research for this study, there had not been any research conducted on the November 2017 levy failure. While college leaders and college employees had opinions about the levy failure, there was no funding available in the budget for conducting follow-up research. This project study has allowed me to provide the college leaders with research findings for decision making in regard to a future levy campaign and strengthening relations with the community served. This is a crucial strength as research has an important role in education policy and practice, with the potential for addressing equity and positive social change (Bourke & Loveridge, 2017).

Limitations

There are two limitations of my project study. First, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, state governance has implemented a social distancing order. Additionally, in response to this order, college leaders have mandated that all college business and instruction is to be conducted remotely until further notice. These orders have eliminated the opportunity for me to present my white paper at a board of trustees meeting. While this limitation is unfortunate, available technology will provide an opportunity to share my findings remotely through email, Skype, or Microsoft Teams. While I would have preferred to present my findings in person, the use of media and videoconferencing has been proven to be an appropriate substitute (Orngreen, Gnaur, & Henningsen, 2019).

The second limitation of my project study is that a future replacement tax levy proposal has yet to be planned. The ability to evaluate my delivered project is dependent on another levy campaign and subsequent election. While this is a limitation, the recommendations of this project not only provide suggestions for planning for a more successful future levy campaign, but also for strengthening community relations. Even without a future levy campaign and election, this project is in alignment with research that aims to explore new methods for improving the quality and value of services that colleges offer to their students and the communities in which they serve (Holland & Malone, 2019).

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The problem that prompted this study was the failure of the community college's replacement tax levy that left college leaders with a lack of understanding as to why the levy failed. An alternative definition of the problem could have been based on the feasibility study that was conducted by an external consultant agency. The feasibility study indicated that with minimal campaigning, the levy should pass. Taking this alternative approach, the study could have focused on the implications of the feasibility study's data and information in the college leaders' campaign planning. Had the feasibility study not been conducted; would the college leaders have employed stronger campaign tactics? Would the execution of a stronger campaign have led to a different election outcome? Did the feasibility study ultimately set the replacement levy campaign up for failure?

I chose to conduct qualitative research on the levy failure by interviewing community members about their perceptions about the way community members voted on the tax levy proposal, as opposed to conducting other types of research, because I was seeking thick and rich descriptions of the community members perceptions. Alternative approaches that could have been used for researching the levy failure could have included conducting quantitative research by surveying community members directly or by conducting a case study.

The use of a survey allows researchers to collect original data from a population that is too large to observe directly (Babbie, 2017). The survey could be dispersed to a larger number of community members than what is feasible in conducting personal interviews. A survey approach for research about the levy failure could consist of direct questions about the college's marketing, community engagement, services offered, programs of study, and communication with the community served. The use of a quantitative survey could provide a larger sample size for gathering feedback from the local community to be used in the creation of community college initiatives.

A case study approach can be used to study things such as a program, a phenomenon, a community, or an institution; and involves collecting in-depth data from multiple sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study approach for studying the 2017 community college levy failure could involve interviewing community members, as well as college leaders, college employees, current students, graduates of the college, and local industry leaders. Additionally, documents, reports, and observations could be used for gathering data about the levy failure. A case study approach may provide a deeper understanding of the levy failure as perceived my multiple stakeholders.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Through the doctoral study process, I have grown as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. When I reflect back on the development of my doctoral study prospectus, I realize how far I have come, especially in terms of my writing skills and my comprehension of what it means to write in a scholarly voice. While completing my doctoral study has been challenging and stressful at times, the growth that I have realized as a scholar has made the process meaningful and impactful in my professional development.

In developing my white paper project, I learned through research how to provide concise information about my research study and research findings. While I felt that many aspects of my doctoral study were important, the key to writing an effective white paper is to consider your audience. Most likely, college leaders would not be interested in detailed information about the coding results of my interview transcripts, or my study's data storage. I learned to provide enough information to highlight the background and procedures of the study, and then summarize the findings of the study in a way that would be meaningful to the audience. Additionally, I learned how to write my recommendations in concise, yet explanatory, language.

Reflective Analysis of Personal Learning

Prior to the start of my doctoral study, I thought that I was an effective writer. However, through the process of writing my prospectus and proposal, I quickly realized that my researching and writing skills were not at the scholarly level. The processes of researching, analyzing, synthesizing, writing, editing, and revising have enhanced my skills and have provided me with the confidence to conduct future research and publish.

Growth as a scholar. In the early days of my doctoral study, I struggled in finding relevant research to support my writing. By conducting the exhaustive research that is required to complete a doctoral study, and with the support of Walden University's library and writing center, I have become proficient and efficient in conducting literature reviews. My proficiency in synthesizing literature has also improved significantly. Perhaps the most significant testimony to my growth as a scholar has been the transfer of my growth to my ability to support and teach my students. As co-director of the college's honors program, I help students in their development and completion of their senior capstone projects. As a result of my doctoral journey, my ability to help students through their capstone process has greatly improved. Specifically, my improvements have been realized in helping students develop a narrow topic for research, in providing timely feedback and suggestions, in providing help and instruction in conducting a literature review, and in assisting them through the IRB approval process.

Growth as a practitioner. Since my doctoral study is at the institutional level, as opposed to the classroom setting, my doctoral project study journey has contributed to a significant increase in my involvement in the development of campus initiatives and my advocacy for the underserved student. The experience that I have gained through my doctoral study has given me the confidence to engage in discussions during various institutional meetings, where in years past I did not speak out. My increased involvement across the college campus and the demonstration of my passion for positive change in higher education has contributed to my recent promotion to department chair.

Growth as a project developer. The development of my delivered project expanded my understanding about developing projects utilizing research, and how to deliver a project that provided concise direction, complete with a plan for evaluation. The experience that I have gained through my research and project development has provided me with the necessary skills to develop more projects in the future, and confidently present project proposals. In fact, I am currently working on a proposal to present to the college's academic leaders for a new program of study based on local industry demands.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

The purpose of this study was to examine community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition. The purpose of this project was to provide recommendations to the community college leaders for the creation of initiatives to strengthen community support of the college and to plan for a more successful future levy campaign based on the feedback from the community served. The importance of this study is that the project provides a much-needed channel of communication between the community and the college. Prior to this study, research had not been conducted about the college's levy failure. Now that this study has been completed, college leaders can create initiatives based on unbiased feedback, as opposed to hearsay and assumptions.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications, applications, and directions for future research are presented in the following subsections. My conclusions end the section.

Implications

The implications for positive social change as a result of this study may include improving the community college's relationship with its community served, through initiatives created to strengthen the positive perceptions of the college and decrease the negative perceptions of the college. In terms of a more successful tax replacement levy, the additional funds secured by a future successful replacement levy may have positive social change implications for multiple institutional stakeholders at the local level including; students, student dependents, faculty, board of trustee members, college administration, community businesses, employers of future graduates, and the study site in terms of its institutional viability. The additional funding that a successful replacement levy would contribute may allow for maintaining operations at the study site, basic investments such as improvements in technology and the physical campus, and the funding of faculty and staff vacancies. The improved financial support of the institution may translate into improved student outcomes, including degree completion and improved employment opportunities

Applications

The research findings of this study and the recommendations of the white paper can be used to create initiatives at the community college for improving local community support and for planning for a more successful future levy campaign. Community colleges across the country may also find this study to be applicable to addressing their own institutional challenges. Additionally, the community college under study, as well as other community colleges, could conduct use this study to develop further research studies for further investigation into the challenges of passing tax referenda.

Future Research

While this study contributes to the existing literature on community perceptions of a community college following a tax levy failure, there is a great need for additional research on community college levies. During my research for the literature reviews, I found little current research on community college tax levies. The existing body of knowledge is focused on K-12 tax referenda, and while there are parallels between the two entities, public primary and secondary schools have different challenges than community colleges.

In addition to the need for future research on community college levies, there were other areas that I identified while conducting my literature reviews that identified a gap in the literature. While there is significant research available on town and gown relationships specific to four-year universities and colleges, there was little current literature pertaining to community colleges and their community relationships. This research would prove beneficial because community colleges do not typically have the same missions as four-year institutions. Communities may have different expectations of the local community college, as opposed to a four-year institution.

Another area of research that would have been helpful in my literature review and in making recommendations to the college leaders, would have been current literature on community programs and services that a community college could provide. Current literature that discussed programs and services that other community colleges have implemented would have been useful, especially if statistics regarding successes and failures were included. While current research discusses the importance of providing community programs and services, there is little information available to college leaders to direct them in the planning and implementation of these services.

A final recommendation for future research would be on the use of external consultant firms in guiding decision making in higher education. When an institution pays for an external consultation, a reasonable expectation would be that the information and data that is provided in the consultant’s report is accurate and valid. Research about the accuracy and validity of feasibility studies would be useful in the determination of using such reports as a tool for institutional decision making. Additionally, future research on the accuracy and validity of external consultant feasibility studies could assist college leaders in the decision of whether to spend valuable funding on such research.

Conclusion

The study site, a rural community college in Appalachia, placed a replacement property tax levy on the ballot in November 2017 that would have provided much needed additional funding to the financially struggling institution. The problem of study is that the levy failed. College administrators have determined that the levy needs to be placed on the ballot again, and it needs to pass, yet administrators did not have a clear understanding as to what went wrong in 2017. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine community members’ perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site’s replacement levy proposition.

Utilizing Lewin’s force field analysis for the examination of possible positive and negative forces that possibly contributed to the way community members voted on the levy derived through personal interviews of voting age community members, I chose to conduct research that consisted of a personal interview with 12 community members. The information that was collected consisted of the participants’ perceptions about the way community members voted on the levy, not the participants' personal voting behavior. Based on the research findings, community members are tired of paying additional property taxes that levies generate, especially for levies that do not provide a clear and direct benefit to the taxpayer. Community members either did not know about the levy, or if they did, they did not understand the levy. Community members knew too little about the community college and its offerings and felt that the study site maintained a "quiet" presence in the community. Multiple community members discussed the benefits of having a more active community college in the local community. Those benefits included close-to-home options for their children and non-traditional students, economic benefits from better education opportunities close to home, and opportunities for economic growth of the community. Although those perceived benefits were acknowledged, the benefits were overshadowed by the community members' limited knowledge of the community college, and the services that it provides. The limited knowledge that the community possessed about the study site resulted in a lack of priority in comparison to competing levies. Community members felt that the timing of the levy was wrong with multiple competing levies on the ballot, especially in one county where another controversial levy garnered a lot of attention. Community members felt that placing the levy on the May Primary, as opposed to the November Election Day, or holding a special election may have proven to be more successful. While community members do not feel that putting the replacement tax levy on the ballot again in the near future would have a different outcome, they did state that with actual improvements made by the study site in programming, community services, and a significant increase in information dissemination, a replacement tax levy campaign in a few years, could prove more successful.

The interview findings contributed to a white paper that summarized the interview-specific information and participant suggestions that should be viewed as valuable, as it has provided a voice to the community that the college serves. While participants voiced issues with the community college, many of them also demonstrated a passion for education and a desire to see the community college grow and be more successful. The participants provided a number of recommendations that should be considered, not only for improving the chances for a more successful future replacement levy campaign, but more importantly, for improving the community college's relations with the community it serves.

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Appendix A: The Project

White Paper: A Community's Perceptions of a Rural Community College After a Replacement Levy Failure

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Abstract

In November 2017, a community college in rural Appalachia placed a replacement tax levy on the ballot in the institution's four-county district to generate additional funding for the financially struggling community college. For the levy to pass successfully, the levy had to pass in all four counties. The levy did not pass, and there was not a clear understanding by the study site's administration as to why it did not pass. To provide potential insight into why the study site's replacement levy failed in November 2017, the community members' perceptions that contributed to the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition were examined and the following research question guided the research: What are the community members perceptions (positive and negative forces) about how community members voted on the replacement levy? 12 members of the community college's four-county service area participated in personal interviews. This white paper will provide a summary and analysis of the research that I conducted, evidence from both current literature and research, and recommendations that may contribute to a more successful future levy campaign.

White Paper: A Community's Perceptions of a Rural Community College After a Replacement Levy Failure

Background

The study site, a rural community college, placed a replacement property tax levy on the ballot in November 2017 that would have provided much needed additional funding to the financially struggling institution. The problem of study is that the levy failed. College administrators have determined that the levy needs to be placed on the ballot again, and it needs to pass, yet administrators do not have a clear understanding as to what went wrong in 2017. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition.

Review of Literature

The literature review that was conducted flushed out multiple themes that are relevant to the historical underpinnings of community colleges, as well as trends currently effecting the funding and support of community colleges. Community colleges from their infancy as land-grant colleges in the 19th century, through their rapid growth in the 20th century to the contemporary community college of today, have focused on the delivery of higher education through increased accessibility and affordability, while predominantly addressing the current vocational training needs of the American workforce (Cohen, et al., 2014). While the majority of community colleges were once funded by the communities that they served, only half of the states continue to allow funding from local tax appropriations (Mullin et al., 2015). Now the majority of community colleges, like other public and private colleges and universities, are dependent on state tax dollar allocations and student tuition (Mitchell et al., 2015). With a dependence on state allocations, community colleges are now dealing with the reality of fluctuating revenue streams that are a direct result of competing funds at the state level (Webber, 2018) and funding trends such as performance-based funding (Ziskin et al., 2018).

Although community college tax referenda have existed as long as community colleges have, there is minimal recent research on community college levies. The largest and most current body of literature pertains to K-12 tax referenda, and although there are parallels between the two, the body of literature is lacking. Utilizing Lewin's force field analysis for the examination of possible positive and negative forces that possibly contributed to the way community members voted on the levy derived through personal interviews of voting age community members, this study contributes to a better understanding of the levy failure. The application of Lewin's change management model provides the framework for sharing valuable information for creating initiatives for a more successful future levy campaign and contributes to the sparse body of current literature specific to community college tax referenda.

Population and Sample Size

The minimum criteria for research participants consisted of a minimum age of 18 years old (for voting eligibility) and a verified physical address within one of the four counties that make up the study site's in-district service area and where the study site's tax referenda are voted upon. Additionally, respondents that knew me personally or professionally, or were employed by the college, were excluded from the research study to minimize researcher bias. In planning for achieving theoretical saturation, I chose to interview a minimum of 12 participants because previous research by Guest et al. (2006) indicated that when studying a relatively homogeneous sample of interview participants, saturation is typically achieved by the twelfth interview. Interview participants were recruited for participation through flyers posted at the five local libraries in the four-county in-district region, through advertisements in a local newspaper that has a circulation in all four counties, and advertisements on Facebook. Of the 20 initial study participation respondents, I secured 12 participants that met the study participation criteria.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research consisted of a personal interview with each of the 12 participants. The interviews were conducted in the participant's home county, at the local public library of the participant's choosing, in a private conference room, to provide a local, private, neutral location for accurate and unbiased research, as well as providing a measure for safety. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview script with predetermined open-ended questions, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. The information that was collected consisted of the participants' perceptions about the way community members voted on the levy, not the participants' personal voting behavior. Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for concepts that demonstrated significance to the study, followed by the identification of themes or patterns, through the connecting of concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community members' perceptions about the way community members voted on the study site's replacement levy proposition, to better understand the levy failure. Based on the 12 personal interviews that I conducted, community members are tired of paying additional property taxes that levies generate, especially for levies that do not provide a clear and direct benefit to the taxpayer. Community members either did not know about the levy, or if they did, they did not understand the levy. Community members knew too little about the community college and its offerings and felt that the study site maintained a "quiet" presence in the community. Multiple community members discussed the benefits of having a more active community college in the local community. Those benefits included close-to-home options for their children and non-traditional students, economic benefits from better education opportunities close to home, and opportunities for economic growth of the community. Although those perceived benefits were acknowledged, the benefits were overshadowed by the community members' limited knowledge of the community college, and the services that it provides. The limited knowledge that the community possessed about the study site resulted in a lack of priority in comparison to competing levies. Community members felt that the timing of the levy was wrong with multiple competing levies on the ballot, especially in one county where another controversial levy garnered a lot of attention. Community members felt that placing the levy on the May Primary, as opposed to the November Election Day, or holding a special election may have proven to be more successful. While community members do not feel that putting the replacement tax levy on the ballot again in the near future would have a different outcome, they did state that with actual improvements made by the study site in programming, community services, and a significant increase in information dissemination, a replacement tax levy campaign in a few years, could prove more successful.

Recommendations

The interviews that I conducted generated information and suggestions that should be viewed as valuable, as it has provided a voice to the community that the college serves. While participants voiced issues with the community college, many of them also demonstrated a passion for education and a desire to see the community college grow and be more successful. The participants provided a number of recommendations that should be considered, not only for improving the chances for a more successful future replacement levy campaign, but more importantly, for improving the community college's relations with the community it serves. I recommend that the following community member suggestions be considered when creating new initiatives and strategic plans:

- Publish local student success stories.
- Create summer programs for the local youth.
- Offer enrichment courses at the main campus and academic centers.
- Increase community services and outreach to senior citizen and community youth.
- Offer more relevant programs of study to reflective of community needs and interests.

- Improve and increase marketing of programs and services.
- Offer a free “Introduction to College” course at all campuses.
- Increase presence in local high schools.
- Increase college representation at community organization meetings and political meetings in all four counties.
- Increase information dissemination and transparency of future replacement tax levy proposals.

Implications

Improving the community college’s relationship with its community served, through initiatives created to strengthen the positive perceptions of the college, and decrease the negative perceptions of the college, may contribute not only to a more successful future replacement levy campaign, but also improve the relationship with the community college and its community served. In terms of a more successful tax replacement levy, the additional funds secured by a future successful replacement levy may have positive social change implications for multiple institutional stakeholders at the local level including; students, student dependents, faculty, board of trustee members, college administration, community businesses, employers of future graduates, and the study site in terms of its institutional viability. The additional funding that a successful replacement levy would contribute may allow for maintaining operations at the study site, basic investments such as improvements in technology and the physical campus, and the funding of faculty and staff vacancies. The improved financial support of the institution may translate into improved student outcomes, including degree completion and improved employment opportunities. Improved student outcomes may translate into positive changes in the local economy, a decrease in local governmental assistance for individuals and families, and a stronger community college better equipped to meet the needs of its community served (Levin & Garcia, 2018).

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Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Research Question:

What are the community members perceptions (positive and negative forces) about how community members voted on the replacement levy?

Interview questions related to research question:

1. There may be a variety of reasons that voters choose to support a tax levy. What do you believe were the reasons that community members chose to vote "YES" on the Rio Grande Community College replacement tax levy?
    a. Were there possibly personal reasons for voting "YES"?
    b. Were there possibly community benefits that resulted in "YES" votes?

2. Please explain why you believe these reasons may have had a positive influence on community members voting "YES" for the replacement levy.

3. What do you believe would strengthen these positive influences as perceived by community members?

    a. Why do you believe ________________ would strengthen these positive influences?

4. There may also be a variety of reasons that voters choose not to support a tax levy. What do you believe were the reasons that community members chose to vote “NO” on the Rio Grande Community College replacement tax levy?
    a. Are there possibly personal reasons for community members voting “NO”?
    b. Are there reasons that have nothing to do with RGCC that possibly made community members vote “NO”?

5. Please explain why you believe these reasons may have had a negative influence on community members resulting in a vote of “NO” for the replacement levy.

6. What do you believe could be done by RGCC to change these negative influences as perceived by community members?

    a. How could RGCC doing _________ change the negative feelings that community members may have about RGCC?

7. Do you think that the timing of the levy vote (November 2017) effected the outcome?
    a. Do you believe placing the replacement tax levy on the ballot during the May primary instead of November would have changed the outcome?

i. Why or why not?

b. Do you believe holding a special election would have changed the outcome?

i. Why or why not?

8. Should RGCC attempt another replacement tax levy in the future?

a. Why or why not?