ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

# MAKING SENSE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING: AN EXAMINATION OF THE MEANING AND IMPACT OF A UNIVERSITY'S STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

BY

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## Approval of Dissertation

The undersigned certify that they have read the dissertation entitled

**"Making sense of strategic planning: An examination of the meaning and impact of a university's strategic planning process"**

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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The dissertation examination committee certifies that the dissertation (and the oral examination) is approved.

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## Dedication

*To my amazing wife, Joy Galloway-Jones, who has always supported and encouraged me in the doctoral journey. I could not have done it without her.*

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## Abstract

In this dissertation, I present a study of how faculty and administration make sense of the strategic planning process. Strategic planning is a common activity for all types of organizations, yet there has been limited research on the practice during the past two decades. These processes often involve considerable investment of time and resources, and some question the value of that investment. Early research focused on searching for connections between planning and performance. The inconclusive results of these studies led many scholars to dismiss the process as ineffective, yet it continues to be a regular event for many organizations, including universities. Whereas many managers assert that the process itself is more important than the plan, there are few interpretive studies of strategic planning that examine what the process means for the organization.

This dissertation presents a qualitative case study of a recent strategic planning process at a Canadian university, using interviews and existing documents to develop an understanding of how individuals experienced the strategic planning process. The goal of this study is to enrich our understanding of how individuals make sense of strategic planning and what the process can mean to the organization. I use content analysis to identify situations that triggered sensemaking and apply a critical sensemaking lens to identify and analyze what the strategic planning process meant to the individuals involved. Because sensemaking is not simply a way of interpreting organizations, but

also of socially constructing organizations, I also examine the impact of the sensemaking around the strategic planning process on the organization.

As an empirical study applying the critical sensemaking lens, this study provides support for the need to view sensemaking as occurring on the stage set by the organization's formative context and power dynamics. The study reveals that the sensemaking around the strategic planning process was significantly impacted by the organization's formative context. It also demonstrates that the strategic planning process had an impact on trust and engagement within the organization. Additionally, the study informs the practice of strategic planning, giving insight into the importance of understanding and addressing past experiences and expectations during the process and paying attention to issues and situations within the process that may be triggering sensemaking.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Strategic planning is a common practice in all types of organizations, including North American universities, but it is often criticized as being a waste of time and money (Birnbaum, 2001; Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004; Ginsberg, 2011; Hinton, 2012; Wolf & Floyd, 2013). These initiatives can take months to complete, consuming a significant amount of organizational resources (Hinton, 2012). However, research has not shown a direct connection between strategic planning and organizational performance, either in business or in post-secondary institutions (Birnbaum, 2001; Mintzberg, 1994). This raises the question of whether there is any value to engaging in the planning process. Although managers will often state that the process of planning is more important than the plan itself (Lumby, 1999), there have been very few studies of the impact a strategic planning process has on the organization (Wolf & Floyd, 2013).

Often, a goal of strategic planning is to give everyone in the organization a common understanding of its purpose, goals, and direction (Delprino, 2013). Where there are multiple perspectives within the organization, the strategic planning process could have different meanings to different participants (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). If different understandings of the strategic planning process are not recognized and addressed, that goal may be undermined. Within universities, there are typically many distinct interest groups, each with their

own views of the organization, and many researchers have noted that two key groups – faculty and administration – often have different perspectives on the university (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Birnbaum, 2001; Ginsberg, 2011; Rhoades, 2000; Tierney, 2008). Thus, it is important for leaders of strategic planning processes in universities to understand how these key stakeholders are experiencing the process. A review of the literature reveals that there is limited analysis available regarding how individuals experience strategic planning and how strategic planning impacts the organization. This dissertation seeks to expand our understanding of the meaning and impact of strategic planning in the university context, using a critical sensemaking lens to identify how individuals are attaching different meaning to the same events (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

**Evolution of Strategic Planning**

Strategy theory in management has its roots in military theory, dating back to Sun Tzu's treatise on *The Art of War* (Clegg, Carter, Kornberger, & Schweitzer, 2011). As businesses began to explore the formal use of strategy in their operations, the process of strategic planning was born. Chandler (1962) introduced the idea that structures needed to be put in place in order to implement strategies. Strategic planning as a structured process was first introduced in private corporations and was quickly adopted by not-for-profits and public entities, including universities (Birnbaum, 2001). It is a "formalized,

periodic process that provides a structured approach to strategy formulation, implementation, and control" (Wolf & Floyd, 2013, p. 5). The process typically includes establishing a mission and vision, then setting strategic goals or priorities and objectives to help the organization achieve that vision (Hinton, 2012; Kotler & Murphy, 1981).

When businesses began to adopt formal strategic planning processes, there was a significant amount of research conducted to assess whether this management tool improved organizational effectiveness and performance (Wolf & Floyd, 2013). The focus was on trying to identify a causal link between strategic planning and improved outcomes. It soon became apparent that finding a clear connection was extremely challenging, given all of the other factors that could be involved (Miller & Cardinal, 1994).

When researchers found only slight performance differences between companies that used strategic planning and those that did not, the process fell out of favour among business scholars. They began to criticize it as being too linear and structured, placing form over function (Gilmore & Camillus, 1996; Miller & Cardinal, 1994). When Mintzberg (1994) argued that strict adherence to a complex strategic planning process was interfering with strategic thinking, the quantity of research on strategic planning declined dramatically and scholars shifted their focus to other aspects of strategy formation and strategic management (Furrer, Thomas, & Goussevskaia, 2008; Wolf & Floyd, 2013).

As researchers moved away from trying to find clear connections between strategic planning and performance, some began to examine the indirect outcomes of the planning process, such as how individuals experienced the strategic planning process (Bryson, Crosby, & Bryson, 2009; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). However, in many studies, the focus of the research still remained on determining what made strategic planning successful in terms of performance outcomes, rather than analyzing the impact of the process (Chae & Hill, 1996; Gilmore & Camillus, 1996; Ketokivi & Castaner, 2004). As Wolf and Floyd (2013) noted, there is a need for more theory-driven analysis of strategic planning that examines a broader range of organizational outcomes.

**Strategic Planning in Universities**

During the 1980s, universities in North America found themselves facing significant challenges: changing demographics (both in student numbers and diversity), increasing external oversight and accountability, increasing competition, and financial constraints (Black, 2010; Finley, Rogers, & Galloway, 2001; Keller, 1983; McNaught, 2003; Sporn, 1996; Welsh, Nunez, & Petrosko, 2006). In the face of these challenges, many administrators embraced strategic planning as a way to define organizational goals and guide university operations (Birnbaum, 2001; Dooris et al., 2004; Ginsberg, 2011; Swenk, 1999). Currently, there are a variety of reasons why universities engage in strategic planning. Sometimes it is to address external challenges or to satisfy an accrediting body,

but often it is just because developing strategic plans on a regular basis has become the norm for the university (Bess & Dee, 2008; Birnbaum, 2001).

There are countless ways to structure a strategic planning process. In the university context, it typically involves a series of events (Delprino, 2013; Hinton, 2012). The process often begins with an environmental scan, which is intended to identify internal and external strengths, challenges, opportunities, and risks. Many different stakeholder groups may be involved in gathering this information – board members, staff, faculty, students, alumni, and community partners. The information from the environmental scan is used to develop a vision and strategic priorities for the period of the plan (typically three to five years) that are aligned with the overarching mission. The process may also include an examination of the mission, which is a statement of why the university exists, but the mission often stays in effect over several planning periods (Hinton, 2012). The vision and priorities or goals may be set by senior administrators or a strategic planning committee and then shared with the broader community for comment, or they may be developed by a larger group of stakeholders. The final plan is typically endorsed by all levels of the university – faculty senate, senior administration, and the board.

Although this formalized approach to setting the institutional direction has been widely adopted by North American universities, it has not resonated with all of the groups on campus, resulting in problems with implementation

(Fugazzotto, 2009a; Ginsberg, 2011; Rhoades, 2000). Some argue that formalized strategic planning simply does not fit with university structure and culture (Swenk, 1999). Most universities in North America have developed a unique bi-cameral system of governance, where authority is divided between the faculty and administration (representing the governing board) (Birnbaum, 2001; Holton, 1995). The faculty, often through an elected Senate, have responsibility for academic matters. They develop and evaluate curriculum and programs, set academic priorities, and approve and enforce academic regulations. The Board (typically composed of alumni and business leaders) and administration are responsible for operational matters. The Board has final approval over academic decisions, but it does not get involved in developing curriculum and programs (Bess & Dee, 2008).

The adoption of strategic planning in universities was connected to an evolution of their management structures. When universities were first established in North America, there were very few administrators, and most of them were faculty members who took on administrative appointments for limited terms then returned to faculty ranks (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008). The faculty were very involved in university operations. As universities became larger and more complex during the 1970's, that pattern changed. The introduction of additional support services and increasing demands of financial and human resources management required the addition of more managerial and

administrative positions (Birnbaum, 1988). It became more common for academics who moved into administrative roles to stay there or move on to other administrative positions instead of returning to the faculty. Increasingly, administrative positions were held by professional administrators with little or no experience as professors or researchers (Birnbaum, 2001; Ginsberg, 2011). Even as the number of administrators increased, faculty members retained their control over many key academic decisions through shared governance, such as program and curriculum development (Birnbaum, 2001; Holton & Phillips, 1995; MacKinnon, 2014).

The organizational structure that has developed can be characterized as a "professional bureaucracy," where the operational core consists of professionals with significant autonomy who have a strong affiliation with colleagues in their disciplines as well as with their universities (Mintzberg, 1991). In professional bureaucracies, administrators often struggle to control the operational direction of the organization, particularly the strategy (Birnbaum, 2001; Fugazzotto, 2009b). University strategic planning processes are typically led by administrators, but faculty are involved in the planning activities and are expected to participate in implementing the resulting plan (Hinton, 2012).

The literature reveals differences in how these two groups view strategic planning, but there is limited analysis of how these differences affect and are reflected in the process itself (Dooris, 2003; Fugazzotto, 2009a; Gioia & Thomas,

1996; Lorange, 2000; Rhoades, 2000). Moreover, most of the research involves American universities. Universities in Canada and the United States share many common features, but there are some distinct differences. Many of their governance structures and features of organizational culture are very similar. Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) analyzed academic organizational cultures by studying both Canadian and American universities, and noted significant similarities in how universities in both countries developed and evolved. However, the funding structures are quite different. Whereas the United States has both private and public universities, all degree-granting universities in Canada are established through provincial legislation and receive significant government funding to support operations and keep tuition low (Small, 1994). Thus, while organizational research on universities in the United States is generally relevant to Canadian universities, it is also important to have research from the Canadian perspective.

**Introduction to the Study**

This dissertation presents a case study of strategic planning in a small Canadian university, examining how faculty and administrators make sense of a recent strategic planning experience using a critical sensemaking lens (Helms Mills et al., 2010). The university has a primarily undergraduate, liberal arts focus. It was originally founded by a church, but has a decreasing religious connection. It experienced a contentious labour dispute several years ago, and

this is the first strategic planning process it has undertaken since that event. The university was selected because of its size and the recency of its strategic planning experience. The President agreed to allow the study and provided some access to internal documents. This strategic planning process took place over several months and provided many opportunities, both formal and informal, for members of the organization to interact with each other and share ideas. There were opportunities to provide written input as well as large gatherings. These events provided a forum for individuals to share and develop their perceptions of the organization (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994).

This study is intended to provide empirical insight into how individuals in this organization experienced the strategic planning process, with a focus on the meaning and impact of the process. I use critical sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010) to examine how the informants experienced and created their own understanding of the process. Sensemaking is an approach to understanding the process of organizing (Weick, 1995). It is "about understanding how different meanings are assigned to the same event" (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 183). Sensemaking in organizations is both an individual and a social process: "Organizational sensemaking is a fundamentally social process: organization members interpret their environment in and through interactions with others, constructing accounts that allow them to comprehend the world and act collectively" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21) Thus, through this sensemaking study, I am

examining the different meanings individuals attached to the same situation and how their sensemaking affects the organization.

Weick (1995) identified seven properties that can be used to identify how individuals make sense of organizational shocks or unusual situations. According to Weick, sensemaking is: grounded in identity construction, social, ongoing, retrospective, focused on and by extracted cues, driven by plausibility, and enactive of the environment. The critical sensemaking approach adds a focus on how formative context and power dynamics of the organization contribute to sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

In this study, I identify the strategic planning process as an "organizational shock" around which sensemaking occurs. It is a qualitative case study, using document review and interviews to explore how faculty and administration make sense of how the organization formulates and implements a strategic plan and their own roles in that process. I reviewed documents related to the planning process, including background information, stakeholder feedback, committee minutes, and drafts of the plan. I visited the campus four times to conduct semi-structured interviews with six administrators and ten faculty members regarding their experiences.

Sensemaking is revealed when individuals encounter unusual or unexpected situations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The strategic planning process created opportunities for engagement, discussion, and reflection within the organization that were not part of the

typical routine. During the process, topics arose and events occurred that created unique opportunities for sensemaking. Through preparing and coding the interview transcripts, I identified key issues and events that prompted sensemaking during the strategic planning process. These included the understanding of what the process would entail, how the university's religious affiliation should be reflected in the plan, the university's academic focus, and the relative importance of collective bargaining and strategic planning. Analyzing the sensemaking around these issues reveals that the reasons behind the different perspectives are multi-faceted, relating to organizational context, past experiences, identity, social interaction, and power dynamics. Critical sensemaking introduces a consideration of power and context to Weick's sensemaking properties, making it an appropriate lens for examining what the strategic planning process meant to individuals and how the process impacted the organization. This study contributes to our understanding of the broader organizational outcomes of strategic planning, as well as providing an opportunity to apply critical sensemaking theory to a real situation.

**Overview of the Thesis**

In the following chapter, I present a review of the relevant literature. I begin with a description of the development of strategic planning, both generally and in the university context. Next, I discuss evolution of the research on strategic planning, noting the gaps in our understanding of how planning

processes affect organizations. Finally, I describe how this study will contribute to the strategic planning literature. In Chapter 3, I explore how critical sensemaking will provide a useful framework for analyzing and understanding the meaning and impact of strategic planning. Then I describe how this study fits in with existing sensemaking research. In Chapter 4, I present my methodology, describing the site selection and data collection process. I include my interview protocol, a description of how the informants were selected, and a discussion of reflexivity and the limitations of the study. In Chapter 5, I present the details of the case, providing the historical background of the university along with a description of the recent planning process. In Chapter 6, I describe the varied stories of the strategic planning process that emerged from the data and present a critical sensemaking analysis to explore what the process meant to the participants. In Chapter 7, I discuss the impact of strategic planning on the organization, with an emphasis on trust and engagement. Finally, in Chapter 8, I assess the theoretical and practical significance of the study to our knowledge of sensemaking theory and strategic planning in universities.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature on Strategic Planning in Universities

In this chapter, I review the literature on strategic planning generally, with attention to how the focus of research has shifted from analyzing performance outcomes of the plan to exploring the organizational impact of the planning process. Next, I examine the adoption of strategic planning in the university context, with a focus on the unique governance and operational aspects of post-secondary education. Then I discuss where this study fits within the current literature.

### Evolution of Research on Strategic Planning

Mintzberg and Lampel (1999) described the evolution of our understanding of strategy since the 1960's, by identifying ten different "schools" of strategy theory. They classified the earliest ideas about strategy as "prescriptive" approaches – ones that dictated how strategy should be done. Later theories were considered to be more "descriptive," analyzing how strategy actually happens rather than providing a formula for how to do it. Among the earliest approaches to strategy they identified was the planning approach, which spawned the common business practice of formal strategic planning (Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

Chandler (1962) introduced the idea that an organization needed a structured process for developing and implementing strategy. Although there are many variations of strategic planning, the process typically involves developing or reviewing the organization's mission, then creating a vision and strategic goals or priorities that are aligned with that mission. The goal is to provide a roadmap for the organization to follow over a specified period of time. Researchers quickly began to note that strategic planning by itself is not strategic management, and, as will be discussed below, questioned its value in developing and implementing strategy (Clegg et al., 2011; Mintzberg, 1994).

When strategic planning first emerged as a business practice, many lauded it as the best way to align priorities with resources and set direction for the organization (Miller & Cardinal, 1994). Businesses established strategic planning departments, dedicating significant resources to setting up and implementing regular planning processes (Mintzberg, 1994). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers studied strategic planning systems, trying to find connections between planning and performance (Eisenstat, 1993; Keller, 1983; Miller & Cardinal, 1994; Mintzberg, 1987a, 1987b; Schmidtlein, 1989; Wilson, 1994). The studies were primarily quantitative, using a variety of metrics to compare both systems and outcomes (Wolf & Floyd, 2013). As the research progressed, the results were inconclusive, leading some scholars to claim that strategic planning was dysfunctional (Miller & Cardinal, 1994). Perhaps the most

well-known critique of strategic planning came from Mintzberg (1994), who unequivocally stated that strategic planning interfered with strategic thinking. Although he recognized that planning departments could provide important data to support decision making, he took the position that the dominance of planning was preventing managers from making strategic decisions on emergent issues. He called on organizations to take strategy back from the planners.

After Mintzberg (1994) published his critique of strategic planning, the volume of research on the planning aspect of strategy dropped significantly, even though the study of other strategy topics increased. Wolf and Floyd (2013) conducted an extensive review of the literature on strategic planning. They searched for articles that included “strategic planning” or “planning” in their titles in academic journals as well as journals aimed at management practitioners. They found 65 articles published between 1980 and 1993, and only 52 in the twenty years since then, with more than half of those later articles appearing in *Long Range Planning*, the official journal of the Strategic Planning Society. Most of the *Long Range Planning* articles involve a description of a particular planning process, rather than an analysis of the effectiveness of strategic planning as an organizational practice, with the focus on defining particular steps to take in planning (Wolf & Floyd, 2013).

In a content analysis of more than 2000 articles on strategic management published in the major management journals from 1980 to 2005, Furrer,

Thomas, and Goussevskaia (2008) found that, even though the number of strategic management articles increased each year, those that addressed planning decreased from 92 in 1980-85 to just 16 in 2001-2005. The focus of study in the field shifted away from formal planning processes to issues surrounding organizational performance, international strategies, and innovation (Furrer et al., 2008).

As studies attempting to find a direct connection between planning and performance declined, some researchers turned their attention to what made the planning process work well, particularly how individuals could affect it. Early examinations of the strategic planning process focused on how individual behaviour could obstruct the process (Lyles & Lenz, 1982). Later, researchers began to recognize the importance of adapting the planning process to the organization's culture and engaging individuals in the process (Bonn & Christodoulou, 1996; Wilson, 1994). The focus, however, still remained on what makes a successful plan in terms of performance, rather than on what the experience of the process meant to the organization and its members.

Eventually, research began to shift from examining the results (the plan) to how the process affected the organization (Bryson et al., 2009). Researchers started to look at strategic planning as a tool that could integrate units and individuals within the organization rather than simply as a means of improving productivity (Wolf & Floyd, 2013). They found that the process could effectively

provide a framework for gradual change and readjustment of focus, depending on how the members of the organization participated in the process. Kaplan and Beinhocker (2003) argued that the real goal of strategic planning should be to prepare individuals to make strategic decisions. Jarzabkowski and Balogun (2009) suggested that strategic planning could contribute to the integration of multiple units in a large organization.

Although Wolf and Floyd (2013) identified that there is a trend in more recent research to focus on the role individuals play in the strategic planning process and how they are involved in it, they also found that there is a need for more research based in cognitive theories that examines the different perspectives individuals might have on the process. They suggest that cognitive-theory-driven research can provide important insights into how individuals construct both the strategic planning process and their organizations. For example, Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) examined strategic planning in a university as a communicative process, an organizational event that has meaning that is separate from the resulting plan. They found that the formal process provided context for how individuals make meaning within the organization and recognized that different groups within the university bring different interests to the process, as well as having different levels of power.

Similarly, Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson (2009) examined a complex public agency planning process as a “way of knowing,” focusing on how stakeholders

engaged with each other using an actor-network theory lens. They identified many ways that the connections and networks between individuals and ideas affected the organization and the resulting plans. This research contributes to our understanding of the strategic planning process, but there are still gaps in what we know about what the planning process means to individuals and how that affects the organization.

Even though some researchers seemed to lose interest in strategic planning, the use of the practice continued to be popular in businesses and other organizations (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). However, many managers are dissatisfied with the process. One study found that only eleven percent of managers believed that their planning processes were worth the effort (Mankins & Steele, 2006). Given the amount of time and energy dedicated to strategic planning, it is important that we understand what the process means to the individuals involved and how it affects their organizations. As Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) pointed out, universities provide an excellent context for exploring how individuals construct the strategic planning process because they engage in the practice regularly and they include diverse constituent groups who must be involved in it.

## Strategic Planning in the University Context

### Unique structure and culture creates challenges for strategic planning

As with other types of organizations, strategic planning happens regularly in universities, and there is some disagreement on whether it is an effective practice. Researchers have recommended that strategic planning processes be adapted to fit the culture of the organizations involved (Bonn & Christodoulou, 1996; Hinton, 2012; Wilson, 1994). Like other educational organizations, universities are loosely coupled systems (Birnbaum, 2000; Rytmeister, 2009; Weick, 1976), consisting of a number of different segments (e.g., faculties, colleges, academic departments), each with its own priorities, loosely connected to each other through the overarching administration. The connections between the segments develop from shared experiences and values rather than being established and dictated by management (Bess & Dee, 2008).

Governance is primarily democratic, rather than having significant power vested in a chief executive. Most have a bicameral structure, where the academic senate or faculty council has significant control over academic issues while the governing board and administration control operational decisions (Doyle & Lynch, 1979). Mintzberg (1991) characterized universities as professional bureaucracies, where the people who provide the "operating core" of the organization are professional experts (in this case, faculty). In such organizations, members of the operating core work independently with little

need to coordinate with co-workers. This structure creates an environment where the faculty operate with considerable autonomy. There are limited restrictions on what and how they teach, and they have a significant level of freedom in choosing the focus for their research, which often results in faculty pursuing their own agendas instead of being aligned with the organizational strategy (Bess & Dee, 2008; Mintzberg & Rose, 2003). Although individual parts of loosely coupled organizations can have more resilience in response to challenges, these types of organizations also have more difficulty responding as a whole to changes in the environment (Weick, 1976).

Until the late twentieth century, university administrators usually came from the faculty ranks and served in those roles temporarily, returning to scholarly activity at the end of their terms (Birnbaum, 2001). Thus, when any differences of opinion arose with faculty over particular issues, they brought an understanding of the faculty perspective to the position. During the past few decades, however, there has been an increasing trend of hiring professional administrators who have limited or no experience as faculty members (Birnbaum, 2001; Ginsberg, 2011). Some of the recent presidential appointments in Canada reflect this trend. For example, President Richard Florizone of Dalhousie University never served as an academic after receiving his Ph.D. (Dalhousie University, 2015). Similarly, the new president of St. Francis Xavier University and the president of Acadia University have a background of business

and community college leadership rather than as university professors (Acadia University, 2015; St. Francis Xavier University, 2015).

At the same time, the ranks of administrators have grown much faster than those of faculty. From 1985 to 2005, the number of administrators in universities in the United States increased by 85%, while the number of students increased by 56% and the number of faculty increased by 50% (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 28). Similarly, the trend in Canadian universities has been to increase administration to the point where the costs of administration outweigh the cost of faculty. In Canada, the ratio of academic to administrative salary spending has been steadily declining since the 1970's, falling from 1.2 to 0.7 (Usher, 2014).

### Role of strategic planning in universities

Into this environment of shared governance and decision-making, university administrators brought formalized strategic planning (Birnbaum, 2001). When strategic planning was first introduced in universities in the late 1970's, management scholars recommended that universities focus on establishing missions, setting clear goals and objectives, and defining strategies to achieve them so that they could allocate resources appropriately (Doyle & Lynch, 1979; Kotler & Murphy, 1981). Up until this point, universities had not been actively engaged in strategic planning, but they were entering a period of more limited resources and increasing competition, so the theorists proposed that adopting the business model for strategic planning would improve efficiency

(Kotler & Murphy, 1981). Keller (1983) produced a guide for university planning that became very popular with university management. Gioia, et al. (1994) described a large university's first experience with strategic planning, examining how the process was institutionalized and used by top management to implement strategic change. In that case, the president was the key driver behind adopting strategic planning, seeing it as a tool to drive the change he envisioned.

By 1985, some estimated that 88% of universities in the United States had adopted some sort of formal planning process (Birnbaum, 2001). Canadian universities were slower to adopt the practice. In a special feature in the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* on implementing strategic planning, Sibley (1986) estimated that most Canadian universities were not engaged in the level of strategic planning advocated by Keller. This trend shifted quickly. In response to a survey of Canadian university administrators on university reform conducted in 1991, the most common trigger cited for change initiatives was mandates arising out of strategic planning (Small, 1994). Strategic planning remains popular in Canadian universities. A review of the websites for each of Canada's "U15" group (the top fifteen research-intensive universities in the country) reveals that each of them has a strategic plan in effect for 2015.

One driving force behind the widespread adoption of strategic planning was the influence of accreditation requirements. In the United States, most regional accrediting bodies require colleges and universities to demonstrate that

they have strategic goals and a plan for achieving them. Some program-specific accreditation bodies with international reach, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), also require schools to prove that they have a strategic plan for their programs. Sometimes, universities are prompted to update their plans only when accreditation is looming (Hinton, 2012). In Canada, regional higher education commissions serve as the approval body for new programs, and some are placing an increased emphasis on quality assurance. The standards they are using to measure whether universities are providing a high-quality educational experience include an expectation that the university has adopted and is following a strategic plan (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2007).

Some researchers have found that the strategic planning process has not been effective in universities (Birnbaum, 2001; Ginsberg, 2011; Rhoades, 2000; Swenk, 1999). For example, some have recognized that differences in how faculty and administration view strategic planning affect the process. When administrators introduce new tools or processes, they often encounter resistance from faculty, who are concerned that they will lose their autonomy and flexibility (Birnbaum, 2001; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Faculty are particularly opposed to any approach that would give administration more control over academic decisions, which are seen as a core function of the

faculty (Ginsberg, 2011; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997). Faculty frequently feel as if they are not part of the strategy formation or strategic planning process.

Pidcock (2001) studied the academic perspective of the strategic planning process in a United Kingdom university, and found that faculty did not feel a sense of ownership of or involvement with the process. In fact, many of the faculty were unaware of the new mission statement or believed that its development was a sign of increasing administrative control. Patterson (2001) examined goal development in universities and found a similar lack of connection with faculty. She noted that the different constituencies in the university may have different goals, and that many of the goals are complex and difficult to measure. In a university, the bi-cameral structure means that decision-making authority is split and goals may diverge. In her study, she found that the university structure interfered with the ability to make timely decisions in the strategic planning process, resulting in a lack of buy-in from the faculty.

In another study, Welsh, Nunez and Petrosko (2006) recognized that administrators and faculty have distinctly different perspectives on university operations generally, and on strategic planning in particular. Their research on higher education in Kentucky led to recommendations for developing university-wide support of strategic planning initiatives. They found that the level of involvement in both the planning process and the implementation affects the level of faculty support.

Ginsberg (2011) was particularly critical of the use of strategic planning in universities. He stated that the primary purpose of the process is for the administrator leading it to advance within administrative ranks, and expressed distrust and resentment of managerial control of the process. In an attempt to identify how universities can effectively engage in strategic thinking, Rhoades (2000) argued that there are many myths about universities that interfere with strategic thinking and activity. He found that a linear strategic planning approach is not effective for resource allocation in universities. Instead of focusing on getting the faculty to trust the strategic planning process, he noted that administrators need to learn to trust the faculty as a valuable resource in the university:

> The goal should not be developing a strategic plan and reengineering the university with algorithms and rational incentive structures to ensure that everyone works to the same design; rather, it should be to encourage and contribute to an ongoing conversation that raises faculty's consciousness about what they are (and are not) doing and what possibilities exist" (Rhoades, 2000, p. 64).

**How This Study Contributes to the Strategic Planning Literature**

As a post-secondary administrator, I have observed and been involved in many different planning processes. In my experience, there were varied levels of engagement in the processes, as well as varied views on the value of them. These experiences stimulated a curiosity about strategic planning generally, and strategic planning within the university context in particular. As I examined the

relevant literature, I found that we still have much to learn about how strategic planning affects organizations. Wolf and Floyd (2013) argued that past practices of focusing on productivity and results ignored the importance of the planning experience for the organization. They identified a need to examine how individuals experienced the process, and how that experience affects the social construction of the organization (Wolf & Floyd, 2013).

Smircich and Stubbart (1985) called for such an approach to strategic management research three decades ago. They viewed organizations as being "socially constructed systems of shared meaning" (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985, p. 724). From this perspective, reality is not objective; it is unique for each individual, based upon the meaning and interpretations they attach to objects and events (Bess & Dee, 2008). Strategy is not a result of a plan, it is determined by how individuals enact their worlds (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). Thus, to understand strategic practices, the focus should be on understanding how individuals are socially constructing their environments and their understanding of strategy. Similarly, Weick (2001), using the example of a group that found its way using an incorrect map, argued that the plan itself did not matter. The key was how individuals made sense of the plan, how they socially constructed the plan and their organization.

There has been some research on the role of actors in the strategic planning process in a university setting, but the focus has been primarily on one

group within the university – administrative leaders. In her study of organizational activity to identify strategic actions in a university, Jarzabkowski (2003) identified the "key actors" as the top management team, grouping all others on the campus involved into "collective organizational structures" (p. 25). Thus, only the actions taken by key administrators were considered in determining how the strategy developed.

In examining university strategy from a resource-based view, Lynch and Baines (2004) argued that managers are responsible for developing strategies and treated faculty and staff as part of the resource bundles, not as active participants in the strategy process. In the United Kingdom, during the 1990s, higher education institutions were required to generate structured strategic plans. Lumby (1999) examined how colleges experienced that strategic planning process by interviewing only top administrators. The informants expressed that the process of involving people in planning was more important than the strategic plan itself, but thought that the ideal of everyone feeling a sense of ownership was unrealistic and unnecessary. In their minds, the plan was for managers to understand and use, not for the entire campus to embrace.

Similarly, Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) examination of sensemaking during strategic change at a university focused entirely on what the top executives thought about the university's strategy, with only a passing reference to the fact that faculty had a different perspective. That study and the follow-up

survey examining how leaders at other universities made sense of change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) provide insight into how administrators make sense of and communicate their strategic priorities, but they do not provide a complete picture of how the university as a whole experiences the process. Even where it is recognized that all participants in the system impact strategy and a shared understanding of the organization is necessary for success, the focus is on how university leaders create that shared understanding and communicate strategy to the faculty and staff (Chaffee, 1984; Cowburn, 2005).

**Summary**

Even though strategic planning is widely practiced in businesses and universities, there is a gap in our understanding of the impact it has beyond performance outcomes. Wolf and Floyd (2013) identified a need for more cognitive-theory driven research that explores the organizational outcomes of the strategic planning process. In the next chapter, I describe how the critical sensemaking theoretical lens provides an appropriate framework for examining the strategic planning process in a university and identifying how the process was experienced by and affected the organization.

## Chapter 3: The Critical Sensemaking Lens

This study required both a theoretical lens and a method that allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of the strategic planning process. There are many different approaches to understanding how individuals make meaning of events and their organizations (Bess & Dee, 2008). In this chapter, I explore why the critical sensemaking lens (Helms Mills et al., 2010) is an appropriate framework for this research. First, I examine the options for exploring the meaning of the strategic planning process and identify critical sensemaking as the approach I will use. Then, I present Weick's sensemaking framework, which has served as the basis for many studies of organizational sensemaking (Colville, Waterman, & Weick, 1999; Weick, 1993). In my discussion of Weick's sensemaking properties, I note the limitations of his approach. Then, I discuss how the critical sensemaking approach builds on Weick's framework and why it is an appropriate theoretical lens for this study. Finally, I identify where my research will fit within the existing body of sensemaking research.

### Choosing a Theoretical Lens

The focus of this study is to understand how individuals experience and understand the strategic planning process, as well as explore the impact the process has on the organization. It is intended to be an interpretive approach

that examines multiple perspectives (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). Within the research on strategic planning, there are examples of different approaches to understanding the process. Some have focused on discourse to examine how individuals communicate about strategic planning (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011), while others have approached it using actor-network theory to analyze how the process works (Bryson et al., 2009). Within the university context, there has been research around how organizational culture affects strategy (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988) and how administrative leaders make sense of strategy (Gioia et al., 1994). There has also been a call for more cognitive-theory based analysis of strategic planning and recognition of the importance of studies that link talk about strategic planning to the social activity it involves (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Wolf & Floyd, 2013).

Given the focus on how individuals experienced, interpreted, and engaged with the strategic planning process within the context of a specific organization, I settled on using the critical sensemaking lens for this study. As I discuss below, critical sensemaking focuses on how different individuals interpret the same events within the larger context of the organization (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Sensemaking analysis relates to not just how individuals interpret events, but also how those interpretations affect the social construction of the organization.

### Weick's Sensemaking Properties

Weick (1995) suggested that sensemaking is both an organizational process and a framework for understanding organizations. All individuals within an organization are constantly "making sense" of what is happening around them and where they fit. However, organizational sensemaking is more than just a collection of individual understandings. As members of the organization interact, they may share and adjust their sensemaking. Ultimately, it is through this collective interaction that individuals socially construct the organization (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking theory developed through research that examined the process individuals used to understand their organizations (Gephart, 1993; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1979). These studies, rooted in social constructionist theory, helped expand the understanding of how individuals create their own environments through individual sensemaking. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) examined sensemaking in their analysis of strategic change in a university, focusing on "meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties" (p. 442). However, their focus was on the university's administrative leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving, with little attention paid to the other perspectives that might exist within the organization. They discussed the idea of sensemaking, but they did not develop a specific framework we could use to identify and understand it.

Weick began exploring sensemaking in organizations in the 1970's, focusing on the social psychology that leads to organizing (Weick, 1979). His examination of how individuals socially create their reality and their organizations led him to focus on understanding how people make sense of the world around them. He became particularly interested in how sensemaking manifested itself during disasters or crises because those organizational shocks presented opportunities to examine how individuals made sense of an unexpected situation. His studies of how sensemaking contributed to or broke down during crises helped him formulate a framework for examining sensemaking (Weick, 1990, 1993).

In 1995, Weick formalized his ideas about sensemaking theory by presenting seven properties that could be used to analyze and understand how individuals engage in sensemaking. According to Weick, sensemaking is defined as a process that is: grounded in identity construction, social, ongoing, retrospective, focused on and by extracted cues, driven by plausibility, and enactive of our environment (Weick, 1995). He argued that sensemaking becomes apparent when there is an organizational "shock" – an event or crisis that requires individuals in the organization to develop a new understanding of reality or justify their reactions.

For this research, I have identified the strategic planning process as the organizational "shock." Although this is not a crisis situation, it is one where

members of the organization are asked to engage in activities that are not part of their normal routines. Strategic planning processes also create multiple opportunities for participants to confront situations or events that do not conform to their expectations, which can serve as triggers for sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). It is important to note that sensemaking does not just happen in organizations. It is how people socially construct the organization (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Thus, how individuals make sense of a situation can have a significant impact on the organization.

As will be seen in the elaboration of these properties below, each element is interconnected with and dependent on the others. Depending on the situation, one or more of the properties may play a more significant role than the others (Weick et al., 2005). Identity construction occurs through retrospection, interaction with environment, and social context. Retrospection is not just about making sense of incidents or events, it is also about forming your view of yourself and your environment, using the values and priorities set by your identity to create your filter for retrospection. The cues one extracts and views as most important are based on identity construction, past experiences, what seems plausible, and what others have emphasized. The social interactions you have can affect identity construction, cues, and how you view the past. Meanwhile, all of this is ongoing, not a static process. What is plausible depends on identity, social interactions, and your past. The environment that is enacted

by sensemaking then lays the groundwork for the future, which will affect future sensemaking through cues, identity construction, and retrospection.

Although Weick's properties provide a framework for understanding sensemaking, they are not complete. As I discuss each of the properties below, I note the gaps and identify how critical sensemaking fills them by adding a focus on how context and power impact individuals' sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

**Grounded in identity construction**

Identity is a multifaceted concept. It is how we view ourselves, and how others view us. It is the image we want to project, and the one we actually project. Identity can also apply to the organization, or even to subgroups within the organization – the collective identity that is both perceived by the members and by those outside the group. When individuals in the group find common frames of reference for their identity and develop a shared sense of meaning, they are experiencing intersubjectivity, which contributes to an integrated organizational sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is affected by how we construct our identity, how our past experiences shape not only our identity, but how we view the world.

Some have asserted that identity construction is one of the pivotal properties that are key to sensemaking, that all other elements flow from how individuals and groups formulate their identities (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Weick

et al., 2005). Identity construction plays an important role in universities. For example, Weick (1976) noted that faculty members often have strong affiliations with their field of study. The identity of “psychologist” or “biologist” is constructed through years of examining issues through a particular lens. That identity construction can influence the way academics view and experience the world outside their field of study. Identity construction is also affected by organizational power and position. The weight given to the perspective of others can be impacted by their perceived identity. For example, some faculty discount the perspective of administrators who have not been academics (Birnbaum, 2001; Rhoades, 2000).

**Social**

An individual makes sense of the world through interacting with others. Without others, there can be no shared meaning or intersubjectivity (Weick, 1995). It is the social aspect that brings individual sensemaking together to socially construct the organization. Although each member of an organization is making sense of their experiences individually, it is through social interaction that they share their sensemaking and adjust it based on what they hear and learn from others.

Through social interaction, individual sensemaking synchronizes and socially constructs the organization, and it is the social interaction that can provide a window into the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). How the

individuals are making sense of the world is revealed through conversations, stories, and texts, which can reveal where the sensemaking is converging and where it is diverging. However, Weick's view of sensemaking neglected to address the role power and context of the organization play in controlling individual sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Who holds the power? What rituals or stories have become dominant? It is important to explore which voices are heard and which are suppressed in the social aspect of sensemaking.

### Ongoing

People engage in sensemaking on a daily basis, assessing and reacting to the situations they are involved in based on their understanding of past experiences. In most cases, that sensemaking is unconscious and not particularly remarkable. It never formally starts or stops. However, most studies using sensemaking theory focus on a particular event or crisis, one that caused people to either assess how they understood what was happening or adjust how they understood their organization (Weick, 2001). Weick (1995) argued that it is these moments when sensemaking is somehow interrupted or disrupted that allow us to analyze it, and many of the classic sensemaking analyses are based on examinations of crises, such as the Tenerife airplane disaster (Weick, 1990), the Mann Gulch fire (Weick, 1993), or the Challenger shuttle explosion (Weick, 2001).

The event being studied can also be a more long-term process, such as organizational change that happens over a significant period of time (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Helms Mills, 2003; Thurlow, 2007) or gendering of organizational culture (Helms Mills & Mills, 1995). These studies focus more on the sensemaking that is occurring on a daily basis than on what happened in a crisis. People make sense of every aspect of their organizations – the procedures, the rules, the power structures, the relationships. Although that process may be more apparent in a crisis it may also be somewhat atypical. How we behave in routine situations may be dramatically different from how we respond in crisis, and (in most organizations) we are more likely to encounter the routine than the critical (Gioia & Mehra, 1996).

Studying the ongoing nature of sensemaking provides important insights about the individual's daily experience of the organization (Helms Mills, 2003; Thurlow, 2007). Strategic planning processes are both a disruption and ongoing. They involve activities and events that are not part of routine operations, but they also typically extend over a period of time, so the sensemaking evolves as it progresses rather than occurring with a single event (Hinton, 2012). Strategic planning involves conversations about the organization's direction and may bring up issues that are ambiguous or generate uncertainty. Those issues cause individuals to actively make sense of a new situation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

**Retrospective**

Sensemaking is retrospective in that we make sense of what has happened in the past by reflecting on it and determining how it fits in our current reality. How we make sense depends significantly on what our past experiences have been (Weick, 1995). However, it is also affected by the present – what is happening to us right now affects how we filter our memories, which ones we choose to draw upon. The role an individual plays in the organization will also affect what is remembered and how it is applied to the present. But we must also consider who is controlling the stories of the past. Is there a perspective on the organizational history that has been suppressed?

Retrospection also has an impact on the future. How we remember the past and apply it in the present will set the stage for what we do in the present and how we will react in the future. Within the university, retrospection is an important part of the relationship between faculty and administration. How courses are taught (and who teaches them), seniority of faculty, budget practices, governance, even classroom assignments, are all connected to how it has been done in the past. Often faculty members are more long-tenured than administrators, who either serve limited terms or move from one university to another, so the retrospection for each group could be significantly different (Birnbaum, 2001).

**Focused on and by extracted cues**

Sensemaking is built around cues we are extracting from our environment, either from the present situation or from the past through retrospection. Which cues are selected depends on a number of factors – who is doing the extraction, what weight the cues have been given by others, what the situation is demanding. In turn, the cues that are extracted influence the focus of the sensemaking. The extraction of cues and their impact are thus highly interconnected with both identity and retrospection – who we are and our own experiences will affect what we see or hear. For example, when two people observe a car accident from opposite corners of an intersection, they make sense of it in very different ways because their physical location means they will observe different cues, and because their own experiences will affect which cues they extract (a car buff would note the make of the cars, whereas someone else might focus on what the drivers looked like). Similarly, in universities faculty and administration would extract different cues based on their roles, their past experiences, and even the disciplines they study (Birnbaum, 2001). For example, an administrator with a finance background may view requests for classroom technology upgrades as less important than a heating upgrade based on a cost-benefit analysis, whereas a professor would be more interested in comparing the direct impact on the learning environment.

Weick's framework does not consider that the extraction of cues can be affected by power and context. If those in power control the flow of information, important cues may not be available to everyone. Similarly, if leaders make incorrect assumptions about what cues should mean, they may miss that others are not extracting the same meaning from the same cues.

**Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy**

Plausibility is another key property in sensemaking, as it controls perceptions of legitimacy (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Few people are able to accept as truth something that simply does not seem plausible. Even when supported by accurate information, our instinct is to reject it as not possible if it does not fit with our past experiences and understanding of the world, until we have new experiences that would make it plausible. Ultimately, what we understand of the world needs to make sense to us (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking is grounded in social constructionist theory – individuals do not need accurate data to "prove" their perceptions of reality. Reality is created out of what seems plausible. Perception, however inaccurate or skewed, becomes reality. Often what is plausible is driven by the history and stories of the organization. Universities are deeply rooted in history, which can affect how innovations are viewed (Birnbaum, 2001). For example, as online learning becomes more common, there are significant factions within universities who argue that students cannot have a "real" academic experience without face-to-

face interaction. The idea that a professor can instil learning without ever meeting a student in person is just not plausible for some. However others who have had positive experiences with online teaching find the concept plausible and are able to embrace it (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008).

Some argue that plausibility, like identity construction, is pivotal to sensemaking and may be the key property – the entire process fails if the result is not plausible, or does not "make sense" to the participants (Mills & Helms Mills, 2004). Plausibility can also drive organizational processes, such as strategic planning. Universities and other organizations continue to engage in strategic planning in spite of the research that questions its effectiveness. The idea that an organization could function well without a strategic plan to guide decision-making is simply not plausible.

**Enactive of our environment**

Sensemaking is not just thinking about the past and telling a story of what happened. It also involves using that sense to take action to impact one's environment. How we perceive the world, how we create the plausible understanding of what has been, is then applied to our current environment. We create a world that fits with our sensemaking, enacting our own environment. But the environment we create and enact may also constrain how we make sense in the future. We enact what fits with our sensemaking, laying the ground

work for continuing in the same vein, until a shock or crisis stimulates change (Weick, 1995).

Enactment is the difference between individual interpretation and sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). It is the process of sharing interpretations, revising them based on what you hear from others, and then taking action based on a collective understanding. In a loosely coupled organization, there can be multiple enactments, with none becoming the dominant organizational reality (Weick, 1976). Thus, there could be varied enactments within the same organization, resulting in different perspectives and reactions to the same circumstances. When there are different enactments, we need to look to issues of power and context to examine how one may become dominant.

**Contributions of Critical Sensemaking**

Given that none of Weick's sensemaking properties exists in isolation, is one more important than the rest? Are there other properties that are missing? Maitlis and Christianson (2014) suggested that enactment of individual sensemaking is what actually produces the collective sensemaking that creates the organization. Through a number of studies, Helms Mills explored the role of power and context in sensemaking, developing critical sensemaking theory (Helms Mills, Dye, & Mills, 2009; Helms Mills, Weatherbee, & Colwell, 2006; Helms Mills, 2002, 2003; Mills & Helms Mills, 2004).

Critical sensemaking proposes that identity construction and plausibility are central to sensemaking and brings in the impact power relationships in the organization and formative context can have on individual sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Helms Mills, 2003). In discussing the importance of identity, the critical sensemaking perspective notes that there is a difference between the identity of the organization and the identity of individuals. In addition, identity is changeable, and how identity is constructed can be significantly affected by power dynamics (Thurlow, 2007). Power, particularly as manifested in an organization's informal rules, affects which voices are heard and which sensemaking becomes dominant within the organization (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

However, the informal power in the organization could also affect sensemaking. Often there are those in an organization who are trusted, whose opinions carry weight with others. Through the social aspect of sensemaking, those individuals could influence how others make sense of a situation. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) presented an analysis of sensemaking in strategic change in a university, which demonstrated the role that power can have in the sensemaking process. Although they discussed how the leadership and the staff shared their sensemaking, ultimately the result was that the leadership's sensemaking was enacted by the organization. However, whereas that study focused on sensemaking by administrative leaders, it did not examine

sensemaking in faculty. It is possible that the official organizational sensemaking was not fully embraced by the professoriate, which has been known to be resistant to managerial initiatives (Birnbaum, 2001).

The formative context of an organization is integrally connected to the sensemaking properties, particularly identity construction and plausibility. Formative context is "taken-for-granted arrangements and shared beliefs that give coherence and continuity to the roles people enact and that guide how interests are defined and problems are approached" (Crawford & Mills, 2011, p. 91). It is the organizational structures that dictate what can be done and how individuals are expected to behave (Helms Mills et al., 2010). An organization's history and current conditions drive the formative context, which is often formed as a result of past social conflicts (Unger, 1987). However, formative context is more than just the background of the organization or the daily routines. Rather, it is the elements of the history and context that stimulate the development of traditions or generate resistance to change within the organization (Crawford & Mills, 2011). Thus, to identify the formative context, you need to look beyond the routines to identify their roots.

When individuals need to make sense of a new conflict or unusual situation, they draw upon the formative context to guide their responses. Formative context plays an important role in identity construction within an organization. Both the formal and informal rules help define what it means to be

a member of the organization and create expectations regarding how the members should engage with the organization and each other. Identity construction can be dictated by the formative context, and the formative context defines what is considered plausible (Helms Mills et al., 2010). The inclusion of power and formative context in the critical sensemaking framework provides a deeper understanding of what makes an organization work. It takes you beyond examination of how individuals see the organization to look at how their position within the organization and their relationships with others affect, and perhaps control, their sensemaking.

**Where This Study Fits in the Context of Sensemaking Research**

Maitlis and Christianson (2014) conducted an extensive review of the current organizational sensemaking literature and identified that there were generally two approaches to sensemaking studies: those that focused on how sensemaking happens and those that examined how sensemaking contributes to other organizational processes. In this study, the focus is on both, examining how sensemaking occurs within the strategic planning process and, in turn, how sensemaking contributes to the impact the process has on the organization.

Within the literature, there is also a divergence regarding where sensemaking takes place. Is it an individual cognitive process that is shared with or imposed on others? Or does it develop collaboratively in conversations, not just in one's mind (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014)? Much of the literature has

focused on how leaders drive organizational sensemaking either by controlling it or by playing a significant role in guiding it (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). However, it is also important to study how the social and power dynamics within the organization affect individual sensemaking, which may or may not align with that of the formal leadership.

The literature on strategic planning in universities reveals that there are different opinions about the value of strategic planning, but the literature does not provide a complete picture of how individuals make sense of the process or how the process affects the organization. How to "do" strategy in universities is challenging (Fugazzotto, 2009a; Rhoades, 2000). By shedding light on how key groups make sense of strategic planning, this research may provide valuable insight into how sensemaking affects the strategic planning process and what the process means for a university.

In the next chapter, I will describe the study in greater detail. I discuss my choice of methodology and describe how I applied it to examine sensemaking in a university's strategic planning process.

# Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter, I present the methodology used to design and conduct the research study. First, I discuss the rationale for using a qualitative case study approach. Then, I describe the site selection, data collection, and data analysis that provided the basis for this dissertation.

## Rationale for Qualitative Case Study

According to Yin (2009), a case study is appropriate for research questions that are examining how something is happening within a contemporary context where there are multiple variables to consider. Case studies have been identified as being helpful in creating "managerially relevant knowledge" (Gibbert et al., 2008, p. 1465). Through focusing on a single case, a researcher has the opportunity to examine an organization or event in detail to reveal its unique nature.

Even though case studies can be used to build theory, they are also regularly used to help researchers illustrate and understand the constructs of a theory (Siggelkow, 2007). They are recognized as being helpful in developing a practical understanding of how theory works in real situations (Gibbert et al., 2008). The constructs of critical sensemaking are well-defined, but there is a need for additional research that explores those constructs in practical situations

(Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Helms Mills et al., 2010; Weick et al., 2005). It can be enlightening to use a single case to explore theoretical constructs rather than a large empirical data set because the researcher can dig deeply into the situation and examine an issue or idea from multiple angles (Siggelkow, 2007). Applying theory to cases expands our understanding of the theory and builds theoretical expertise (Flyvbjerg, 2006). My aim is to provide practical management insights while enhancing our understanding of critical sensemaking theory. Thus, a single case study is an appropriate method to use for this research project.

Using a case study approach does present challenges. It is often stated that a single case is not representative and cannot create generalizable knowledge. However, the single case can provide a powerful example that can explain and enrich theory (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Siggelkow, 2007). Some argue that when case studies are used to test theory, there is a tendency to simply verify the researcher's assumptions. The issue of researcher bias is not unique to case studies, however. When one approaches any set of data, regardless of how it was gathered, with a limited focus, there is a risk that anomalies will be missed. With a qualitative case study, there is actually an opportunity to engage with the informants, which can allow the researcher to question responses and reveal where assumptions are false (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

As previously discussed, sensemaking focuses on processes (Weick, 1995) and examining how sensemaking occurs and evolves over time (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In addition, critical sensemaking incorporates issues of power and context affect sensemaking, particularly with respect to whose voices were privileged and how that influences enactment (Helms Mills et al., 2010). This approach views the organization as being socially constructed by the participants. In other words, it recognizes that individuals have unique perspectives on events, which frame their understanding of the organization and their roles within it.

Smircich and Stubbart (1985) advocated for an interprevist approach to studying strategic management issues, one that examines how individuals interpret and enact their environments. When organizational reality is understood to be not the same for everyone, it requires a research approach that examines experiences and perspectives of the individuals who make up, and are making up, the organization (Gioia et al., 1994). Qualitative research is focused on interpretation and understanding of social phenomena rather than explanation of them (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). It focuses on words, experiences, and actions rather than numerical data and statistics (although those can inform qualitative analysis, too) (Johnson & Harris, 2002).

In this study, I am seeking to understand what a strategic planning process meant to individuals and the organization. I chose a qualitative approach

because I needed to develop a holistic understanding of the many perspectives by examining feelings, memories, and opinions. Given the social constructionist approach of critical sensemaking, it is important to gather and analyze these perspectives through a qualitative approach (Bess & Dee, 2008).

**Site Selection and Access**

I selected the case study site for a number of reasons. The university conducted a year-long strategic planning process approximately one year prior to the study, so the informants had relatively fresh memories of it but were still making sense retrospectively because it had been completed. The proximity of the experience also ensured that most of the faculty and administrators who participated in it are still at the university. The size of the university provided a context where there are enough members of the university community to provide multiple layers of involvement ranging from those who were actively engaged in the process to those with no direct participation, but not so many that it would be difficult to gather a wide range of perspectives.

Before beginning the research, I gained permission from the university President to conduct the study. This permission gave me access to some internal documents that are not available to the public and also helped my credibility when approaching individuals for interviews. Through the ethics review process and in all my contacts with informants, I made it clear that participation was voluntary and that anonymity would be maintained for both individuals and the

university. I received ethics board approval from both my university and from the host university. (see Appendix A for the ethics approval letters [redacted to preserve the anonymity of the research site]).

**Data Collection**

Case studies often involve the analysis of existing empirical data, as well as data that are produced in the course of the research, such as interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). To develop an understanding of the sensemaking around the strategic planning process, I gathered data through document review and in-person interviews. In this case, the existing empirical data consist of the following documents that cover all aspects of the strategic planning process:

- Announcements regarding the process.
- Agendas and minutes from meetings where the strategic plan was discussed or considered.
- Background information provided to the university community at the beginning of the process.
- A thematic summary of written input from faculty and staff.
- Drafts of the strategic plan, including the prior plan.
- E-mail correspondence regarding the plan and the process.
- University web pages describing the institution, its history, and the strategic planning process.

In addition to gathering and reviewing the existing documentary data, I conducted interviews with sixteen people on the campus – six administrators and ten faculty members. The informants were selected through a combination of targeted and randomized invitations to participate. All administrators (ten) were invited to participate, but four declined due to the demands of their schedules.

Faculty members were selected in different ways. The two faculty members who were part of the joint Board-Senate committee that guided the planning process were specifically invited, and both accepted (note: one of these individuals is now serving in an administrative role). Another nineteen faculty members were randomly selected for invitation. I created a list of all full-time faculty from the university website, assigned each one a number, and then used a random number generator to select those I would invite to participate. Once that list was generated, I reviewed it to ensure that it included a variety of disciplines, gender representation (note: the faculty were predominantly male, so only five of the nineteen invited were female), and different levels of seniority (assistant to full professor).

Invitations to participate were sent by e-mail, with follow-up phone calls as necessary (see Appendix B for a copy of the invitation letter). Five of the eighteen agreed to be interviewed. Seven additional invitations were issued to faculty members based on suggestions from informants, and four of those

agreed to participate. Although the participants were not intended to be representative, they did represent a range of perspectives. The informants included people who were actively involved in the strategic planning process, as well as those who considered themselves to be uninvolved with it. Table 1 provides additional details regarding the informants.

Table 1: Informant Background

| Informant | Discipline | Years at university | Position |
|---|---|---|---|
| A1 | Professional school | 2 | President |
| A2 | Social Sciences | 21 | Administrator |
| A3 | n/a | 10 | Administrator |
| A4 | Social sciences | 18 | Administrator |
| A5 | n/a | 2 | Administrator |
| A6 | Social Sciences | 9 | Administrator |
| F1 | Professional school | 3 | Assistant professor |
| F2 | Humanities | 14 | Associate professor |
| F3 | Social Sciences | 19 | Associate professor |
| F4 | Social Sciences | 13 | Professor |
| F5 | Social Sciences | 8 | Associate professor |
| F6 | Humanities | 4 | Assistant professor |
| F7 | Social Sciences | 9 | Associate professor |
| F8 | Humanities | 9 | Associate professor |
| F9 | Professional school | 29 | Assistant professor |
| F10 | Social Sciences | 10 | Associate professor |

The interviews were conducted over seven days during visits to the campus in November 2013, December 2013, and January 2014. Each informant signed a consent form prior to beginning the interview (see Appendix C for the consent form). The interviews were semi-structured, using open-ended

questions to explore the participants' experience of the strategic planning process, how they were involved with it, and how they use the plan now. Appendix D contains the outline of the interview.

In each interview, I adapted the questions based on how the informants told their stories, as many of them covered multiple topics in their responses to the first general question ("Tell me about your recent strategic planning process"). I also asked follow-up questions that were prompted by the information the informants shared. All of the interviews took place in the informants' offices or a departmental meeting room on campus. Most of the interviews were between 40 and 60 minutes, with only three lasting less than 35 minutes. With permission, I recorded all interviews and transcribed them verbatim.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis began and continued during data collection, using a qualitative content analysis approach with the goal of allowing patterns to emerge as the research progressed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Qualitative content analysis involves a systemic coding of the data to identify themes or patterns. It is not merely counting the words, focusing more on the meaning that emerges than the number of times a term occurs. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there are three ways to approach qualitative content analysis, depending on the researcher's theoretical approach. Conventional qualitative

analysis allows the themes and theories to emerge from the data analysis, as with a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 2010). Directed content analysis starts with a relevant theory, which drives some of the coding. Summative content analysis begins with a somewhat quantitative word counting, then moves on to looking for latent themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I used a directed approach, given that I am applying critical sensemaking theory to this case.

I began the analysis during transcription of the interviews. Transcribing each interview myself allowed me to review and reflect on the interviews before beginning the formal coding. I created the transcripts within NVivo software, which allowed me to synchronize them with the audio files. This meant that I could easily review the audio as I was reviewing the transcripts if I wanted to verify tone or content. My initial coding focused on what was said. I coded the transcripts and documents for the topics that were mentioned, adding codes as new topics appeared. This initial coding was intended to help me identify topics that appeared repeatedly. Then, I examined how each source addressed those common topics to identify similarities and differences in how they were talking about the same issues or events.

I identified certain topics that appeared to involve ambiguity or something unexpected or unusual for the informants. These topics presented an opportunity to examine sensemaking and to compare sensemaking among the informants. I reviewed the transcripts again, this time using sensemaking

properties to identify how individuals were making sense of those topics. I identified differences and similarities that emerged from the different stories about the same situations, looking for insight into how the informants developed and shared their sensemaking. I also identified where power dynamics within the organization are reflected in the sensemaking and which sensemaking, if any, became dominant within the organization. I looked for signs that certain sensemaking was privileged over others, examining the impact that may have had on the individuals' perspectives. This analysis led to an examination of how sensemaking around the strategic planning process impacted both the process and the organization.

**Reflexivity**

I originally proposed this study because my personal experience working in post-secondary education piqued my interest in knowing more about faculty-administration relationships and the use of strategic planning in universities. As I worked on different campuses and engaged with the post-secondary community, I was increasingly noting that faculty and administration often speak of each other in stereotypes: faculty are resistant to change and oppositional; administrators are too focused on business and do not understand the academic mission. However, my personal involvement with both groups led me to believe that the relationship is not so easily defined. At the same time, I was seeing post-secondary institutions spend significant time and energy on strategic planning

initiatives that did not seem to be embraced by all. As I researched these topics, I began to see that the literature was also focused on a dichotomy of faculty versus administration, and that there was limited analysis of how a campus experiences a strategic planning event. Thus, the idea for this study emerged.

Keeping in mind the potential for bias, as I conducted this research, I was cognizant of my own understanding of strategic planning and how it could affect my interpretation of my findings. I have attended or worked at seven different campuses in two different countries. They include universities and colleges, private and public institutions, and traditional and online instruction. Thus, I have observed how strategic plans are developed, used, and not used in a variety of higher education contexts. I also have multiple experiences with the differences that exist, and are perceived to exist, between faculty and administration. Currently, I am an academic administrator (assistant dean), an instructor for both degree and diploma level courses, and a doctoral student. I did not conduct the study at my own university because my position might affect what people I work with would tell me, as well as how I would interpret it.

As I conducted the research, I consciously questioned whether my own experiences and prior research were affecting my interpretation. For example, the focus of this study was initially on the differences between faculty and administration. However, as my research progressed I found that the university community had other important subgroups with varying perspectives. In fact,

differences in sensemaking could not be attributed solely to the differences between faculty and administration. I needed to be careful to be open to different ideas and adjust my analysis accordingly. It was helpful that I recorded all of the interviews to ensure that I was not filtering the information or recording my own interpretation in notes instead of what the informant actually said. I believe that there is no way to completely remove researcher bias, so it is important to recognize it and question whether it may be affecting the interpretation of findings.

**Limitations**

The goal for this study was to develop analytical generalizations, not statistical validity (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, the sample of informants interviewed was not intended to be statistically representative of the university community, and the findings may provide insights that can inform theory and future research, but they may not be applicable to other universities. This strategic planning process occurred within the unique context of this university environment. The history and organizational dynamics of the campus affected how individuals made sense of the experience, and any other university will have its own unique context that frames individual experiences. The case provided insights into how sensemaking works, but would not (and was not intended to) provide a strategic planning roadmap that could be applied universally.

Although I attempted to review all available strategy documents, I did not have access to all the correspondence that related to the planning process, particularly the direct written feedback from the campus community. The President had promised confidentiality for all submissions, and the writers had not consented to the disclosure of that correspondence. Therefore, I was limited to reviewing the thematic summary of the input.

The use of interviews means that the study did not include an analysis of naturally occurring talk from the strategic planning process. During interviews, informants may share their understanding of what others said or experienced. Although these perceptions can provide insight into how the informant was making sense of the situation, they cannot be relied upon as evidence of what others experienced. Additionally, the data is limited to what the informants remembered and were willing to share. Thus, this study captures only the sensemaking of those who participated in it, rather than the university community as a whole. Being able to interview additional participants would have enriched the study.

Given that retrospection is an important part of the sensemaking process, examining how participants talk about a completed strategic planning process provides insight into how that retrospection is occurring. However, sensemaking is also ongoing and strategic planning is a process that takes place over time. Therefore, studying the process as it happens, either by actually

observing it or by conducting multiple interviews as the process was taking place could have provided a more complete picture of how the process unfolded and how sensemaking developed and evolved.

**Presenting the Findings**

By becoming deeply familiar with the content of the data collected and then applying the critical sensemaking lens to it, I believe that I developed insights into how individuals made sense of the process and how the process impacted the organization. In the following chapters, I present what I learned about and from this case. In Chapter 5, I describe the case, providing the history of the organization and the context in which the strategic planning took place. In Chapter 6, I discuss how individuals made sense of the process. In Chapter 7, I discuss how sensemaking around the strategic planning process impacted the organization. Finally, in Chapter 8, I present my insights and conclusions.

# Chapter 5: The Case

When using a critical sensemaking approach, it is important to consider the context of the organization and the role that it plays in sensemaking (Helms Mills et al., 2010). This chapter describes the case, based upon university documents and the informants' stories about the university, its history, and the planning process that they shared during their interviews.

## Organizational History

The research site is a small Canadian liberal arts university with fewer than 3,000 students. It focuses on undergraduate education, with some post-baccalaureate professional programs, but no graduate-level education and no science programs. Even though many faculty are actively engaged in research, it is often referred to as a teaching university because of its focus on undergraduate education. Like many Canadian universities, it was originally founded by a religious organization, and many of the early presidents and professors were religious leaders. The religious focus has diminished, but the university still has connections to the church leadership and references its religious heritage in the mission statement.

In the early 2000's, the university went through a period of growth coupled with a number of retirements, which resulted in a spate of faculty hiring. During that time, some estimate that close to half of the faculty complement

turned over. These new professors were generally more focused on research than their predecessors had been, which created a culture shift in the university. During this period, tensions developed among the faculty and between the faculty and the Board of Governors regarding the level of focus and support for research. Newer faculty wanted more time for research, but the Board wanted to maintain a primary focus on teaching with higher teaching loads for faculty. At that point, many members of the Board of Governors were older alumni or church leaders. The faculty representatives on the Board had the impression that the other Board members were more interested in reflecting on their own undergraduate experiences than understanding the current reality of the university. One faculty member who served on the Board during that time described his role as that of a “peon.”

These tensions culminated in a very contentious collective bargaining process in the mid-2000’s, where one of the primary areas of disagreement was around workload, particularly as it related to the balance of teaching and research. When the parties reached an impasse, the Board decided to lock out the faculty, which prompted an overwhelming strike vote. The faculty remained off the job for almost six weeks, returning to work after the Board agreed to arbitration. At one point during the strike, the Board used a provincial law to force a vote on its most recent offer, which a significant majority of the faculty rejected. There was not unanimous support of the union position, however, and

some faculty members refused to participate in the picketing. This split among the faculty led to a continuing divide after the labour dispute was resolved.

In the aftermath of the labour dispute, there were significant changes in the university. The faculty report that relationships on campus were negatively impacted, with many feeling significant anger towards and distrust of the administration. In addition, some of the disagreements among the faculty created problems with workplace relationships. As a result, faculty became much less engaged and were less likely to work with people from other departments or to volunteer to help with administrative initiatives. The administration was significantly affected, with most of the senior leaders leaving within the next few years. There was repeated turnover in the President's position. The President during the labour dispute left shortly thereafter, the next President served on an interim basis, and then a new President was hired in 2011. Subsequent collective agreements have been negotiated without significant disagreement, and faculty indicate that, after more than five years, the relationships that were damaged by the labour dispute seem to be healing.

**The Strategic Planning Process**

The university had a history of strategic planning, with this being at least the third planning process that it had undergone. The most recent plan was adopted before the labour dispute and had expired more than a year before this process began. There is a joint Board-Senate committee with a focus on the

growth and future of the university that is generally charged with overseeing the planning process. This process was initiated by the new President, who had been given a mandate by the Board to develop a new strategic plan. The President engaged a consultant to facilitate the process, selecting one that she had worked with before in another context. Although some questioned whether a consultant was necessary, as they had not used one in the past planning processes, the consensus was that in the end it was helpful to have a person from outside the university facilitate the process. The President introduced the planning process to the campus community by distributing a "strategic planning primer," which contained detailed information on the university's current status and an analysis of external conditions. Faculty, staff, and students were invited to provide written feedback on the following questions that related to the university's priorities and challenges:

1. What are your hopes and aspirations for the long-term future of [the university]? What would success look like for [the university] ten years from now?
2. How are we distinct? Are [there] aspects of our uniqueness that should be strengthened?
3. What are [the university's] opportunities and risks over the next 5-10 years?
4. What role does research serve at [the university]? What role would you like to see it serve over the next five years?
5. How can we enhance the undergraduate teaching and learning experience?
6. What are [the university's] priorities for the next five years? Why?

7. What does success look like in relation to each of those priorities for [the university]?

8. What do you think might be barriers to achieving success in those priority areas and how can we overcome those barriers?

9. What government post-secondary education priorities fit with [the university's] mission and priorities? How can we achieve win-win?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to the development of a Strategic Plan for [the university]?

(*Strategic Planning Primer*, p. 3)

The primer indicated that the senior team would draft the plan, based on input from the written feedback and "facilitated sessions." The President and Vice President Academic reviewed the written submissions and worked with the consultant to create a thematic summary of the input. The thematic summary included the following themes and sub-themes:

1. Sharpening our liberal arts focus
    a. Interdisciplinary and collaborative learning communities
    b. Defining liberal arts education
2. Strengthening the financial foundation
    a. Growing the endowment
    b. Developing a tuition and scholarship strategy
3. Improved and improving academic quality
    a. Admissions and programming
    b. How we define ourselves
4. Enhancing our distinctiveness
    a. Comments on distinctiveness
    b. Comments on the size of [the university]
5. Creating knowledge and engaging society
6. Supporting teaching effectiveness
    a. Comments on workload and structure
    b. Learning and teaching committee
7. Internationalizing the learning community

8. Quality of community life
    a. Residence upgrades
    b. Campus beautification
    c. Athletics and recreation
    d. Culture of service
    e. Healthy workplace

(*Thematic Summary of Stakeholder Feedback*)

When the summary was distributed to the university community, it included additional details on the next steps in the process, making it clear that the facilitated sessions would be with small groups (e.g., deans, directors, department chairs) and would not be open to the entire campus. Some faculty members and the union executive expressed concerns in response to the thematic summary, raising questions about whether religious affiliation would be discussed and the format of the consultation process. The President responded to the concern about leaving the comments on the religious affiliation out of the thematic summary by indicating that it only included topics that were relevant to the themes that would drive the plan. The joint committee considered the concerns over opportunities to provide input and determined that the time for providing written responses would be extended and that an all-campus forum would be held once the draft plan was circulated. The draft was distributed, and the forum was held to gather feedback on it. Using input received in the forum, the senior team (President, Vice President Academic, and communications director) worked on revising the draft plan, narrowing and refining the strategic priorities.

There was some confusion among members of the committee with respect to the appropriate steps for finalizing the strategic plan. The senior team worked on finalizing the document for presentation to the Board for approval. However, at least one faculty member on the joint committee thought that the committee would be more involved in the drafting process and have final approval of it. Meanwhile, some faculty members questioned whether the faculty Senate should also approve the plan. There had been no provisions for Senate approval in the original timeline, and no one had raised it as an issue until near the end of the process. As soon as the issue was raised, the President reviewed past practices and determined that the plan should be presented to Senate for approval prior to taking it to the Board.

The final plan was generally well received. It contained a commitment to liberal arts education and set forth five strategic priorities:

- Excellence in undergraduate liberal arts education
- A meaningful and memorable student experience
- A commitment to research and societal engagement
- A welcoming, diverse and inclusive community
- Financial sustainability

Faculty members who had been worried about what the plan would include were pleased to see that it did not have any specific goals related to religion (although the published document did include the mission statement, which still

references the religious affiliation and history). Some faculty, particularly from the professional programs, felt that the plan did not adequately represent or relate to them.

This research was conducted eleven months after the plan was formally adopted by the Board. Whereas most faculty members did not report using the plan in their work, others have been actively engaged in working groups that were formed to develop operational plans for achieving the strategic priorities. The university recently issued an 18-month progress report describing how the university has implemented the strategic plan goals, and the President was also renewed for an additional five-year term.

In this study, I analyzed the different stories of the strategic planning process and identified issues that triggered sensemaking. In the following chapter, I examine how sensemaking occurred around those issues.

## Chapter 6: The Meaning of Strategic Planning: How Individuals Made Sense of the Process

In this chapter I present the analysis of the individual sensemaking around the strategic planning process. I do this by identifying four issues that triggered sensemaking. According to Maitlis and Christianson (2014), sensemaking can be triggered by "events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations" (p. 57). In this study, each of the informants was asked to describe the recent strategic planning process. Based on what emerged from the interviews and documents, there were four key issues that appeared to prompt sensemaking around the strategic planning process:

- the understanding of what the strategic planning process would entail
- the issue of the religious affiliation
- the academic focus of the university
- the relative importance of strategic planning and collective bargaining.

Many researchers have identified a tendency for there to be disagreements on issues between administration and faculty (Holton & Phillips, 1995). However, in this case, the differences in sensemaking cannot be explained by that simple dichotomy. For each of these issues, I describe the different meanings that were attached to the same events, identifying the different groups involved, and use critical sensemaking to explain how these meanings were formed. The properties of sensemaking are interdependent and, depending on the circumstances, some play a more significant role than others (Weick et al., 2005). Critical sensemaking recognizes that sensemaking occurs within and is affected by the organization's formative context and power dynamics. Therefore, within the sensemaking analysis, I discuss the relevant formative context and power dynamics and make particular note of the properties that emerge as most important to sensemaking on each topic.

**The Planning Process**

As the stories unfolded, it became apparent that there was ambiguity about what the strategic planning process would entail, which resulted in people attaching different meaning to the same events. On this issue, the administrators and most of the faculty members who were involved in the joint committee shared a similar understanding, but other faculty members developed different ones. The key areas of difference involved what the consultation process should look like and the role the joint committee would play. I present the different

perspectives on each issue and then use the critical sensemaking properties to explain how they developed.

### The consultation process

The notes from the early meeting of the joint committee with the consultant show that the plan for consultation was to ask the entire campus community to provide written feedback and then hold in-person sessions with select groups. When the process was first rolled out to the community, the memo from the President noted that there would be "facilitated sessions," without specifying who would be involved in those sessions. Because they had the context of the committee discussions, the members of the joint committee understood that these in-person sessions would be limited to small, specific groups on campus (deans, directors, department chairs), while the rest of the university community participated in writing. The President noted:

> We had the notion … that we had provided the whole community the opportunity for input in writing in response to that primer and the questions in it, … and then we had the facilitated sessions (Informant A1).

In contrast, the interviews revealed that some faculty members who were not a part of the joint committee expected that the "facilitated sessions" would include an all-campus, in-person session where they would be able to provide input. When the summary of the written input was distributed, it specified that the facilitated sessions would happen only with deans, directors,

department chairs, and students. Some faculty members viewed this consultation as limited and not transparent. One faculty member noted:

> I think in the most recent go-round, most of the faculty were expecting something like that [a campus forum]. Again, acknowledging that these things are very very challenging, so it really is hard to try and develop a framework that can bring people together, but we really did think that there was going to be some, some sort of attempt in that direction. And many of us were very chagrined when that didn't happen (Informant F4).

Although the concern around transparency seemed more connected to the content of the summary, as will be discussed below, it was exacerbated by being combined with the realization that there would be no opportunity for campus-wide discussion. Another faculty informant noted that “some of us, myself and others, were surprised then, because that [limited consultation] seemed to be a throwback to the fear of input and attempt to control everything” (Informant F3). Some of the faculty expressed their concerns about the perceived lack of broader consultation to the administration: “so I decided to rattle a few cages and put a bit of pressure on the administration and to force them to open things up a bit” (Informant F4). When faculty members expressed a desire to have an all-campus session, the joint committee considered the request during a mid-process check-in, and they chose to add an all-campus forum to provide an opportunity for in-person feedback on the draft plan.

### Role of the joint committee

Another area of ambiguity with respect to the process arose over the role of the joint committee. This was a standing committee of the university that had played an active role in drafting the plan during the past processes. This time, the committee's role appeared to be different, with a focus on oversight rather than drafting the plan. There was some confusion regarding this new role, with administrators and most of the members of the committee having a different understanding of it than the other faculty members.

The notes of the initial meeting with the consultant indicate that the committee's role would be to establish and monitor the planning process, but the senior leadership team would take responsibility for content. The President noted that the "committee is charged with overseeing the process for the development of the strategic plan." Another administrator (who had been a faculty member when the planning process started) described the committee as one "which oversees the implementation of and monitors the implementation of the strategic plan" (Informant A6).

Some members of the committee did not object to this division of labour, but others were operating under the impression that they would be more engaged with developing the content of the plan. This perception led to additional points of conflict in the process. One faculty member noted:

> Some people on the committee said they had no idea what was going on with the strategic plan. So some people ended up writing to the President, and we got this bizarre letter back saying that the committee that we understood to be the strategic planning committee did not actually, practically speaking, operationally have anything to do with the strategic plan. It simply met 2 or 3 times at the beginning, middle, and the end, and that the strategic plan was run out of the President's office with only minimal reference to this committee (Informant F3).

Additionally, the broader university community had expectations regarding the role of the committee that were based on past planning experiences. Some faculty members described being dissatisfied with how this committee was engaged in the process:

> that's another thing that I should mention that really irked us, that the President formed this strategic planning committee, and you know to me when you form a university committee, there's I think a not unreasonable expectation that you will actually have something to do, and that the committee will get together and you'll review documents, and there's a level of engagement that is implied with the creation of a committee. And we were all very irked when we found out that the strategic planning process was basically going to be run entirely out of the President's office and that this committee was basically there as window dressing (Informant F4).

When the thematic summary was released, some faculty questioned why only the President and Vice President Academic had been involved in reading the written input. This issue made its way into the union letter regarding transparency of the process, where they questioned why the joint committee had not seen all of the feedback:

> The [faculty association] executive has also learned that the [joint committee], which is referred to in the planning documents, is not a 'Strategic Planning Committee' in any meaningful sense of the term. This committee did not see any of the input received from faculty and had no role in the construction of the 'Thematic Summary.' This was not an oversight. The committee is not meant to have any such role at any point in the process. [The President], assisted by senior administration, constructs and writes the plan, and each of its stages (Union Executive Letter).

The expected role of the committee arose again when the plan was finalized. At least one member expected that the committee would formally approve the plan, and he was surprised to learn that a final draft was being put forward for Board approval without coming to the committee again. This was such an important issue to him that he chose to resign from the committee, indicating that he believed that it was not relevant.

> After all that sitting there waiting for the final draft and making sure it's okay, I never actually saw a final draft until it was announced that that final draft was being used to make policy that was deeply unpopular on campus. So I was very concerned, and I heard from a lot of faculty members who said, 'Well, obviously they used you. They put your name on there, made it look like the faculty association played along, and then they just wrote it themselves and now they're using it to bring … centres onto campus, and you totally got played.' And so we're back to square one with a lot of that, so I resigned (Informant F8).

Individual interpretations of the significance of the understanding of the role of the committee differed. Some informants recalled it as a small bump in the process, but most did not discuss it in detail. Those who brought it forward as a

problem shared a strong affiliation with the union, and the union executive did voice it as a concern during the process.

### Making sense of the process

The formative context of the university set the stage for the sensemaking around this issue. With the history of conflict from the labour dispute, patterns of distrust had developed. Some faculty interpreted the lack of an all-campus session as the administration's attempt to control the process. One faculty member speculated that it was a result of the President wanting to control the conversation:

> I think given that context, and probably some other reasons as well, the administration decided that they would set up a process which, in my view was really designed to have the absolute minimal amount of input, and really the absolute minimal potential for any kind of controversy, any kind of argument, any kind of upset (Informant F4).

As a result of the past conflicts, there was a perceived anxiety around what could happen if everyone was brought together. This context was seen to drive the decisions around how to structure the process and the interpretation of that decision.

The issues around the strategic planning process were also connected to power – the concern that not all voices would be heard in the process or that involvement was being deliberately limited. The administration was seen as trying to limit engagement by not including an all-campus forum and limiting the

role of the joint committee. The initial communications about the process came from the President, and it became apparent that the President and the Vice President Academic were controlling the process (summarizing the feedback, drafting the plan) with limited input from the joint committee. Some faculty felt that their voices were being excluded from the process.

Within this context, individual sensemaking around the planning process was driven by retrospective understanding of past processes, which impacted extracted cues and plausibility. In addition, sensemaking was further developed through social interaction and was impacted by identity construction.

Retrospection had a significant influence on sensemaking on this issue because individuals expected the strategic planning process to conform to what they had experienced in the past:

> The strategic planning process that went down prior to the most recent one was a fairly well-developed kind of a thing in the sense that the administration made a real effort to reach out and connect to, really connect to all of the faculty and all of the different parts of the university (Informant F4).

Individuals extracted different cues from the documents that were distributed and interpreted those cues based on their past experiences. For example, those who were not part of the joint committee interpreted the description of the process as including an all-campus session because they did not have the context of the committee discussions. Initially, individuals who were not part of the

committee interpreted “consultation” based on what that looked like in past experiences with planning, assuming that they would have an opportunity for in-person input. One faculty member noted that an important part of the last strategic planning process was the all-campus retreat:

> We had a university-wide retreat. So we went off campus, the whole of the faculty, and there was a process designed there. You know, a somewhat cumbersome process as these things often are when you're talking about trying to get feedback from a large number of people. But, nevertheless, there was at least an attempt made to bring everybody together and to solicit input from everybody (Informant F4).

Sensemaking was also connected to identity construction. Within the university, there were established traditions around faculty engagement on key issues. Through these traditions, faculty members saw themselves as being central to the university and expected to be actively involved in academic planning and decision making. One faculty member said:

> I felt very strongly that the university needed an approach that included wide and open forum-style or town-hall-style consultation rather than smaller, focused group discussion, and I was quite adamant in that. I pushed that promptly because I also thought that the university community - faculty, yes, but also students, also staff, needed a forum to be heard by one another in terms of what their particular interests were (Informant F2).

Thus, those faculty members could not accept that there would be no opportunity for them to be engaged in a face-to-face discussion about it.

In this university environment, some individuals placed a premium on gathering together to share input and define where the university should go, rather than simply providing one-way written communication:

> As someone who would participate in the process, I considered it to be necessary, and I invoked a previous session over our curriculum reform, which did move to an open forum and that it was an enormously important consensus-building process, and I tend toward consensus building in areas of common interest (Informant F2).

The committee members, in contrast, had become convinced that an in-person process would not provide useful input. The President noted that:

> We hadn't anticipated a large open forum with the university originally, you know with the whole university community, because we felt that, because the experience of [the consultant] and some of the other members of the leadership team and the joint Board Senate committee originally was that the type of input that you get in the large sort of town hall setting may not be as valuable as what you get in more focused groups (Informant A1).

Some faculty members developed their objections to the process through social interaction, coming together to compose collective letters to the administration regarding their concerns, enacting their understanding of what the process should include:

> On the one hand I thought, like so many of my colleagues, all of this stuff is window dressing, it's all noise, it's all silly. If they want to kind of turn their backs on us, not really engage, disconnect, at the end of the day, so what. It doesn't really matter. The real strategic planning occurs during collective bargaining. So we can just ignore it. I don't really need the stress, the grief. It's a lot of

> work, you know, writing these letters to the President, going around people, lobbying them. You have to have a long conversation with each person to get them to agree to sign a letter. It's kind of a pain in the ass, I have better things to do, so I did think maybe I should just blow it off. But then I also thought, it just offended me, it irritated me and I thought, you know, even if it is kind of silly and all, I just don't like being sort of disrespected in that manner, and I just despise that attitude of condescension that I'm sensing here that comes from the Board that the President was channeling. And I'm sorry, but I'm just going to say something out loud, I'm just not happy (Informant F4).

Through conversation and social connection, faculty shared their individual interpretations, and their ideas of what the process should include were formulated. In the end, the idea that a valid, transparent consultation process could occur without that social interaction was simply not plausible to many of the faculty. As one administrator described it:

> There was quite an uproar after that, because faculty members that weren't involved in that process [the small-group sessions] felt excluded from the strategic planning process, and I think the reason why they felt excluded was because in the previous strategic planning process, everyone was included…. And I think the fact that people had been included then made them feel excluded in the new one. And people got really up in arms about it (Informant A4).

The faculty exercised their informal power by raising their concerns, which led to changes in the process. In the end, how it was handled helped re-frame the perception of how the administrators would wield their power. One administrator noted: “The faculty members very much appreciated the way it all

unfolded in the end. They were very, very upset about not being included initially, and very pleased to be included later" (Informant A4).

**Focus on Religious Affiliation**

The second issue I identified that prompted sensemaking was the role religious affiliation should play in the plan. Most of the informants discussed how the issue of religious affiliation was addressed during the process, but if one looked only at the written record of the process and the plan, it would not appear to be part of the discussion. The different positions on the issue seemed to be connected to the individuals' history with the university. The administrators who did not serve as faculty at this university had a different understanding of the significance of the issue than those who had been or currently were faculty members. Ultimately, the shared conversation around the role of religion in the university was a way of enacting an evolving sensemaking about their organizational identity.

Although there had been a goal to nurture and develop the religious affiliation in the past plan, it did not appear to be a focus for this process. When the planning process was first rolled out, neither the background information nor the questions posed to the campus community referred to the religious affiliation. Nevertheless, some faculty members submitted feedback advocating for the university to distance itself from the religious connections. In their letter regarding their concerns about the planning process, the union executive

pointed out that at least four individuals and one department specifically raised the issue in their submissions in response to the primer. When the President and Vice President Academic prepared the thematic summary of the feedback, they did not include any references to this issue. Some faculty interpreted this omission as censorship:

> So somebody wrote in to say that what I want is specific repudiation of [religion], to remove any reference to [religion] from our strategic plan. And the administration's response was to say, 'Well, actually, that is a matter for the mission statement not the strategic plan. That was why we didn't bother to include that in our summary.' But you see the subtlety there - I said it, you suppressed it, therefore it's being suppressed (Informant F8).

Combined with the realization that the consultation process would not include an all-campus forum, there were some faculty who interpreted the silence around the religious issue as a sign that their input would be ignored. One noted that:

> we noticed that there wasn't a mention of religion in [the thematic summary], and we weren't quite sure what that meant or how to take it. We weren't sure if that meant that it was simply not going to be discussed and that the old framework would be carried forward, or whether it meant that there had actually been a realization in the change of heart on the part of people in the administration and the Board. And that religion would be taken out of the strategic plan altogether, it would no longer be part of the strategic vision of the university. And because there's such poor communication and such a disconnect between administration and the faculty, we weren't really sure what any of this meant. And because we didn't, at that time anyway there wasn't any kind of plan put in place to bring people together, there wasn't any context for discussion (Informant F4).

The final plan did not include any mention of the religious affiliation, except for the inclusion of the mission statement on the last page of the document. Several faculty members interpreted this as a victory on this issue:

> Another very interesting feature of it was that it took out all references to [religion] (Informant F3).
>
> And, what's interesting about this strat plan is it's the first one not to have the [religious affiliation] in it, in the history of the institution. That is a major coup on the part of this President (Informant A2).
>
> And as it turned out, to my surprise actually, the administration realized, certain people on the Board realized that it did need to change and it was taken out of the strategic plan (Informant F4).

A few informants noted that, after the plan was approved, university advertisements for new faculty changed. In the past, they included a specific statement about the religious nature of the university, which some faculty believed limited the pool of applicants. Now, the ads do not mention the religious history:

> So even though the mission statement hasn't yet been changed, religion is out of the strategic plan, and that basically gives you license to take it out of a whole lot of other things. So all the promotional material that goes out for students, no religion in it. All the material that goes out for faculty, in [my] department we're hiring a new [faculty member] right now as we speak, and the ad that we put out, there's no religion in it. So, that's the most immediate manifestation of it (Informant F4).

Some expressed the belief that the President had some difficulty with the Board because religion was not part of the plan:

> I heard through the grapevine she actually caught a lot of flak for taking religion out of the strategic plan (Informant F4).
>
> I know the President had to explain that to the Board of governors. The Board was not as keen on that part as the faculty, but the President, to her credit, really listened to the faculty, and I'm sure she agreed with the faculty (Informant A4).

There seemed to be some misunderstanding on the part of certain administrators regarding the specific nature of the faculty concerns on this point. When the administrators who had not served as faculty at this university mentioned the concerns around the religious affiliation, they discussed it in terms of the mission statement, which references that tradition, rather than in terms of the plan:

> One of the early skirmishes was, with the strategic planning process, are we willing to open up the mission statement, and the President and [VP Academic], and I fully supported them, did not want to do that because you know what a mission statement's like at a university. It's a whole can of worms, and we did not want to have that debate. We wanted to stay focused on specific operational things. And so, a number of faculty were disappointed that this exercise wasn't used as a mission statement exercise, but we wanted to keep it very narrowly focused (Informant A3).
>
> To me, it's part of our tradition, it's part of our history, you can't change history. For me, that's kind of the end of the conversation, but other people feel more strongly about it (Informant A5).

During the interview, the President did not mention the prior plan's goal regarding the religious affiliation and discussed the concerns as a request to change the mission, not a request to keep the religious affiliation out of the plan:

> Some people felt that … it was time to stop referring to that history and tradition…. And so … I responded to that saying that … we had been authorized … by the Board of governors was to develop a strategic plan under our current mission, not to change the mission. We had no authority to change the mission. And so, we were working under our current mission statement for the university and developing a plan. At the end of the day, there wasn't much either way in the plan on that whole issue at all (Informant A1).

Although some faculty believed that the Board was not happy with the exclusion of a religious goal, the President did not report any challenges having the plan approved by the Board. In fact, she expressed some surprise that the faculty who raised the issue were satisfied with the final result:

> I was surprised at the end of the day, when the plan was done, that some of the people who had been concerned about the [religious] identity and whether or not that was addressed and so on, some of those people in particular wrote me really very positive messages about how much they liked the plan, how good it was, and thanking me for adjusting the process, for listening to the concerns, which they felt one way or another were reflected in the plan that came out of the process (Informant A1).

**Making sense of the role of religion**

The university's history, which included a formative context where religion drove strategic directions and the administration suppressed divergent views, was an important underlying factor in how individuals made sense of this issue. This context contributed to faculty suspicion and anxiety around the role religion would play in the future. The administrators who did not share this

history viewed the situation very differently, not fully understanding the significance of the issue to the faculty and how their actions would be viewed.

Sensemaking around the issue was also affected by organizational power. Given the past power struggles between the Board and faculty, those who raised the issue readily interpreted the lack of dialogue as a way of dismissing their concerns and depriving them of the opportunity to be heard on the issue. There was also a tension between formal and informal power. The administration exercised formal power in excluding the topic from the thematic summary. In response, the faculty used their informal power to continue the conversation:

> So, I organized a few people and sent a letter over to the President and got a bunch of people to sign it, and we really wanted to ensure that this would be clarified and we wanted to be sure there would be some scope for discussing the place of religion in the mission statement and the overall strategic plan of the university (Informant F4).

Within this context, individual sensemaking was driven by identity construction, retrospection, and extracted cues.

On this issue, identity construction played a significant role in sensemaking. The focus on religion did not fit with the identity of many of the faculty, who saw themselves as academics, not religious scholars:

> One of them that's big for me is the whole [religious] mission of the university. And I think that, well it certainly doesn't reflect, does not reflect our faculty body, on the one hand. On the other hand, I don't think it reflects the student population. But, it can

> definitely have some effect on recruitment, both of students and of faculty members (Informant F6).

Additionally, the university itself was developing a new identity with the transition to non-religious staff and faculty. With the shifting identity, the faculty were enacting a new environment, one that did not embrace the religious affiliation.

> We wanted it to be gone. We wanted the place modernized. We wanted it really to be brought into line with the reality on the ground (Informant F4).

Identity construction around this issue was also connected to service as a faculty member at the university. The administrators who had come from faculty shared the understanding of the issue with other faculty. They had served as academics under the strategic plan that included a religious focus and seemed to share the aversion to continuing to embrace that perspective. For faculty, it was no longer plausible to be affiliated with a religious organization. It did not fit with their desired identity as a respected research university. For the non-faculty administrators, who interpreted the issue as being a request to change the mission statement, they did not believe that it was plausible to re-write the mission as part of this process. They did not include religion in the thematic summary because they did not see it as relevant. However, the faculty interpreted the exclusion as meaning that the issue was not open for discussion, that they would not be heard on it.

The important cues for this issue are actually what was not said, rather than what was, and retrospection guided the interpretation of those cues. In creating the thematic summary, the administrators extracted what they saw as important for the planning process. Because there had been a more significant focus on religion in the past, the faculty were extracting cues from the lack of discussion of the issue in the thematic summary and the President's response. Some faculty saw the exclusion as a cue that they were being silenced on this issue, when it appears that senior leadership left it out because there was no intention of including it in the plan: "The administration's response was basically to say that some of the comments that weren't included were comments that weren't relevant to the process" (Informant F8). The faculty viewed the exclusion of the issue from the summary with suspicion, wondering whether it signalled censorship, instead of seeing it as a sign that the new President did not consider religion to be a relevant theme for the strategic plan.

The President, on the other hand, did not share the same history and thus did not seem to understand the significance of the issue. She viewed it as a reference in the mission, not seeing that the religious affiliation had played a much greater role in guiding strategy in the past. With the final plan, the faculty interpreted the fact that there were not priorities related to religion as an acknowledgement that the university was moving away from that history. This sensemaking was reinforced by the changes in faculty and student recruitment

materials. In the end, the faculty interpreted the exclusion of religion from the strategic priorities as a “win” for their side.

**Academic Focus**

Another issue that appeared to present ambiguity during the process was the appropriate academic focus for the university, specifically with respect to the balance between teaching and research and the relative importance of various disciplines. The university has a tradition of placing a high priority on teaching, with limited emphasis on research prior to the recent turn of the century. There has also been a perceived emphasis on particular disciplines, while others are not as valued. The differences on these issues arose within the faculty, with administrators remaining largely silent on the topics.

The tension between teaching and research at this university is part of its evolution from a primarily teaching university to one where academics are expected to research as well as teach. One faculty member noted:

> There was hostility to research, I mean obviously a teaching, undergraduate teaching institution, but teaching was emphasized to the point of obsessiveness, where you felt, you did feel it had more of the atmosphere of a high school at some times (Informant F3).

That balance began to shift as newer faculty with an academic focus were hired to replace the older religious teachers: “The newer generation on balance, there's a little bit of slippage, some exceptions, but on balance were much more

oriented toward research" (Informant F4). However, some of the long-tenured faculty members still viewed their primary role as teaching. Workload issues involving balancing teaching with research were part of the significant labour dispute, creating a continuing tension both between faculty and administration and among the faculty, themselves. One faculty member noted:

> We have had a bit of dynamic tension in the university for several years now about the balance between teaching and research as sort of what faculty are to do [here], and we had a like a strike-lockout kind of conflict, and much of that was to do with this question of teaching loads vs. research expectations and the fact that up to that point [the university] placed much more emphasis on teaching time and teaching quality than other universities in the country (Informant F10).

Some look back on the history of focusing on teaching as being outdated:

> The university used to identify itself as a teaching university, which a lot of academics find a bit of a paradox in that if you're a university you can't just be teaching, you have to be doing research. So, that's always been a debate at [the university] and it continues to be, although we've become, we've come a long way in that debate and we don't call ourselves a teaching university anymore (Informant A4).

Meanwhile, those who focus on teaching continue to take pride in carrying a larger teaching load and speak passionately about the importance of undergraduate education: "[the university's] primary focus and responsibility is teaching. The university should find concrete ways by which it can support and encourage excellent and innovative teaching" (comment from *Thematic Summary of Stakeholder Feedback*, p. 12).

In the thematic summary of the initial written input, the different ideas on the appropriate focus were acknowledged. Although some asserted that the focus should be on research ("most faculty do not come to the academy to teach, they come to do research"), others wanted the tradition of being a teaching institution to be reinforced ("[the university] is not and never can be a 'research university'") (*Thematic Summary of Stakeholder Feedback,* p.11). The plan itself includes priorities that relate to both, emphasizing the need to provide excellent undergraduate education and recognizing the role that faculty research can play in that process.

When the informants discussed the planning process, disciplinary affiliation appeared to affect how they viewed certain issues, as well as how they viewed others in the university. When describing their role in the university, most faculty members and some administrators identified their field of study without prompting. In some cases, they analyzed the strategic planning process through the lens of their disciplines. One discussed it in terms of actor-network theory, and others talked about discursive practices within the process. Some also identified how disciplinary affiliation affects position and power within the university. Many have the impression that some disciplines or programs are favoured over others, with one administrator noting that there were:

> Concerns over the strategic plan and the extent to which it may privilege some departments and programs over others. And because there has been an ongoing concern amongst, especially some smaller departments but also larger ones that certain

> departments are privileged over others, not necessarily in terms of resources, but more so in terms of how they are advertised if not portrayed as the face of the university (Informant A6).

Several of the informants referenced an ongoing power struggle within the organization between a "great books" perspective and a social sciences focus, with some being very dissatisfied with how certain disciplines appeared to be favoured with resources whereas others were more popular with students:

> Some people think that [the great books program] is sort of our flagship and other people think that [it] is very small, attracts very few students, and it takes up a lot of resources and gets a lot of attention in our publications. You know, in our media that we would use to attract new students. So that became a, you know some people are really strongly in support of [the great books program], and some people are really resentful of the attention given to [it]. That became a source of debate (Informant A4).

The "great books" supporters speak positively about the importance of the program to the liberal arts focus, as others speak about how there are more students in other programs:

> The Great Ideas/Books programmes are interdisciplinary, collaboratively taught programmes with cohorts of students that have a very special experience. This model is unique (comment from *Thematic Summary of Stakeholder Feedback,* p. 4).

> If in terms of kind of the marketing representation of the place, if most of our students are coming here to study philosophy and to study in the great books program and if those are the biggest majors, again, that would be fine. I would have no problem with that. But that isn't the case. The data on all of these points makes a very very strong, points in a very strong direction away from all those (Informant F4).

Discipline also seemed to play a role in how individuals engaged in the process and related to the plan. Faculty from the professional programs reported being less engaged with the process and having difficulty seeing themselves within the plan. The significant focus on liberal arts and undergraduate education in the preamble to the plan and the strategic priorities had the effect of making the faculty in the professional disciplines feel less valued. One expressed the concern that her department would:

> not always see that we're going to show up in a significant way in the main goals of the strategic plan, given that we're a professional program and that we're not liberal arts, which is the core of the university and the sole focus of the university. The main focus, not the sole. It appears that at times I think members of this school have felt that professional programs don't get the same kind of attention (Informant F9).

**Making sense of academic focus**

Sensemaking around the university's academic focus took place in a context of shifting power dynamics in the university, which had once been much more focused on teaching but was now trying to establish itself as a leader in research, too. The root of the issue seemed to be focused on who controlled the direction of the university. In the past, the Board and administration had attempted to keep the focus on teaching, which was one of the causes of the labour dispute:

> We have had a bit of dynamic tension in the university for several years now about the balance between teaching and research as sort of what faculty are to do at [the university], and we had a like

> a strike-lockout kind of conflict in 2008, and much of that was to do with this question of teaching loads vs. research expectations and the fact that up to that point [the university] placed much more emphasis on teaching time and teaching quality than other universities in the country. We had a 3-4, no 3-3 load and with some research expectations as well, and the strike was about reducing the teaching load and giving more support and recognition to research. And that question sort of continues beyond that particular strike, and it popped up again in the strategic planning process (Informant F10).

When the dispute was resolved, the faculty who advocated for more research prevailed, and the university has been shifting the focus in that direction.

The context in which the strategic planning process took place was deeply steeped in the liberal arts tradition. In fact, the plan included a full page on the goals of a liberal arts education as an introduction to the strategic priorities. This statement was careful to support both teaching and research, but it also seems to marginalize the professional programs. The sensemaking around these issues seems to be tied to the role these disagreements play in the university's history, where the conflict that led to the labour dispute centred around the emphasis on teaching over research. Additionally, the administrators at the time of the dispute were seen as being aligned with the Great Books program:

> It was sort of around this time they were in the process of establishing their great books program. … So essentially then, … they had a hegemony exercised over the university, these people with what I considered a very narrow retrograde view of what undergraduate education should be (Informant F3).

Within this context, sensemaking appeared to be significantly influenced by identity construction and plausibility.

The informants' positions on issues of academic focus appeared to be strongly connected to their identity construction. Identity construction in universities is often linked to discipline, where faculty members may have a stronger affiliation with their field of study than with their university (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Weick, 1976). This focus can create tensions in the university, as each discipline views the world differently. A psychology professor extracts different cues from a situation than a philosophy professor, which can lead to divergent sensemaking. Disciplinary affiliation also affected the credibility some had in the process. Some faculty expressed the idea that only academics should be making decisions regarding the academic focus of the university. This was raised with respect to the President, who has a professional degree rather than a research doctorate:

> There should be more possibility to actually steer the direction of the university, and having the Board of governors generally make big decisions about the university is problematic because they're not academics. … The current President we have, she's very good. She's very good at what she's doing. She's very good at her job, but she's not an academic either, in the traditional sense (Informant F6).

In addition to disciplinary affiliation, some informants identified as teachers, others as academic researchers who happened to teach. One noted "our public figure is teaching, but a great part of our work is either managing this

place or doing our research," (Informant F6) while another stated "I do research and so forth, but I'm not fixated on it, like the way some of my colleagues are, so that language I don't care about. In fact, I disagree with the emphasis that many people do place on the research function here anyway" (Informant F10).

There are multiple factions in the organization, each enacting their own sensemaking with respect to where the university should focus its attention. The supporters of teaching and research provided clear statements on their positions in their feedback during the planning process. Meanwhile, the professional program faculty appear to be enacting their sensemaking by disengaging. They reported not being actively involved in the process and noted that they did not see themselves in the plan, which emphasized the university's focus on undergraduate, liberal arts education. This perception had been reinforced by past administrative actions:

> One example I'll give you is that I think there was some discouragement because we were trying to get a master's program established in the school of social work a few years back. It was approved by Senate, but it was not approved by the Board of governors for financial reasons. So, in the course of the strategic planning, there had been the, as part of the, I think the goals, was to establish graduate studies through the research office, a graduate studies unit because there is talk about other people wanting to have graduate studies level programming, not just us. And at one point, that was taken out, and I think we were informed of that, and that, I think that really played a role in terms of people's motivation to get engaged (Informant F9).

Thus, the professional school faculty informants saw no reason to become engaged and did not have a positive view of the process:

> It seemed to me like it was more of a mechanical exercise than an actual dynamic process. But keep in mind that I was quite disengaged, and I'm sure I missed talking to the people who were more engaged with it because there's lots of people in different parts of the campus that could have been more involved with it (Informant F9).
>
> I'm not saying that they didn't motivate, lots of people did participate, but I did not see the kind of, there is something significant is going on, which I have a say into it, I should have a say into it, and my say is very important. I did not smell that in the involvement (Informant F1).

The competing views on what is an appropriate emphasis for the university are strongly influenced by plausibility. From one perspective, a university without a strong research presence is not plausible. Meanwhile, others note that it is not plausible for the university to aspire to be a top research university, given its context of being small and lacking graduate programs:

> We do not have cadres of graduate students to form research teams. We do not direct graduate students engaged in original thesis research that explore new questions in our discipline. Nor do we teach specialized graduate courses in our research field. The maxim that research enhances teaching may not hold true for [our] professors where many, if not most of us, do not teach courses that directly link to our research interests (comment from *Thematic Summary of Stakeholder Feedback,* p. 11).

The sensemaking around the appropriate focus for the university is ongoing, with no single perspective appearing to be dominant and the strategic plan recognizing multiple key priorities.

**Collective Bargaining and Strategic Planning**

Given the history of the past labour dispute, collective bargaining played a prominent role in the university and was another trigger for sensemaking during the strategic planning process. Several informants expressed the idea that collective bargaining and the collective agreement were far more important than strategic planning. They noted that they are much more likely to look at the collective agreement to guide decisions around how they interacted with the university than the strategic plan. In some cases, strategic planning was described as a conversation about issues that were not covered by collective bargaining, so the collective agreement was seen as the dominant document:

> So what we do is during faculty … meeting we have a copy of our collective agreement. … So we bring it, because we know that it is, oh, so there is an issue, let's see what the collective agreement says about it. So article 2.5.6 says, oh okay, now it's clear. Do we do that with the strategic planning document? No (Informant F1).

Most of the administrators interviewed did not make this distinction, but one did mention that he would be more likely to refer to the collective agreement in his daily work than the strategic plan.

Some presented the idea that collective bargaining should be the forum for setting university direction rather than strategic planning:

> And I think all of this is relevant in the current context because it seems to me that what's happened here is that collective bargaining has in a sense taken the place of strategic planning. What I mean by that is that you can't really talk to each other effectively anymore, so the talking happens in the one place where the administration is forced to listen to the faculty, and that's in collective bargaining. They're legally obliged to do that, and the faculty actually have a little bit of leverage at that moment through labour law to be taken seriously (Informant F4).

The two processes were seen as separate, with the boundaries of strategic planning being set by the parameters of the collective agreement. One faculty member described strategic planning as:

> a period of time to encode those ambitions in a document that was the common ground, outside of the collective agreement, for faculty engaging with the administration of the university. This is how we spoke to our employer in ways that were not framed by the collective agreement (Informant F2).

One administrator noted:

> The other initiatives that we want to make may bump up against the collective agreement, so the faculty association may have their own interpretation of that. So, not saying that the two aren't perhaps at times in parallel, but there is that potential for them to clash, and at the end of the day, I would much more, I would be happier following the collective agreement, because I don't really enjoy being grieved (Informant A6).

Others described the strategic planning process as being secondary to collective bargaining as a forum to identify and address issues:

> So when something like a strategic plan comes along, I think that most people feel it's kind of a waste of time. And if there's anything of any real concern, something that's really going to affect you on a day-to-day basis, the way to deal with that is in the context of collective bargaining (Informant F5).

> Because collective agreements now cover just about everything in an academic institution, fights over the collective agreement are often fights about the nature of the whole place. And that one got everybody really energized. This strategic planning process was not like that (Informant F8).

**Making sense of the role of collective bargaining**

Engaging in strategic planning in an environment dominated by collective bargaining triggered sensemaking around what should guide the university's direction. The university's labour relations history was the dominant formative context for the sensemaking around strategic planning. Out of that social conflict arose both informal and formal rules that guided engagement in the university. During the labour dispute, the faculty union established itself as being able to successfully challenge the Board and administration. That situation created an environment where the union is very powerful. The new President came in with a mandate from the Board to set the strategic direction, but needed to do so within the context of the unionized environment. The union's strength can be seen in the role it played in raising concerns about the structure and transparency of the strategic planning process. One member of the joint

committee who was part of the union leadership believed that he had been put there as a union representative, even though he was formally appointed through the Senate. The formal rules contained in the collective agreement are prominent within the university, with both faculty and administrators noting that they looked to the collective agreement to guide their responses and decisions on a regular basis. Sensemaking around the importance of collective bargaining was driven by identity construction, retrospection, and plausibility.

To some extent, this university has been controlled by its past, with the labour dispute continuing to impact relationships, expectations, and behaviour. It is significant that so many informants discussed the topics of the labour dispute and collective bargaining when they were not asked directly about it. This demonstrates the continuing impact on the organization. How individuals viewed, and even spoke of, the labour dispute seemed to be connected to their identity as union members. When informants described their roles in the university, some of them mentioned their present or past union affiliation. Four of the faculty members and one of the current administrators noted that they had served or were currently serving on the union executive. Some of these informants had union signs or other paraphernalia on display in their offices, demonstrating the significance of their union status as part of their identity construction. Others mentioned the role the faculty union played on campus

during their interviews, noting that there is a strong union presence on the campus:

> I remember one gentleman on the union, quite a, I guess, quite a militant President of the union, he told me and several others, you know '… don't bother sitting on Senate, don't bother doing strategic planning, don't bother trying to sit on any of these major university committees, just work with [the faculty association]. It's the only place you have a chance of affecting change in the institution' (Informant F3).
>
> Of course you have the union, the very strong unions at universities, the agenda of CAUT is a co-governance environment, whereby the unions will be running the institution along with the administration, so they see any exercise like this as an opportunity to push and prod (Informant A3).

The tension between strategic planning and collective bargaining was ultimately about which was the most plausible way to set university direction. Because of the significance of the union and the focus on collective bargaining, some believed that all important issues should be part of the collective agreement. Thus, the strategic plan was really not relevant to them. Meanwhile, the President and the administration had been charged by the Board with developing a strategic plan and they viewed it as a document that would guide their decisions. One administrator noted: "I guess for me it certainly helps me determine my own priorities in terms of my own work, so whether it's capital budget plans, the strategic priority, I take my kind of guidance from that" (Informant A5).

**Summary**

Many points in the strategic planning process served as triggers for sensemaking – issues that required individuals to resolve discrepancies between what they were experiencing and what they expected. Examining the sensemaking around the varied stories of the strategic planning process shows that there are multiple factors contributing to the different meanings assigned to the same events. Using a critical sensemaking lens can help identify the roots of the differences and contribute to our understanding of the underlying issues that can give rise to conflict. Recognizing how different sensemaking is developed leads to a more comprehensive understanding of how different understandings of a shared experience can create misunderstandings and conflicts. Sensemaking is more than just individual interpretations of events, however. It also contributes to the social construction of the organization. Therefore, to understand the impact of the strategic planning process on the organization, we must go beyond individual meaning and examine how that sensemaking affected the organization. In the next chapter, I examine the impact the sensemaking around strategic planning had on the university.

## Chapter 7: Organizational Impact: Reconstructing Trust

In the previous chapter, I explored how the planning process was not a single event around which sensemaking occurred; rather, the activities and discussions involved provided multiple opportunities for sensemaking. With each opportunity, individuals not only made sense of the specific situation, but also used that sensemaking to socially construct the organization (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In this chapter, I examine how sensemaking around the various issues discussed in Chapter 6 affected the university, with particular attention to issues of trust and engagement. I describe how the informants presented the history of engagement and trust, and then examine how sensemaking around the strategic planning process altered those perceptions.

### The Existing Landscape of Engagement and Trust

The topics of engagement and trust arose frequently in the interviews, in multiple contexts. It was apparent that relationships among members of the university community were developed in a formative context that was heavily influenced by the labour relations history. Most informants spontaneously mentioned the labour dispute, noting how it had impacted the university and drawing connections to the recent planning process. Although it happened six years ago, informants mentioned the labour dispute as being relevant to their

experience of the strategic planning process. Ten of the informants (three administrators and seven faculty members), including one who was not hired until after the dispute, mentioned it as a source of ongoing tension in the university. This event has had a long-lasting impact on the university, creating an atmosphere of distrust and disengagement. One faculty member stated:

> So there was about 20 to 25 percent of people supported the administration and sided with them, and they also cultivated student leadership, and it really turned into a kind of civil war on campus. And the aftermath of that is still with us now, so much so that people I think for the most part really are not that interested in talking to their colleagues (Informant F4).

Another commented:

> There was a lockout a few years ago, a few years before I arrived. And I think that really created a rift between the administration and the faculty body. … I think that created a lot of animosity between the administration and the faculty body (Informant F6).

In the thematic summary of input, it was noted that several people raised issues around the need to promote healthy workplace relationships. Although the summary did not specifically mention the labour dispute, some of the comments quoted appeared to be referring to the atmosphere it created. Individuals noted a need to "regain a sense of community" and make the university "safe and respectful" (*Thematic Summary of Stakeholder Feedback,* pp. 16-17). The tensions that were identified as connected to the dispute were not just between faculty and administration; they also existed among faculty. One informant

noted that faculty were much less likely to engage with others outside their departments, or gather to engage in discussions around important university issues:

> It's not that people were angry, it's just disengaged. As I say, you come into your office, you teach your classes, you go home. You stopped going to functions, you stopped serving on committees (Informant F3).

There was also continuing distrust of other faculty members' motivations, framed in terms of the tension that existed over which programs appeared to be favoured by the administration:

> They're in a way signature, the great books program is kind of one of our flagships in a way, and it's embattled in the sense that other departments at the university don't quite like it because they think it's elitist or something like that. But, anyway, it's been a great experience for me to be involved in (Informant F10).

The informants who described their union involvement also signaled a level of distrust of the administration. Although they reported being quite engaged in the planning process, they also described their desire to be involved as being motivated by worry that the plan would be somehow bad for the faculty. They engaged with the process in an effort to make sure there was not anything "bad" or "nasty" in the final product: "I was more there to make sure nasty things didn't get into it, so I was more watching than coming in with manifestos or anything" (Informant F8). They seemed to be concerned that they maintain a role in setting the direction of the university; they did not trust the

administration to have all the power. Identification with the union also affected how people spoke of the labour dispute. Most of the faculty referred to the labour dispute as a lockout, emphasizing that the Board initiated the dispute. Only one, who disclosed that he disagreed with the union position, called it a strike.

Additional issues of trust and engagement existed within the professional schools. The university had a history of focusing primarily on undergraduate education. In the last strategic plan, not one of the six goals and twenty-five objectives related to the professional programs. For their part, the professional school faculty developed a pattern of keeping to themselves and not engaging in university-wide initiatives:

> Looking back, maybe there's some disappointment that the professional programs weren't approached in a way that would motivate us to get engaged. It was clearly not the focus. It's more that there was an absence of that as opposed to that being like how are we going to engage the professional programs in setting out at least one objective that's focused on professional programs and what would that be. Where do we want to go with these two professional programs and what's our vision for that. There's been a lack of that as far as I'm concerned. A lack of focus from administration to drive that particular goal or objective. And it's you know I think that is a weakness, but, like I said, would it have happened had we become more of a force and really gotten engaged, it might have. So I'm not sure where you know, it could be a chicken and egg thing. But we weren't, it seems like we weren't motivated to do it (Informant F9).

**Impact of the Strategic Planning Process**

The university's history drove the initial responses to the strategic planning process. The ongoing rift between the faculty and the administration and Board presented itself frequently through questioning motivations and backgrounds. When bumps happened in the process, there was a tendency to question motivation. But as those problems were resolved, individuals adjusted their sensemaking in an ongoing process. Trust in the process was, fundamentally, about plausibility. Given past experiences, many faculty members attributed motivations and meaning to certain actions, such as seeing the exclusion of the religion issue from the thematic summary as suppression. They interpreted the omission as an attempt to evade the issue or suppress dissent, rather than trusting that it meant that religion would not be a theme within the plan. In their experience, it was not plausible that the perceived exclusion was not an attempt to control the conversation.

Many faculty expressed a lack of trust in the administration that was rooted in the labour dispute and impacted their faith in the transparency of the current process:

> There was a lockout, there was a lockout on the 26th of December, and a few days after there was a strike in response to the lockout, and yeah, I think that created a lot of animosity between the administration and the faculty body. …Not that those animosities are still the same now, I mean, I think we've come a long way since then. But, it's still very much to the forefront of people's minds, so a lot of my, a lot, not all of my colleagues, but a lot of my colleagues really felt like they had been

> betrayed by the administration. And really felt that the, that the administration could not be trusted any more (Informant F6).
>
> I mean, we had a labour disruption a few years ago and there are still some sort of negative feelings from that. … I think most people feel like we're through to the other side of that and things are improving in a number of ways, but you know, I guess the fact that … those kind of personal animosities can be a major role (Informant F7).
>
> And there was still a lot of suspicion about senior administration, there was still a lot of mistrust (Informant A6).

Some believed that the omission of a large campus forum in the initial process was deliberate because there was a worry that these tensions would surface in and perhaps derail the discussion:

> But it was an extremely contentious, really a kind of toxic experience. So much so that in the aftermath of that, various sections of the university couldn't even stand to be in the same room as other parts of it, so I think given that context, and probably some other reasons as well, the administration decided that they would set up a process which, in my view was really designed to have the absolute minimal amount of input, and really the absolute minimal potential for any kind of controversy, any kind of argument, any kind of upset (Informant F4).

Even though there was some initial distrust, the sensemaking around the strategic planning process seemed to involve enacting a more positive environment of trust within the university. The history of the labour dispute had created a disruption in the social engagement of the university. The university community valued the social exchange of ideas, as seen by the call for an all-campus forum, but the continuing distrust limited the willingness of some to

engage with their colleagues. The strategic planning process created a new social space for engagement, which appeared to build trust among the faculty and between faculty and administration. Faculty who reported worry that the plan would contain something bad also stated that they were pleased with the final result:

> I suppose my overall take on it all was that I was actually pleasantly surprised. I mean, when it was first building up and we were being marginalized in this way, I thought oh boy, I am not going to like this document, it's going to be bad, bad, bad. And the President ended up pulling a rabbit out of the hat, surprising all of us by being very very controlling and distancing and yet at the end of the day producing something which, given some of the crazy nostalgia-obsessed nuts that she has to deal with on that Board, was actually pretty darn good (Informant F4).

Those who were upset with the exclusion of the religious affiliation issue from the thematic summary were ultimately very pleased that there was no mention of religion in the final strategic priorities. The adjustments to the process in response to concerns about transparency – adding the all-campus session and bringing the plan to Senate before the Board – also worked to build trust. These changes provided new experiences that allowed individuals to adjust their understanding of what is plausible. One informant expressed the opinion that the initial exclusion and subsequent change in process actually created a higher level of engagement with the process than would have occurred if an all-campus session had been planned from the start:

> And if you could have worked it all out, and I know this is not what happened, but if you wanted to strategize and exclude them and make them mad and then give them what they want, that would be the best way to get buy in, because in the end, people felt much more committed to this plan than the previous plan, and I think it's because they had to … fight for it. You value what you fight for. So they felt like they fought for a voice, and when they got it, they just so appreciated it. I think we got a lot more turnout by excluding people initially and then opening the door than we would have ever have if we just initially said, come one, come all (Informant A4).

Although it was possible that a lack of shared history and retrospection between faculty and administration could have de-railed this process and reinforced the enacted reality of distrust, some key events in the planning process helped enact an adjusted environment. The President responded to the expectation that there would be an opportunity to provide input in-person by adding an all-campus forum to the planning process. In addition, when the faculty noted that the process did not include approval of the final plan by Senate, that step was immediately added. By listening and responding, by extracting the cues of frustration and discontent, the President acted in a way that did not fit with the tradition of distrust. This unexpected response triggered a new sensemaking, requiring the faculty to re-frame their expectations of administration:

> So, in the, sort of at the end of it all, the document wasn't nearly as bad as I initially feared. The initial set up, it did seem as if we were getting kind of pushed to one side and a rather odious thing was going to come down, but I will say in fairness to the President, I think she did actually do quite a good job of listening

> to the concerns of people, especially letters that were sent in (Informant F4).
>
> Now we are, like, we are working together, the faculty body and administration, and things are very functional now and I think by and large the new President coming in has helped a lot (Informant F6).

A few of them specifically noted that "this President" seemed to be genuinely willing to listen. Essentially, a new relationship was being enacted, one that led to most faculty expressing that the final plan was a positive thing for the university.

However, there was a missed opportunity with respect to the professional school faculty. Faculty from that group reported that they did not feel as if they were actively engaged in the planning process. As a result, they did not believe that they were adequately represented in the plan. The informants from the professional schools reported that the continuing emphasis on undergraduate, liberal arts education reinforced their sense of separateness and their expectation that their voices would not be heard. Thus, their lack of trust in being a valued part of the university was reinforced by the process and the plan rather than being improved by it.

As informants looked back on the university's history, they described significant challenges with trust and respect in the workplace stemming from the labour dispute. But they also noted that those wounds were beginning to heal.

This strategic planning process was seen as the first real opportunity for the entire campus to engage and move forward together:

> The university had been through an acrimonious labour dispute, now I guess about six years ago, five years ago, and I thought the strategic plan would be important for faculty as a kind of trust-building exercise, to restore some confidence and trust (Informant F2).

In spite of some of the bumps and the disconnect reported by the professional school faculty, overall the informants viewed the strategic planning process as a positive experience, one that has helped them develop a refreshed view of the university and what it means to be part of it:

> We definitely went from the worst of times to probably the best of times, I would say, which was an interesting evolution, really, in people's attitudes. People were very hostile when they got excluded and they were very positive when they were included, and especially when they could see some of the things and some of the suggestions that they made actually made their way into the final plan. That was really encouraging for people, they really felt like they were being heard (Informant A4).

**Summary**

A strategic planning process involves many activities that are not part of the normal daily life of the organization, providing opportunities for sensemaking. As seen in this case, those activities could have positive or negative impacts on the organization, depending on how they are handled. Analyzing the

sensemaking around the strategic planning process helps us understand how individuals experienced the strategic planning process. The additional analysis of how that sensemaking affected the organization reveals the impact of the process on the organization. In this university, the ongoing adjustment and enactment of changes in the environment brought about by sensemaking prompted by the strategic planning process are helping to re-create the organization. The results of this study not only provide insights for the university, but also inform theory and practice. In the following chapter, I discuss the contributions this study makes to the fields of critical sensemaking theory and strategic planning practice, as well as present questions for future research.

## Chapter 8: Implications for Theory and Practice: Insights and Conclusions

This study was undertaken as an attempt to understand the meaning and impact of a university's strategic planning process using a critical sensemaking lens. After analyzing and situating this study within the existing literature on strategic planning and critical sensemaking, I presented the methodology and the case. Through my data analysis, I identified issues within the strategic planning process that prompted sensemaking, and then examined how individuals made sense of those issues. Then I examined how the sensemaking around the strategic planning process impacted the organization, with a particular focus on issues of trust and engagement. Now, I turn my attention to the contributions this research makes to theory and practice.

In this chapter, I discuss the contributions this study makes to critical sensemaking theory, with attention to what the study revealed about the constructs of the theory. Then, I examine practical implications for university strategic planning and management, focusing on lessons learned regarding the impact of expectations and noting how paying attention to sensemaking triggers could inform practice. Next, I discuss limitations of the study and questions it raised for future research. Finally, I present my conclusion and my own lessons learned from conducting the study.

## Contributions to Sensemaking Theory

Case studies provide unique opportunities to examine how the constructs of a theory operate in real situations (Siggelkow, 2007). In this next section, I first examine the lessons learned about Weick's sensemaking properties in this context. Then, I discuss how the critical sensemaking approach of layering an understanding of power and context over the sensemaking analysis enriched the understanding of the case.

### Weick's sensemaking properties

This study reinforces that identity construction is multi-layered and complex and that it is pivotal to understanding sensemaking. It consists of not just how an individual identifies at the moment, but also of the identities they have had in the past. In the university context, there are the additional layers created by disciplinary focus, administrative roles (both past and present), and union affiliation. Getting to know individuals and how they view themselves is critical to understanding how they are making sense of a situation. This can be seen in how individuals approached the issues of religious affiliation and academic focus. How they identified impacted not only their views on those issues, but also their understanding of the organizational identity. In this case, not only was identity construction affecting sensemaking, but sensemaking was also affecting construction of the organizational identity. As the university

community engaged in the planning process, the discussions about the role of religion and the academic focus helped alter the organizational identity.

Although sensemaking is highly individualized and internal, we cannot overlook the social nature of it within organizations (Maitlis, 2005). This case provides an interesting example of an organization where social engagement had been disrupted by the labour dispute and its aftermath. Due to the reduced social engagement, the organizational culture was negatively impacted. After the labour dispute was resolved, there were continuing rifts within the faculty. Their social interactions changed, which limited opportunities to share perceptions of different issues and situations. With more limited social interactions, there were fewer opportunities to share their sensemaking. One faculty member noted that union gatherings were really the only place where faculty would have an opportunity to engage as a group, which was demonstrated by the union executive raising the concerns around the process, not the Senate. However, the individuals who did not agree with the union's position in the labour dispute did not report being engaged in these activities. By creating spaces to share ideas and perspectives, the strategic planning process facilitated sensemaking and created opportunities for participants to re-engage with each other and the organization.

Our world is not static, and neither is sensemaking. The ongoing nature of sensemaking can adjust how an organization is operating. In this case, ongoing

sensemaking about how individuals were reacting to the strategic planning process led to positive adjustments in it that, ultimately, made it more plausible to many in the community. The strategic planning process created an opportunity to re-build the social aspect of the university through the ongoing nature of the sensemaking around it. Faculty members spoke with each other to share their concerns and gather support to lobby the administration to modify the strategic planning process. When the all-campus forum happened, it created a venue for the community to engage with each other again. The sensemaking around the usefulness of the strategic planning process continued to evolve, with some faculty members who had objections during the process expressing that, in the end, they felt it was a positive thing for the university.

Retrospection is not just about reflecting back on an event to make sense of it; it also involves how past experiences are driving present reactions. Even though we use organizational shocks or events to examine sensemaking, we also need to be aware of the lasting impact of organizational shocks on future sensemaking. In this case, the shock of the labour dispute was continuing to reverberate and direct individual sensemaking. This university's past has the potential to influence future sensemaking, as the history of the labour dispute is impacting how the faculty engage with administration and with each other. However, with each new event comes a new opportunity for sensemaking and for re-creating the community.

Organizations are socially constructed through the compilation of many different individuals' sensemaking. When looking at the cues that are being extracted, we must also recognize that not only are individuals extracting different cues, they are also giving different meanings to the same cues. This case presents an example of how different interpretations of the same cues can lead to divergent sensemaking. The varied understanding of what "consultation" meant created a significant challenge in the process. Thus, in identifying extracted cues, we need to look at the meanings that are being attached to the cues.

Individuals will only accept what they believe is plausible. This case demonstrates that plausibility was often a driving force in how individuals responded to the planning process and the issues they focused on within that process. It is important to recognize that what is plausible is not set in stone. As individuals make sense of new situations, they may re-think what they consider plausible. Taking the time to explore the roots of plausibility may help to adjust the vision of what is plausible, or reveal ways in which a particular approach should be adjusted to make it more plausible. In this case, modifying the process to conform to what was expected played an important role in making the process plausible to the faculty. New experiences may also reinforce existing ideas of plausibility, as occurred with the professional school faculty. They did

not see it as plausible that the university's focus on liberal arts included their disciplines, and the strategic planning process did not alter that understanding.

This case provides an example of how, by sharing their sensemaking and taking actions based upon it, individuals can enact their own environments. The faculty did this by coming together to raise concerns about the process, and the President did this by adopting an approach of listening and adapting. The organization as a whole is enacting a new environment through the sensemaking around the strategic planning process, as evidenced by the removal of the religious affiliation references from the job announcements.

Each of these aspects of the sensemaking process do not stand alone. They are connected to, and took place on, the stage set by the organization's formative context and power dynamics. As will be discussed in the next section, this case supports the importance of adding an analysis of context and power to Weick's sensemaking properties through a critical sensemaking approach (Helms Mills et al., 2010). It also demonstrates that examining issues of identity construction and plausibility are not only key to understanding sensemaking, but also are strongly connected to the organization's formative context and power dynamics.

### The importance of context and power

Considering the formative context of the organization and the power dynamics was key to understanding the sensemaking in this case. This

organization experienced a significant disruption with the labour dispute, one that is still impacting relationships and sensemaking. The labour dispute was, at its root, a power struggle. It was not just a battle between the Board and the faculty, it also involved a clash between those who wanted to continue old traditions and those who wanted to shift the university's focus. Identity construction and plausibility were important drivers in creating and adjusting this context. Although the faculty who wanted to move to a more research-intensive approach ultimately prevailed, the division still remained. The strategic planning activities took place within this context, and how each individual made sense of the process was often connected to their role in the earlier dispute and their sense of their own power within the organization. The faculty members who identified as being part of the successful faction in the labour dispute were also the ones who felt comfortable pushing back against the process, asking questions and seeking more opportunities for input. Some of the challenges in the process can be connected to the fact that some members of the organization did not share this history, notably the President.

Another contextual element that played an important role in sensemaking was the past planning experience. Most of the informants spontaneously framed their story of this planning process within the context of the other planning efforts they had been involved with. The shared nature of this context was important in that many of the faculty had particular expectations of

what the process should look like, which resulted in their misinterpretations of what was planned with respect to the consultation process. Individuals pushed back because the proposed process did not appear plausible. On the other hand, the President did not share that history, and so did not understand what the expectations would be.

The strategic planning process also took place within the context of a strong union environment. In this case, many saw collective bargaining as a more important venue for working out the direction of the university than strategic planning. Power also plays a role here as the union and the collective agreement are viewed as being powerful tools for faculty to use. Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) describe how what they call the "advocacy culture" can develop in a university. This culture typically develops where there has been a history of distrust or conflict between faculty and administration. When identity construction is connected to union status, a strong focus on collective bargaining as the way to set a university's direction develops. There is an expectation that all significant discussions will happen within that venue (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008). The perceived shift in power from the Board to the faculty association was an important part of how the faculty constructed their identity in the organization. The increased role of the faculty association and emphasis on collective bargaining meant that strategic planning was perceived by some as an administrative exercise that did not plausibly control the direction of the

organization. The continuing impact of the dispute on personal relationships affected how individuals engaged in the university and with each other.

In this case, the ongoing sensemaking around the labour dispute was re-creating the organization, demonstrating that formative context is not static. It is ever-evolving and can be impacted by sensemaking around each new situation. As a result, we see a new atmosphere of trust that may alter the formative context for future issues that trigger sensemaking.

**Practical Implications for University Strategic Planning and Management**

Although this study is not meant to be generalizable to other organizations, it does provide some "lessons learned" that could be of use to other universities. First, it is important to know the history of the organization. Past events can create challenges and should not be ignored, particularly when they were highly contentious or emotional. It is also important to understand past planning experiences and how those experiences might be driving expectations. The residual impact of the past and the expectations of planning in this case almost derailed the process. That is not to say that all planning processes should look the same, but knowing the expectations can help identify where additional information may be needed, or where there should be specific explanations of why and how the current process might differ from the past. This case also provides insight into how sensemaking could be used in practice to

help identify issues that may trigger sensemaking and raise awareness of the sensemaking as it occurs.

### Experience and expectations

This study revealed that not only did the strategic planning process impact the organization, but sensemaking around past processes had a continuing impact on this one. The stories of the strategic planning process demonstrated the impact that past experience had on expectations, and how those expectations framed the understanding of the planning process. Most of the informants framed their experience in terms of other strategic planning processes they had participated in, either at the university or elsewhere. These past experiences contributed to the formative context and played an important role in their expectations of what the process should look like. Understanding how the expectations drove this process could provide insight for future processes.

When the planning process was first rolled out, the announcement mentioned “consultation” and described the written feedback schedule. Faculty members who had been part of the previous planning process extracted that cue and layered their own understanding of what “consultation” would look like. They were subsequently surprised and upset to find that consultation would not include an in-person feedback session, which made them question the transparency of the process. Past experiences (the last plan included a goal to

nurture the religious affiliation) drove expectations, which in turn guided the extracted cues.

The social context and history of the university was a significant influencer of expectations. Most of the faculty have the shared experience of the labour dispute, whether they agreed with the union's position or not. However, only one of the current administrators served in that role during the dispute, and two of them were not at the university during that time. Many of the informants also participated in other planning processes at the university, which framed their expectations of what it should look like, but the President had not been part of those. Within this context, it became apparent that many faculty did not see written, one-way consultation as being sufficient; they were looking for the social interaction that would help them develop an understanding of the plan. Even though the President did not initially understand this need, the process was quickly adapted to accommodate it once the faculty raised the issue. In this instance, the collective expression of the expectations led to the enactment of a revised understanding of the strategic planning process. The lesson for managers is to be aware of expectations when implementing strategic planning processes so that you can meet them or make it clear why the process might be different.

**Sensemaking in practice**

This study also contributes to our understanding of how to use sensemaking in practice. Whereas critical sensemaking literature typically uses

the theory to interpret situations and events retrospectively, I support the perspective that there is a benefit to using it in practice, as well (Iveroth & Hallencreutz, 2015). The critical sensemaking lens can provide insight into how and why interpretations of the same situations diverge. Additionally, paying attention to how and when sensemaking occurs within a strategic planning process – or during other situations – could be useful for implementing such processes.

When multiple interpretations of the same circumstances arise, it is important to do more than simply correct misunderstandings. Identifying where they come from and how they developed will enrich the organizational experience (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). Within the university context, it is particularly important to pay attention to how identity construction through role and discipline may affect how individuals will make sense of the planning process. It is also important to recognize that the stereotype of the faculty-administration dichotomy is not always the case. Assuming that the division exists could lead to not seeing the real sources of tension, which may be rooted in history more than role, or may be more within one group or another. Digging deeper into any divergent perspectives should lead to an improved understanding of the perspectives and assist with problem-solving.

As the different stories of the strategic planning process became apparent in this case, the critical sensemaking analysis helped reveal the roots of

the differences. I suggest that taking the time in the midst of the process to dig deeper into the varying perspectives to understand the underlying issues would support better relationships and problem-solving. Perhaps if there had been pauses to think about sensemaking throughout the strategic planning process, there would have been improved understanding of why there were different perspectives on particular issues. In my own organization, I have already been using some of these lessons when we encounter challenging issues. The goal is not to eliminate differences of opinion, but rather to understand them more fully. A deeper understanding can help find areas of common ground and provide more insight and transparency in decision-making.

With respect to the strategic planning process, managers may benefit from paying attention to the points in the process that are likely to trigger sensemaking, as well as watching for unexpected situations that arise as the process plays out. I am not suggesting that managers try to control sensemaking, but rather that if they are aware of when it is likely to occur, they can actively examine how it is happening and address challenges that may come out of it. They could even consciously create situations that would be unexpected with the purpose of actively engaging the organization in sensemaking. Applying this important organizational theory in real time could contribute to making strategic planning productive and engaging, rather than having it be viewed as a waste of time.

**Limitations and Questions for Future Research**

As with any study, reflection on what was accomplished leads to ideas for improving it and questions for future research. During the data gathering process, I found myself wondering about the experiences of others within the university, the individuals I did not have the opportunity to speak with due to the limits of their time and mine. Within this study, I limited my focus to faculty and administration, and, as a result of who agreed to participate, the administrative perspective came entirely from senior administrators. Universities have many other stakeholders, including middle managers, staff, students, alumni, Board members, and community partners. Strategic planning initiatives typically involve engaging all of these stakeholders in some way, and in this case students, staff, and the Board were all included. Future research into how these other groups make sense of strategic planning would be informative.

I also found myself wishing that I could have had the opportunity to capture the sensemaking as it was happening. It would be interesting to conduct a future study of a strategic planning process using an action research methodology, where the researcher is engaged in the process, and with greater engagement with all levels of the organization. This approach could provide insight into how the strategic planning process unfolds and how sensemaking both develops in the moment and evolves over time. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) have identified a need for more multi-case studies in sensemaking

research to provide opportunities to identify patterns across contexts. Subsequent studies of strategic planning at different universities, or even in different types of organizations, would deepen our understanding of sensemaking.

The most significant surprise for me in this study was the ongoing impact of the labour dispute, and particularly that so many informants raised it in their stories without being asked about it. This was a very emotional event for the individuals involved, one that changed the culture of the university. One faculty member who had been on the Board just before the labour dispute noted that another Board member had predicted this impact:

> I vividly remember him making this impassioned speech - don't do this, I'm practically the only person in this room who has first-hand experience with a lockout, and he said it will take you, it will take this institution at least a minimum of 10 years to deal with the aftermath of this. And quite possibly a full generation, so the whole working life of the people you have on the ground right now will be affected by this (Informant F4).

That prediction was correct, and this case raises the question of the ongoing impact labour disputes have on an organization's culture. With university and college strikes and lockouts becoming more common in Canada, I believe the post-secondary sector could benefit from studies of how labour disputes affect organizational culture and sensemaking.

In addition to the issue of the impact of the labour dispute, and perhaps as a result of it, this case also presented the question of how strategic planning intersects with collective bargaining in post-secondary education. As I discussed my research with leaders of other colleges and universities, I realized that many are struggling to find ways to alter the strategic direction of their organizations within the confines of collective bargaining agreements. Additional research on where the boundaries are between the two processes and how to integrate the two successfully would be particularly useful.

My experience of the research process itself also presents a topic for future research. As I was collecting and analyzing the data, I found myself thinking about my own sensemaking in the research process. Researchers are essentially making sense of a topic. They come to it with their own identity construction; engage socially with informants and other scholars; examine the data on an ongoing basis; engage in retrospection on both the research topic and their own experiences conducting research; extract cues that need to plausibly connect with their understanding of the world; enact their understanding through writing and presenting; and are continually affected by the context and power within their field, their research site, and their institutions. I believe that a study of the sensemaking of research would produce some interesting insights, not to mention discussions among researchers.

## Conclusion

Conducting this study was a theoretical, practical, and personal journey. In the process, I not only examined how a university experienced strategic planning, but also explored how critical sensemaking theory can inform both our understanding of organizations and our management practices. Strategic planning is a common organizational practice, one that can provide many opportunities for individual and organizational sensemaking. And yet, organizations frequently engage in it with a focus on the plan it produces without paying attention to how the process impacts the organization. Through this study, I learned that paying attention to what is triggering sensemaking, the formative context within which sensemaking occurs, and how the sensemaking is happening, can help us understand more about how strategic planning is affecting the organization.

We all live and work within multiple organizations – home, work, community groups. In each of these, there is the potential for conflict, disagreement, and misunderstanding. As I studied organizational theory throughout my doctoral program and applied it in my research, I came to appreciate the importance of taking the time to understand how organizations work and how individuals experience them. Examining individual sensemaking, recognizing the significance of organizational context, and identifying how power affects interactions can provide us with a rich understanding of an organization,

and perhaps give us the tools to address significant organizational challenges. The goal is not to avoid conflict or problems, but to understand them and see them as part of the complex fabric of an organization that is ultimately made up of and created by unique and interesting individuals. Through this study, I learned not only about a very special university community, but also about how to approach and understand challenges within my own organizations.

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## Appendix A: Ethics Approval Letters

# MEMORANDUM

Athabasca University
Canada's Open University

**DATE:** September 4, 2013

**TO:** Keltie Jones

**COPY:** Jean Helms Mills and Kay Devine (Co-supervisors)
Alice Tieulié, Acting Secretary, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
Dr. Vive Kumar, Chair, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

**FROM:** Dr. Fathi Elloumi, Chair, Faculty of Business Research Ethics Review Committee

**SUBJECT:** **FB 13-08: Jones, Keltie**
***"Perspectives on Planning: An Examination of How Faculty and Administration Make Sense of Strategic Planning"***

The Faculty of Business Research Ethics Review Committee, acting under authority of the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board to provide an expedited process of review for minimal risk student researcher projects, reviewed the above-noted proposal and supporting documentation.

I am pleased to advise that this project has been awarded **CONDITIONAL APPROVAL** on ethical grounds.

**A revised application that addresses the following points and clarifications is required.** For ease of review, please show all revisions by using yellow-highlighting additions and ~~yellow-highlighting with strikethrough~~ for deletions.

1. **APPLICATION FORM**
   - **B2-1** – end of second paragraph "*Recorded interviews will be transcribed. Observations of the campus environment and individual behaviour during interviews will be documented in field notes.*" You need to specify the type of technology to be used. Audio-recording or video-recording?

     [There are different identification and privacy concerns involved between audio-video recording and just audio recording. The researcher should be sure ahead of time which type of equipment she will be using, so that the permission structure accurately reflects the participant choices that will be available. Generally, audio-video recording is undertaken when analysis of facial expression, body language, etc, are part of the research design. As use of an audio-video recorder may be perceived as more invasive by participants, if the only purpose of electronic recording is to ensure accuracy of transcription of the interview, audio-recording should be sufficient to supplement the handwritten notes.]

   - **B2-1** – Interview length is set at 60 minutes. Given that your research instrument (Appendix C) may vary between interviewees, you may need to specify a range (e.g. 60 to 90 minutes)
2. **APPENDIX F (Letter of Consent)**
   - **Consent Area – Permissions** – revise wording so that "audio recorded" and "audio-video recorded" are two separate (initialing) choices if that is what is actually being offered, replacing the current single choice line for "*…the interview will be recorded and transcribed …*" If it is just a permission for electronic recording versus note-taking only (which is a single permission issue), the wording should only offer the actual type of recording that will be available.

**COLLEGIAL COMMENT**: Based on their own experience, several reviewers felt there is a good possibility that the interviews may last longer than one hour in order to cover all the questions appropriately, and wondered what you would do in that case. It is suggested that you provide for that eventuality by either indicating in the **Information Letter** a longer time range (e.g. 60 to 90 minutes) for the interview, or by indicating the possibility of resumption at another time that is mutually convenient if the interview is not finished within one hour.

**After completing all revisions**, please ensure that your Research Supervisor(s) receives a copy of the final version. **A new Supervisor Support e-mail** indicating they have seen the revised application and support it going forward for final review is required to accompany the revised application package.

Please forward the revised application to the Faculty of Business Ethics Review Committee via the REB Office at rebsec@athabascau.ca for further review.

****The research cannot proceed until a final Approval to Proceed has been issued****

# MEMORANDUM

Athabasca University
Canada's Open University

**DATE:** September 10, 2013

**TO:** Keltie Jones

**COPY:** Jean Helms Mills and Kay Devine (Co-supervisors)
Alice Tieulié, Acting Secretary, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
Dr. Vive Kumar, Chair, Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

**FROM:** Dr. Fathi Elloumi, Chair, Faculty of Business Research Ethics Review Committee

**SUBJECT:** **FB 13-08: Jones_Keltie "*Perspectives on Planning: An Examination of How Faculty and Administration Make Sense of Strategic Planning*"**

Thank you for providing the additional information requested by the Faculty of Business Research Ethics Review Committee.

I am pleased to advise that the above-noted project has now been awarded **APPROVAL TO PROCEED**. **You may begin your research immediately.**

This approval of your application will be reported to the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (AU REB) at their next monthly meeting. The AU REB retains the right to request further information, or to revoke the approval, at any time.

**The approval for the study "as presented" is valid for a period of one year from the date of this memo.** If required, an extension must be sought in writing prior to the expiry of the existing approval. **A Final Report is to be submitted when the research project is completed.** The reporting form can be found online at http://www.athabascau.ca/research/ethics/ .

As implementation of the proposal progresses, if you need to make any significant changes or modifications, please forward this information immediately to the Faculty of Business Research Ethics Review Committee Chair at fathie@athabascau.ca for further review.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Faculty of Business Research Ethics Review Committee Chair at fathie@athabascau.ca

[redacted] University

Research Ethics Board

[redacted]

REB Members:
[redacted] Sociology
[redacted] Education
[redacted] Legal Representative
[redacted] Community Member
[redacted] Psychology
[redacted] Social Work
[redacted] Psychology, Alternate

Keltie Jones, J.D.
Assistant Dean, Students
Faculty of Agriculture
Dalhousie University

Oct 22, 2013

RE: Ethics research proposal: **2013-16**
Title: [redacted] University's recent strategic planning process

**Dear Keltie Jones,**

The Research Ethics Board at [redacted] University has reviewed your file and grants approval for the above named research for a period of one year. Please note the following regarding all research that has been granted ethical approval by the REB:

1. If there are any substantial changes to the research plan or research protocol the Chair of the REB must be promptly notified.
2. If the project continues after one year, please submit a completed "Annual/Final Report" form to the REB (available on the REB website).
3. When the project has been completed please notify the Chair of the REB by completing the "Annual/Final Report" form (available on the REB website).

Please also ensure that you quote your REB certificate number on all public documents associated with this research (e.g., recruiting advertisements, letter of informed consent etc).

If you have any further queries, please contact Chair, Research Ethics Board, [redacted] or the Office of Research Services ([redacted] or email [redacted]).

Best wishes in your research.

Yours Sincerely,

for Chair, Research Ethics Board

cc: File; Assistant Vice-President (Research), Office of Research Services

## Appendix B: Interview Invitation Letter

**E-mail to prospective participants:**

Subject: Invitation to participate in study of XXXXXX University strategic planning process

Dear [participant's name]:

I am a student in Athabasca University's Doctorate in Business Administration program. For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study of how faculty members and administrators make sense of the strategic planning process. XXXXX University has given me permission to conduct my research on the university's recent strategic planning experience.

I am inviting you to be a participant in this study through a one-hour interview. If the interview is not completed within an hour, you will be given the option to continue at that time, re-schedule, or end the interview. Your participation in the research study is entirely voluntary, and if you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign an informed consent document and will have the right to end the interview at any time.

All data will be treated confidentially and anonymity will be maintained as no direct quotes will be attributed to any one individual nor will you or your organization be named. All data collected will be kept in a secure location. Hard copies will be kept in a locked file and electronic data will be maintained on password-protected computers and external devices. After ten years, the data will be destroyed by shredding any hard copies generated of the transcript of your interview and deleting the data files from the computer storage.

To inform the academic and practitioner communities interested in this research, the results may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. The existence of the research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library's Digital Thesis and Project Room, and the final research paper will be publicly available. If you have any questions now or during the research period, please feel free to contact me (contact information provided below) or my research supervisor Dr. Jean Helms Mills by email to jean.mills@smu.ca or by phone at 1-902-496-8139.

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board and by the XXXXX University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Athabasca University Office of Research Ethics at 780-675-6718 or by e-mail to rebsec@athabascau.ca.

If you decide you would like to be part of this study, please contact me by e-mail or telephone to arrange an interview time.

Thank you for your interest in this research project.

Sincerely,

Keltie Jones
Student of Athabasca University
Centre for Innovative Management
Doctorate in Business Administration Program
c/o 200 Burnyeat Street

Truro, NS  B2N 4R1
902-890-3253
keltiejones@gmail.com

## Appendix C: Consent Form

**Consent Form**

*Perspectives on Planning: An Examination of How Faculty and Administration Make Sense of Strategic Planning*

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Keltie Jones, who is a graduate student at Athabasca University, as part of her Doctorate in Business Administration program. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your academic or employment performance evaluation will not be affected by whether or not you participate. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconvenience, or discomfort which you might experience. Participating in this study might not benefit you, but we might learn things that will benefit others. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Ms. Jones as she reviews this form with you.

Purpose and Design of the Study:
This study involves an examination of how faculty and administration make sense of strategic planning processes. The goal is to advance our understanding of what strategic planning means to an organization and the individuals within the organization. The researcher is examining how individuals experienced the recent strategic planning process at your university, by reviewing documents and conducting interviews with individuals who worked at the university during the planning process.

Who can Participate in the Study:
You may participate in this study if you were employed by XXXXX University between October 2011 and January 2013.

Who will be Conducting the Research:
Keltie Jones will be conducting this research, under the supervision of her doctoral co-supervisors: Dr. Jean Helms Mills, Sobey School of Business, Saint Mary's University, and Dr. Kay Devine, Centre for Innovative Management, Athabasca University.

What you will be asked to do:
You will be asked to participate in an interview that is expected to take approximately sixty (60) minutes. If the interview is not completed within an hour, you will be given the option to continue at that time, re-schedule, or end the interview. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview. The researcher may contact you later with additional questions or requests for clarification. You will have the right to end your participation at any time.

Possible Risks and Discomforts:
The risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research study are no greater than those that are present in common experiences of everyday life.

Possible Benefits:
While there may not be personal benefits associated with this study, it is anticipated that the analysis will provide your organization with a better understanding of how its members

experienced the strategic planning process. This research may also provide insights on strategic planning that could benefit other organizations.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:
All data will be treated confidentially and anonymity will be maintained as no direct quotes will be attributed to any one individual nor will you or your organization be named. All data collected will be kept in a secure location. Hard copies will be kept in a locked file and electronic data will be maintained on password-protected computers and external devices. After ten years, the data will be destroyed by shredding any hard copies generated of the transcript of your interview and deleting the data files from the computer storage.

Questions:
If you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact Keltie Jones at keltiejones@gmail.com or 902-890-3253, or should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Athabasca University Office of Research Ethics at 780-675-6718 or by e-mail to rebsec@athabascau.ca.

[page break for signature page]

**Consent Form Signature Page**

*Perspectives on Planning: An Examination of How Faculty and Administration Make Sense of Strategic Planning*

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to take part in this study. However, I realize that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

By initialing below, I also indicate my consent to:

_____ (initials) Allowing the researcher to audio-record the interview and to transcribe the recording.

_____ (initials) Allowing the researcher to contact me at a later date with additional questions or clarifications.

_____ (initials) Allowing the researcher to use direct quotes from my interview, maintaining my anonymity.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Participant's printed name | Signature | Date |
| Researcher's printed name | Signature | Date |

*A copy of the consent form and signature page will be given to the participant.*

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

- Introductions and informed consent
- Background questions:
    - What is your role in the university?
    - How long have you been at the university?
    - What other positions have you held?
    - Have you worked at other universities? In what capacity?
- Experience of strategic planning process:
    - Tell me about your recent strategic planning process.
    - How was the plan developed?
    - Can you tell me about the type of involvement you may have had in creating the plan?
    - How were others involved in creating the plan?
- Understanding of strategic plan:
    - What do you think the strategic plan means for the university?
    - How do you use the plan?
    - How do others use the plan?
    - How does it impact your daily work? Your overall goals?
- Wrap-up:
    - Are there any documents you think I should be reviewing?
    - Are there any other people you think I should be interviewing?

***Note: these questions represent themes to be explored. The interviewer may pose other questions depending on the information the participant provides.***