THE FACULTY/STAFF COMMUNICATION DIVIDE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC LOOK INSIDE A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Abstract

This study examines the communication divides that exist between faculty and staff at a rural community college in Texas. Through the use of survey data, personal interviews and ethnographic observation, the researcher gained significant insight into the communication culture of one institution. The theoretical framework for this study is built largely upon the group communication concepts of Bormann (1983) and Taylor and Altman (1975). Specifically, the study looks for evidence of Bormann’s (1983) symbolic convergence theory and Taylor and Altman’s (1975) social penetration theory. The philosophical framework for this thesis is grounded in Benhabib’s (1993) idea of the generalized versus concrete other, which considers the way people view people who belong to groups other than their own. The researcher, a longstanding employee of the organization being studied, conducted the study over a period of one month during the spring 2013 semester. A significant communication divide was discovered between administrators (and administrative support staff) and those who work in other areas of the campus. The results suggest that this divide is built around the administration building as a negative cultural symbol. Non-administrative employees appear to have created a group fantasy that views “administration” as a group to be avoided (Bormann, 1983). The study also indicated that there is a lack of communication between adjunct (or part time) faculty members and others at the college. These findings, which are expository in nature, serve to provide a foundation for further critical research within the institution to determine a course of action to improve communication processes between faculty and staff.
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## APPENDIX
Chapter 1: Introduction

Jane is a hypothetical staff member in the financial aid office at a small community college. After receiving her bachelor’s degree from the local state university, Jane landed her first “real” job at the age of 21. Jane works eight hours a day, five days a week. If Jane continues this pattern and retires at the age of 65, she will have spent more than 91,000 hours of her life at work. That is almost 10.5 years at a desk and in meetings. Like Jane, most people will spend much of their lifetimes at work. If one thinks of organizations as cold, inanimate objects, this prospect can seem bleak and depressing. However, the truth is, people don’t just work at work.

Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) point this out in their study of organizational cultures:

From our point of view, organizations are places where people work and do a whole lot of other things, and all of these work things and other things constitute life in that organization. We believe that organizational life is interesting in its own right, irrespective of its relationship to organizational outcomes. (p. 117)

This thesis is built around the idea that human behavior is an important part of organizational life. Specifically, this research focuses on the relationships and communication activities that occur between employee groups at one institution of higher learning, which will be referred to as Community College X.

Importance of the Study

The methodology for this study is largely grounded in Geertz’s (1977) ethnographic approach, which relies upon anthropological observation to better understand the ins-and-outs of a specific culture. Essentially, this study simply seeks to understand how people within Community College X communicate with one another. Rather than approaching the project with
a specific problem in mind, the researcher tried to keep assumptions to a minimum and allowed communication divides to manifest organically through the research. Organizational studies often begin with a specific problem in mind – this is an effective method that is commonly used by consultants and other professionals. However, the researcher, following the example of Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982), believes that there is value in spending time observing what is going on within an organization before identifying specific problems. By observing culture as it naturally unfolds, researchers can discover nuances of culture that may not have otherwise been visible even to insiders. Sometimes, as was the case in this study of Community College X, observations yield results that diverge from expected outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

As director level staff member at Community College X for more than six years, the researcher observed communication behavior that indicated cultural divides within the organization. It was initially assumed that the communication divide primarily existed between faculty and staff members. This seemed to make sense to a large degree, as faculty and staff have different roles within the organization. Basic group communication theory (Bormann, 1983 and Taylor and Altman, 1975) indicates that it is natural for people to bond with others similar to themselves. This became evident as groups of employees with similar roles tended to stick together at campus wide assemblies and other events. The researcher observed that faculty members (generally subdivided by teaching discipline) and staff members (generally subdivided by department) segregated themselves. It appeared that this separation between employee groups extended to organizational communication as well. These observations inspired the hypothesis that there is a communication divide between faculty and staff members at Community College X. In keeping with the ethnographic approach, the researcher did not approach this as a problem,
but rather a unique cultural phenomenon that warranted further study of how employees communicate between and within subgroups.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

This study is based upon the organizational structure of Community College X and, therefore, it is necessary to define certain institutional terms that are used frequently throughout this paper:

**Adjunct Faculty.** Adjunct faculty members are part-time employees whose primary job functions involve teaching. This group may teach as little as one course per semester to the equivalent of a full teaching load. Unlike full-time faculty, adjunct faculty members do not receive employee benefits, do not generally have offices on campus, and are not bound (or protected) by employment contracts. Many adjunct faculty members have full-time jobs outside of teaching or are retired.

**Administrator.** Administrators are staff members who hold the position of dean, associate vice president, vice president, or president. These employees are upper-level managers and organizational decision makers.

**Classified Staff.** Classified staff members are paid on an hourly basis and serve in various support roles on campus. Members of classified staff range from maintenance workers to office clerks.

**Full-Time Faculty.** A full-time employee whose primary job function involves teaching. This group can include employees who have some degree of administrative duties, such as program or division directors.

**President.** The president is the top leader in the organization and is responsible for all major decision making. This individual reports to an elected board of trustees.
**Professional Staff.** Professional staff members are salaried employees who serve administrative support roles within the organization. This group includes specialists, coordinators, directors, and others. Professional staff members serve many different roles on campus, from executive assistants to mid-level managers.

The following are two non-institutional terms that are used frequently throughout this paper:

**Culture.** This paper uses the Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) definition of culture as things that “constitute life within an organization.” This is a simplified outlook on culture, but serves well for the sake of this study.

**Ethnography.** Ethnography is a methodology used in anthropology and the social sciences that studies cultures and “cultural sense-making.” This approach generally involves outsiders immersing themselves in an unknown culture for the sake of understanding their “daily habits, rituals, norms, and actions” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 137).

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter two outlines the philosophical assumptions of the paper, defines the theoretical basis, reviews literature relevant to the topic, rationale for the study and specifies the research question. Chapter three explores the scope and methodology used to conduct the study, including data analysis, validity, reliability, and ethical considerations. Chapter four reveals the outcomes of the study itself and includes discussion on pertinent findings. Chapter five summarizes the study, identifies limitations to the research, and recommends ideas for further study. The appendix includes an organizational chart to help the reader better understand the structure of Community College X, a copy of the survey questions used in the study, and an outline of interview questions.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to better understand the dynamics of faculty/staff communication at a community college, it is first necessary to learn what is already known about the topic. This chapter will reveal philosophical and ethical assumptions and provide the theoretical basis for this research. This chapter will also look at relevant literature on the topics of organizational communication and higher education culture to determine the most effective approach to studying organizational behavior.

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

When one considers the field of ethics, it is easy to conjure images of Aristotle’s golden mean or the Bible’s ten commandments. These are famous examples of manmade laws or rules that govern civilized behavior. It is generally accepted that some acts are good, some are bad, and some are in between. Philosophers spend lifetimes pondering what it means to live ethically – and few of them agree completely. This paper makes no attempt to argue deep philosophy. However, this section will take a brief look at what it means to communicate ethically. Specifically, the researcher looks at communication ethics within the context of groups such as those in the organization being studied for this paper.

In today’s fast-paced, ultra-connected world, people communicate almost from the moment they wake up. Text messages, e-mails, phone calls, meetings, casual face-to-face conversations, and video chats are considered business as usual for most people. These things are ingrained in daily life, but how much thought goes into how communication affects oneself and others? The philosopher Benhabib (1992) discusses the concept of the “generalized and concrete other” in relation to communication ethics. The “generalized other” viewpoint sees “each individual as a moral person endowed with the same moral rights as ourselves; this moral person
is also a reasoning and acting being (Benhabib, 1992, p. 10). Essentially, people are capable of making decisions on their own. The reverse of this, Benhabib (1993) sees as the “concrete other,” which “enjoins us to view every moral person as a unique individual, with a certain life history, disposition and endowment, as well as needs and limitations (p. 10). This implies that, while unique, people are products of their environment.

Through this “concrete other,” individuals carry with them the collective experiences, morals, and ideas of those around them (Benhabib, 1993). Because of this, people are profoundly affected by the attitudes of the people they come into contact with on a regular basis, be it at home or work. In an organizational setting, people don’t usually have much control over the groups they spend time with. Often, organizational charts and geographic locations define groups – not personal preference. This can prove challenging from an ethical standpoint if people do not see eye to eye on issues of morality or ethics.

Too often the individual can get lost in the “concrete other” to an extent where he or she absorbs the moral views of the collective group. A person begins to think from the standpoint of the group, and their uniqueness can be compromised (Benhabib, 1992). Not only is this dangerous on an internalized level, it can also be harmful to one’s perceived reputation within an organization.

Benhabib (1985) finds that there is a need to blend the “generalized other and concrete other” in order to achieve ethical communication: “The ideal community of communication corresponds to an ego identity which allows the unfolding of the relation to the concrete other on the basis of autonomous action. Only then can we say that justice without solidarity is blind and empty” (p. 95). She believes that in order to communicate morally, people must view others in their organization as more than just members of a specific group. Rather, they should consider
each person as an individual who brings his or her own feelings, beliefs, and ideas to the communicative activity (Benhabib, 1985).

This study found that there are significant communication divides between different subgroups of employees at Community College X. Qualitative interviews and observations indicate that people have very strong perceptions of those in different groups from their own, many of which are based on group prejudice, not individual actions. When allowed to continue, communication habits can lean towards the “concrete other” to an extent that is not healthy to individuals or the organization as a whole. When this happens, it is imperative to make a conscious effort to look beyond where someone works or who he or she works for and see the person as a unique individual who exists autonomously of the group. Through doing so, one can achieve more ethical communication habits.

Theoretical Basis

In order to understand how communication manifests within the organization, it is important to look at relevant theories on the topic. Psychologists Taylor and Altman (1975) theorized that people have a natural instinct to interact and communicate with others whom they share something in common. They called this theory “social penetration” – or “the range of interpersonal behaviors that occur in growing interpersonal relationships” (Taylor & Altman, 1975, p. 18). From a very young age, this process becomes evident as people gravitate towards different social groups or cliques. Humans generally choose to cultivate interpersonal relationships that maximize benefits and minimize costs to them personally (Taylor & Altman, 1975). Essentially, people choose to hang out with people who are the most like them and whom they perceive as being open to a relationship.
Just as the middle school cafeteria was divided into social groups, the same can be said for the break room in most organizations. While these adult groups may not be as clearly defined as they were earlier in life (i.e. jocks, cool kids, band geeks), social layers can generally be discerned when one takes a closer look at the organization. The communication that occurs between these groups is an integral part of the organizational culture.

Accepting that social layers and sub-groups exist within organizations, it is important to consider how group communication works. Communication theorist Ernest Bormann (1983) studied group communication in depth and developed the symbolic convergence communication theory, which essentially explains how people use “symbols” to build bond and persuade when placed into groups.

Bormann also theorized that groups tend to share something called “group fantasies”, which serve to create symbolic convergence. Essentially, a group fantasy happens when members of a group get caught up in a narrative that bonds them together. For example, a group of faculty members may be meeting to discuss the development of a new syllabus. The topic at hand is not particularly engaging until one group member mentions an anecdote from her class last week. The other group members join in and offer similar experiences. The result of this exchange leaves the group re-energized and more enthusiastic about an otherwise mundane task (Bormann, 1983).

Bormann’s theory is valuable to this research because it gives insight into the anatomy of group communication. Through observing the communication habits of faculty and staff members at a community college, symbolic convergence and group fantasies quickly became apparent in the narrative. Bormann (1983) says:
Formal and informal groups and communities within formally defined boundaries of an organization create consciousnesses by their members becoming aware that they are involved in an identifiable group and that their group differs in some important respects from other groups. (p. 105)

This seems to imply that subculture development within an organization is natural. As faculty and staff members have different roles within the college, it makes sense that they would find commonalities to bind themselves to those who share a similar status in the organization. As the ethnography is conducted, it will be helpful to look for the symbols that tie certain groups together. Significant evidence of symbolic convergence theory is found at Community College X. This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Lastly, as previously mentioned, this research will be primarily based upon the organizational culture model developed by Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982). This framework is built upon the foundation that there is value in everyday observation: “the underlying motive of the organizational culture approach is coming to understand how organizational life is accomplished communicatively” (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982, p. 121). Essentially, this model “cuts loose from its managerial moorings” (p. 122) and lets assumptions and themes rise from the observation rather than a pre-determined hierarchy. This model will be looked at in more depth in Chapter 3 as the methodology is introduced.

**Literature**

**Group Communication and Dynamics.** It is important to consider group communication behavior carefully when conducting organizational research. While this was briefly touched on earlier, there are a couple of additional aspects of group communication worth pointing out. The first is the concept of organizational silos. The term “silo” is used to describe
groups or parts of an organization that “function in a manner disconnected from the others” (Cilliers & Greyvenstein, 2011, p. 2).

This is an important idea to consider when undertaking organizational research. Organizational silos go beyond cultural bonding to a point where teams or groups actually view themselves a separate from the organization as a whole. Cilliers and Greyvenstein (2011) point out that members of silo groups “will feel safe within the team and view other silos and teams…not just as the other, but as the enemy other – to be distrusted, feared and fought” (p. 3).

The Cilliers and Greyvenstein (2011) qualitative, descriptive study sought to describe how the silo mentality impacts team identity. They found that organizational silos severely impact team identity and “manifested in similar symptoms of destructive, autistic and schizoid functioning” (p. 8). These groups can impact the organizational culture and even cause dysfunction in overall productivity. As an ethnographer conducting fieldwork, it is helpful to observe groups carefully and look beyond personal relationships and communication to determine if silos are manifested in the organization being studied (Cilliers & Greyvenstein, 2011, p. 2).

Giles and Reid (2010) look closely at a more common (and less destructive) intergroup dynamic. They believe that the way people behave within groups “provides information about groups in society, and the ways in which information about groups and group membership shapes communication” (p. 2). Giles and Reid (2010) define a group as “a collection of people who have a perception of shared characteristics, interests, goals, history, or activity” (p. 2). They go on to say: “Groups only exist to the extent that people give them meaning. One way in which we make groups meaningful is by identifying with some groups (and not others)” (Giles & Reid, 2010, p. 3).
Giles and Reid (2010) also highlight the occurrence of “in-groups” (which are groups we think we belong to) and “out-groups” (which are groups we don’t think we belong to). The way people arrange themselves into groups and self-identify can provide interesting insight into ethnographic narrative.

**Higher Education Culture.** Until recently, institutions of higher education looked much the same as they had for centuries. The primary focus of a college or university was centered on academic pursuits like teaching and research. This led to an environment in which faculty members were relatively free (at least within the role of the department) to teach in whatever style or manner they chose. The educational process was accepted as legitimate without much questioning for the most part (Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & Meurs, 2009). However, the literature points out that institutions of higher education are now facing external political and economic pressures that require them to prove accountability and quantify success. This has been called the “commoditization of knowledge work” (Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & Meurs, 2009, p. 764). This shift in overall philosophy has resulted in the implementation of traditional business models and a more hands-on role for higher education administration: “Higher education institutions seem to struggle in dealing with tensions between traditional collegial notions of leadership and the introduction of management principles derived from the private sector” (Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & Meurs, 2009, p. 777). The result of this struggle has become a distinctive divide between faculty and administrators (staff).

Welsh and Metcalf (2003) found that most managerial strategies in higher education fail because they have trouble gaining support from all institutional stakeholders. Their study looked at how internal groups affect institutional effectiveness (the process by which institutions track information that indicates performance) and discovered that there is a distinctive divide between
faculty and administrators that makes it difficult to achieve managerial goals: “Colleges and universities may initially appear as havens of consensus to those on the outside, but cooperative relationships between faculty and administrators are sometimes difficult to achieve…A growing sense of disconnect among faculty and administrators at colleges of all types has weakened their ability to work collectively” (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003, p. 447).

Campbell and Slaughter (1999) also confirm faculty/administrative divide: “Some tension between faculty and administrators has been accepted as an enduring part of academic life” (p. 310). They suggest that faculty members resent being treated “in the same manner that industrial managers treat their employees” (Campbell & Slaughter, 1999, p. 310). This can result in faculty members feeling as if they do not have autonomy to do creative, innovative work. All three studies on faculty attitudes toward administration (Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & Meurs, 2009; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003; Campbell & Slaughter, 1999) suggest that the divide between faculty and staff may go beyond a cultural nuance to a systematic problem that hinders productivity in the organization.

 Knowing this, it is important to take a deeper look at institutional culture in order to better understand the key factors and players. Kuh and Whitt (1988) give a report on institutional culture in colleges and universities. Their paper looks at the overall culture of the institution, including students. This broader analysis gives good insight into how subcultures are formed in institutions of higher education: “Institutional culture is both a process and a product. As a process, culture shapes, and is shaped by, the ongoing interactions of people on and off campus. As a product, culture reflects interactions among history, traditions, organizational structures, and the behavior of current students, faculty, and staff” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6).
Factors that contribute to faculty culture include disciplinary perspective, interests, and role. They also found that the heart of culture is often found beneath the surface. “In effect, a person creates reality for him or herself. Therefore, multiple realities exist” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 109). If this is true, a cultural ethnography will be limited to the viewpoint of the people who are observed and interviewed. Examples of Mead’s generalized other theory can emerge from these behaviors (Griffin, 2008). As the researcher conducts interviews and observations, it is important to be sensitive to whether a subject’s perceptions are based on actual institutional reality or an individual, internalized concept of reality.

Kuh and Whitt (1988) provide good advice for the ethnographer: “What people say and what they do are not always congruent. Assume and expect that people see different things and interpret differently what takes place” (p. 111). One method that helps uncover incongruence is to administer a survey to informants in addition to observation and interviews. Survey and interview questions can be coordinated, which allows for some level of data triangulation.

Kuh and Whitt (1988) also mention two terms that are beneficial to this research: Academic clans and occupational communities. They define an academic clan as “a well-defined, institution-specific group that has existed for some time and employs relatively stable mechanisms of acculturation” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 121). They say that these clans “can isolate faculty from other groups that hold competing views and encourages the development of a distinct sense of identity” (p. 121).

Occupational communities, on the other hand, emphasize “the pervasive influence of the occupational role on one’s identity and social relationships” (p. 122). Essentially, this means that there is overlap between one’s work and personal pursuits. This is most often found to be evident
in employees who live on campus (like residence hall staff), who may not have as clearly defined
work vs. personal time.

Akhtar, Arif, Rubi, and Naveed (2011) studied “organizational learning” in higher
education institutes in Pakistan. They define organizational learning as “a transformational
process through which different stakeholders contribute their learning experiences both
individually and collectively to attain organizational goals” (p. 327). They found that
organizational learning has a significant impact on performance (Akhtar, Arif, Rubi & Naveed,
phenomenological study on how culture affects the amount of mentoring received by female
members at an institute of higher education. Gibson (2006) found that mentorship varied greatly
between departments and academic disciplines. Some women received a lot of attention and
development from their departmental leaders, while others received little or none. By hoarding
institutional knowledge, some departments were stunting the development of other faculty
members. Organizational learning factors heavily into the results of this study, which are
reviewed in Chapter 4.

**Relevance to Community Colleges.** Community colleges, or junior colleges, were first
established in the 1940s under President Truman as a bridge between high school and the
university. These institutions were intended to offer the first two years of college locally before
students attended the junior and senior years at a university. However, the missions of these
colleges have become much more complex with time (Bailey & Morest, 2004). Educational
needs are not the same as they were 70 years ago and community colleges have evolved along
with the communities they serve. Rising costs of a university education and a high demand for
technical training has resulted in community colleges expanding their missions drastically
(Bailey & Morest, 2004). As missions have grown, community colleges have become increasingly complex organizations. Bailey and Morest (2004) point out some of these ever-increasing focuses: developmental education, adult basic education, corporate training, industry certification training, personal enrichment, and others. The result is what Bailey and Morest (2004) and Amey and VanDerLinden (2002) call a “comprehensive” community college. Essentially, community colleges attempt to be “all things to all people” (Bailey & Morest, 2004).

When one adds the political nature of community college funding (usually a mixture of revenue, state and federal funding, local taxes and grants), the complexity of the community college becomes even more evident (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002).

Bailey and Morest’s (2004) work offers insight into the mission of the modern community college, but does little to describe the organizational culture. Amey & VanDerLinden (2002) look at community colleges through the unique lens of college administrators. This study surveyed community college administrators across the country in regards to their overall job experience. The findings showed that administrators overwhelmingly enjoyed their jobs and felt satisfaction with the work they do – despite the many challenges that community colleges face. (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002).

Perhaps the most insightful literature into the internal culture of community colleges comes from Ayers (2005). This work studies the organizational climate at rural community college in the Southeastern United States. The research used a quantitative approach to better understand relationships between different groups of employees. Among its key findings was the correlation between degree attainment and organizational perception. For example, Ayers found that employees with graduate level degrees were more likely to travel for work conferences and were assigned programs that led to university degrees. Those with associate’s
degrees were relegated to vocational and industrial programs that prepared students for the workplace. “In particular, among interview participants the researcher noticed the appearance of higher socioeconomic status among those in the dominant regime” (Ayers, 2005, p. 12). Even the language preferred by employees differed – as the associate’s level employees referred to college leadership as “management” while those with higher degrees preferred the term “administration”. This implies that a class hierarchy exists within community college organizations. It appears that there seems to be some level of discord between those in charge of the traditional community college mission (university preparation) and those in charge of technical programs.

Though somewhat dated, London’s (1980) observational study provides similar insight. He found that community college teachers are unique from those at other institutions of higher learning in that they come from many different backgrounds. Some hold terminal degrees in their field, while the largest percentage hold master’s degrees. Those who teach in vocational programs are only required to have an associate’s degree in some instances. This results in a truly varied faculty. Below are some key findings London’s (1980) observations:

- Most community college teachers were trained to do something other than teach at a community college.
- Many community college instructors would prefer to teach at a university.
- Faculty question the open door (automatic acceptance) policy of the community college and feel that some level of quality is sacrificed in its name.
- Some level of snobbery exists between traditional academic programs and vocational training programs.
• Community College teachers may feel isolated due to their heavy course loads in one specific subject (no variety).

These findings are broad and may not accurately translate to each institution. However, it is good to note these trends to determine whether they are upheld in this ethnographic study. Huber (1998) goes into even more detail about community college faculty statistics and attitudes. Her comprehensive survey found that most faculty members are middle-aged and have few options for organizational mobility. Respondents reported having influence within their academic departments, but having little influence in the institution as a whole (Huber, 1998). Only about a third of community college faculty reported having an “excellent” or “good” relationship with administrators (Huber, 1998, p. 33). This seems to confirm that a divide does exist between faculty and staff members.

Tierney (1988) also looked at the concept of organizational culture in the higher education setting and indicated that internal factors contribute greatly to the culture of an institution. “This internal dynamic has its roots in the history of the organization and derives its forces from the values, processes and goals held by those most intimately involved with the organization’s workings” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). The research found that employees’ day-to-day experiences and interactions with other employees developed their overall attitudes and perceptions of work. In the case study college used for the research, surveys indicated that employees took cues from their leaders and felt strong individual pride in achieving the college mission of helping students. However, the researcher points out that this is only the experience at one college – and that the same leadership practices at another institution could be ineffective. Tierney called for expanded research on organizational culture as a way to gauge institutional effectiveness (Tierney, 1988).
Shults (2008) provides a more recent look at organizational behavior in community colleges. Though examining organizational subgroups (such as faculty and staff) was only a small piece of his study, Shultz (2008) discusses the organizational silos that have traditionally existed in community colleges:

Community colleges are not structured for ease of knowledge transfer between subcultures or work groups. The days of perpetuating organizational silos, however, will end for successful colleges as the need for access to knowledge and for the creation of a learning organization will trump job categories, units, and titles – artifacts of an old management structure responsible for creating inefficient communication streams, knowledge hoarding, and resistant subcultures. (Shults, 2008, p. 4)

This study revealed that traditional management techniques (which would include silo subcultures) are “ill equipped to provide exceptional value to stakeholders in the changing economy, which is based on the increasing importance of human capital” (Shults, 2008, p. 19). Essentially, Shults believes that community colleges’ future success lies within developing it’s people from within. This is difficult in a silo environment, as these groups tend to see themselves as functioning on their own within the organization. Human capital is wasted when there is not effective cross-group collaboration. The manifestations of subgroups and silos are examples of what can happen when the affects of social penetration theory (naturally grouping with others like ones self) occur to a degree that becomes destructive to the whole college.

Rationale and Research Question

This literature review looked at three key areas that are important to help gain insight into this research: group dynamics, overall higher education culture, and community college culture. First, this chapter looked at group communication dynamics. This was primarily to identify
possible scenarios that may evolve from the research. Organizational silos emerged from the literature as a particularly destructive group behavior that should be looked for during cultural observation (Cilliers & Greyvenstein, 2011). Next, the literature review looked at the culture of higher education and, more specifically, community colleges. There is strong evidence to support the assumption that there is a cultural divide between faculty and staff members in higher education and that this divide can hinder organizational progress (Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & Meurs, 2009; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003; Campbell & Slaughter, 1999). Rapidly-changing times (including economic factors and technology advancements) make it increasingly difficult for community colleges to fulfill their very broad missions (Bailey & Morest, 2004). Those same external factors have also contributed to the “commoditization of knowledge work” and have caused many institutions to abandon traditional structure and shift to a more business-driven structure (Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & Meurs, 2009). This has left many faculty members feeling frustrated and distrustful of college leaders. Collectively, faculty members develop a negative group fantasy and begin to align themselves against administrators, which can be destructive to the overall organization (Bormann, 1983). Faculty members begin to view the “administration” as a symbol of oppression rather than a group of individuals who serve the greater good. As this fantasy grows, it becomes an innate part of the organizational culture. Social penetration theory tells us that people seek out relationships that are high reward and low cost to them personally (Taylor & Altman, 1975). It makes sense, accepting that a negative group fantasy towards administration is already in place, that faculty members would view interpersonal relationships with administrators as potentially low reward and high cost. Thus, communication divides emerge. This proved to be the case at Community College X.
One key component to this ethnographic study that was not revealed in the literature was the cultural relationship between faculty and non-administrative staff. While it could be argued that these employees are an extension of the administration, in that they carry out functions handed down from above, most of the literature seemed to focus primarily on relationships with senior leadership (cabinet level). This study proposes to go further to observe communication dynamics between faculty and lower-level staff as well. It also examines the communication dynamic that exists between adjunct (or part-time) faculty members and the rest of the college. Throughout the study, the researcher looked for communication behavior that aligned closely with Taylor and Altmans’ (1975) social penetration theory, and Bormann’s (1983) symbolic convergence theory. Looking at the organizational culture of Community College X through the lens of these two theories provides valuable insight into the interpersonal and group communication that occurs. These theories help explain why certain communication behaviors and divides exist and help the researcher dig beyond employees’ individual motives. The research consists of a three-tiered qualitative study that fosters understanding of two primary questions. First, how do faculty and staff members at a small community college in Texas communicate within and across subcultures? Second, how do organizational communication divides affect processes and productivity within the institution? Answering these questions should provide valuable cultural insight into Community College X and could pave the way for future research at other institutions.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Scope

Scope

This qualitative research seeks to explain the communicative relationships between faculty and staff members at a rural community college in Texas. It also hopes to better explain how communication divides between these employee groups affect the organization as a whole. The study was conducted at a two-year institution in Northeast Texas with an enrollment of approximately 3,000 students. This college employs around 100 full-time staff members and 65 full-time faculty members. The research was conducted through the use of an ethnographic model for studying organizational culture developed by Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982).

The study was conducted over a period of about one month and consisted of a baseline survey, cultural observations, and face-to-face interviews with employees. For the sake of this research, “faculty” is defined as any employee whose primary job duties involve teaching and “staff” is defined as one whose responsibilities lie in roles outside of teaching. While these are the two primary categories of subjects, the researcher further identifies employees as belonging to one of five subgroups that emerge from the college organizational chart (Appendix A). Staff subcategories include: administrative, professional, and classified (or hourly). Faculty subcategories include full-time faculty and adjunct (or part-time) faculty. Subjects were chosen from the six subgroups to participate in face-to-face interviews.

Methodology

Why Ethnography? Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) define ethnographic research as a methodology that “has been developed for the study of cultures and cultural sense-making” (p. 137). This field of study emerged from anthropology (i.e., Geertz), where social scientists would
immerse themselves in foreign cultures in order to better understand how other people live. This is often done through participant observation, where the researcher “both participates in the activities of the group and observes the behaviors” (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010, p. 223). The findings of these insider accounts tell real-life stories and are presented in a narrative format with “a great deal of description…to let the reader know what happened in the field” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 151). Ethnography became associated with communication studies in the 1980s as researchers looked for new ways to describe and understand communication behavior, particularly within organizations (Pacanowsky & O-Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). There is much debate and discussion about the best way to approach ethnographic research in the organizational setting. Some scholars believe that ethnographers should be “naturalists” who provide “objective description to minimize your influence on the activities of the people that are studied” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 142).

Naturalistic versus Critical Approaches. Modern organizational research tends to have the goal of fixing something that is broken. From a managerial standpoint, this is certainly appealing – time is money after all. Why would an organization bother with a study that doesn’t have a specific goal? Critical scholars, like Deetz and Kersten (1983), would agree that organizational research should strive for “social change.” On the opposite end of the spectrum lies the naturalistic school of thought. Scholars, like Linda Putnam (1983), argue that there is value in “seeking understanding” without a predetermined hypothesis or agenda (Putnam, 1983). The naturalistic (or ethnographic) approach involves the researcher conducting fieldwork that observes culture without prescribing solutions to perceived problems (Putnam, 1983).

This study utilized the naturalistic approach, as the ethnography is not conducted with a particular expectation or problem that it seeks to solve. Specifically, the ethnography looks for
patterns of communication between the five employee subgroups. Do groups primarily communicate with others in their own group? Do they feel more comfortable communicating with certain groups more than others? While the survey data can provide a baseline to compare to, the ethnographic observations and interviews put those perceptions into the context of actual people who live and work within the organization. Another area that is examined closely is geography. How does proximity affect relationships? Taylor and Altman’s (1975) social penetration theory implies that it is natural for people to gravitate towards others near them and with whom they share a common bond. The ethnography looked at how social penetration manifests within the organization. It examined the specifics of the communicative relationships to determine whether something deeper and more destructive – like organizational silos – could be dividing groups and harming the organization. As an employee at a community college, the researcher has observed (and been a part of) faculty/staff communication for more than six years. Ethnographic interviews provide alternate viewpoints that help to determine whether the researchers own observations are in line with those of others in the organization. Through honest, constructive insight, the ethnographic narrative reveals areas where communication divides appear to exist. This thesis does not seek to explain the origin of the problems or pose any suggestions on how they can be improved. Rather, the goal was simply to foster improved understanding of organizational communication at Community College X and shed light on areas of concern. This ethnography provides a discovery framework (Wilson and Chaddha, 2010) that lays a path for future research that looks at ways to improve communication divides within the organization.

**Research Design/Data Analysis.** This study was designed utilizing the organizational culture framework provided by Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982). Permission was
obtained from the college president to conduct an ethnographic study within the community college. As I am an employee at the college being studied, permission was also obtained from my supervisor. A survey was developed (Appendix B) with the goal of gaining baseline perceptions of a broader group of employees. The results will be used as comparison data for the ethnographic components of the study. The anonymous, 15-question survey was distributed to all college employees via e-mail at the beginning of the research process. It consisted of five demographic questions, six interval scale questions, and four multiple-choice questions. The demographic questions were designed to gather information pertinent to the study – such as a subject’s employee subgroup. This allowed for data filtering by group. The interval scale questions asked employees questions pertaining to their frequency and comfort levels when communicating with each of the five employee subgroups. The questions looked at both informal interactions and professional interactions. This helped to determine the prevalence of personal versus formal contact between employees. When compiled, the data indicated trends in communication between groups. This provided a basic degree of quantitative data to look at alongside the ethnographic interviews and observations.

After the survey was distributed, ethnographic data was gathered through a series of interviews and personal observations. A total of 15 personal, face-to-face interviews were conducted over a period of about one month during the spring semester at Community College X. A sample of two to three employees were chosen from each subgroup to participate. Rather than choosing employees through a random process, the researcher opted to choose participants who varied by time employed at the institution. This provided a range of perspective among employee groups.
The interviews were arranged at the convenience of the subjects and conducted in an environment of their choosing. In order to maintain consistency between interviews, a list of general questions have been prepared as an outline (Appendix C). Hand-written notes will be taken and the conversation will be recorded with the subject’s permission. Out of the respect for the employees’ time and my own (given that most research will have to be conducted during business hours), interviews will be scheduled for 30 minutes each. Personal observation notes will also be collected throughout the study. This will be accomplished through note taking during regular organizational functions. The goal of this is to casually observe communication activities like formal meetings, cafeteria talk, break room discussions, special events, and others. Notes obtained in this manner will be used to supplement the interview data.

The first step in the data analysis was to compile the survey data. The results of this survey are secondary, and serve as comparison insight that either support or contradict with interviews and observations. Interview and observation notes were compiled and organized. All three data groups (survey, interviews, and observations) provide the foundation for the ethnographic narrative. Per the framework provided by Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982), the following “organizational sense-making indicators” will be looked for in the data: relevant constructs, facts, practices, vocabulary, metaphors, stories, and rites and rituals (pp. 124-127). By looking at these cultural indicators, a better picture of the communication between faculty and staff members will emerge in a narrative format.

**Validity/Reliability.** The nature of this study is subjective. With the exception of the survey data, the research relied heavily on ethnographic observations and personal interviews with organizational insiders. As such, the study is built around personal opinions. In order to minimize bias, effort was made to include a variety of subjects with different perspectives - such
as choosing subjects based on time employed, discipline, geographic location, and other factors. This did not ensure that all viewpoints were included, as the purposive sample size was small (Rubin, 2010). However, it does help to minimize partiality to some degree. The researcher also took care to choose subjects with whom she did not share a close personal relationship. Interview notes were compiled electronically and analyzed for patterns and themes. Some members of the interview sample were approached after the data was compiled to gain respondent validation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Survey data was the primary tool used to preserve validity in this study. This technique utilized a much larger sample size and provided valuable comparison data. This data was electronically tabulated and compiled in two ways: aggregate and filtered by employee subgroup. The aggregate data provided a good overall look, but more insight into the research question emerged from the filtered responses. The ethnographic observations and interviews correlated consistently with the survey responses in most areas. Using a three-tiered research approach in the study, and comparing the data accordingly, ensured a higher degree of reliability than any of the methods could provide on their own.

**Ethical Considerations.** As I am a staff member of the organization being studied, there are certain ethical considerations that must be taken into account. My position as a native in the organization will make it challenging for me to interject my own organizational experiences without biasing the responses of informants. Rather than trying to remove myself from the story, I intend to utilize my personal experiences and cultural understanding to the benefit of the research. This research dilemma is addressed a recent article by Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang (2010): “Research is an extension of researchers’ lives. Although most social scientists have been trained to guard against subjectivity and to separate self from research activities, it is an
impossible task” (p. 2). This article presents a fairly new and different slant on the ethnography called the autoethnography. This approach is similar to ethnography, except the researcher places his or herself at the center of the study rather than being an outside observer (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Goodall (2004) defines autoethnography as “a cross-disciplinary communication project aimed at re-establishing the centrality of personal experience and identity in the social construction of knowledge” (p. 187).

Bell (1999) examines the researcher’s role in ethnography in her feminist study on male dominance in organizational research. This article identifies some interesting ideas about how the ethnographer can place his or her self into the study. Bell (1999) commented on the practice of autoethnography: “Incorporation of the ‘ethnographic self’ into organizational ethnography would involve seeing the researcher not merely as a ‘partitioned off appendage’ or qualification to the ethnographic account, but as an integral part of it” (p. 24). This ethnographic study utilizes some elements of autoethnography, as the researcher is an employee in the organization being studied. It would likely be impossible to maintain an objective viewpoint while conducting this research. Interview subjects were people that the researcher works with, eats lunch with, goes to meetings with, etc. In this case, the researcher did not feel that these factors took away from the effectiveness of the study, but rather that it enhanced it. Goodall (2004) says: “You could also say that narrative ethnography is holistic. It is about work and it is about life, and it is about the interplays of work in our lives and our lives at work” (p. 188). Throughout this study, the researcher was cognizant of maintaining some level of distance from the subjects when appropriate. However, the researcher freely acknowledges her own role in the narrative and admits personal subjectivity when it exists.
Subject consent and anonymity are also important ethical concerns in this study. Interview participants were asked by phone or e-mail if they were willing to participate in the interview process. Each of the 13 subjects either verbally or electronically consented to the interview under the agreement that the narrative would be written in such a way that would not identify the subject’s identity or specific role at Community College X. As a small organization with some departments of one person, it would be difficult to provide descriptors that do not give away a subject’s identity. They are referred to in the narrative by their employee subgroup and a pseudonym only. This allows the researcher to reveal subjects’ honest cultural insights without endangering their position within the organization. Some employees brought up subjects that they requested to be “off the record.” The researcher agreed to this, and any information given with that stipulation is not used in any direct way in the study.
Chapter 4: The Study

This study, which seeks to better understand the relationships that exist between faculty and staff at Community College X, took place over a period of several weeks during the spring 2013 semester and consisted of a baseline survey, semi-structured interviews with employees, and ethnographic observations by the researcher. The goal of the research is to explain the nuances of communication between faculty and staff members and to understand how communication gaps between these two groups impact the overall organization. As an insider of the organization for more than six years, the researcher anticipated that a distinct divide between faculty and staff would be evident. Upon completing the research, however, some trends emerged that call this hypothesis into question. The data did confirm that there are communication divides within the organization, but there was not clear evidence that the gap exists primarily between faculty and staff as broad groups. Rather, the gap seems to exist between the campus at large and the collective administration (administrators and their staff). This chapter will examine the data and look at trends that emerge from the results.

Data Analysis

Survey

The study began by distributing an anonymous baseline survey to all employees at Community College X via e-mail through preset intranet groups. The survey invitation went to approximately 500 e-mail addresses on Thursday, March 21, 2013, but it is difficult to determine how many of these were valid accounts. According to the college IT department, there are some duplicates between employee groups and some addresses do not belong to active users. It is estimated that approximately 300 employees received the e-mail. Of this group, 124 unique users completed the survey over a period of two weeks.
The goal of the survey was to provide a broader look at how employees view communication within the organization. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, survey respondents were asked to self-identify as one of five employee sub-groups that were taken from the organizational chart: administrative staff, professional staff, classified (hourly) staff, full-time faculty, and adjunct (part-time) faculty. In addition to looking at the collective survey data, filtering responses by these subgroups helped to provide insight into how perceptions differ between employee classifications. The results were tabulated electronically and charts were developed to showcase emerging trends (Appendix D).

**Interviews**

A series of ethnographic interviews were conducted over a one-week period during the study. Interview participants were chosen from each of the previously-identified employee subgroups as follows: two from administrative staff, three from professional staff, three from classified staff, two from full-time faculty, and three from adjunct faculty. A total of 13 interviews were completed, ranging from 20 minutes to one hour each. Employees were first identified for participation based upon their time employed at the institution. It was desirable to speak with employees whose years of employment varied in order to gain a broader perspective of the culture. Interviews were scheduled through phone conversations and e-mails and occurred at a place of the subject’s choosing. Due to the sensitive organizational nature of the interviews, subjects were assured anonymity beyond being identified by their subgroup category and/or a pseudonym. A general question guideline (Appendix C) was used to provide a basic framework for the interviews. Hand-written notes were taken by the researcher during the interviews and were compiled afterwards. The notes were then analyzed as part of the larger ethnographic study.
and compared to the survey results. Overall, the interview results corroborated with the survey results and ethnographic observations. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

**Ethnographic Observation**

While much of this study was conducted over a period of just two weeks, ethnographic observations were actually being conducted for a much longer timeframe. The researcher is a native in the organization of six and-a-half-years. The idea for this study actually began shortly after the researcher began employment as a member of the college’s professional staff. There is a unique culture at Community College X. As Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) point out (regarding their organizational culture approach): “The jumping-off point for this approach is the mundane observation that more things are going on in organizations than getting the job done” (p. 116). Observations relevant to this study include patterns of behavior and/or communication over time, general employee attitudes, informal communication events, and formal communication events. Observations notes were recording during the study period; however, some ethnographic observations occurred prior to the formal research process and are related from the researchers past experiences and memories.

**Results**

**Demographics**

**Survey**

All employees of Community College X were invited to participate in the communication survey. A total of 124 people responded, with 119 completing all questions. The survey demographics generally mirrored the college demographics. More full-time faculty (31.1%) and professional staff (29.4%) participated in the survey than other groups. Administrative staff accounted for 8.4% of responses, 12.6% were classified staff, and 18.5% were adjunct faculty.
Time employed at the college varied considerably, though 26.1% of respondents indicated that they have worked there for 15+ years. Only 7.6% of those who answered had been at the institution for less than one year. The majority of respondents were female (68.9%). Only 12 employees (10.1%) were age 35 or under. Most were ages 46-55 (32.8%) or 56+ (36.9%).

**Interviews**

Interview subjects were chosen based on two primary criteria: employee subgroup and time employed at the organization. This allowed each group to have its voice represented and to compare perspectives across different levels of institutional acculturation. Interview participants were as follows by group: two from administrative staff, three from professional staff, three from classified staff, two from full-time faculty, and three from adjunct faculty. A total of 13 interviews were completed, ranging from 20 minutes to one hour each. Interviewees are not identified by gender, as this could potentially compromise anonymity in some subgroups.

The first administrative staff member interviewed was a veteran in the organization of 15+ years and the second for less than five years. The three professional staff participants ranged from 2 years to 26 years of employment. Classified staff members ranged from 5 to 25 years working in the organization. Full-time faculty members represented ranged from 4 to 15 years in the organization. Adjunct faculty interviewees varied from less than one year to seven years. Educational attainment of interview subjects ranged from a high school diploma with some college work to the doctoral level.

**Survey Results**

**Aggregate Results**

The employee communication survey results showed relatively positive communication experiences between faculty and staff at Community College X. When looking at the aggregate
data, most employees indicated that they are comfortable communicating with all employee
groups both formally and informally. At least 77% of respondents reported feeling “comfortable”
or “very comfortable” communicating with all five groups in a professional capacity. At least
69% of all respondents reported feeling “comfortable” or “very comfortable” with all five groups
on an informal level. At least 73% of respondents also reported feeling “respected” or “very
respected” by all groups. However, employees indicated that there are lower levels of informal
communication than there is professional. The data shows that employees, in general,
communicate less with administrative employees and adjunct faculty members than other groups.
Electronic communication was chosen as the most prevalent medium for communication across
groups.

![Graph showing informal communication frequency by employee group](image)

*Figure 1.* Shows collective survey results regarding informal communication.

Overall, most employees reported that they feel that they have the most in common (on
both a professional and personal level) with members of their peer subgroups. Half of
respondents agreed that there is adequate communication between faculty and staff at the study
college. When asked to choose the statement that best describes the relationship that exists
between the faculty and staff at Community College X, 49.5% chose “professionals who work together.”

While aggregate data provides a broad look at communication within the organization, it does not tell the whole story. In order to better understand the relationships between subgroups, it is necessary to filter the survey data by individual groups.

**Administrator Results**

Administrative staff was the smallest group in the study, with only 10 responses. This was expected, as this group has the fewest employees within the organization. The 10 survey responses represent 100% of administrators employed at Community College X, including: president, four vice presidents, one associate vice president, and four deans. This group reported to have the most official contact with other administrators, professional staff, and classified staff. They reported lower levels of interaction with faculty members (both full-time and adjunct). Administrators reported infrequent informal contact with any group, but indicated high levels of comfort when communicating with any group (either informally or formally).

Results were mixed on which group administrators feel that they have the most in common with on a personal level. Five reported administrators, two stated professional staff, and three associated closest with full-time faculty. Professionally, 60% felt they had the most in common with other administrators. Professional staff and full-time faculty were split at 20% of respondents. One respondent commented: “I have many areas of direct responsibility and a very high level of responsibility, so I feel that I have the most in common with the administrative staff.” Eight respondents agreed that there is “adequate communication between faculty and staff members at the college.” One chose “I don’t know” and one chose “I disagree.” Among administrators, 60% of respondents chose “professionals who work together” as the best way to
describe the relationship between the faculty and staff, while 30% reported “separate groups with different goals.” Most respondents (70% or more for each subgroup) reported feeling that they are given the respect they deserve from employees in all subgroups, with only one reporting feeling disrespected by full-time faculty. Administrators reported the least amount of contact with adjunct faculty. Most (80%) said that they interact with adjunct faculty through e-mail most of the time, while 3 reported little or no contact with this group at all.

**Professional Staff Results**

A total of 34 professional staff employees completed the survey. This group reported having the most professional communication with fellow professional staff and classified staff. Informal contact was sporadic with all groups with the least contact with adjuncts (82.4%), full-time faculty (54.5%), and administrators (44.1%). The majority of respondents felt comfortable or very comfortable communicating with all groups formally. They reported slightly higher levels of comfort with professional and classified staff members. Electronic communication was the most popular medium for communication across all subgroups. Other areas (formal conversations, informal conversations, telephone, meetings/small group communication) were also chosen as prevalent media. The only area that was indicated to have “little or no communication at all” was adjunct faculty (26.5%). Personally, 69% felt that they have the most in common with other professional staff. On a professional level, 78% indicated having the most in common with other professional staff.

Opinions were mixed on question eight, which asked: “There is adequate communication between faculty and staff members at the college. (Choose the statement that best describes your opinion of this statement).” While 38.3% agreed with the statement, 26.5% “did not know” and 23.5% disagreed. The majority of professional staff (52.9%) felt that “professionals who work
together” best described the relationship between faculty and staff. The next highest choice was “separate groups with different goals” at 26.5%. Most respondents reported feeling high levels of respect from all groups.

**Classified Staff Results**

Fourteen classified staff members completed the survey. This group indicated that it interacts the most with professional and other classified staff members. Unlike professional staff and administrators, classified staff members reported a high level of interaction with full-time faculty when carrying out official duties. This group has the least contact with administrators and adjunct faculty members. When asked about informal communication, classified staff members did not indicate high levels of contact with any specific group. Most said that they “infrequently/rarely” interact with administrators and adjunct faculty members informally.

This group reported a higher level of comfort when working with professional and classified staff members, both formally and informally. They indicated largely neutral feelings regarding administration, full-time faculty, and adjunct faculty. A small percentage (14.3%) said they feel “very uncomfortable” when communicating with administrators professionally. Like both previous groups, classified staff chose their peers (fellow classified staff) as the group that they feel the most in common with on both professional and personal levels. Nearly half (42.9%) of classified staff respondents indicated that they “don’t know” whether there is adequate communication between faculty and staff at Community College X. Three statements stood out in this group in regard to describing the relationship between faculty and staff – “professionals who work together” (35.7%), “one big family” (21.4%), and “separate groups with different goals” (29.6%). The majority of classified staff indicated feeling respected by all groups.
**Full-Time Faculty Results**

Full-time faculty accounted for 36 of the survey responses. This group reported having the most official contact with fellow full-time faculty members. There was also a high rate of daily contact with classified staff. Like the other groups, full-time faculty showed infrequent/rate informal contact with any specific group, though 25% did report frequent informal contact with other full-time faculty. Respondents indicate that they are comfortable communicating with all five subgroups both formally and informally, though they showed slightly less comfort when communicating with administrators. This group had the highest rate of electronic communication use of all the subgroups, but other media were also prevalent. Almost a quarter (22.9%) reported little or no contact at all with adjunct faculty.

Again mirroring previous subgroups, full-time faculty overwhelmingly (94.3%) reported having the most in common with fellow full-time faculty on a personal level. They had similar responses on a personal level, with 88.9% indicating the most in common with full-time faculty. One respondent said: “My interests through my graduate education have evolved to this level, and I feel a greater sense of intellectual stimulation among this group.” The majority (66.7%) agreed that there is adequate communication between faculty and staff. Almost half (44.4%) thought “professionals who work together” best described the relationship between faculty and staff. “Intellectuals with a common mission” and “separate groups with different goals” followed with 19.4% and 22.2% of responses respectively. Most full-time faculty members reported feeling “respected” or “very respected” by all subgroups.
Figures 2 and 3 clearly show a disparity of engagement between adjunct faculty (top chart) and full-time faculty (bottom chart).

**Adjunct Faculty Results**

Adjunct faculty accounted for 22 responses in the survey. This group of employees reported “infrequent/rare” communication with any subgroup, both formally and informally. Adjuncts did report relatively high levels of comfort when interacting with all groups – when that communication actually happens. E-mail was the most popular form of communication used by adjuncts. The majority (52.4%) of adjunct faculty members felt the most in common with fellow adjuncts on a professional and informal level. A slightly smaller percentage (33.3%) felt
the most in common with full-time faculty. Results were split between adjunct staff members who agreed (40.9%) that there was adequate communication between faculty and staff and those who didn’t know (36.4%). Most adjunct faculty members (59.1%) chose “professionals who work together” as the best description of the relationship between faculty and staff members. Overall, this group reported feeling respected by all groups, though some indicated neutral feelings.

Survey Result Summary

The communication survey was designed to supplement the personal interviews and ethnographic observations by gathering insight from a larger sample of employees. While the survey results do not answer the research question on their own, a few patterns emerge from the data that may be helpful in better understanding the communicative relationship between faculty and staff members at Community College X:

1. All employee subgroups reported feeling the most comfortable (on both informal and professional levels) with their own peer group.

2. Informal contact was significantly less frequent than formal communication across all groups.

3. All groups indicated infrequent/rare communication with adjunct faculty members.

4. Electronic communication was most prevalent across all groups.

5. Half of employees agreed that there is “adequate communication between faculty and staff members at the college.” The other half did not know or disagreed with the statement.

6. Half of employees chose “professionals who work together” as the best statement to describe the relationship between faculty and staff at the college.
7. The majority of employees reported feeling respected by all subgroups.

**Interview Outcomes**

A smaller sample of employees was chosen to participate in face-to-face interviews. These were conducted in a place of the interview subject’s choosing and were relatively informal. About half of subjects chose to be interviewed in the researcher’s office, while the other half chose their own office or area. While many different opinions were expressed through the interviews, four relevant themes became apparent: 1) overall positive communication experiences, 2) geographical communication divides, 3) distrust and anxiety associated with the administration building, 4) “us vs. them” mentality between faculty and administration, and 5) Lack of communication and engagement among adjunct faculty members. These are explored further below.

**Overall Positive Communication Experiences**

A theme that immediately emerged as a common thread among all interviews was that people genuinely enjoy working at the college and feel that their overall communication experiences are positive. Adam, a full-time faculty member sits in his cramped, sunny office for a late afternoon interview. The researcher asks if he would prefer to close the door for privacy and Adam declines. The office is cluttered with stockpile of drinks and snacks for an after-school event for a student club he advises. After a few minutes of casual chatter, Adam describes his early experiences with the organization: “I felt like the school was interested in me as a person, not just a set of credentials. Throughout the hiring process, I felt like I was being wooed. The people were all very warm and welcoming. This was very different from what I experienced at other organizations.” A few minutes into the interview, a student stops by to ask a question. Adam greets the student by name and patiently explains the details of the assignment that is
coming due and then gives his attention back to the interview. Adam goes on to say that he feels communication within his building is especially strong. “I have a great relationship with most of the people in our building. It has become sort of an informal ritual for faculty members to have lunch in the cafeteria together. Mostly, we talk about our students and how the semester is going. Having this kind of relationship with fellow faculty was new for me since I came from large universities with huge departments. Here, I am at least acquainted with everyone in my building.” Pam, a relatively new adjunct faculty member who teaches one face-to-face class and online courses, stopped by the researcher’s office for an interview before class. She says: “I felt welcomed the first time I set foot on this campus. I teach part time at another college and that is not the case there. This college just has a warmer environment in general.” Despite only being on campus for short periods of time each week, Pam says that she feels like part of the culture. Each full-time and adjunct faculty member interviewed gave similar accounts.

While administrators, professional staff, and classified staff also expressed an overall positive communication environment, their comments were somewhat less effusive. These three groups of employees appeared to define “communication” in more of a formal sense. There was very little talk regarding interpersonal communication. Brian, a long-time staff member, said that the communication environment at the school has changed drastically over the life of the organization. He said that the current president (who has been at the organization for almost five years) has a much more open communication style than the previous leader: “Our president goes to a lot of effort to communicate with the rest of the organization. He sends out e-mails after cabinet meetings to keep us informed and holds employee forums fairly often. I feel like I know more about what is going on at the college than I ever did in the past.” Jan, a member of the classified staff, mirrored this opinion: “I’ve always felt a good connection with the campus, but
things seem more open now. I have a good relationship with both faculty and staff members, and I feel like we mostly communicate well.”

Rita, an administrator, noted that most of her daily communication occurs between her staff and students. She noted that she “isn’t really in on the grapevine” and that she relies on her superior, with whom she has a very open relationship, to pass down relevant organizational knowledge: “I feel like we have a very top-down communication approach at the college. I rely on my boss to keep me informed and I, in turn, pass that information down to my employees. This seems to work pretty well here.” Ultimately, following the trends that emerged from the survey data, all employees interviewed felt there were many good aspects to the communication at the college. Subjects frequently referred to the collective faculty/staff as “the college family.”

Bob, an adjunct faculty member, spoke to this phenomenon: “I feel like the college is like a family. We care about one another and I would defend my colleagues to outsiders. However, like a true family, we sometimes hurt each other the most.”

**Geographical Communication Divides**

The theme of geographical communication divides began to manifest very early in the interview process. Employees across all groups indicated having closer relationships and more communication with employees in their immediate geographic location (buildings or general office areas) on campus. Whether the separation was from building to building or department to department, interview subjects all mentioned some degree of feeling separated from other locations on campus. Jennifer, a professional staff member, spoke to this: “There are definitely a lot of cliques on campus. I don’t necessarily feel like they are exclusive of one another in a harmful way, but they are there. Most of the time these groups just make sense – like faculty spending time with other faculty in their discipline.” As offices are generally grouped by area of
responsibility and discipline, this appears to be an example of Taylor and Altman’s (1975) “social penetration theory” that was explored in the literature review. Employees automatically gravitate towards the people who are most like them. Tom, a classified staff member said, “The different employee groups pretty well stick with their own kind around here. For the most part, everyone communicates fine in our work-related duties, but you won’t see much socializing between groups.”

Other employees indicated that the geographical divide might not have as much to do with social conditioning as practicality. Lynn, a professional staff member who works in a very high-traffic area, said that she is generally so busy she rarely gets to spend much time on other areas of the campus: “Most of my contact with other employees is through e-mail or over the phone. I rarely get outside of my office and see people in other buildings face to face.” In fact, Lynn said she eats at her desk by herself most days because she really can’t afford to be gone for a full lunch break.

**Fear of “The Big House”**

The interview feedback suggests that most geographical communication separations within the organization are not damaging to the daily function of the college. There was, however, one notable exception that could warrant a deeper look into the organizational culture. In more than 90% of the interviews conducted with employees who work outside of the administration building, subjects admitted (without prompting) to having some level of aversion to the administration building and those who work there. The longer employees were employed at the college, the more prevalent these feelings seemed to be. Tom, the classified staff member previously mentioned, said that he makes every effort to stay out of the administration building. He even went so far as to say that he and his fellow classified staff members call the
administration building the “big house” or “snake pit.” He noted that he does not hold personal grudges against any of the people employed in that building, but feels that it is in his best interest not to communicate with them too often. Even Lynn, who is relatively new to the organization and doesn’t associate much outside of her area, said that she calls the administration building the “big house.” She said she has never had any negative dealings with anyone in that area, but she picked up that there was a division between “them” and the rest of the campus. Amy, a full-time faculty member, said: “The administration building is a place you generally don’t want to go. It kind of feels like there is a negative energy over there and I can’t really put my finger on why it seems that way.”

The administration building is centrally located on the campus and houses a variety of offices, including the president’s office, human resources, advancement, business services, financial aid, admissions, registrar, academic advising, and others. Essentially, this where most of the non instruction-related business for the college is executed. Most of the interview subjects who work within this building did not seem to carry negative feelings about the building. When asked about his perceptions of the administration building, Brian (professional staff) said: “I have worked in the administration building for many years and I have never noticed any negative undertones. There are a lot of people working in a relatively small space, and that can cause problems at times, but I don’t feel like it is a bad place to work.” Carl, an administrator who works in the administration building, said he feels that the college has relatively open lines of communication: “I believe that most faculty members feel pretty comfortable communicating with administration and other staff members.” Another administrator, Rita, who works in the administration building, did admit that it sometimes feels like there are bad feelings between employees within the building. “I can see, at least in my area, that there is a distrust of the human
resources department. Any time personnel action is taken; people have to parade in front of a lot of employees to get to the HR office. There is very little privacy in that area and a lot of people will see you, and speculate, if you get called in for something.”

Other employees also mentioned the layout of the administration building as being problematic. Due to a lack of office space, much of the building was recently converted to cubicle units and the main receptionist was moved to a switchboard in a back office. “It almost feels like you are under scrutiny when you walk in that building. There is no one to greet you, but a lot of people who work out in the open look up and stare.” Jennifer (professional staff), who works in a different campus building, said. Brian (professional staff) expressed similar sentiments: “I don’t like the new layout of the building. I don’t think it is inviting to either students or employees and it is kind of hard to tell where you are supposed to go if you aren’t familiar with the place.”

While the interviews offer some insight into the overall negative feelings toward the administration building, there was no common thread that stands out. For the most part, employees who work outside of the building seem to have a cultural aversion to it. Lynn, who is a relatively new professional staff member, said: “I don’t really know why we avoid the administration building. I guess it just seems like that is where the important people sit and the big decisions are made. It feels separate from the rest of us somehow.” In many ways, the administration building appears to be viewed symbolically by the rest of the campus. Through the exchange of fantasies about what happens (allegedly) within the administration building, non-administrative employees bond over the negative symbol that it represents. These group fantasies and perceptions are then passed on to new employees, like Lynn, who perpetuate the symbol unknowingly (Bormann, 1983).
“Us Versus. Them” Mentality Between Faculty and Administration

Another theme that emerged is an “us versus them” mentality between faculty members and administrators. This appears to tie closely with the previous theme of geographical communication divides, as faculty members and administrators work in separate physical areas. Most full-time and adjunct faculty members interviewed expressed some degree of distrust of “administration.” It is interesting to note that the subjects seemed to lump all administrators (and their staff) into the generic label of “administration.” Amy (full-time faculty) brought up the topic of Faculty Senate as a group that divides faculty and administrators. This is a formally organized group of faculty members who meet periodically to advocate faculty issues. “These meetings can get pretty heated. This is where we discuss things like our wages – which are among the lowest in the state – and I think it breeds an ‘us against them’ mentality.”

One administrator, Carl, acknowledged that the divide exists, but felt that there is a good overall relationship between faculty and administration: “I think most faculty members feel pretty comfortable communicating with administration.” However, he said he realizes that administration roles sometimes make faculty feel as if he is working against them: “As an administrator, it is ultimately my job to handle administrative tasks and let the faculty do what they do best – teach. I know that sometimes they feel like we do the opposite and impose things that make their lives more difficult. That is never our intent.”

Erin, an adjunct faculty member, also expressed some distrust of administrators: “I have noticed that the current leadership has backtracked in communicating key initiatives recently. Messages weren’t communicated well in the beginning and it has been difficult for them to go back and get buy-in from faculty. We get mixed signals from this administration.” Erin also pointed out that the relatively new president has brought major changes in recent years, and this
has not always been easy for long-time faculty. “I think our faculty are territorial and reluctant to let go of the way we have always done things. A lot of these folks have been teaching here since the college opened, and this has bred a culture that values tradition over change.”

Even professional staff noted that the “us versus them” mentality has spilled over into their realm – as they work closely with administrators. Brian said, “With the exception of the very beginning of the college, I have always felt that there is some degree of separation between faculty and staff. The previous leader really catered the faculty and went out of his way to make them feel appreciated. The current administration seems to respect faculty, but he is not afraid to question them or push them outside of their comfort zones.”

**Lack of Communication and Engagement Among Adjunct Faculty Members**

Adjunct faculty members emerged from this study (survey, interviews, and observations) as a group that the larger organization rarely communicates with. Pam (adjunct faculty) said, “I think adjuncts are generally out of the campus communication loop. Part-time instructors teach the majority of classes at the college, and yet, most rarely interact with anyone other than their students.” Pam noted that many of them have full-time jobs outside of teaching and they are rarely on campus, but feels that the college could do more to include adjunct faculty. “I don’t think adjunct faculty are viewed by most employees as active in the daily running of the college. We are seen more as commodity providers,” Erin said. Adjunct faculty members said that they primarily rely on e-mails for information, including a weekly news blast from the marketing department. For the most part, however, they rely on the faculty division director in their discipline to keep them informed. “Our experience really depends on our division director. Some directors take on a mentorship role with adjunct faculty and work at cultivating them. Others are not as involved,” Erin said.
The fact that adjunct faculty members teach such a large percentage of classes (currently about 60%) at Community College X means that this subgroup has high degrees of contact with students and could provide valuable insight and cultural contributions to the overall institution. The interview responses and ethnographic observations suggest that the college may be missing out on opportunities to connect with this subgroup and recognize them as valued members of the overall organization. The survey data supports the interview results, as all groups (including adjunct faculty) reported low levels of communication with adjunct faculty. “Adjuncts feel like they don’t have a voice and they don’t know how to be heard. Gaps in communication need to be filled in order for us to feel like a viable, valuable part of the institution,” Erin said.

**Cultural Observation Outcomes**

It is a sunny Wednesday afternoon in the middle of the spring semester at Community College X. It is ten minutes until three o’clock in the afternoon and the president’s forum is about to start. I hurry across the building to our largest lecture room, knowing I need to be there early in order to get a seat. Since the current president joined the organization in 2008, his forums have become popular among both faculty and staff. The room is always overflowing at these things. I arrive in the room and realize I am actually the first one there. Where is everyone?

I choose a seat in the middle of the second row and sit down and check my smart phone. Soon, people start to file in. Some colleagues from student services are next to arrive and they choose seats next to me. The row behind me fills in and I notice that informal groups are emerging. The row in which I sit is completely made up on professional staff members. Behind us, half of the row is classified staff clustered together with some professional staff finishing out the row. Full-time faculty members seem to gravitate to the back of the room, which fills up
quickly with last-minute arrivals from all employee groups. I do not notice any adjunct faculty members in the room at all. The seats have all been filled (with the exception of the front row) and stragglers begin to sit on the steps that flank the lecture hall. A dull roar of conversation and laughter permeates the room and spills out into the hallway. Two cabinet-level vice presidents sit at the end of the front row, but no one else makes a move to sit in those chairs.

The president is having technical difficulties with his presentation, so members of the IT staff have joined him at the front of the room for last minute troubleshooting. I talk casually with acquaintances, though it is a little hard to hear over the chatter. The presentation is on the screen ready to go and the president smiles out at the noisy crowd. A few of us realize that he is ready to start, but he good-naturedly tells us to keep talking. From the look on his face, it appears that he is enjoying the upbeat mood and seeing all of us together.

A few minutes behind schedule, we finally give him our attention and the forum begins. He thanks us for coming and reminds us of the purpose of the event. “Sometimes we (the administration) make assumptions that the rest of the college family knows what we are doing, when you may not,” he says. He hopes to use the forum to fill that gap. The main topics for the day are an update on the current state legislative session and a status report on the strategic planning process (which began the previous month). For the next hour-and-a-half the president talks to us about the state of the college. There is a lot of information to cover, so he moves at a quick pace. He tells us things are going relatively well in the legislature, all things considered. We certainly can’t expect the state to fund us to the level we deserve, but it looks like we will receive enough to get by. We will have to continue to run lean, as always, but he knows that our talented, efficient faculty and staff will make it work. He shifts the topic to the strategic planning
process. In order to move our organization forward into the future, he says, we will have to adjust the way to do our jobs.

Suddenly, the mood of the room seems to shift. There is a subtle tension in the air. He briefly touches on the fact that the organization has seen many changes within the last couple of years. He doesn’t say it, but we all know that he is referring to a string of personnel changes. This is a touchy subject among us, and has been the topic of much speculation and emotion in recent months. Several long-time employees had exited the organization abruptly and under mysterious circumstances, and we are all still a little edgy about it. In the forum, he admits that none of us enjoy the job security that we might have enjoyed a few years ago. It is not enough to just show up and do our work, he says. We have to excel at what we do.

The presentation is running longer than expected, so a few faculty members get up to make their exit from the back of the room – presumably because their classes are about to begin. The audience is distracted and the president begins to wrap up the forum. The mood seems very different from when the meeting started - more subdued somehow. He rushes through his final slides and doesn’t encourage questions. No one asks any. We all file out of the room quickly, saying little as we head back to our respective offices to finish up the day.

The researcher recorded this observation at a recent employee forum held by the college president. This glimpse into the culture of Community College X provides an insider’s view of a formal communication event that took place during the study timeframe. Some of the same themes emerge from this situation that were evident in the survey results and interviews. Employees seemed to naturally align themselves with their own employee groups. Faculty members positioned themselves farthest away from administrators (in the back of the room).
Only administrators sat in the front row. All of these actions, while subtle, provide insight into the communicative culture of the organization.

The forum itself is what Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) would call a “relevant construct” within the organization – or something used to “identify the generic aspects or organizational understandings and serve as global indicators of how members structure their experiences” (p. 124). Presidential forums have become a mainstay in communication since the current president was hired in 2008. In the beginning, these events had the feel of a town hall meeting – where the president imparted information and employees had the chance to ask candid questions. Ice cream was even served at the first one. The forum described above shows how these events have moved away from their original manifestation into something more serious and somber.

From an organizational sense-making perspective, it seems as if there are contradictions within the communication system at Community College X. On one hand, the president expends significant effort in communicating with employees. Forums are just one way in which this happens. The president also sends out minutes after cabinet meetings, encourages broad participation in planning processes, and openly invites employees to stop by to talk to him and ask questions about what is going on within the organization. The survey data and interview result reflect these efforts. Few deny that the president communicates frequently with employees. However, there is an air of distrust among employees when it comes to dealing with administrative leadership at the college. One employee commented off-handedly during a casual conversation: “I hear what he is telling us, but I just don’t believe it.”

It is almost as if the employees perceive their president’s overtures as propaganda efforts rather than genuine communication. This likely goes back to an incident that was mentioned by
adjunct faculty member Erin in the interview results. About a year ago, the president unveiled a new “Big Idea” to the faculty in a special meeting. Essentially, the “Big Idea” was to change the way the college approaches educating students. There would be an increased focus on online education to fulfill a market demand and bring in more revenue. In turn, this would help subsidize the on-campus students’ education and allow faculty members to offer more innovative, hands-on experiences for students in the classroom.

Faculty members did not receive the “Big Idea” positively. Many saw it as a threat to their jobs – the college was simply going to become an online “diploma mill.” The researcher conducted candid conversations with the president regarding this misconception and it was acknowledged that the communication was handled badly in the beginning. This was also admitted in public communication. However, it has been difficult for employees – especially faculty – to let go of their skepticism and embrace changes that are coming in the organization. Paired with the personnel changes mentioned in the observational account, the distrust of the “administration” continues. Despite attempts to rebrand and repackage “The Big Idea,” there are still many people on campus who feel as if the president is now trying to push his agenda through new means, by making it appear as if it was the employees’ idea all along. The college has now hired a strategic planning consultant and is utilizing a highly participatory process that gains buy-in from a wide variety of sources – including faculty, staff and other college stakeholders. The researcher was asked to serve on the strategic planning taskforce and felt that the experience resulted in an organic vision that grew from all involved. However, many aspects of the original “Big Idea” are present in the new plan, which leads some to believe that the president manipulated the process. The initial communication misstep has proven to be one that has cost the trust of many employees. The skeptical attitudes of the faculty seem to have carried
over to other staff members. This has resulted in a communication environment that feels one-
sided and top-down – not the “open door” policy that the president initially encouraged.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to answer two questions: 1) how do faculty and staff members
at a small community college in Texas communicate within and across subcultures? 2) How do
organizational communication divides affect processes and productivity within the institution?
The three-tiered research approach, which utilized survey data, qualitative interviews, and
ethnographic cultural observation give insight into both questions. A few key findings are
discussed in this section.

Subgroups Stick Together (At Least Professionally)

One fact that became evident early on in each of the three method approaches was that
employees at Community College X tend to gravitate towards other people in their own
subgroup. Members of the five subgroups (administrators, professional staff, classified staff, full-
time faculty, and adjunct faculty) indicated in the survey that they have the most contact, both
professionally and informally, with other employees in the same subgroup. This supports the
results of the interviews and cultural observations. While most employees did not report feeling
alienated by other groups, they found that they were most comfortable communicating with peers
in their subgroup. Members of groups tend to have similar educational backgrounds and job
duties, so this is not a surprising finding.

One aspect that was more surprising was the fact that employees across all groups
reported very little informal communication – even within their own subgroups. The interview
subjects seem to confirm this. The majority of employees – regardless of subgroup – said that
they eat lunch at their desks by themselves most days. None indicated that they a significant
amount of time socializing with employees outside of the work environment. “I get along great with my coworkers,” Lynn, a member of the professional staff subgroup, said. “We just don’t really get together outside of work. I guess I sort of separate my personal life and my work life and they don’t overlap much. I kind of like it that way.” Lynn’s account is similar to the experience of the researcher. While the researcher feels strong bonds with colleagues, there is minimal contact off campus. A likely explanation for this phenomenon is that employees do not share much in common with coworkers outside of the office setting. The campus is rural and many employees commute significant distances to get to work each day. Few share the same social circles - like churches and civic organizations - outside of work. This showcases the manifestation of social penetration theory (Taylor & Altman, 1993). Relationships only develop as far as common ground is In this case, Community College X itself is a symbol that employees build their work relationships around (Bormann, 1983). Both the survey and observational results indicated that people feel a strong sense of pride in the mission of the college. This creates common ground that allows for meaningful work relationships based upon shared passion for a cause. While other divisive symbols exist at a deeper level within the organization, the college is viewed positively by all subgroups.

It is not surprising to find that subgroups within the organization communicate with their peers more than other groups. These findings support both Taylor and Altman’s (1975) social penetration theory and Bormann’s (1984) symbolic convergence theory. Earlier in this thesis, the example of kids in a school setting was given as an example of social penetration. The workplace culture at Community College X is very similar to a middle school in that people gravitate towards others like themselves to form groups that see the world from their own unique perspective. This ties nicely to Bormann’s (1984) theory, which says that groups bond together
through shared symbols. In this case, each group has its own symbols that tie it together. For example, common educational levels and interest in scholarly pursuits may unite the full-time faculty. The only group that does not appear to have high levels of communication within its own group is adjunct faculty. Because there is no united “symbol” to bind this subgroup together, there is very little to indicate that adjunct faculty members are a group at all. The study lends evidence that this subgroup is more of a loosely connected network of individuals who achieve a similar function within the organization, but without any real “convergence” (Bormann, 1984). Provide examples-like the big house story.

*Formal Communication Uses a Top-Down Approach*

Administrators, particularly the president of the college, appear to use a top-down, or trickle-down, approach to formal communication within the organization. Interview subjects in all groups said that they rely on the president and their supervisors to relay important information. The survey data shows this to some degree. When asked how comfortable employees feel communicating with employees from each subgroup, administrators reported the highest level of comfort communicating with all subgroups. Comfort levels decreased significantly in all other subgroups. This implies that non-administrative employees may feel more reluctant communicating openly with those in positions perceived to be higher on the organizational chart than them. The top-down approach was especially evident data collected on adjunct faculty members. This group reported very low levels of communication in general, but said they rely heavily on their division directors to impart crucial information. Adjunct faculty members indicated feeling “out of the loop” frequently. This group values e-mail communications from the president and marketing departments, as they allow them to know what is happening on campus. Their lack of a consistent physical presence on campus does not
foster many opportunities to actively participate in communication at the college. Because adjunct faculty members are so loosely connected, there are few opportunities to bond and develop interpersonal relationships with fellow adjunct faculty members or other subgroups. Unlike employees who work on campus full time, these employees are not as privy to the group fantasies and symbols that the other subgroups perpetuate (Bormann, 1983). This group, for the most part, does not have enough exposure with other employees to penetrate the social structure and develop meaningful relationships with other employees (Taylor & Altman, 1993).

**Distrust of “Administration”**

The initial hypothesis for this research suggested that there is a communication divide between faculty and staff at Community College X. The research confirms this to some degree, but the divide did not manifest in the manner that was initially expected. For the sake of this study, the researcher defined “staff” as all employees whose primary duties do not involve teaching. This meant this group included administrators, professional staff, and classified staff. The data suggests there is a communication divide on campus – but it is not limited to faculty versus staff. Rather, the divide exists between those who work in the administration building and those who work elsewhere on the campus. This fact did not emerge from the survey data, but became apparent through interviews and observational experiences.

As previously discussed in this chapter, all interviews with employees who worked outside of the administration building felt some degree of separation from those who work in that area. It appears that the distrust of higher administrators (specifically the president) expanded to include those who work in administrative support roles – such as professional and classified staff. The study offers minimal insight into why this geographical divide exists, but it seems to be a divisive force on campus. It appears that the organizational structure and location of certain
offices perpetuates the divide in many ways. The physical placement of administrative employees as separate from the rest of the campus makes it easier for employees to view those people as “other” from themselves. The administration building itself becomes a symbol of this disconnect (Bormann, 1983). Those who work in the administrative building did not seem to perceive the divide as frequently as those who work in other buildings. This is likely because these employees are not participants in the group fantasy that views administration in a negative light. Many of the employees in the administration building report having minimal contact with faculty and staff who work on other parts of the campus. It could be interesting for future research to observe the culture of the administration building to see what binding symbols and group fantasies exist. The number of interview subjects utilized for this study did not include enough employees who work in the administration building to draw any valid conclusions to that end.

Lack of Engagement Among Adjunct Faculty

The last major finding of this study was the lack of engagement among adjunct faculty at Community College X. This was discussed to some degree in this chapter, but warrants mentioning again. Despite playing a major role in college operations, part-time instructors appear to be left out of communication processes much of the time. The survey data supports this, as this group reported very low levels of communication with any group.

To some extent, this divide may occur for practical reasons. Most members of this subgroup presumably have jobs outside of teaching and are not able to be on campus to participate in professional development and communication events. However, interview subjects from this group all expressed a desire to be more involved in campus life. There was very little
observational information available for the study, as the researcher has little contact with this group.

As was mentioned briefly earlier in this chapter, the lack of communication within the ranks of adjunct faculty members may be partially explained due to a lack of symbolic convergence. Bormann’s (1983) theory says:

Symbolic convergence explains how people come to share enough symbolic ground to take part in logical negotiation processes to achieve coorientation and also explains how individuals come to share a common sentiment or emotional involvement and commitment to symbols. (p. 102)

The survey data, interviews, and ethnographic observations do not indicate that adjunct faculty members exhibit any of these factors that could serve to bind them as a group. Though this subgroup reflects a large percentage of college employees, they differ greatly from the other groups who work in close proximity to one another on a daily basis. There is simply no “symbolic ground” to bond adjunct faculty members together (Bormann, 1983).
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

While this study made every effort to ensure validity of results, there are some limitations to the methodology that should be noted. First, it is important to point out that the findings of this research reflect the culture of Community College X only. In no way does this study attempt to imply that these cultural observations would be relevant at any other institution. Secondly, the sample size for the study was limited by the timeframe of the project. While the survey sample size was fairly large, the interview sample only reflected a small percentage of employees in the organization. Ideally, the interview sample would have been twice the size and included a broader range of individuals. Thirdly, the results are limited by intrinsic bias of both subjects and the researcher. Though measures were taken to prevent partiality to some extent (such as selecting interview subjects with varying viewpoints), each person carries his or her own unique ideas and understanding of the culture. Because of this, the study results offer generalized findings, but cannot claim to accurately reflect the opinions or perceptions of all employees at Community College X.

Lastly, this study was limited due to the simplified method of recording observations and interviews. No coding process was utilized to determine themes. Rather, the researcher compiled all notes and underlying trends were selected subjectively. This was possible due to the small sample size. However, a more complex model for data analysis would be desirous.

Recommendation for Further Study

This study provides a glimpse into the complex nature of one institution. It uncovers some unique cultural nuances that may warrant further study at Community College X. Specifically, there is a need to better understand the divide that exists between the campus at
large and the administration building. This dynamic appears to be the cause of significant communication deficiencies within the organization. The foundation provided by this research paves the way for a critical communication analysis to determine strategies to improve employee perceptions of the administration building itself and the employees who work within it. A comprehensive communication audit of the organization could also be useful.

This study uncovered one global theme – a lack of engagement among adjunct faculty - that could be interesting to study on a broader scale. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reports that the number of part-time faculty positions in the United States has grown significantly since 1975, even as full-time faculty positions have steadily declined (Curtis & Thornton, 2013). As institutions rely upon adjunct faculty members more and more, the need to understand this group’s contribution to institutional culture also increases. There is potential for both observational and critical research in this area.

**Conclusions**

The study confirmed the researcher’s initial hypothesis that communication divides exist at Community College X. The goal of the study was to learn more about how faculty and staff members communicate within and across subcultures. The research also looked at where divides occurred and how they affected processes within the institution. Initially, the researcher predicted that a major communication divide existed between faculty and staff at the college. While this assumption was not proven to be completely false, the divide did not emerge as cleanly along those lines as the researcher expected.

The first, and least surprising, finding was that members of employee subgroups tend to relate with and communicate more frequently with peers in their own subgroup. This supports the general group communication theories of Taylor and Altman (1975) and Bormann (1983).
This in-grouping tendency did not appear to cause significant negative impact upon the organization. All three methods (survey, interviews and observations) indicated that people in the organization have mostly positive communication encounters with colleagues across all groups. While they tend to be closer to their own subgroups, employees appeared to have good working relationships with most other groups. This was particularly evident in the survey data. It is also interesting to point out that employees did not report having high levels of informal contact with colleagues, regardless of subgroups. This was confirmed by all three methods.

While most employee communication appeared to be positive, there was one significant area revealed in the research that causes concern: distrust of “administration.” In order to explore this, it is important to distinguish the difference between the terms “administrator” and “administration.” This research defines an administrator as an employee who does not teach and holds a leadership role of dean or higher. “Administration” is a term that came up frequently in the interview and observational process as a collective descriptor for all of the employees who work in the physical location of the administration building on campus. The term was most often used with a negative connotation.

The administration building (which houses administrators and administrative support staff) seemed to take on a life of its own in the research. This was explicitly expressed in the interview process, as most subjects (regardless of subgroup) brought up the topic of avoiding the administration building without prompting. There was significant evidence of Mead’s idea of the generalized other at play within the organization (Griffin, 2008). Employees seemed to have very explicit preconceived notions about how “administration” was not to be trusted – and this cultural knowledge is passed down to new employees. Interestingly, subjects did not appear to carry personal grudges against individuals. In fact, when speaking of specific people, subjects’
comments were generally positive and complimentary. The distrust appeared to stem from some idea that it is dangerous for employees outside of the realm of administration to spend time in the administration building or to cultivate relationships with those who work within it. They seem to fear the collective, not the individual. All of these feelings seemed to be manifested in a generalized aversion to the actual physical structure of the administration building. These negative attitudes could be indicative of a destructive silo mentality – or one group being seen as separate from the organization as a whole (Cilliers & Greyvenstein, 2011).

There was also significant evidence that employees distrust communication from the president. This notion emerged from the interviews and cultural observations. Inconsistency in messages from the president and a top-down communication approach appear to foster this distrust. The fact that the organization has undergone significant change and turnover in recent years likely contributes to this attitude. Interview subjects indicated that the president has a very specific vision for the college and that there is a “you are either with us or against us” mentality. Basically, the subject’s perceive that employees can either cope with imposed change or they will be let go. As many employees have worked at Community College X for much of its lifetime (founded in 1985), they appear to be reluctant to accept radical change. It is likely that their influence has been passed down to newer employees, creating a culture that distrusts communication from the president. These findings support those of Campbell and Slaughter (1999), who confirmed that tension between faculty and administrators is a common theme in higher education.

Finally, the study highlighted the lack of engagement of adjunct faculty at Community College X. This fact was confirmed by all three methods. The survey may provide the most insight into this issue, as all subgroups reported very low rates of communication with adjunct
faculty members. The interviews supported this. While adjunct faculty members are one of the largest groups in the organization by sheer numbers, most are not actively involved in the culture of the organization. Many of these people have other jobs outside of teaching and are only on campus for short periods of time. This means most of their institutional communication happens in the classroom with students. Professional development activities and campus communication events are generally scheduled at times that make it difficult for adjunct faculty members to attend (during the work day). A lack of visibility and contact with other subgroups results in adjunct faculty members not being perceived as colleagues by others in the organizations. Rather, adjunct faculty members seem to be viewed as contractors providing a necessary service – or outsiders who are paid to do a specific job and then leave. Because there are few opportunities to create symbolic convergence – or symbols that bond them together – there is little structure or organization among the ranks of adjunct faculty members (Bormann, 1983).

In general, it appears that employees at Community College X could benefit from adopting Benhabib’s (1992) philosophy of finding a balance between the “generalized and concrete other.” This study finds that members of the organization have a tendency to allow the attitudes and opinions of those around them greatly affect their perceptions of other groups on campus. As this happens, employees cease to view people as individuals, but rather as members of a group that is “other” from their own. This was clear as interview subjects consistently spoke negatively about administration as a collective group, while admitting no specific hard feelings towards individuals who work in the same group. This behavior is dangerous because it can lead to dehumanizing people and unethical communication behaviors like workplace bullying (Benhabib, 1992). Hopefully, the cultural insights contained in this thesis can provide a deeper
understanding of the communicative culture at Community College X and eventually lead to
improving the divides that were found to exist.
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"Community College X" Employee Classifications

Classifications by division (cabinet-level). Illustration does not necessarily reflect hierarchy of reporting.

Top Decision Maker

President

President's Cabinet | Decision-making Body

VP Admin. Services
- Directors
- Assoc. Directors
- Coordinators

VP Instruction
- Deans
- Assoc. Deans
- Directors
- Assoc. Directors
- Coordinators

VP Student Services
- Assoc. Deans
- Directors
- Assoc. Directors
- Coordinators

VP Advancement
- Directors
- Coordinators

N/A
Full-Time Faculty
N/A
N/A

N/A
Adjunct Faculty (Part Time)
N/A
N/A

Hourly Staff
Hourly Staff
Hourly Staff
N/A

Color Key
- Administrative Employees
- Full-Time Faculty
- Professional Employees
- Adjunct Faculty
- Hourly Employees
## Appendix B

### Baseline Survey Questions

1. **How frequently do you interact with members of the following employee groups while carrying out official college duties?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Frequently (more than once a day)</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Several times a week</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Infrequently/rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff (deans &amp; above)</td>
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2. **How frequently do you interact with members of the following employee groups informally (not pertaining to official duties)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</table>

3. **How comfortable do you feel communicating with employees from each of the following groups professionally (during the course of official college business)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Very comfortable</th>
<th>Comfortable</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Uncomfortable</th>
<th>Very uncomfortable</th>
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4. **How comfortable do you feel communicating with members of the following employee groups informally (not pertaining to official duties)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
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5. **How do you primarily communicate with members of the following employee groups at the college? Choose all that apply.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Official face-to-face conversations</th>
<th>Informal conversations</th>
<th>Electronically</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Meetings/Small group</th>
<th>Little/no communication at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</table>
6. On a personal level, which group of employees do you feel that you have the most in common with?
- Administrative staff (deans & above)
- Professional staff
- Classified staff
- Full-time faculty (including program & div. directors)
- Adjunct faculty (part-time)
Why? (optional)

7. On a professional level, which group of employees do you feel that you have the most in common with?
- Administrative staff (deans & above)
- Professional staff
- Classified staff
- Full-time faculty (including program & div. directors)
- Adjunct faculty (part-time)
Why? (optional)

8. There is adequate communication between faculty and staff members at the college. (Choose the statement that best describes your opinion of this statement)
- I strongly agree
- I agree
- I don't know
- I disagree
- I strongly disagree
Explain (optional):

9. Which of the following do you believe best describes the relationship that exists between the faculty and staff at the college?
- Competitors
- Professionals who work together
- One big family
- A group of friends
- Intellectuals with a common mission
- Separate groups with different goals
Why? (optional)

10. To what degree do you feel that you are given the respect you deserve from each of the following groups of employees?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>I feel very respected</th>
<th>I feel respected</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>I feel disrespected</th>
<th>I feel very disrespected</th>
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11. Which of the following best describes your role at the college?
- Administrative staff (deans & above)
- Professional staff
- Classified staff
- Full-time faculty (including program & div. directors)
- Adjunct faculty (part-time)

12. How long have you been employed at the college?
- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 15+ years

13. What is your age?
- Under 25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-56
- 56-65
- 65+

14. What is your gender?
- Male
- Female

15. Which area of the organizational chart does your position at the college fall under?
- Administrative Services (Financial)
- Instruction
- Student Services
- Advancement
- President's Office
Appendix C

Interview Outline/Questions

1. Tell me about your experience at the college when you first started working here. Who did you hang out with then? Who “showed you the ropes” within the organization? What was your original opinion of the organization?

2. Have you always had the position you have now in the organization? If not, which other positions have you held?

3. Where and with whom do you eat lunch on most days?

4. Which (if any) committees have you served on within the last year?

5. Please describe your perception of the relationship that exists between faculty and staff members at the college.

6. What kind of relationships do you have with your colleagues? Do you feel a stronger connection to one group over another? Please explain.

7. Name the first three words that come to your mind that best describe the college faculty as a group? The staff?

8. How do you feel when you communicate with employees outside of your own group?

9. How do you generally hear about what is going on in the organization? Who is your best source for news?

10. How have your work relationships evolved since you began working at the college? Have you grown closer to certain groups or more distant from others? Please explain.