ACADEMIC GAME CHANGERS:
A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL NETWORKING STRATEGIES OF LEADERS
GUIDING DISRUPTIVE INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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A DISSERTATION
in
Higher Education Management

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania
in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education

2017

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DEDICATION

To Leo,

who saw this in me decades before I did,

and kept me going with your indefatigable love & support
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The road to this juncture has been long, and it diverged in more than a few yellow woods along the way. Who knew, when I boarded that Greyhound at the age of 17 to begin my higher education journey so many decades ago, that it would culminate in this? I owe a debt of gratitude to so many who helped me arrive at this place; I regret I can mention only a few here.

To my beloved Leo, who imagined this destination decades before I had a GPS for it, I am eternally grateful. You single-parented two teenagers for eight months so I could finish this dissertation (need I say more?) and never wavered from encouraging me with long telephone calls and skypes as I worked out of state and wrote and wrote and wrote…

To my children, Nic and Galen, who persevered in my absence and seemed delighted to see me (however conjured, I suppose, at times) whenever I made it home, I am in awe of your beautiful spirits and your commitment to not let anything come between you and your dreams. Your relentless pursuit of—and zeal for—your own career interests motivated me.

To my advisor, Peter Eckel, whose exacting requirements pushed me to excellence and whose cattle-prodding goaded me into keeping on when I grew weary, I am so appreciative. To my dissertation committee members, Joni Finney and Adrianna Kezar, who, along with Peter, inspired me with their scholarship, I am honored to work with the very people whose research I have quoted in these pages. Your passion and commitment instilled in me a sense of responsibility to contribute in a meaningful way to the future of academic leadership. Thank you.

Finally, I’d like to acknowledge that terrified 17-year old who purchased a bus ticket, to a destination she had never even visited, to take that crucial first step.

That has made all the difference.
ABSTRACT

ACADEMIC GAME CHANGERS:
A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL NEWORKING STRATEGIES OF LEADERS
GUIDING DISRUPTIVE INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Paula T. Langteau
Peter Eckel

This study examines the internal and external networking strategies of leaders furthering potentially disruptive innovations in higher education. The goal of the research was to understand specifically what types of networks they develop, activate, and leverage; the functions of those networks; and the ways they engage them to further their innovation.

A review of current literature on Social Network Analysis supports the research and provided a set of strategies for examination within the networked relationships. The research questions were structured to explore the leaders’—and, by extension, the leaders’ team members’—outreach to a variety of types of networks, for a variety of functions, and by utilizing specific outreach strategies.

Leaders at two different types of institutions, a private comprehensive and a public cooperative extension, respectively, were the focus of this dual-site, qualitative interview study. The findings emerged out of the site visits to the primary innovation site campuses, personal interviews, and review of relevant available documents and media coverage. The difference in sites and innovations helped to isolate the leadership strategies as the focus of the study rather than the innovation or the type of institution. While the leaders and the innovations they developed differed by site, several common themes emerged, and the study uncovered some important revelations and implications for both the literature and leaders in practice today. For example, the findings demonstrated the significance of
developing and activating networks to serve the goal of the innovations (over the goals of the network), the importance of building open networks with diverse ties, and the balance of accountability and trust at play within structurally formal and informal relationships. Ultimately, by identifying and demonstrating how these leaders leveraged networks to attempt to bring about substantive change, the research provides visibility to, and greater understanding of, networking strategies, which future leaders might consider implementing, consciously and deliberately, as market forces and evolving needs come to require adjustments to their packaging and delivery of instructional models into the future.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Could the U.S. higher education marketplace be on the verge of disruption? It has the signs of markets that often are. Its business model has been accused of being outdated and needing reform, with the significant expense of a college education jeopardizing access and completion for so many families (Finney, 2014). The drivers increasing costs are many, including expensive faculty-intensive live lectures, with duplicated curriculum, at 4000+ separate locations across the country. Pricing is further compounded by on-site living expectations, with “high-cost amenities, such as residence halls, improved information technology infrastructure, wired classrooms and recreational facilities” (Eckel, 2007, p. 78). The model is simply unaffordable for an increasing number of families. For example, middle income families are expected to contribute 14-19 percent of their annual incomes to postsecondary education, and lower-income families 50-69 percent (Finney, 2014, p. 6), percentages that are staggering.

Moreover, expense concerns are coupled with concerns over quality. College and universities are often perceived as failing to develop specific, career-based skills for a rapidly-evolving economy (Fogg & Harrington, 2011). As a result, more and more college graduates are accepting jobs for which they are over-educated, a problem that has been labelled mal-employment by economists (Caplan, 2013; Dang, 2013) and has come to be used throughout the higher education industry. Mal-employment of new bachelor’s-degree holders, aged 20-24, rose from 33.2 percent in 2007 to 40.2 percent in 2012. Furthermore, overall employment of college graduates declined 40 percent, post-recession, from 2010 to 2012, when the market was recovering (Fogg & Harrington, 2012, p. 10).

Higher education pricing and performance are causing concerns not only among

1 The term “sector” is often used in higher education, while “industry” is used in the corporate world. For the purposes of later comparison, they are used here interchangeably.
consumers, but also among policymakers. With tight budgets, states are disinvesting in higher education—at an average of 24 percent over the past 25 years, based on full-time student equivalent (FTSE) enrollment (SHEEO, 2014)—while at the same time demanding greater accountability for the ever-shrinking support they provide to institutions (Perna & Finney, 2014). As students and their families struggle to absorb the increased tuition which has typically accompanied state disinvestment at traditional institutions, they, along with legislators and the larger public, have begun to question not only the efficiency but, ultimately, the market value of the degrees being funded.

At the same time as traditional higher education faces cost, quality and market-relevancy concerns, new organizations, like Edevate, Udacity, Learning Jar, and Smarterer, to name a few, have emerged to offer innovative, lower-cost, industry-specific, targeted training and alternate credentialing (i.e. badges). Badges are an emerging “new online standard to recognize and verify learning” (Mozilla, 2016, May 22) of various content and processes. They can be collected in a portfolio, to represent mastery of certain skill areas, as an alternative to a college degree (Mozilla, Moodle, Roblox). Sometimes these market newcomers are partnering with, but other times they are competing head-to-head with, traditional institutions of higher learning.

**Higher Education: On the Cusp of Disruption?**

Higher education pundits have identified this period of cost escalation and quality concern for American colleges and universities as making the sector ripe for disruption (Zemsky 2013; Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Disruption is a particular type of industry upheaval that takes place in a market sector when traditional providers are displaced by those providing simpler, less expensive options that have not been offered before, often utilizing new technologies. Those new options, typically initially of lower quality, improve over time, appealing to a new (and expanded) market and, ultimately, leading to a
disruption in who dominates the marketplace, pushing the former market leaders to the periphery (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Kim & Mauborgne, 2015; Hamel, 1996).

Potentially disruptive innovation in higher education is not new. Community colleges disrupted the four-year market, providing “a viable option for the unserved: aspiring undergraduates for whom traditional colleges, for a variety of reasons, are out of reach” (Christensen et al., 2006, p. 5). Online learning is another example of disruptive innovation. This modality utilizes technology and a new approach to repackaging and delivering higher education to serve new as well as existing markets. Initially of lower quality, online learning has improved, bringing with it convenience and cost advantages. Some believe online learning, and its bridge to otherwise traditional classrooms—through blended (online + face-to-face) instruction—has the potential to disrupt colleges and universities that do not adapt to the needs of an increasingly technologically-adept adult learner population (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which followed on the heels of online learning, similarly repackaged instruction to serve new market segments, sometimes at low- or even no-cost to the consumer. Their technology, too, has been adapted to traditional instruction, which can incorporate flipped classroom models, for example, where lectures are provided in an online format and discussion takes place face-to-face. While these innovations haven’t displaced the traditional higher education business model at this point in time, the technology they utilize has unquestionably permeated the market and challenged thinking at many institutions around delivery modality, cost, and quality. These innovations have also broadened the expectations of consumers to new ways of thinking about postsecondary instruction, accessibility, and cost. Consumer choice, influenced by pricing and convenience, plays a critical role in disruptive innovation, as consumers (in higher education’s case, students) have an ever greater array of options for meeting their market needs (Christensen & Eyring,
While traditional higher education has yet to be upended, a number of recent innovations have built upon these earlier innovations and are evolving with the potential for sector-wide disruption. Competency-based education (CBE), an innovation from decades ago, has resurfaced in contemporary, technology-based packaging, with a renewed potential for industry disruption. It is also now being offered as the first innovation to disrupt the credit hour since its inception in higher education a century ago (Laitinen, 2012). CBE measures progress toward a pre-determined set of learning outcomes rather than the amount of time students spend in a classroom. CBE programs are a natural outgrowth of technology-based instructional delivery, including online, and in particular, asynchronous models, which struggle to document sufficient seat-time for students (Laitinen, 2012). CBE was first implemented by Western Governor’s University. But only when Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) launched its CBE program, College for America, did the potential for real sector-wide disruption take place—with the approval by the Department of Education, in July of 2014, to award financial aid to students on the basis of direct learning outcome assessment (Fain, 2014). This was important because it allowed for a new financial model for universities and other potential disruptors by broadening the basis on which federal financial aid is calculated. The DOE, for the first time since the establishment of federal financial aid, gave 350 institutions, including public as well as private adopters, approval to pilot CBE as “experimental sites,” offering federal student financial aid to students enrolled in those programs (Fain, 2014).

A second innovation, micro-credentialing, reflecting a shift in postsecondary credentialing away from traditional university degrees, with the potential to revolutionize higher education, is now emerging. Micro-credentialing providers offer on-demand skills training and documentation of learning in specific, targeted areas—whether technical (i.e
types of computer programming) or general education (i.e. report writing, public speaking, etc.)—which leads to the awarding of a micro-credential representing mastery of a specific skill set. Micro-credentialing builds not only on advances in technology (as much of the instruction is delivered online) and re-emerging ways of documenting learning (i.e. competency-based education) but also on the host of new providers offering alternative training models (Merisotis, 2016). Because the micro-credentials are narrowly targeted, the duration of instruction is shorter and the tuition significantly less than traditional college or university classes, as little as $25 (universitylearningstore.org).

Initially, with micro-credentials offered by large numbers of disconnected providers, lack of recognition, uniformity and transferability made their individual value limited. Recently, however, “leaders in the business, government, philanthropic, and education sectors have begun a robust push to define credentials in commonly understood terms” (Merisotis, 2016), a process that could transform their validity and value. The Lumina Foundation, with 96 co-sponsors, has developed Connecting Credentials (connectingcredentials.org), an online platform for developing “a universal taxonomy to connect all credentials” (Merisotis, 2016). The goal is to make micro-credentials uniform and stackable, whereby individuals can customize their learning by accessing a number of providers, earning a set of recognized credentials that serves their individual goals and employment objectives.

Both of these emerging innovations have the potential to disrupt higher education by leveraging new technology to repackaging and deliver instruction, conveniently and affordably, and to serve new and expanded markets. Some of these alternate models are being offered by traditional institutions delivering a portion of their programming in a non-traditional way while other models are being offered by new organizations which were created for the expressed purpose of developing these models. Traditional colleges and
universities must determine if and how to respond to such innovations and whether failure to do so places them at risk of becoming outmoded. If they don’t, one day, industry-disruption could mean the surrendering of a significant portion of the higher education market to newcomers who could, potentially, undercut and outcompete much of traditional higher education.

A number of higher education forecasters have pointed out that higher education has been on the verge of disruption for decades, while little has actually changed, (Zemsky, 2013; Birnbaum & Shushok Jr., 2001). Furthermore, it is easy to dismiss innovations that emerged initially decades ago (such as CBE) without generating significant change for so long. Yet, it is difficult not to acknowledge that the upending of credit hours based on seat-time challenges a one-hundred-year tradition and that the 2014 change in the Department of Education (DOE) requirements for federal financial aid represents the first significant disruption of its distribution based on credit hours since its inception. This change was approved for CBE, which is based on content mastery rather than seat time. More significantly, this change was approved 40 years after CBE was first introduced, raising questions about the timing (to be explored more below). Furthermore, momentum is now building as direct competition to traditional higher education institutions are gaining ground. National organizations such as American College Testing (ACT), American Council on Education (ACE), National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and Educational Testing Services (ETS), along with the Lumina Foundation, regional accrediting organizations (like SACS) and regional higher education boards are working together to develop alternate credentialing pathways (see connectingcredentials.org).

In short, traditional higher education can choose to take the lead in exploring and delivering options to leverage technology to reduce costs and better serve the population or sit back to allow one of two things to happen: either higher education prices will to continue
to escalate while participation and attainment degree gaps widen (Zemsky, 2013), or market newcomers will lead the changes, offering alternatives to greater numbers of students who are un- and under-served by traditional higher education (Selingo, 2013; Carey, 2015; Kamenetz, 2010). Neither of those options bodes well for traditional higher education.

**The Role of Leadership in Disruption**

If higher education is, indeed, on the cusp of substantial disruption, what will it take for traditional higher education institutions to play a major role? The answer seems to be linked to the leadership needed to pave the way for and to guide innovative change. When, in 2014, the DOE changed the approval process for student federal financial aid after 100 years of it being based upon seat time, it was in response to an institutional leader effectively arguing for the change, based on an emerging CBE model. Why did the change happen under one leader but not under others who launched CBE so many years before? What was the role of the leadership and, more specifically, the relationship of that leader to the DOE, which approved the change?

While it has been documented that leaders play a primary role in change processes (Kezar, 2001; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1991; Kotter 1985; Schein, 1985), little research has been done on the leadership necessary to get out ahead of, and guide, disruptive change. That leadership not only affects the organizations of the leaders but may also have an impact across the sector. These potential game-changing innovations require leaders who are able not only to effect substantial change at their own institutions but who can leverage relationships to create impact on a larger national scale, in higher education’s supporting networks. Without that kind of leadership, potentially disruptive innovation in higher education may remain uneven, isolated, sporadic, and with varying degrees of success and failure, while the traditional, high cost higher education models
continue to govern the market.

**The Lens of Social Network Analysis (SNA)**

This study is on the leadership needed from within traditional higher education to advance the institution and possibly the sector and that may fend off new, non-traditional providers. More specifically, the focus is on the networks higher education leaders create and utilize to advance their potentially disruptive innovations. One way to approach that study is through a network perspective. Summarizing Daly (2010), Kezar (2014) describes higher education as comprised of “webs of relationships” which “are often the chief determinant of how well and how quickly change efforts take hold, diffuse and are sustained” (p. 95). Guiding a dramatic shift in higher education, then, requires significant leadership to accomplish corresponding shifts through webs of relationships. Given the nature of the change under investigation here, those networks are likely both internal to institutions and outside of them. Creating and leveraging networks both inside and outside of the academy allows leaders “to identify strategic opportunities, marshal resources, assemble teams, and win support for innovative projects that benefit the organization” (Sparrowe & Liden, 2015, p. 505) and the larger higher education sector.

One framework to understand networks and how leaders develop and sustain them is Social Network Analysis (SNA). SNA is an interdisciplinary framework, adapted from sociology and anthropology, used to explore social contexts, “recording data on who is connected to whom” (Valente, et. al, 2015, p. 3). Empirically based, it quantitatively maps out the webs of relationships relevant to a given phenomenon. It has been used extensively, for example, in tracking viral markets, communicable diseases (Pow et. al., 2012), and terrorist networks (Lindelauf et. al., 2009). While SNA is primarily quantitative, it has also included qualitative components to examine the relationships between members in a network and the organizational actors and influencers, including opinion leaders and
gatekeepers (Friemel, 2008; Koput, 2010; Freeman, 2004). The qualitative elements will be explored in this study.

SNA has been explored for its applicability to higher education but only in limited ways. Kezar (2014) summarizes these ways and the researchers who have explored them: “SNA has been used primarily to examine issues of access and success among college students, particularly around the development of social or cultural capital through networks of peers, school personnel, and their families” (qtd. p. 92, referencing Heck, Price & Thomas, 2004; Mayer and Puller, 2008; Skahill, 2003; Ternishi & Briscoe, 2006; Thomas, 2000; Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005). It has also been applied to studies of “the sense of community of online learners” (qtd. p. 93, referencing Otte & Roseau, 2002; Traud et. al., 2011); and to connections and collaborations among researchers (p. 93, referencing Marion et. al., 2003; Sharma & Urs, 2008; White, 2003), colleges (p. 93 referencing Lariviere, et. al., 2006), research collaborations (p. 93 referencing Balconi & Laboranti, 2006; McMillan, 2008; Rogers et. al, 2001), student activism (p. 93 referencing Biddix & Park, 2008; Crossley, 2008); and corporate partners of higher education associations (p. 93 referencing Metcalfe, 2006). None of these studies, however, focuses on disruptive innovation change leadership in higher education.

SNA is particularly important to the examination of change leadership surrounding innovation because “innovation is both a change process and a social process” which makes SNA “a powerful tool to provide in-depth information [on the processes at play in social networks undergoing innovative change] that cannot be surfaced with traditional methods” (Suciu & Petrescu-Prahova, 2011, p. 17). Among other things, SNA “helps to explain social cohesion and why some groups (and individuals) are more amenable to change while others may be more resistant (Pow et. al., 2012, p. 2777). This knowledge is particularly important when the change happens on a broad scale, impacting a myriad of interrelated
social networks both internal and external to an organization, as it would in industry-disruptive change. Indeed, “the building block of innovation is a networked individual” (Suciu & Petrescu, 2011, p. 19). Yet, despite SNA “research [that] indicates ways managers can influence informal networks at both the individual and whole network levels, executives seem to do relatively little to assess and support critical, but often invisible informal networks in organizations” (Cross, et. al., 2002, p. 26). This neglect happens at the leader’s, the innovation’s, and, potentially, the organization’s and the industry’s peril, as SNA has demonstrated that “the network of relationships within which we are embedded may have important consequences for the success and failure of our projects” (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, p.1-2). Thus, leaders, to effect significant change, need to not only be mindful of and skillfully navigate multiple networks but they must successfully guide efforts at implementing change within those networks.

**Problem Statement**

There is little research on how leaders invoke social networks to advance higher education change (Hartley, 2009; Kezar, 2001, 2005, 2014) and even less that focuses specifically on the role of leaders in guiding dramatic change within those complex social systems. Moving from a focus almost exclusively on change at the institutional level, “the most fundamental shift in a future research agenda is to alter the focus of change research from the campus (organization) as the only analytic unit to the network (or network in combination with the campus)” (Kezar, 2014, p. 107). This shift in analytic focus to the larger network should include the external forces that help shape the industry, including the market and regulatory and governmental agencies, supply chains, etc. Examining the social networking strategies of leaders who guide institutions implementing some of the newest, potentially disruptive higher education models of innovation seems the logical next step.
One important caveat exists: because networks are dynamic and often ephemeral entities, a study of such leaders working within networks is best to capture in real-time. If industry disruption has already been evidenced, then time has passed, and those leaders are no longer engaged in the same networks for the same purposes. If innovations are in process, though, we cannot be sure they will ultimately disrupt the industry. This is, indeed, the conundrum of a study seeking to identify the networking strategies of tomorrow’s leaders today. Accepting that reality as a limitation, a great deal could be learned through a comparative study and analysis of social networking strategies of higher education leaders attempting to implement potentially disruptive innovation today, knowledge that could potentially inform widespread industry change.

**Scope of Proposed Research**

This study examines the internal and external networking strategies of two higher education leaders, Paul LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), and David Schejbal, Dean of Continuing Education, Outreach and E-Learning (CEOEL) at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. Each is furthering a different potentially disruptive innovation—competency-based education (CBE) and micro-credentialing—at two different types of institutions, a private comprehensive and a public cooperative extension, respectively. The disruptions are also distinguished by the institutions’ degrees of autonomy and responsibility in the programming: SNHU is implementing *College for America* as the sole educational provider while the UW-Extension is implementing *The University Learning Store* in partnership with other traditional higher education institutions: Georgia Institute of Technology, UC Davis Extension, UCI Extension, and the University of Washington Continuum College.

The study seeks to understand the complex social networking strategies of the selected leaders as well as the experience of other key players involved in advancing the
change. The difference in sites and innovations helps to isolate the leadership strategies as the focus of the study rather than the innovation or the type of institution. The intent is to understand what types of strategies leaders use internally and externally to their institutions to create, leverage, and manage social networks to further sector-wide disruptive innovation. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the relevant social networks of higher education leaders around potentially industry-disruptive innovation?
   a. What different types of networks are leveraged around the innovation?
   b. What types of people are in those networks and what are their roles in the innovation advancement?
   c. To what extent did the leaders use existing networks or did they create new ones?

2. In what ways do leaders activate, develop, and leverage those networks?
   a. In what order do they build or utilize networks?
   b. How do leaders engage internal and external networks differently? Around what issues?
   c. What strategies do leaders use to amplify engagement and support for the disruptive innovation within those networks while managing and countering resistance to it?

**Significance**

The significance of the research is to illuminate the social network leadership strategies of higher education change leaders implementing disruptive innovation. The hope is that by identifying and understanding how leaders leverage networks to bring about substantive change, those tools will gain visibility for potential use by a broader range of
higher education leaders. With a greater understanding of such strategies, sector-wide change can be implemented more deliberately and effectively.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A study of the social networking strategies of leaders implementing potentially disruptive innovations in higher education necessitates a review of multiple literatures. First, the literature of disruptive innovation provides a working definition of the phrase. The concept of marketplace disruption though innovation has been applied in both the corporate arena and in higher education. The working definition is then applied to the two types of innovation being implemented by the higher education leaders of this study: Competency-Based Education and micro-credentialing. Both of those innovations are described and their characterizations as disruptive are explained. Next, a review of the literature of leadership explores the ways that leadership has been studied in the corporate arena as well as in higher education and the limitations of previous studies on leadership in elucidating the kind of leadership necessary for higher education industry disruption. Finally, Social Network Analysis (SNA) is introduced and its applicability to a study of potentially disruptive change in higher education is established.

Disruptive Innovation

Clayton Christensen at Harvard Business School first coined the phrase disruptive innovation with the publication of his book, The Innovators Dilemma, in 1997. His research is based on a set of case studies in which businesses such as Sears, IBM, Digital Equipment Corporation, Xerox, and Bucyrus Erie lost their marketplace dominance, he contends, by continuing to do what had brought them success initially: appealing to a defined, consistent market while investing their energies in improving upon on their existing products, a process Christensen labels sustaining technology. In contrast, disruptive technology develops a very different, simpler product often with added convenience at a significantly lower price than the market dominator. The new product appeals to a different, often expanded market. As a readily identifiable example, the advent of the personal computer disrupted the
mainframe computer market and, by extension, IBM (p. xiii). It made computing within the reach of individual consumers, by placing it in a smaller, simpler unit on their desktops. While the new product is typically of initially lower quality, and it takes time for it to permeate the market, over time as the quality improves and as consumers embrace its value, the innovation disrupts the marketplace. This means that the new product displaces the previous market leader, transforming the industry (Christensen, 1997).

Kim and Mauborgne (2015) promote a similar concept to disruptive innovation in their international bestseller, *Blue Ocean Strategy*. A blue ocean is an “uncontested market space characterized by new demand and strong profitable growth” (loc. 29). It assumes as a premise that “industry structure is not a given; it can be shaped” (loc. 86) and focuses on “uncontested market space that makes the competition irrelevant” (loc. 192). Furthermore, it typically “achieve[s] high impact at a low cost” (loc. 39). Like Christensen’s example of how the personal computer redefined computing, which up to that point had been exclusively mainframe, Kim and Mauborgne (2015) argue that Cirque du Soleil expanded the boundaries of what it meant to provide circus entertainment, appealing to a whole new market segment (loc. 279). In the case of Cirque de Soleil, the lower cost was their own (not necessarily the consumer’s), as the circus eliminated the cost of maintaining animals and animal trainers. Their success has been overwhelming:

Cirque’s productions to date have been seen by some 150 million people in over 300 cities around the world. In less than twenty years since its creation, Cirque du Soleil achieved a level of revenues that took Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey—the once global champion of the circus industry—more than a hundred years to attain. (Kim & Mauborgne, 2015, loc. 269)

Like Christensen (2009) and Kim and Mauborgne (2015), corporate strategists have also written on the process for such industry-disruptive change, developing their own language for it. Hamel (1996), for example, dubs it *revolutionary* change. Revolutionary change redefines an industry through significant product or service reconceptualization,
market space and strategy reconceptualization, and the redrawing of industry boundaries (Hamel, 1996). These features reflect the same components as Kim and Mauborgne’s blue ocean and Christensen’s disruptive innovation. Further, like Christensen’s distinction between sustaining technology and disruptive technology, revolutionary change is distinguished from operational effectiveness, which is simply doing things better than one’s competitors (Porter, 1996); ploys, which are “maneuvering to confront a competitor” (Mintzberg, 2007); or advancing a new strategic position, which is doing new things, but often in a customary way (Mintzberg, 2007; Porter, 1996). Revolutionary change requires adopting a new strategic perspective, or theory of business, which means challenging and restructuring assumptions about the market, customers, competitors, the organization’s core competencies and technologies, as well as it products, services and policies (Drucker, 1994; Mintzberg, 2007).

The components of disruptive innovation that these strategies share serves as the basis for a working definition for the purposes of this study. Disruptive innovation takes place through the implementation of strategy that reflects significant innovation borne out of a new strategic perspective (or theory of business) (Mintzberg, 2007), whether or not designed to intentionally upend the entire industry. That strategic perspective, nonetheless, challenges the industry’s traditional product and the market assumptions on which it is based, at least within the confines of the innovation’s program. This challenge leads to the development of a new approach to both the product offered and the market to whom it is offered, with potential for impact to be felt throughout the industry, the market, and its critical supporting social networks (i.e. regulatory and governmental agencies, supply chain, 

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2 Because the components of revolutionary change mirror those of disruptive innovation, the phrases will be used interchangeably.
etc.). It results in the repackaging of products or services that appeal to a traditionally un- or underserved market segment while offering convenience and lower pricing, often through the utilization of technology.

Higher Education Industry-Disruptive Innovation

While higher education has not experienced an upending the way the computer industry did with the introduction of the personal computer, or the traditional circus did with the emergence of Cirque du Soleil, college and universities have nonetheless been impacted by various disruptive innovations over time. Community colleges, for example, “dramatically chang[ed] the shape of higher education in the United States” (Christensen et al., 2006, p. 5) by expanding access through increased convenience, lower-pricing, reduced selectivity in admissions, and a focus on employment preparation and job placement (p. 5).

While initially serving as “a viable option for the unserved: aspiring undergraduates for whom traditional colleges, for a variety of reasons, are out of reach” (p. 5), community colleges have begun to encroach on the traditional college and university market by offering housing, upper-division courses, and even bachelor’s degrees (p. 5).

Similarly, online learning is another example of disruptive innovation. It utilizes technology to repackage and deliver higher education to serve new as well as existing markets. Initially of lower quality, online learning has improved, bringing with it convenience and cost advantages (Christensen & Eyring, 2011, p. 8). Furthermore, the status of online programming is “enhanced by changes in accreditation standards that play to their strengths in demonstrating student learning outcomes” (p. 19). The legitimacy conferred by the acceptance of the modality by accrediting organizations strengthens its potential for industry disruption or, at the very least, opens doors for some future iteration of the technology to do so. For example, online learning has led to the development of other forms of instruction leveraging online instructional space, such as blended learning (online +
face-to-face), Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and flipped classrooms, where lectures are provided in an online format and discussion takes place face-to-face.

Some believe these progressive iterations of the online modality, which similarly repackage instruction to serve new market segment with greater convenience, sometimes at low- or no-cost to the consumer, have the potential to displace colleges and universities that do not adapt to the needs of an increasingly technologically-adept adult learner population (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Indeed, consumer choice, influenced by pricing and convenience, plays a critical role in disruptive innovation, as consumers (in higher education’s case, students) have an ever greater array of options for meeting their market needs (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Kim and Mauborgne, 2015; Hamel, 1996). As Christensen & Eyring (2011) contend, “price-sensitive students and fiscally beleaguered legislatures have begun to resist costs that consistently rise faster than those of other goods and services” (p. 19). The institutions that leverage technology to offer online disruptive innovations will be the ones “poised to respond cost-effectively to the national need for increased college participation and completion” (p. 19).

The theory of disruptive innovation is not without its critics, including in higher education. Harvard Professor of American History, Jill LePore, who also writes for The New Yorker, is among its most vocal naysayers. She points out that while Christensen’s examples are striking, so are the number of industries that have thrived on continuity (LePore, 2014). Furthermore, with shifts in ownership over time, many of the companies that had previously dominated their industry and were disrupted, according to Christensen’s account, are back in positions of dominance again (LePore, 2014). Citing additional errors in Christensen’s work, LePore (2014) calls his sources “often dubious and his logic questionable” (23 June). Perhaps her greatest criticism, though, is that “Christensen tends to ignore factors that don’t support his theories” and that the theory of disruptive innovation
“doesn’t explain change” (LePore, 2014, 23 June).

Acknowledging that these are fair criticisms of Christensen’s work, this study applies the theoretical framework of disruptive innovation/revolutionary change developed from a combination of industry change theorists. Ultimately, this study is not interested in the potential applicability of the theory of disruptive innovation across a wide range of industries, but, instead, is focused on using the working definition of disruptive innovation to isolate two potential arenas for higher education change in order to study how leaders utilize social networks to guide dramatic change from inside the industry.

**Competency-Based Education (CBE) and Micro-Credentialing**

Two of the promising progressive iterations of online learning in higher education today with potential to disrupt the industry are competency-based education (CBE) and micro-credentialing. The modern CBE evolved from online learning, and, in particular, asynchronous models of delivery. CBE documents student learning through demonstrated mastery of a set of competency-based learning outcomes rather than through the amount of time spent in the learning environment (aka *seat time*), on which the traditional higher education credit system is based (Laitinen, 2012). This alteration of the means to document student learning challenges the industry’s traditional product of credits based on seat time, which has been in effect for over 100 years (Laitinen, 2012). Seat time documentation has been critical to higher education because it is used to calculate credit hours, which, in turn, is used as the standard measure for federal financial aid distribution (Laitinen, 2012). In short, students learning through early CBE models were ineligible for federal financial aid, which limited its accessibility and appeal. That changed in July of 2014, however, with the approval of the Department of Education (DOE) to expand its awarding of financial aid to CBE students on the basis of direct learning outcome assessment (Fain, 2014). That decision marks the first time since the establishment of federal financial aid that its distribution
could be based on anything other than traditional credit hours (Laitinen, 2012). The DOE granted 350 institutions, representing a mixture of public and private colleges and universities implementing CBE programs, approval to pilot CBE “as experimental sites,” offering federal student aid to the students enrolled in their programs (Fain, 2014). The change in financial aid distribution as well as the hundreds of institutions now piloting some form of CBE demonstrates the significant internal (institutional) and external (industry) impact of CBE. The DOE approval also represents the legitimizing by another external organization within the higher education sector of a disruptive innovation taking place within the sector, much like the acceptance by regional accrediting organizations of online learning provided external legitimization of that innovation. Access to federal financial aid for pursuing CBE, together with the convenience and outcomes-based pricing structure of model, opens up the potential market for this innovation to disrupt.

The second emerging innovation whose leadership networking will be a subject of this study is micro-credentialing. Micro-credentialing builds not only on online learning and competency-based education but also leverages the emergence of a host of new providers and the range of credentialing they offer (Merisotis, 2016). Micro-credentialing providers offer asynchronous, on-demand skills training and documentation of learning in specific, targeted areas. This training leads to the awarding of micro-credentials, typically in the form of badges, which are an emerging “new online standard to recognize and verify learning” (Mozilla, 2016, May 22) of various content and processes. They can even be collected in a portfolio as an alternative to a college degree.

Micro-credentialing, as a new type of higher education product, challenges the previous marketplace reliance upon college and university degrees as the primary, recognized credential. Micro-credentialing is becoming more widespread for a variety of types of learning. Common among these are continuing education for K-12 educators, such
as offered by Digital Promise (digitalpromise.org); IT training, such as provided by Educause (educause.edu); and library services training, such as provided by YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) (2016, May 22). Recently, general education courses have also been packaged in micro-credentialing formats (universitylearningstore.org). As a potentially disruptive innovation, micro-credentials could appeal to a wide range of potential students with their narrowly targeted training, shorter duration of instruction, and significantly lower tuition than traditional college or university classes.

Micro-credentialing is gaining industry credibility, as key higher education national organizations (identified in introduction) and higher education boards are working together to develop credentialing pathways so that micro-credentials offered by various organizations will be uniformly recognized as well as accepted to build toward larger credentials (Merisotis, 2016). In fact, a total of 96 co-sponsors, working with the Lumina Foundation, have developed Connecting Credentials (connectingcredentials.org), an online platform for “developing a universal taxonomy to connect all credentials” (Merisotis, 2016). This type of external validity for micro-credentialing as an alternative to traditional college and university degrees contributes to its potential as an industry-disruptive innovation.

Higher Education Institutional Leadership Research

The importance of change leadership to innovation in higher education has been established by research (Kezar, 2001; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1991), though much of it is conceptual, not empirical. Four of the six current major theories of change identify a key role for leadership (Burnes, 1996; Collins, 1998; Levy & Merry, 1986; Morgan, 1986; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Kezar, 2001; Kezar & Eckel, 2002a; Kezar & Eckel, 2002b). These include teleological (Kezar, 2001), dialectic (Kotter, 1985; Kezar, 2001), social cognition (Kezar, 2001; Bolman & Deal, 2013), and cultural (Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1991; Schein 1985; Kezar, 2001). Moreover, the higher education researchers
mixing models (Birnbaum, 1991; Lueddeke, 1991), combine those that don’t address a leadership role with those that do, underscoring the significance of leadership to the change process.

Research on higher education change with the most depth and pervasiveness, and the leadership that guides it, has been at the institutional level. Within the institutional context, change in higher education has been categorized in four quadrants, at the intersections of low and high depth with low and high pervasiveness with respect to its impact on the institution (Eckel, Green, Hill, & Mallon, 1999, p. 16). The type of institutional change with the greatest depth and pervasiveness has been referred to as transformational change (Lindquist, 1978; Sporn, 1999; Eckel, Green, Hill, & Mallon, 1999; Eckel, Hill, Green, and Mallon, 1999; Ramaley, 2002), and the term is applied most commonly to describing deep and pervasive change within and across an institution.

Within the findings of transformational change research, while the focus has been on collaborative leadership, the implication is embedded that there are change agents/leaders guiding the process. For example, three of the four factors of successful transformational change offered by Eckel, Green, & Hill (2001) directly address the roles of the leaders in (1) facilitating change, (2) helping people develop new ways of thinking, and (3) paying attention to the process and adjusting action as they learn. In recent decades, through the work of Kezar and Eckel (2002b) who draw on ethnographic data gathered from six institutions in an ACE study of twenty-six colleges and universities, more concrete leadership strategies have been offered to guide transformational change (that is both deep and pervasive). The findings include five core change strategies, adapted from the teleological theoretical framework to a transformational change model and echoing the work of Cowan (1993), on the requisites for small college turnaround: (1) senior administrative support, (2) collaborative leadership, (3) robust design, (4) staff
development, and (5) visible action.

Additional research studies and conceptual higher education literature on change leadership offers advice for new leaders. For example, Birnbaum (1992) offers ten lessons for successful leadership, including ideas such as “listen with respect [and] be open to influence” (p. 175), “emphasize strong values” (p. 183), “focus on strengths” (p. 185), and “find a balance for governance” (p. 178). And Ramaley (2002) advises leaders to “remain accessible,” “becom[e] a storyteller,” keep your finger on the pulse of campus reaction to change to offer constructive (re)interpretations, and “hav[e] a good theory of change” (p. 67-69).

Corporate Industry-Wide Change Leadership

While the majority of research on the type of higher education change leadership has been at the institutional level, in the corporate domain, quite a bit of the literature addresses industry-wide change and the leadership to guide it. Like higher education institutional transformational change, corporate models suggest that industry-wide revolutionary change also must have both depth and breadth, or “unity” (depth of focus) and “diversity” (breadth of application) (Hamel, 1996). Furthermore, it is generally accepted that while change may arise from other places in an organization (other than formal leadership channels), the organization’s leadership must at least actively support, if not initiate, it (Hamel, 1996; Mintzberg, 2007).

In the corporate arena, the key to leading industry-disruptive revolutionary change, as Hamel (1996) dubbed it, is knowing which aspects of the organization’s—and, by extension, the industry’s—core to hold sacred and which to challenge for disruption. Both academic and corporate cultures alike underscore the importance of an organization remaining true to its mission (Martin & Samels, 2009; Cormier, 2009; Collins & Porras, 1996). In the corporate arena, that sacred core is known as the core ideology, which “defines
the enduring character of an organization—a consistent identity that transcends product or market life cycles, technological breakthroughs, management fads, and individual leaders” (Collins & Porras, 1996, p. 66). It is comprised of the “essential and enduring tenets of the organization,” (p. 66) which defines what the organization stands for, the extent to which the company would choose to cease to exist rather than abandon those values, and the organization’s reason for being, beyond generating margins. In revolutionary change, all other features of the organization’s form and function are open to potential disruption (Collins & Porras, 1996).

The processes for leading disruption of those other features of the organization that are not core ideology focus on three areas: market- and product- reconceptualization and managing internal organizational change. Market reconceptualization involves identifying and assessing assumptions about the market environment and core strategies for creating products and services for that market as well as testing the alignment of the market reality with the products and services produced (Drucker, 1994; Mintzberg, 2007). It also involves ways to demonstrate competitive uniqueness through product packaging and marketing approaches based on the needs and access to products and services of the target market (Porter, 1996). Product reconceptualization involves critically examining the product’s form, function, accessibility and even the consumer’s emotional response to using it (Hamel, 1996). Organizational change leadership involves establishing a compelling vision for the organization’s—and, by extension, the industry’s—future to generate employee acceptance of and support for the shift in direction the company will be taking as it pursues industry disruption (Collins & Porras, 1996).

Of the processes in these three key areas, it may be easiest for leaders implementing potentially disruptive innovation to take the third—organizational change leadership—for granted while channeling their energies into product- and market- reconceptualization. Yet,
“the network of relationships within which we are embedded may have important consequences for the success and failure of our projects” (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, p.1-2). Thus, without the embracing of deep and pervasive change throughout the organization and, indeed, within the industry-related external constituent bodies (such as regulatory agencies, supply chains, etc.), successful, sustainable change is unlikely. This means that neglect of the organizational change process could happen at the leader’s, the innovation’s, and, potentially, the organization’s and the industry’s peril. To effect significant, lasting change, leaders need to not only be mindful of, create, and skillfully navigate multiple networks but they must successfully guide efforts at change within those networks.

**The Social Network Analysis (SNA) Lens**

Given the importance of creating and leveraging social networks to effect organizational-, and, by extension, industry- change, it is insightful to use the lens of Social Network Analysis (SNA) to examine leading higher education change. What SNA adds to the previous body of change leadership literature is a focus on the complexity of the “patterned relational processes that interact with the embedding social context to jointly constitute leadership emergence and effectiveness” (Carter et. al., 2015, p. 597). In sum, SNA facilitates the exploration of the social networks that impact leadership.

SNA is an interdisciplinary framework, adapted from sociology and anthropology, used to explore social contexts, “recording data on who is connected to whom” (Valente, et. al, 2015, p. 3). Empirically based, it maps out the webs of relationships relevant to a given phenomenon. It has been used, for example, to track the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Morris, Goodreau, & Moody, 2007). While SNA is primarily quantitative, it has also included qualitative components to examine the relationships between members in a network and the organizational actors and influencers, including opinion leaders and gatekeepers (Friemel, 2008; Koput, 2010; Freeman, 2004).
**SNA & Change through Innovation.** SNA has also demonstrated that social networks play a key role in change. In fact, “(SNA) provides strong confirmation of the inseparability of fundamental planned change and social networks” and recognizes that “change comes not from plans,” but change “must be appropriated by participants and incorporated into their patterns of interaction” (Mohrman, Tenkasi, & Mohrman, 2003, p. 321).

Because disruptive innovation has the potential to upend an entire industry, it stands to reason that strategies necessary to implement it reach beyond a single organization’s set of social networks. As Kezar (2014) indicates, referencing the work of Spillane, Healey, & Chong, (2010), as in any situation in which “multiple stakeholders need to be engaged” and “problems are multifaceted and require quite different expertise and groups to address them” p. 92), industry disruption requires attention to and effective negotiation of a myriad of networks. Change must be appropriated and incorporated into the networking patterns of all relevant constituents because disruption affects not only the direct institutional players and their markets but also critical supporting networks, such as regulatory and governing agencies and supply chains (Porter, 2008; Hamel, 1996). In higher education, this would include a wide range of external organizations, from accrediting bodies, and federal and state governments (which distribute funding and govern policy), to technology equipment providers.

Furthermore, SNA is particularly important to the examination of change surrounding *innovation*, because “innovation is both a change process and a social process” (Suciu & Petrescu-Prahova, 2011, p. 17). This connection makes SNA “a powerful tool to provide in-depth information [on the processes at play in social networks undergoing innovative change] that cannot be surfaced with traditional methods” (p. 17). Among other things, SNA “helps to explain social cohesion and why some groups (and individuals) are
more amenable to change while others may be more resistant (Pow et. al., 2012, p. 2777). This knowledge is important to successfully launching the innovation, so important that Suciu & Petrescu-Prahova (2011), assert that “the building block on innovation is a networked individual” (p. 19).

**SNA & Higher Education.** There are distinctive features of social networks in higher education that call for unique leadership strategies to engage social networks and tackle the internal organizational processes necessary for institutionalizing change. Kezar (2001), whose monograph “Understanding and Facilitating Organizational Change in the Twenty-First Century,” summarizes higher education change theory and strategies, describes these distinctive features of the academy through which higher education leaders must guide change: the interdependence of the organization, a relatively independent environment, a unique culture, institutional status, a values-driven organization, multiple power and authority structures, a loosely-coupled system, organized anarchical decision-making, professional and administrative values, shared governance, employee commitment and tenure, goal ambiguity, and a focus on image and success. These socially-constructed and sustained, unique organizational features represent a highly complex set of interdependent social networks in which a variety of change processes take place, including sensemaking, legitimization, access to resources and more. These need to be successfully negotiated for deep and pervasive change to root (Kezar, 2001).

Within this complex network of relationships in higher education, SNA has been applied only in limited ways and typically quantitatively. Kezar (2014) summarizes these ways and the researchers who have explored them: “SNA has been used primarily to examine issues of access and success among college students, particularly around the development of social or cultural capital through networks of peers, school personnel, and their families” (qtd. p. 92, referencing Heck, Price & Thomas, 2004; Mayer and Puller, 2008;
Skahill, 2003; Ternishi & Briscoe, 2006; Thomas, 2000; Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005). For example, Mayer and Puller (2008) explored the establishment of friendship networks among students at ten public and private universities, using student-level social networking data from Facebook and administrative data to simulate alternate university policies to study their impact on the student social networks. They discovered that race was such a strong social tie in the development and maintenance of student friendships that policy changes by the schools had only limited potential in reducing race segmentation (Mayer & Puller, 2008). This information is useful to schools seeking to understand student friendship networks and to promote student social integration.

SNA has also been applied to studies of “the sense of community of online learners” (Kezar, 2014, p. 93, referencing Otte & Roseau, 2002; Traud et. al., 2011). For example, Otte & Roseau (2002) describe how SNA can serve as a tool for information scientists in the “study [of] publication, citation and co-citation networks” (p. 441). The Internet represents a vast social network over which information can be shared and accessed, and its tracking mechanisms help information scientists to understand how information is obtained and distributed (Otte & Roseau, 2002).

SNA has also been employed in higher education to study connections and collaborations among researchers (Kezar, 2014, p. 93, referencing Marion et. al, 2003; Sharma & Urs, 2008; White, 2003), colleges (p. 93, referencing Lariviere, et. al., 2006), and research collaborations (p. 93, referencing Balconi & Laboranti, 2006; McMillan, 2008; Rogers et. al, 2001). For example, Sharma and Urs (2008) use SNA to trace linkages among the multi-disciplinary network of academics shaping and using the Digital Library. Meanwhile, Lariviere, Gingras, and Archambault (2006) use SNA to “shed light on the collaborative activities of researchers in the NSE [natural sciences and engineering] compared to those in the SSH [social sciences and humanities]” (p. 519). Their empirical
analysis of the citation indices from each of those disciplinary areas from 1980-2002 reveals that collaborative research patterns in the social sciences are more comparable to NSE than to humanities (Lariviere et al., 2006).

Two higher education studies use SNA to explore student activism (Kezar, 2014). Biddix and Park (2008) employed SNA to track student use of the Internet to mobilize in 2001 (and maintain for several generations of students) a networked community, the Harvard Progressive Student Labor Movement. Crossley (2008), meanwhile, investigated the broader politicizing networks of university campuses, which “recruit political novices to activism” (p. 18). His findings show how these networks perpetuate themselves as novices go on to become recruiters for the next generation of student activists (Crossley, 2008).

Finally, SNA has been used in higher education to explore how professional development organizations for faculty and administrators serve to forge connections between the university and industry (Metcalfe, 2006). While not typically the subject of research, this social network pathway is significant because it may account for “increased market-like behaviors in post-secondary education” (p. 459).

**SNA & Leadership.** These studies demonstrate that it is through a variety of social networks that leaders (informal as well as formal) interact with constituents to guide change. Indeed, “the structure and composition of an individual’s network of informal contacts allows him or her to identify strategic opportunities, marshal resources, assemble teams, and win the support for innovative projects that benefit the organization (Sparrowe & Liden, 2015, p. 505). Thus it is “increasingly important for executives and managers to attend to informal networks in their organizations” (Cross et. al, 2002), and, in the case of potentially industry-wide change, within their larger external networks as well. In fact, “contemporary definitions of leadership advance a view of the phenomenon as relational, situated in specific social contexts, involving patterned emergent processes, and
encompassing both formal and informal influence” (Carter et al., 2015).

Previous SNA studies across a wide array of disciplines identify some important reasons leaders might leverage social networks to manage change. Kezar (2014) summarizes these, as identified in the work of numerous researchers, to include supporting “communication systems, knowledge transfer, alteration of schema or mindset, shaping of attitudes, increasing of problem-solving, and accountability” (qtd. p. 95; referencing Ahuja, 2000; Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Kraatz, 1998; McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003; Szulanski, 1996; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Key SNA research findings across a broad range of social networking research reflect the strategies used by leaders to manage networks to accomplish their goals. Most of these are summarized by Kezar (2014), with some gathered from other sources.

**Network Strength.** One set of findings that Kezar (2014) summarizes relates to the strength of the relationships in the networks. The strength of a relationship is dependent on its duration (with longer relationships being stronger), a history of mutual confiding, and frequent interaction (Kraatz, 1998). Newer network connections, for example, which were created exclusively to support the change process, are less influential than existing ties (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Cole & Weinbaum, 2010; Kezar & Lester, 2009). Strong ties facilitate complicated and enduring change (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003). In Coburn & Russell’s (2008) study on math curricular reform, strong ties were important to generating engagement and embracing of the complex process of redesigning the pedagogical strategies (referenced in Kezar, 2014, p. 99).

**Network Diversity.** While strong ties have their value, so do weak ties. Weak ties tend to be more diverse because weak ties typically connect individuals to circles very different from their own. Weaker and more diverse ties assist in the flow of information that may not be readily available in a smaller, tighter network (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Moody
and White, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003; Nelson, 1989). Weak ties have also proven useful for generating innovative ideas for change (Tsai, 2002) and for diffusing innovation (Granovetter, 1973).

**Network Types & Functions.** Another set of SNA research findings identifies types of social networks and their functions (Kezar, 2014; Battilana & Casciaro, 2013). Some networks are built upon friendships, and their function is to provide social support. They are often called friendship or expressive networks (Kezar, 2014, referencing Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Other networks are formed for the purpose of sharing information or expertise, such as the relationships developed at places of employment. These are often called knowledge or instrumental networks (Kezar, 2014, referencing Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Friendship/expressive networks have stronger ties and are more influential in changing attitudes and mindsets while knowledge/instrumental networks have weaker ties and are more useful for generating innovative ideas and sharing information (Kezar, 2014). Kezar (2014) shares that “Cole and Weinbaum (2010) found expressive ties were more effective in impacting teacher attitudes towards reform than instrumental networks” (p. 102).

**Network Cohesion.** Networks are also categorized by the level of connectivity of their members (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013). Cohesive networks are made up of individuals that are well connected to one another, which “leads to high levels of trust and support” (p. 65). Within cohesive networks, there may also be densely-connected subgroups, which are smaller groups within a network that have strong ties, such as informal lunch groups (Kezar, 2014, referencing Finnigan & Daly, 2010; Daly, 2010a, 2010b; Lariviere et. al, 2006; McMillan, 2008). Leaders may be able to utilize these subgroups to problem-solve or spark innovation. Kezar (2014) relays how Daly (2010a, 2010b) determined that “leveraging and connecting subgroups is one of the key principles for creating change and reform in
education” (p. 103).

**Network Bridging.** By contrast, in a bridging network, individuals are connected by their relationships to a single member, who serves as the bridge. One benefit of bridging networks is a diversity of perspectives and novel approaches from disparate members (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013, p. 65). The member serving as the bridge can also control the flow information and adapt messages to different members (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013, p. 65). Given this important role, leaders may appoint individuals with strong ties to others outside the leader’s immediate network to serve as bridges to those networks, to fill the structural gap (Kezar, 2014, referencing Ahuja, 2000; Burt, 1992; Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988; Finnigan & Daly, 2010).

**Central Actors & Opinion Leaders.** There are additional roles individuals play within social networks. Some network members, for example, serve as “central actors and opinion leaders” (Kezar, 2014, p. 101). These individuals tend to have greater access to information and a wide communication network in which they leverage distinct influence to sway others to adopt their viewpoints (Cross & Parker, 2004; Freeman, 1979; Valente, 1995). Opinion leaders are critical in the change process because others may wait to embrace the change until the opinion leaders do so, such as a group of doctors, noted in Valente’s (1995) study, who adopted a new drug only once a key opinion leader in their network did so (referenced in Kezar, 2014, p. 101). Referencing studies by Cross & Parker (2004), Honig (2006), Valente, (1995) and Coburn & Russell (2008), Kezar (2014) explains how by ensuring frequent constituent contact with such change agents and innovators, leaders can facilitate change (p. 104). For example, teachers who had frequent professional development, coupled with contact with a coach and early adopters, were more likely to change their practices (Kezar, 2014, p. 104, referencing Coburn & Russell, 2008).

**Endorsers, Resisters & Fence-Sitters.** In addition to the opinion leaders, change
networks have *endorsers, resisters* and *fence-sitters* (Batillana & Casciaro, 2013). The endorsers are positive about the change, the fence-sitters are indecisive, and the resisters actively reject it (p. 67). The relationship of the leader to each of these types of network members makes a difference in the change outcome. Research indicates that being close to endorsers has no positive or negative influence for the leader on the change outcome, but being personally close to fence-sitters can help to sway them to embrace change (p. 67). With deep and pervasive change, however, “resisters typically perceive a significant threat and are much less susceptible to social pressure” (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013, p. 67). Thus, Battilana and Casciaro (2013) advise that leaders “handle resisters with care: if you are pursuing a disruptive initiative, you probably won’t change their mind—but they might change yours” (p. 68).

**Developing Relational Trust.** Of primary importance is for the leader to develop—and facilitate among others the development of—a relationship of trust to support a climate of change (Kezar, 2014, referencing Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008; Moolenaar & Sleegers, 2010; Scott, 1991; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coburn & Russell, 2008). Kezar (2014) paraphrases Bryk & Schneider’s (2002) definition of relational trust as “exchanges among members of the community and the reciprocal understandings about the obligations and expectations inherent in their roles” (p. 102). Creating trust has been identified as important to network enhancement to facilitate change (Sparrow & Liden, 2005; Kezar, 2014; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008; Moolenaar & Sleegers, 2010; Scott, 1991; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coburn and Russell, 2008).

**Impact of Organizational Structure.** Leaders also need to be aware of the impact of the organizational structure on social networks. Kezar (2014) shares how “Mohrman, Tenkasi, and Mohrman (2003) identified how prescriptive and inflexible policies within organizations prevent dense networks that create greater information flow and knowledge
transfer from forming” (p. 105). Furthermore, strict hierarchies “rely on one-way information flow” and “have people operate in prescriptive rather than creative ways” (Kezar, 2014, p. 105). For example, Kezar (2014) shares how “more hierarchical relationships that are established between district offices and schools because of No Child Left Behind have created relationships of distrust between district offices and schools that have broken down networks that formerly operated to facilitate change” (p. 106, referencing Finnigan & Daly, 2009). Recognizing this, leaders might loosen strict, formal hierarchies that often impede information flow and the formation of important dense social networks. Furthermore, because SNA has revealed that “organization design has influence on patterns of informal networks via formal structures, physical proximity, and nature of the task” (Cross, et. al., p. 27), leaders might strategically arrange for such organizational structures, physical office location, and task groups to support the fostering of strong ties and dense subgroups to facilitate change implementation.

Inter-O rganizational Linkages. Not only can leaders make changes to contribute to network effectiveness internal to the organization, but they can create inter-organizational linkages (Kezar, 2014, referencing Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Tilly, 2005; Tsai, 2002; Coburn, Choi, & Matta, 2010). Examples of such linkages include institutional interactions with national and discipline-specific associations often bridged by cross-function teams (Tsai 2002, referenced in Kezar, 2014) or school districts, in the K-12 arena. Coburn, Choi, & Matta's (2010) study, for example, demonstrated how school “district policy positively influenced social networks by creating structures, requirements, and focus that helped create ties that were beneficial to change” (Kezar, 2014, p. 106-107). Meanwhile, Moolenaar and Sleegers’ (2010) study revealed that school “districts can establish organizational structures—such as teams and learning communities—to help support networks and innovation” (Kezar, 2014, p. 107).
In short, Social Network Analysis (SNA) research suggests that leaders can exert influence on the multiple social networks to assist in the implementation of change processes, both inside and outside their organizations. Understanding the nature of networks, the types of networks, and the important roles of individuals within networks can assist leaders in effectively leveraging those networks, and deliberately creating bridges between networks, to facilitate change.

**Applying SNA to Higher Education Disruptive Innovation**

Applying these qualitative components of the framework of Social Network Analysis (SNA) across multiple, interdependent relevant social contexts holds promise for illuminating the strategies of college and universities leaders for effectively implementing potentially industry-disruptive change in higher education. An examination of the structure of their networks and ways in which they engage their constituents to embrace and advance that change could generate important insights for an industry that many believe is on the verge of disruption. The leadership lessons available through a study of such specific strategies could support the revolutionary change that higher education is ripe for—to contain costs, significantly reduce duplication, and streamline relevant educational opportunities for the 21st century.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Overview & Research Questions

This study examines the social networking strategies of higher education leaders guiding potentially disruptive innovation. This study builds upon existing scholarship on higher education change leadership, which is focused primarily on institutional change. Using the lens of Social Network Analysis (SNA), the study examines the relevant networks both within and external to their organizations needed to advance industry-wide change.

The study considers the nature of the relevant networks—their types, populations, and origins—and how they are activated, developed, and leveraged to advance the innovation being implemented. In particular, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the relevant social networks of higher education leaders around potentially industry-disruptive innovation?
   a. What different types of networks are leveraged around the innovation?
   b. What types of people are in those networks and what are their roles in the innovation advancement?
   c. To what extent did the leaders use existing networks or did they create new ones?

2. In what ways do leaders activate, develop, and leverage those networks?
   a. In what order do they build or utilize networks?
   b. How do leaders engage internal and external networks differently? Around what issues?
   c. What strategies do leaders use to amplify engagement and support for the disruptive innovation within those networks while managing and countering resistance to it?
The inquiry was conducted as a qualitative interview study, with interviews taking place in the Fall of 2016. The unit of analysis was the networks of leaders related to the specific innovation being implemented. Given the importance of context to an understanding of the behaviors and actions of the study participants, a qualitative approach was appropriate (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, because the research questions sought to understand not just the impetus for the actions of the leaders but the interpretation and response to those actions on the part of the campus community and relevant external higher education sector players, the unit of analysis extended to the context surrounding the leaders (Yin, 2009).

A qualitative interview approach was used to allow for an analysis of multiple nodes (individual relationships) in these complex networks. A qualitative approach to the study provided the best means for generating rich, detailed information (Merriam, 1998). In the end, twenty-one separate interviews were conducted, with one leader having a more extensive immediate network surrounding the innovation that the other. The selection of two primary leaders at two different types of institutions—each pursuing two different types of disruptive innovation—not only ensured that the leadership, rather than the innovation, was the focus of the study, but provided an opportunity to explore the similarities of the networking strategies, allowing for the identification of themes both within and between the two cases (Creswell, 2007). While the qualitative nature of the study means that findings are not generalizable to leadership in other venues, the hope was that some strategies would emerge that are informative and potentially useful for practitioner leaders at traditional colleges and universities to help their institutions embrace and adapt to potentially disruptive innovation in higher education.

Site & Participant Selection

This study examined the internal and external networking strategies of Paul
LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), and David Schejbal, Dean of Continuing Education, Outreach and E-Learning at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. Each is furthering a different potentially disruptive innovation—competency-based education (CBE) traditional degree delivery and non-degree micro-credentialing, respectively—at two different types of institutions, a private comprehensive and a public cooperative extension, respectively. The disruptions are also distinguished by their partnerships: SNHU is implementing College for America as the primary educational provider and the UW-Extension is implementing The University Learning Store in partnership with other traditional higher education institutions: Georgia Institute of Technology, UC Davis Extension, UCI Extension, and the University of Washington Continuum College.

These two leaders were selected because the innovations they are pursuing meet the criteria for potentially industry-disruptive innovation. This means the innovations repackage higher education in a way that eliminates some of the high cost elements of traditional colleges and universities while offering greater convenience (often by utilizing technology) and redefining the marketplace by serving significant un- or under-served markets (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Kim & Mauborgne, 2015; Hamel, 1996). Both traditional degree CBE and continuing education micro-credentialing leverage technology to reconceive and repackage the traditional higher education products (courses and degrees) and redefine the market space and industry boundaries. Degree-granting CBE challenges traditional course- and degree- credit hours and repackages instruction to serve competency-based outcomes. Non-degree micro-credentialing challenges the traditional higher education product—both traditional continuing education courses and credit-based degrees—and repackages instruction into on-demand skills training leading to the awarding of micro-credentials which are customized to employment needs. Both are offered
online and appeal to a larger market because they leverage prior learning and deliver instruction in convenient, asynchronous formats and at lower prices than traditional higher education.

Furthermore, both of these leaders are working on the cusp of these innovations. While CBE existed before LeBlanc and SNHU implemented College for America, as discussed in the case that follows, LeBlanc was instrumental in getting the Department of Education, in July of 2014, to change the limitation on which federal student aid is distributed—formerly based exclusively on credit hour enrollment. Similarly, Schejbal played a key role in the development of micro-credentialing, leading to the first partnership of traditional academic institutions (as opposed to industry newcomers) to develop and offer micro-credentialing.

Both leaders are also working within traditional institutions, which means their leadership must not only further the development of the disruptive innovation but they must work within existing institutional social networks (as well as external, sector networks) to engage far ranging constituents to embrace change. The need for disruption of internal networks adds a layer of complexity to the challenge of disruptive innovation, but one necessary for traditional higher educational institutions to maintain their market primacy.

Prior to launching the study, the researcher completed initial screening of the two study leaders and secured their willingness to participate in the study. This study depended upon such access to market innovation leaders willing to share their experience and strategies as well as the participation of members of their networks. The two leaders were asked to provide names of additional individuals at their institutions who were integral to the innovation implementation, as well as external constituents with whom networking to promote the innovation was essential. Those individuals also served as interview
respondents and informants. This group consisted primarily of members of LeBlanc's and Schejbal’s direct-report leadership teams, business partner leaders and their relevant direct reports, representatives of the relevant regional accrediting organization (for College for America) and the U.S. Department of Education. Note also that the term “partners” is defined differently for the two cases: in College for America, partners are businesses that worked with SNHU to enroll their employees in CfA; in the University Learning Store, partners are the four collaborating academic institutions that worked with UW-Extension to develop and implement curriculum for the ULS. Of these individuals, some provided additional information in the interviews that they requested to be off record. Each of those comments, in retrospect, was not immediately relevant to the case of the role of the leaders and their networks. Taken as a whole, however, they show the political undercurrents that often accompany the networks of potential disruption. People didn’t want to be identified speaking in ways that showed the challenges of networks or the shortcoming of individuals involved in networks.

Interviewees were provided with informed consent forms outlining the parameters of the study and their opportunity to discontinue participation in the study at any time. Leaders were informed that because of the very public nature of the innovations and their roles within them, they and their institutions’ names would be identified. Thus, no effort was made to hide the identifies of the leaders or the institutions they represent. Fortunately, because the study highlights the innovations as it explores their change leadership strategies, the leaders didn’t request to be anonymous. To encourage open and candid input, generic identifiers are used for attribution of any quotations or information from other informants beyond the two leaders. Those other participants were informed, both verbally and in writing, that while their names would not be used, it would not be possible to guarantee that they could not be identified by title or within context. Because of
the narrow scope of the project and the limited number of institutions engaged in such innovations, it was not possible to completely mask all information that could serve to expose participant identities.

**Data Collection**

The first step in the data collection process was a review of documents to better understand the context of the innovation. This review included relevant publically available internal and external documents, such as journal articles, media coverage, institutional and program websites, and social media reactions. Additional documentation, not publically available, was sought from the leaders themselves, (i.e. emails and other correspondence to their campuses and key members of their external networks, calendared meetings, regulatory agency, DOE, or accreditation officials) regarding the innovation as well as background documents. Few of these latter documents were available, however, due to the ephemeral nature of network interaction and electronic communication; over time, emails, calendar entries and other correspondence were discarded. Only the white papers written by the leaders themselves to develop the innovative ideas were retained, though they were altered as the ideas were further developed, with the initial versions no longer available. This dearth of written documentation is a challenge of network studies and is addressed further in the section on limitations.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the two leaders onsite. Each leader was asked to identify key people in their internal and external networks integral to the development and/or implementation of the innovation, who were then subsequently interviewed. Such participant sampling allowed for greater depth in exploration of the planning and implementation of deliberate network strategies as well as any changes in direction in response to resistance or other feedback from network constituents. These network participant interviews rounded out the interviews. Whenever
possible, participant interviews took place on-site during campus visits to Southern New Hampshire University and the University of Wisconsin-Extension, either in the offices of the respondents, or in a private conference room. One participant interview was conducted in a conference room at the participant’s business location. Other participant interviews took place by telephone. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, guided by the research questions but fluid enough to be adapted to differences in relationships and to allow for the emergence of new ideas and themes. Interviews ranged in duration from 12 minutes (network participant) to 115 minutes (leader). The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed clean verbatim by a confidential transcription service. The total number of interviews conducted depended upon the number of key network constituent nodes and the members’ willingness to participate in the study. This led to a significantly larger interview pool associated with one leader over the other. Seven interviews were conducted for the ULS case and 14 for the CfA case, for a total of 21 for the study.

Leader interview questions focused on identifying their networking strategies in response to the research questions. Interview questions were crafted to draw out responses by reasons for tapping or creating networks, as identified by a range of researchers (in chapter 2) and summarized by Kezar (2104), including supporting “communication systems, knowledge transfer, alteration of schema or mindset, shaping of attitudes, increasing of problem-solving, and accountability” (p. 95, referencing Ahuja, 2000; Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Kraatz, 1998; McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003; Szulanski, 1996; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Furthermore, questions were crafted to collect data on if and how specific strategies as identified in previous SNA research were employed. These included the following:

• utilizing existing social networks (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Cole & Weinbaum, 2010; Kezar &
• generating networks with diverse ties (Granovetter, 1973)

• winning the support of opinion leaders (Cross & Parker, 2004; Freemen, 1979; Valente, 1995)

• developing relational trust to facilitate a climate of change (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008; Moolenaar & Sleeers, 2010; Scott, 1991; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coburn & Russell, 2008)

• utilizing densely-connected subgroups to problem-solve and spark innovation (Finnigan & Daly, 2010; Daly, 2010a, 2010b; Larivire, Gingras & Archambault, 2006; McMillan, 2008)

• developing bridges between subgroups to fill structural gaps (Ahuja, 2000; Burt, 1992; Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988; Finnigan & Daly, 2010; Battilana & Casciaro, 2013)

• ensuring interaction with change agents and innovators (Cross & Parker, 2004; Honig, 2006; Valente, 1995; Coburn & Russell, 2008)

• keeping the indecisive close and resisters at a distance (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013)

• loosening formal hierarchies (Mohrman, Tenkasi, & Mohrman, 2003; Finnigan & Daly, 2009; Coburn & Russell, 2008), and

• creating inter-organizational linkages (Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Tilly, 2005; Tsai, 2002; Coburn, Choi, & Matta, 2010).

Interview questions also allowed for the emergence and identification of new strategies that had not been identified in previous research. Questions for network constituents ascertained their roles in the activation, development and leveraging of
networks strategies in relation to the nature and strength of their relationships in the nodes.

**Coding & Data Analysis**

Each of the data sources were analyzed individually and then combined with other data sources to explore and triangulate themes. Interview transcripts and documents were analyzed for quotes, actions and behaviors reported, and themes that demonstrated how leaders used networks to promote, implement or otherwise further their potentially disruptive innovation. Coding was also used to capture the network strategies employed by the leaders and their leadership team members. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo Qualitative Data Software and in keeping with the methods of Kezar and Eckel (2002b), using three different qualitative approaches: (1) categorical analysis, (2) memoing, and (3) narrative analysis. Categorical analysis was used to organize data by the SNA strategies identified above as well as any new emerging strategy arenas. The coding process was guided primarily by the research questions and was carried out through the development of codes created from the SNA strategies identified above and discussed in chapter two as well as emerging strategies and themes that surfaced as result of the individual interview analyses. Memoing was used to capture patterned coding of the data by SNA strategies identified in existing research as well as by newly emergent strategies. The strategies were then organized into three categories of “engagement tactics” as emerged in the data. Finally, narrative analysis illuminated themes by integrating disparate data into a whole, drawing from the stories of change developed from thick, rich description by study participants.

**Validity**

Validity of the study, or “the ways that researchers can affirm that their findings are faithful to the participants’ experiences” was assessed according to generally accepted qualitative study procedures (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 186). Descriptive validity, or the
confirming of factual accuracy (p. 190) was pursued through the audio recording and verbatim transcription of interviews and member checks. Member checks were conducted in the early spring of 2017, with both leaders and a majority of participants from each study responding with confirmation of descriptive validity. At that time, the researcher learned that CfA has been reorganized since the data collection, with the operations moved into the SNHU’s College of Online and Continuing Education (COCE). A number of the study participants, including the CfA Executive Director, are no longer employed at SNHU. These structural changes are not reflected in the study but noted here for future reference. The details of the study are accurate as of Fall, 2016. Interpretive validity, or the accurate attribution of perspective (p. 190), was pursued through use of the language, words and concepts of the participants and the data from documents, whenever feasible. Theoretical validity, or “the ability of the study to explain the phenomenon studied” (p. 191) was pursued through the comparison to, and use of coding procedures of, existing SNA research models. Dependability, or the collection of data consistent with the study’s focus (p. 189), was achieved through the use of existing, appropriate data collection and analysis procedures, as applicable.

Limitations of the Study

While findings of case study qualitative research are not generalizable to other settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), and thus transferability of network strategies identified cannot be assumed, the hope is that some of the strategies evidenced in the data will be informative and potentially useful for practitioner leaders who seek to lead their own institutions in exploring and implementing dramatic, industry-wide change. Nonetheless, other factors limit the study. The finding of networking strategies of two leaders may not represent the range of approaches to leading potentially industry-wide disruptive innovation. Fortunately, the study is not meant to identify strategies that are representative
but rather to explore the relevance of strategies within a given theoretical model to determine some baseline applicability to at least two higher education change leaders.

An additional limitation is that the data was largely self-reported by participants and thus was subject to accuracy of memory and willingness to share. Given the ephemeral nature of networks and the general lack of documentation kept by individuals on personal interactions, very little written documentation either initially existed or was recoverable for the study. In general, the researcher found that participants didn’t document personal interactions associated with the development of professional or friendship networks, the evolving stages of trust, or the strategies they employ to engage networks. Furthermore, some participants exhibited a reticence and were guarded in their responses. The researcher discovered that it can be difficult to get individuals to discuss their use of networks, as some may be concerned that their leveraging of relationships will be perceived as providing an unwarranted advantage. Some individuals, particularly those with whom the researcher did not have a former relationship, and who acted within the study’s networks within roles that could be later scrutinized based upon their actions, demonstrated a vigilance in wording their responses to ensure that network relationships would not be misconstrued as inappropriate. In those instances, research questions were softened based on the tenor of those conversations, and assurances were made that all responses would be returned to the sources for validation for accuracy before including in the study. This careful participant crafting of responses may have had an impact on the accuracy of the data, as it was subjected not only to the initial bias of the individuals interviewed but to their later revisiting as well. It also kept the researcher from attributing certain specific challenging or negative examples of some network exchanges that participants shared only when guaranteed that it not be attributed or traceable to them. Since the purpose of the study is to examine execution of leadership strategy, that bias was
unavoidable and was assessed through triangulation of data from participant interviews, whenever possible. In the end, however, it demonstrates a key limitation to academic network studies: an inherent political awkwardness in forthright participant sharing of information on the role of relationships in moving ideas forward. While this awkwardness and resistance were rare, and most study participants appeared very open (likely given that their leaders had in many ways vouched for the researcher in connecting her to the participants), some were more guarded, and still others did not respond to the request to participate in the study at all.

Furthermore, the constraints of the timing and the ever-changing dynamics of networks serve as significant study limitations. These innovations are very much in progress, and their networks fleeting. The study attempted to balance a retrospective inquiry and a stop-action frame of an ongoing and evolving phenomenon. Participants were asked to reflect upon interactions that may have since evolved into something very different, as they were grounded in a different time. The study also endeavored to capture in real-time today the strategies of tomorrow’s potential industry disruptors, making it impossible to forecast the long-range success of the change leadership being studied—and its ultimate impact on the industry—as well as the embeddedness and sustainability of that change over time. While unavoidable, such a limitation creates an opportunity for follow-up study.

An inherent assumption in the study was that leadership strategy is, at some level, both deliberate and integral to industry-disruptive change. The researcher recognized that may not be the case. Leaders may unconsciously execute strategy, may be guided by others into their methods, or may discover their evolving leadership approaches through trial and error. Furthermore, other forces may account for the introduction and successfully implementation of the potentially industry-disruptive change, other than guided formal
leadership. The researcher actively considered all of these alternatives in the study design and implementation as well as data analysis and interpretation. It is generally accepted, however, that while disruptive innovators often arise from other places within an organization (other than formal leadership channels), the organization’s leadership must at least actively support, if not initiate, the change leadership and must foster the emergent learning (Hamel, 1996; Mintzberg, 2007).

The study networks are also influenced by the act of the research itself, with questions prompting participant reflection that could result in changes in member’s individual behaviors within the networks. Furthermore, the study results serve as a means of diffusion of the network goals, which are themselves a part of the study. Thus, the researcher, by studying the networks, enters into and becomes a part of the networks and, by reporting on them, serves to promote awareness of the innovations they seek to advance (see positionality, below).

**Researcher Positionality**

The study is further guided by the researcher’s past experience as a higher education leader who instituted campus-level change. Her assumption was that this study will elucidate both planned and spontaneous leadership strategy as well as other deliberate and fortuitous factors that contribute to potentially industry-shaping changes. In the investigation of patterns and themes, while application to other change contexts may not be directly possible, her hope is that some strategy will emerge that is informative and potentially useful for practitioner leaders who seek to lead their own institutions into exploring and implementing dramatic change.

While the researcher had existing professional relationships with the leaders in the study, those relationships had been relatively distant. The researcher’s prior professional contact with the leaders of the study worked in a positive regard as it contributed to
rapport, provided her with access to them, and gave them a comfort level to facilitate their sharing information with her.

Ironically, however, the study itself impacts the disruptive capacity of the innovations being studied. Because these innovations are in the early stages, they have national visibility and are gaining further public attention as their implementations unfold. This study will become part of the dissemination network and serve to affirm the legitimacy of the innovations. In that sense, the researcher is part of the networks she is studying. Indeed, the researcher’s professional association with both leaders comprises a node in each of their networks which facilitated her identification of their leadership and the innovation’s alignment with the criteria for disruptive innovation. It also provided access for the researcher to the leaders and their networks. Ultimately, it serves as just another example (however small) of the power of social networks in furthering innovation.
CHAPTER 4: DATA

The University Learning Store

This chapter presents the first set of data from the study of the networks of two leaders of potentially disruptive innovation in higher education; this set relates to the networks surrounding the innovation, the University Learning Store. Data chapters are presented in the order the leaders’ institutions were visited. They are structured to include an introduction to the innovation followed by the detailed facts of the study. Data include responses to the research questions as determined through a review of relevant available documents as well as interviews with the leaders and key members of their leadership staff as well as external stakeholders involved in the innovation. For the University Learning Store, interviewees included the innovation leader, David Schejbal; direct reports on his leadership team at the University of Wisconsin-Extension’s Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning (CEOEL); and deans of the continuing education units of three of the four additional collaborative partners for ULS. Analyses for each of the two innovation networks follow this findings chapter.

The research questions probe the nature of the social networks these two higher education leaders and their leadership teams engaged in to advance the potentially disruptive innovations and the strategies employed to activate, develop, and leverage those networks.

The Innovation & The Institutions. Spearheaded in 2014 by Dean David Schejbal of the University of Wisconsin Extension’s division of Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning (CEOEL), the University Learning Store (ULS) is a potentially disruptive innovation gaining national attention as it gains momentum. A partnership between UW-Extension, Georgia Institute of Technology, the University of California Davis Extension, the University of California Irvine Extension, and the University of Washington Continuum
College, ULS is packaging non-credit education into discrete, competency-based, workforce-skills-related credential bundles, which students can access “a la carte,” to “have an experience like you would in a department store, where you can truly tailor what you want to buy, regardless of the manufacturer of the product” (Schejbal, Qtd. in VandenPlas, 28 April 2016). For example, in a department store, “you buy slacks from one manufacturer and a shirt from somebody else, and a jacket from a third, and you put those on and they fit you well and then you put them in the closet and they fit with the stuff in your closet” (Schejbal, Qtd. in VandenPlas, 28 April 2016). Similarly, ULS, when fully operationalized, will offer courses from all five partners, which students can shop to tailor their educational experience to fit their customized workforce training needs.

Building upon a competency-based education model, ULS instruction is modularized into short-term, non-credit courses that lead to the issuing of a micro-credential or, when stacked, a certificate, rather than a credit-based degree. In contrast to a traditional college degree, which Schejbal indicates can be a “blunt instrument” (Qtd. in Fain, 2015; personal communication, 2016), micro-credentials target specific, employment-related skills sets. The evolving micro-credentialing market is being developed largely outside of the higher education arena—and in direct competition with it. The University Learning Store is the first micro-credentialing model from not only all Research 1, “world-renown universities” (The University Learning Store website), but from any traditional university source.

The driving force behind the development of this innovative approach within higher education is dually disruptive and protective, as higher education seeks to protect their previously exclusive continuing education, non-credit market, from being taken over by non-academic entities. In short, they must disrupt the disruptors. As one university partner described it,

In our field in continuing education, this is a huge potential threat to our business, and we
can either close our eyes and ignore it—the whole MOOC phenomenon, the whole phenomenon of private groups starting to offer a lot of content out there. So, we can either ignore it or we can try to figure out, “How can universities operate in this arena?” because it’s still, in my opinion, a matter of credentials. If we can, universities have sort of a bit of a monopoly on credentials. And if we can continue to play in that arena, then we continue to be successful. If we ignore it, I think we will be in trouble.

The goal of the ULS is to provide alternate higher education credentialing opportunities for “people who aren’t looking to spend two or four years of full-time study in college to get the kind of training and education they need” (Schejbal, Qtd. in VandenPlas, 28 April 2016). In particular, it was designed to “help people be resilient in times of economic downturns so they are able to move into other jobs” (Schejbal, Qtd. in VandenPlas, 28 April 2016). Schejbal points out that

> On average, Americans change jobs every 4.4 years. ... Many of those job changes require additional skill sets, but they don’t require going back for a full degree and they certainly don’t require people to spend years in college. They really require people to come back and consume education in ways that meet their individual needs. (Schejbal, Qtd. in VandenPlas, 28 April 2016)

As the University Learning Store website notes, “McKinsey Global Institute projects a global shortage of up to 85 million skilled workers to fill jobs by 2020” (universitylearningstore.org). The ULS was designed to address skills gaps by meeting the needs of those transitioning workers.

With workforce training as the goal, the ULS’s micro-credentials were developed in concert with employers, who not only recommended and reviewed the content but also the assessments through which “students are able to apply that knowledge in practice to make sure that the employers agree that it’s a good way to test the students’ abilities” (Schejbal, qtd. in VandenPlas 24 April 2016). These “authentic assessments,” as the University Learning Store website calls them, are “hands-on, skills-based projects that resemble real-world business scenarios” (universitylearningstore.org), and they “signify to employers what [specific] knowledge a person has...and how that person can apply that knowledge in a particular context” (Qtd. in VandenPlas, 24 April 2016).
While as a non-credit model, ULS is not financial-aid eligible, Schejbal describes it as “cheap enough for a student to afford without financial aid” (Qtd. in Fain, 2015). Tuition for the ULS course products ranges from $50 to $150 and, during the “early-access preview” period at the time of this writing, at half of that ($25-$75), while the University Learning Store continues to be built (University Learning Store website).

At the time of this writing, the ULS offered 22 courses with six more listed on their website as soon to be available. A total of 50 students were currently enrolled. The courses were divided into three areas, or “departments” (VandenPlas, 26 April 2015): Power Skills, Technical Skills, and Career Advancement. According to the ULS website,

Power skills include competencies in communication, teamwork and collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving and more. Technical skills include industry-specific, and in some cases, job-specific skills in information technology, business, agriculture, health care, sustainability, and more. Career advancement skills include topics such as leadership, public speaking, management and negotiation. (universitylearningstore.org)

No prerequisites or transcripts are required nor is an application for admission. Students simply register online and begin taking courses at their own pace (The University Learning Store website). If students are “already proficient in a skill area, [they] may skip the course content and go directly to the assessment” (“How it Works”). They may also take practice assessments to test their comprehension before taking graded assessments. When they are ready, they take two graded assessments: the first is a multiple-choice assessment that is auto-graded, and the second is the “authentic assessment,” which is defined as “an assessor-graded project designed to show that [they] can apply [their] knowledge in practice” (“How it Works”). Students are given unlimited opportunities to pass the auto-graded assessment but only one attempt to pass the authentic assessment, which they must pass at 80-percent. Upon passing the authentic assessment, students earn a micro-credential that will appear in their student profile. When they have passed all of the micro-credentials within a skills track, they earn a certificate, which is downloadable to share with
employers ("How it Works").

The Networks. In 2014, the University Learning Store concept came to life when Schejbal wrote a white paper on it, which has continued to evolve in specificity. The original version is no longer available, since Schejbal did not retain it as he revised the paper to reflect the concept’s development and operationalization. This chapter explores three distinct types of networks engaged at three different levels of influence, a framework suggested by one of Schejbal’s team members (see below) as reflective of the process: (1) Schejbal’s existing leadership team within UW-Extension’s CEOEL division, (2) the extended network of Schejbal’s team members (largely regional but with some national contacts), and (3) Schejbal’s existing national network that includes both a small, close-knit group of fellow, national higher education leaders in Continuing Education (which refer to themselves as “ASG”), and the national higher education media. “ASG,” is an acronym the group members adopted, which originally stood for “a small group,” (and by which they identify themselves privately and informally); now, publically and more officially, they indicate it stands for “Action, Solutions & Growth” (Schejbal).

The three distinct network arenas in which the ULS idea was germinated and moved into implementation serve a useful framework for exploring and tracking the breadth of networking engagement around the ULS concept and its respective impact at each expanding level. They were originally described by one of Schejbal’s team members this way:

You almost think of what it is that we’re doing here as a series of concentric circles. We need to first understand and find value internally, and that’s [UW-Extension CEOEL] directors and deans. The next layer is working with the [primarily regional] industry folks to sort of give us some feedback. Then the next layer is ASG.

While there are some differences in interview accounts of the order of each circle’s engagement around the ULS idea (likely related to the different perspectives of each
individual within the network, the elusive nature of memory, and the at-times simultaneous engagement of multiple network layers), all three networks played key roles in the University Learning Store development over time. For the purposes of presenting the data and findings, in the sections that follow, the network types/layers are described as distinct, though networks, by their very nature, are complex, intricate webs of relationships.

**The First Layer: Internal Network of CEOEL’s Leadership Team.** At the organizational level, Schejbal initially presented the ULS idea to his UW-Extension assistant dean- and director-level leadership team, including his senior direct reports (assistant deans and HR director) and the directors immediately below them who are responsible for the areas of user interface, instructional design, instructional technology, marketing, etc. They engaged around the idea to understand, refine, and, ultimately, implement ULS. The leadership team members, in their interviews, described their engagement with the ULS concept via a process that seems to be a pattern in their teams’ work interactions in general.

One team member explained, “We tend to have our Dean [Schejbal], who is very forward-thinking, come up with an idea. Then it’s oftentimes left up to the directors to operationalize or figure out what are the steps between idea to execution.” Before those steps could be identified, however, the idea had to be distilled and fleshed out. As another team member describes it, “David had something in his mind so he used the rest of us as kind of a sounding board to get some thoughts.” While the idea was introduced in an initial meeting, it took additional meetings for the team to work through the concepts with Schejbal. One team member explained,

> It took quite a bit of dialogue for the rest of us to get a clear understanding of what he was thinking because the idea continued to mature over time, so there was a lot of interactions and talking, going away from that meeting and thinking, and letting it bake some more….

This development over time is a strategy Schejbal’s team describes as typical for him. As that team member further explains, “David is a very organic person when it comes
to ideas and formulating them out, and having them get a little more structured over time.

But that’s definitely the way he likes to drive his changes.”

Over a period of subsequent meetings, the idea matured, until one day, the meeting changed in focus from fleshing out the idea to operationalizing it into a model that could be launched. One team member recalls,

Although I don’t remember what day it was or what time of the year it was, I remember David saying, “Alright. We need some focus,” so he put a date on the table and said, “Let’s put a prototype together and let’s get something out there.” Then that immediately focused everybody into, “Okay. How are we going to make this work?”

**The Next Layer: The Team’s Network.** As Schejbal’s team worked to develop that prototype—including ideas on the form of the ULS (competency-based, micro-credentialing) as well as its content and delivery platform—they leveraged an array of professional, corporate, and university system networks. One team member explained, “As the project grew, we would tap into other requisite groups, based on needs that we had. That’s how we approach a lot of our ideas. We start out as a core and then these layers of concentric circles simply involve people as the need arises.” The team members’ subsequent outreach to their own connections represents the second level of engagement in this analysis of the web of Schejbal’s networked relationships.

**Developing Relationships with Like-Minded Innovators.** Having a network of like-minded innovators to reach out to, of course, involves cultivating such relationships prior to needing them. Like Schejbal’s own external relationships (discussed later), his team members’ web of external relationships were established long before the ULS idea took shape and were leveraged to develop and implement ULS. One key member of Schejbal’s leadership team indicated that her thinking around the innovation itself, using CBE and micro-credentialing, had been primed through her professional conference attendance, and the national network of innovative professionals she had begun to develop. The key to
developing those relationships is found in how she approached the function of conference attendance, which is primarily about relationships-building and only secondarily about learning about any particular new innovation. She explained: “I don’t go there to get brand new ideas of how to think differently” because “by the time a company shows up [at a conference], even in the vendor display area, they would be well on their way to supporting higher ed.” Instead, she explains, “you’ve got to be looking around the edges” when attending such an event. Those “edges” tend to entail applications outside of typical higher education practices. As she spells out, “it’s like put[ting] yourself in this environment that is just so foreign, but you’re going to learn something. And maybe it applies, maybe it doesn’t. But it certainly will spur on some new ideas and you’ll meet people who have ideas.” When the opportunity comes and she sees something really innovative and interesting, she indicates, “I'm getting these little like antenna going up and I'm going, I've got to go meet that person,' so I dash up there. I exchange cards. I say, 'Hello.' That gives me the entrée to give a phone call later, and that's just what I do." This is how she builds the associations that feed her thinking on innovation later. In short, as she sees it, entrepreneurial people tend to gravitate toward and build their networks with like-minded individuals, regardless of the specific innovation.

At the same time, this team member explains, the team must pay attention to new practices potentially applicable to higher education, to be prepared for where the market may be headed. For example, she has been tracking “the entrepreneurial focus on ed tech start-ups and education, [and] businesses with a purpose, and [has] been watching that bubble around higher ed for awhile.” This foreknowledge of what is coming around the bend in higher education is only possible, however, if the team is looking outside of academia to see what is trending. She explains that vision is achieved through a process of “insert[ing] yourself into arenas that you aren’t normally in so that you can start to see the
world a little differently.” That is what generates innovation. That, she contends is “when I start to think about, ‘What if? What could we do?’” Thus her and other team members’ exposure to ideas outside of their primary industry plants seeds of ideas that take hold in the subconscious to be germinated and nurtured when the opportunity for developing something like the ULS presents itself.

_Gathering Input for Content Generation._ Not only does prior exposure to a vast array of networks fuel idea-generation and innovative thinking, but ongoing relationships provide a source of contacts for fleshing out ideas. For example, the ULS idea was presented to a group of regional business leaders within the networks of Schejbal’s leadership team, for the primary purpose of contributing to content generation. As another team member explains,

_We decided we needed to go out to business to see if they had an interest, so we held a meeting on the Oshkosh campus with business professionals, some high level executives, and some mid-range folks in HR and sort of the C-suite, and they were a collection of folks from sort of the Fox Valley area—Mercury Marine, a few others, Arien’s, which is actually in Brillion, Wisconsin. But anyway, long story short, we wanted to get their impression about what some of the skills gap needs were for their employees._

The meeting with business leaders was held in conjunction with a retreat of “most of the organization’s [UW Extension’s CEOEL] leadership, and then a couple of senior information processing consultants,” according to the senior CEOEL team member who eventually took on project management of ULS. Those business leaders, he said, were largely a “manufacturing-centric group” due to the geographic region of Wisconsin from which they were drawn.

The specific business leaders invited to the retreat were identified through existing professional networks of members of Schejbal’s team. As one team member explained, “one of our [assistant] deans has a really good grouping of connections that we can tap into from some of his past work as a continuing education professional.” Utilizing that existing
network, the ULS team was able pull together the right people to provide input into the model's content. Such networking is recognized by the team as pivotal to their success. As that team member goes on to explain,

That's actually one of our strengths. One of our key reasons why we’re successful is not only are we innovative but we’ve got some pretty deep relationships with external partners that we can tap into. And they know that what we’re going to create, typically, will have meaning and value, so they’re eager to sort of share.

He also shared his own role in reaching out to industry, talent management, and HR groups, including the local (Madison, WI) chapters of Association for Talent Development and the Society for Human Resource Professionals:

I definitely made connections to the Association for Talent Development because I’m a local member of that group, and I knew that this type of experience of micro-credentialing was related to the type of work that that group does. The Association for Talent Development is very much focused on soft skill training, in many ways, so I knew that they’d have an interest. I presented to their Board. Their President happens to actually be an acquaintance of mine.

The stated role of the business leader group was to help identify the specific curriculum to be developed in the University Learning Store. According to the ULS project manager, the business leaders were asked, “what sorts of skills did they consider valuable, where did they see the gaps, what kinds of credentials would they be interested in?” But their feedback, he shared, also served a secondary function—as a “kind of a reinforcement of what a lot of the literature was saying.” That feedback confirmed for him that “there’s essentially a soft skills—or what we’ve sometimes referred to as a power skills—gap. There are a wide variety of terms for this set of skills, but these are essentially kind of your social and functional workplace skills.” The business leaders' identification of these requisite employment skills, which confirmed the team's research, solidified the focus of the courses developed in the University Learning Store even as it lent a legitimacy to both the content and the appeal of the use of an alternative delivery platform for the Store.

Infrastructure Networking. A separate, secondary web of relationships was
leveraged by Schejbal’s team members, this time related to infrastructure, capacity-building and risk-sharing functions. One team member described recognizing the value of seeking a platform delivery partner: first, she related, “I couldn’t turn my IT team to building a solution for this because we just didn’t have the capacity to do that.” Furthermore, “a partnership was going to be a good way to make this happen because we could share the risk with somebody..., allowing us to experiment, but to keep it light enough that we could move on to something else if this wasn’t going to work.” So, Schejbal’s team members started out with a temporary partner while they developed an RFP for a long-term solution.

The RFP process alone required Schejbal’s team to effectively leverage another network—this time of university system relationships—as they attempted to do something not typical of state university bidding to secure resources. In essence, these relationships became critical for removing protocol roadblocks to a new approach. One team member described how unlike a typical university process for buying a product, through which the university pays a large licensing fee for those services, Schejbal’s team had something different in mind: “We wanted to partner with somebody who would be willing to change [or] develop their platform in a way that was in line with our vision, and allow us to use this as our way to launch the Store,” she said. Furthermore, she explained, ULS wanted to use a revenue-sharing agreement, through which the partner’s investment would be repaid. Because the university system was not accustomed to that protocol, however, this team member explained, it took multiple iterations of working with the system’s legal counsel to come up with an approach they could approve. She provided a glimpse into what that networking looked like:

You have to have good relationships on campus and in the System with all of those different units and groups in order to help you achieve your goals. So, making sure you don’t just toss something over the fence to somebody and say, “Hey, here. Go figure it out,” but you’ve got to...have a dialogue and help them understand what you’re trying to achieve.
The key is establishing and maintaining network relationships as an "ongoing dialogue," a give-and-take. She goes on to explain:

Pretty much, most people I’ve ever encountered, want to help you solve your problems. You just have to be human with them and be able to see it as a relationship. Try to understand what motivates them, in their roles, so that you can help them with their issues and problems, and the things that come their way. So, you realize it's a two-way street; it's not just a "I need something and here, you're there to help me get what I need." It's a back and forth. Those relationships don't just happen at the time you need them. They have to be cultivated in an ongoing fashion.

The process of that cultivation is key to understanding how such networking works. She explained, in general, how she develops such relationships by spending time talking about the concept from vision to a very specific example, or “use case.” She said it is not only important to describe “something really concrete so that people can get their arms around it and understand it,” but it is also critical to give “the partner a sense of control, and decision over that action.” Timing and the careful meting out of information are also very important to the process. She explained,

It’s kind of like planting a seed. You don’t want to spring it all on people at once. You want to build the capacity of that idea so they become familiar with it over time...so that when you get to the point where you want them to buy into it, they’ve at least had an understanding over time.

This relationship-building process, she also described as "scaffolding," and underscored how important it is to the building of trust, “because we can’t be non-existent in our partners’ eyes and then come to them one day and ask for something of them.” The ongoing cultivation of the UW System relationships helped Schejbal’s team gain acceptance of a non-standard protocol, enabling the University Learning Store to explore options outside of the typical state RFP process.

Finding their ultimate platform provider, Fidelis, was accomplished through a more remote association but was followed by the establishing of new, strong connection, engaging yet another set of Schejbal’s team members’ networks. One team member described how a former associate dean suggested the team explore a relationship with
Fidelis because of the competency-based education work they had done with the Starbucks program at Arizona State. When the team followed up, ULS’s program manager met with the Fidelis CEO. Though they hadn’t known each other previously, ULS’s program manager reported that they had connected readily as a result of their shared ideas about how to proceed with ULS. The ULS program manager explained of Fidelis’ CEO, “While he’s coming from a very different perspective, he has a similar vision. There was something convergent about the way that I and he were thinking about how credentialing might work, and... might work to fit this market need.” This connection based on shared vision contributed to a strong network relationship (albeit, a new one) when UW-Extension eventually partnered with Fidelis for the project platform development.

**The Third Layer: Schejbal’s Extended Network.** The third critical network layer which was key to not only the development of the concept for the University Learning Store and its implementation but to its ultimate large scale promotion was Schejbal’s extended national network. This network consists of two distinct arenas: the first is his connection to a group of peer continuing education leaders in the area of continuing education that he worked with to develop and deliver the content for the ULS, and the second involves the national media and educational organizations which served to promote ULS.

**Part 1 – ASG.** ASG, an informal academic peer group (as opposed to a formal association, such as the University Professional Continuing Education Association), is comprised of about a dozen continuing education leaders, including Schejbal, who have known each other well from professional conferences and association memberships over the years. They decided to form an unofficial group fifteen to twenty years ago, meeting twice per year to explore partnership ideas. Schejbal joined ASG nine years ago, when he first came to UW-Extension. The unifying features of ASG member institutions seem to be their similar institutional status, desire for a larger and more aggressive scale of continuing
education programming, and their comparable capacity-building and access to resources.

As one member explained,

> We found that most of the organizations we belong to were not really addressing the needs of major, aggressive, entrepreneurial, Research 1 (R1) university continuing education operations. I'm talking operations that go from $30 to $150 million per year. We found that scale meant a lot to us, and the fact that we were research universities and that we knew each other, and knew that each of us had the decision-making authority to actually make decisions and do cooperative ventures and so forth, meant that, as a small group—and I think there's now 12 of us—that we could actually cooperate and learn from one another more effectively than if we were part of a larger group like UPCEA.

Another partner mentioned the importance of each of the members having strong instructional design units, which gives them greater capacity to work on large projects with other institutions, something not all continuing education units have the capacity to do. These features enabled them to each bring enough to the table—in resources, capacity, and decision-making—to be powerful yet equal contributors.

ASG served first as a sounding board for the ULS idea and then as the pool from which the ULS partners emerged. Some eventual ULS partners, in their interviews, shared that they had been simultaneously germinating their own ideas on how to address the rapidly changing non-credit market, with some similar components in their approaches to that which was proposed in ULS. One partner, for example, had been working on developing shorter courses to meet market demand but was concerned about the relatively narrow scale of the market they could reach with their products. As they were producing more courses, they wondered how to get a bigger return on their investments. ULS carried with it the promise of a larger distribution outlet. It also addressed two new components that were shaping the market: competency-based education and alternate credentialing. He recognized a synergy in these elements: by combining the notion of modularity his institution has already been exploring with the competency-based format, ULS could deliver alternative credentialing and badges.

Another partner, who previously led the learning technology research lab, first at
the University of Wisconsin System office and later at UW-Extension, under Schejbal’s leadership, indicated that he helped to develop an early prototype that later formed the basis for ULS. While at UW System, he had invited Schejbal to serve on his advisory board. Schejbal’s ideas complemented his own for, as he described it, Schejbal was focused on the outreach side, of marketing the concept, while he was focused on the team-building and the technological capabilities to be able to deliver the program.

For Schejbal, ASG was an ideal group for the development of the ULS concept because of the established relationships of group members and the open sharing of this kind of innovative thinking. As he describes it, “There wasn’t any need to build trust. We already trusted each other. We’d known each other for a long time. We were good colleagues, so we weren’t starting from scratch.” One partner describes the candor and trust in the relationships this way:

I can get on the phone and call and ask people what they’re doing about Coursera, what they’re doing about alternative credentialing and so forth, and it’s very critical that I get the really straight poop from people about what they’re doing, and it’s really very, very handy for me.

Members’ long-standing professional friendships and trust thus served as the basis for exploring partnerships which could further their individual and institutional goals while lending them national scale and credibility by partnering with other recognized and respected institutions. Schejbal describes the group as coming together because “we know that for higher education partnering is very difficult across institutional boundaries.” Furthermore, according to Schejbal, the group is “very personality-driven, and the principal deans of the continuing ed or extension units have to be members. They have to agree to want to partner with the other institutions around various programs or efforts.” Willingness alone is not sufficient, however, as, according to Schejbal, some continuing education leaders at R1 institutions don’t have decision-making autonomy to commit their institutions
to partnership. So willingness must be coupled with authority.

Due to the strict membership criteria and the lack of large scale partnership ideas, prior to the introduction of the ULS, partnerships within ASG had been very small and limited. As one partner described it:

We've had a few certificate programs that we've done jointly together across our institutions over the years. Nothing as substantial as The Learning Store, but lots of small collaborations, and it's all about the fact that we have these networked relationships that I think makes those small projects work because I think it's about trust. It has to be about trust to get things started that are brand new.

Even as these small projects had value, the group sought something with larger scale and broad enough applicability to align with the various directions member institutions were going in continuing education. As Schejbal explained, “For a while, there was a lot of wheel spinning. We just couldn't find traction on something to partner around. Then when I floated The University Learning Store, that got quite a bit of traction.” The group had finally found a national scale project around which to partner. As another member described it, “The relationships, by themselves, hadn't led to much out of ASG over several years, but when this issue [ULS] came up, it was a significant issue enough to everybody that it sort of catalyzed the group.” Another partner indicated that the ULS provided a project of significant enough interest and scale to provide focus for the group: “The notion is that if we come together and we each contribute modules that there will be a more critical mass that would attract people to this particular store and get us the greater exposure for our courses than we could otherwise, just on our own.”

Not all ASG members, however, could partner on the project, due to constraints within their organizations. One member withdrew his institution's participation, for example, because, according to Schejbal, the provost there was opposed to competency-based education. Other schools withdrew because they simply didn’t think that ULS would work for them. According to one partner, self-selection was based both on the receptiveness
of their institutions and the prioritization within their units. Schejbal characterized those who stayed to partner as "more entrepreneurial than the rest." They were perceived as more willing to take risks.

Membership in ASG soon became a requirement to participate in the University Learning Store even as ULS became the primary focus of ASG. In fact, as one member explained, it became the only project being worked on by the partners. With this singular focus, the responsibilities of member institutions related to ULS became clearer as well. The earliest version available of Schejbal’s white paper, from April 7, 2015, identifies the ASG institutions working on ULS as the core group to “jointly develop the criteria for the student experience, including size, style, and format of modules; criteria for assessments; size, type, and form of credentials; etc.” Furthermore, according to Schejbal, each of the partners is responsible for providing content by way of complete course offerings. While there has been a lot of discussion and debate among ASG partner deans about the approach they would take to implementing ULS, one partner indicated, "I don’t think it’s actually settled now." Thus, the ULS partnership continues to be a work in progress.

Of the roughly dozen schools represented in ASG, only five remained ULS partners as the ULS came to launch. Schejbal described how when the Store gained national media attention (to be discussed more fully toward the end of this data section on ULS), other non-ASG institutions expressed interest in joining but were turned away because they were not a part of ASG. As Schejbal describes it, “ASG is kind of an exclusive club. The members decide who we like. It’s absolutely personality-driven.” And while he acknowledged, with a laugh, that in this characterization he was "being a little flip," Schejbal also outlined the clear criteria for membership: members must lead Continuing Education units of institutions in North America (including Canada as well as the U.S.), their institutions must be R1, and the leaders must all have the decision-making autonomy and capacity to partner. In short, “it
has to be people with some significant clout and power, and money that they can bring to bear on these initiatives” (Schejbal).

While the ASG/ULS leadership network thus evolved to be restrictive according to the established criteria of the partner members, keeping out those they chose to exclude, at the same time the group struggled to bring in members who met the criteria that they sought to include, to increase their critical mass. Schejbal shared the separate stories of invitations to Continuing Education leaders at three other institutions, only one of which resulted in a new member entering the collaborative. The first invitation went to a new dean of an ASG member institution, and, Schejbal indicated, while there was some initial interest, it just didn’t go anywhere. The other invitation was extended to an interested dean at a prestigious institution that did not belong to ASG, but which was then invited to join ASG in order to partner on the ULS. But, ultimately, after considering the work to be done to develop products for the ULS, Schejbal indicated, they decided they just didn’t have the staffing to do it. In both of these cases, the invitation to those outside of the established ASG network did not materialize in new membership. The one, notable exception is when a member of the ASG group retired and his successor was successfully integrated into ASG. When asked about trust-building with that new member, Schejbal indicated, “It wasn’t hard. I mean, [the new dean] is pretty affable, and he came into the group, and was willing to partner; we all kind of gave each other a virtual hug and it was okay” (Schejbal). It is not clear to what, if any, extent the former (retired) dean’s relationship with ASG and the successor dean played a role in the successful transition to the new dean. What is clear is that ASG and ULS began to evolve into an increasingly closed network.

**Developing Terms of the Partner Dean Relationships.** As the ASG partner deans have worked on the ULS project, each has had to determine the extent of their time and resource investment over the course of the ULS development and implementation.
Ultimately, it is a matter of prioritization for each partner, and each is bound only by the strength of their sense of commitment to each other and the project. No terms have been codified in writing, at least at the time of the interviews, in the Fall of 2016.

The lack of written contractual financial responsibility suggests the extent to which there is trust in the network. Working without an overall ULS business plan, partner institutions have the freedom to invest financially at their individual comfort levels, and partners are taken at their word. As Schejbal explains,

> We have no business model at the moment. What we’ve agreed to is that each institution would develop 15 to 20 verified competencies, so the individual small modules, little mini courses, over the course of the fiscal year. We would self-fund those. How the individual institutions pay for them is up to those individual institutions.

The individual partners’ determination of their level of financial investment as well as the prioritization of the ULS project within their continuing education units has ultimately led to a variable level of commitment across the project. In fact, two of the partners used the word “experimental” to describe project. One followed up with, “It may or may not get legs. It may or may not have traction, but to know that we all worked on it together gives a different sense of collaborating and networking than just simply coming together to share information.” Another noted the ULS’s function in keeping his unit future-focused, but he has put relatively limited resources into it. He said, “I’m waiting to see what happens, really.” This kind of tentativeness about the project has resulted in delays in developing courses for the Store. Thus, inventory is limited, a primary challenge for ULS. A third partner delayed launching content with the rest of the partners when he learned that the delivery platform would need to change, so that his team wouldn’t have to develop their content separately, twice, to adapt to each learning environment. He explained, “I just wasn’t ready to invest those kinds of resources when I had so many other things to get done at my own operation.” As a result, he describes his current role in relation to ULS role, as a
“supporter” but not "an active player."

Accountability of any kind is difficult to impose when working with partners whose commitment is not contractual. As one of Schejbal’s team members describes it, “We have to be very careful. We don’t dictate to our partners what they create, but we share with them how we have a hierarchy and how we create relationships internally [to drive accountability], and they can choose to handle it how they would like.” While UW-Extension has little control over how the partners manage their processes to develop their product, according to one of Schejbal's team members, they still require them, in many ways, to follow best practices. So, for example, UW-Extension uses “content validators” in industry to review and validate the context of their courses—a process managed by the Instructional Design Team. If partners “choose to follow that [process], they can,” says Schejbal’s team member. "If they choose not to, they can have a different path, but it’s not optional to not validate the content."

In many ways, Schejbal strives to manage accountability through the deans’ relationship of camaraderie and trust, where it doesn’t exist hierarchically or contractually. As Schejbal describes it, “At the ASG meetings, I asked the principle deans to commit to having a certain number of products on the shelves by a particular time, and then I bug them, but the most I can do is be an annoyance. I mean I have no other recourse.” When asked how that is working, Schejbal replied, "Well with some; not great with others." When asked how he "bugs them," he explained:

Well, I call them and say, "Hey, you said you were going to have ten new things for The Learning Store by two weeks from now. We haven’t seen anything. How’s it going?" Then they usually get a little embarrassed, and then they call up their people who are doing the work and say, "Hey, Schejbal is bugging me. Where is this stuff?"

Thus generating embarrassment and attempting to impose a sense of responsibility is the key strategy at play. As one of Schejbal’s team members explains it,
That's the interesting thing about these relationships. We don't have a lot of teeth. It's sort of a Gentleman's Agreement. There's probably a more politically-correct way of referring to that, but a lot of these seem like handshake conversations of, "We need you to do this. Here's how we've done it. You can choose to follow or not, but it's not an option not to do that important step."

It remains to be seen if the network ties will prove strong enough to support accountability without written agreed-upon terms.

**ASG Partner Networks.** The networks of the partner deans in ASG are a critical part of Schejbal's extended network as the commitment of the partner institutions and their continuing education teams is key to the success of ULS. As part of working through their individual levels of commitment, ASG partner deans had to negotiate their networks back at their home institutions to gain acceptance for their continuing education unit's participation in ULS, based on the expected contributions and benefits the partners bring. One ASG partner, for example, brought expertise in digital marketing. His institution had been considering alternative credentialing to the traditional degree, and they joined the ULS project to gain from UW-Extension's background in competency-based education and the opportunity to generate a more prominent distribution outlet for their instructional products. Another partner brought expertise in assessment and testing, with the ULS providing an arena for experimenting with its application in competency-based education. A third partner came from Wisconsin, having previously worked on Schejbal's team, and brought his expertise on competency-based education (CBE). This working knowledge of the vision of UW-Extension helped him communicate the ULS goal and its benefits. And, of course, a key factor for all of the partners gaining support from their institutional leadership teams was each institution's ability to determine its own financial commitment. As one partner explained, he was able to obtain his CFO and Chief Operations Officer's support when they understood that "I had a specific amount of money that I was going to spend on it, and then I was going to wait and see what was going to happen, and we were going to
reassess it later on.”

Gaining buy-in from their institutions involved more than just outlining the benefits and the commitments to the institution’s leadership. The deans also had to rally the excitement of their respective continuing education teams, which had other existing priorities. This was true even at UW-Extension, where Schejbal’s team must balance the priority of ULS with other of the unit’s functions. Schejbal explained,

This is the third leg of our revenue stool: So we have our collaborative degree programs, which are really traditional, credit, online degree programs in partnership with campuses across the UW System. We have flexible-option programs, competency-based programs in partnership with campuses across the System, and now we’re starting to do our own. And then this non-credit effort.

Having multiple simultaneous priorities means that no one priority gets exclusive focus: “My time,” Schejbal described, “is divided probably into thirds, and then one of those thirds is divided into halves.” What this means is that there’s “probably a third for The University Learning Store, a third for our business degree and other programs, and then a third for other stuff, other administration. And then I carve off a piece for scholarship.”

The need to juggle multiple priorities is a challenge of the partners as well. One partner explained,

I’ve tried to be very careful about not pushing this on the team here just simply because it was something we were doing in Wisconsin. So we’ve been a little bit slower than the other universities despite the fact that I have a little bit more insight [and] working knowledge than maybe the other deans do.

The dance has been delicate with the team members at the partners’ home institutions. One partner shared that when he agreed to join the ULS partnership, one of the things he said is, ’These projects are great, but they can’t take too much of our time, so let’s really drive some clarity around what this particular project looks like.’ That dean relied on his team members at his own institution to assess the ULS project and decide on their level of engagement. Part of the team’s ultimate embracing of the idea revolved around the opportunity to gain access and exposure to new ideas: “they got very excited because they
got to go get trained on something new [CBE], and they're seeing what's happening in other parts of the country, and just getting a fresh perspective gets people pretty excited about this.” That helped him to win his team over. Nevertheless, the ULS had to be prioritized among other of the unit’s projects. In the end, he describes ULS as not a primary priority for his institution: “it’s very helpful for us to have designers and others who understand what's involved in developing competency-based education, but it is not a major focus for either our unit or the [university] right now.”

This struggle reveals an inherent conflict in the role of ASG as a network for developing cross-institutional partnerships: it hasn’t addressed the logistics of how shared initiatives fit into individual institutional agendas. Two partners voiced concerns about this, with one clearly outlining the dilemma, saying,

So [ASG] being very intentional about coming together to look for things to try to collaborate on versus just getting together to share information is, I think, a huge difference in the way a group functions. And I think it is sometimes hard when you get together, people can brainstorm lots of great ideas, and then when the rubber meets the road, everybody is going, “Whoa! My unit’s priorities don’t match that.”

To facilitate the project’s implementation within their units, some of the partners shared that they utilized some structural changes—whether formally or informally. One partner shared that he incorporated the concept of “reimagining learning” into his unit’s strategic plan as a way to bring CBE and the work of ULS into the the operational focus of the organization. He also placed key individuals in leadership roles to serve as champions. He explained,

I brought a couple people with me from [my previous institution] who knew my approach and my style, and I have hired some new leaders as well, who more readily adopt the positions I am advocating and actually believe in them. So, it’s easier once you have more people on board.

Despite that attempt to leverage his relationships with those who embrace his position to win others over, there remains a split in his senior leadership team: “The new people that I brought on board and some of the old people are totally supportive; others are sort of wait
and see." So gaining buy-in remains a constant challenge. He shared, "It’s a constant issue of persuading people and influencing them, and sharing the facts and the data that point us in a direction, and having a dialogue around it."

In Schejbal’s unit, Schejbal identified a project manager for ULS, which has provided some structural clarity for the team and, as one team member put it, “we have all easily fallen into our roles around the table.” Ultimately, though, that team member shared, "we’re still relying heavily on the core team that was part of the initial ideation and development,” and the team members "haven’t talked a lot about when do we transition to an operational [mode], because we’re not quite there yet.”

Another partner shared that he has used a more informal kind of reorganization of his unit for the ULS project, organizing team members into task forces with time-limited roles. For example, he has assigned some instructional designers to think about how his unit will develop the products required for ULS and other team members to determine whether the courses they develop will be offered individually by their institution or just through The Learning Store. In short, individual team members are assigned time-limited roles to make certain decisions on key aspects of the institution’s participation in ULS.

ASG Sub-Networks. As a shared means to gain buy-in from their respective teams, the deans formed subgroups of their assistant dean- and director-level direct reports, with representatives from the respective partner institutions, which have become their own branch networks. As Schejbal indicated,

It used to be that just the principle deans of those ASG partners would meet, but now we're bringing the instructional designers, and they meet, and we bring the media people, and they meet. We bring the IT people, and they meet. So they are building their own communities, which they have found to be incredibly valuable.

The first step to reaching out to partners’ teams was being able to tell them a compelling story to gain their interest, and, ultimately, their commitment to the ULS
concept. One of Schejbal’s team members explained that he was tasked with preparing and delivering that story. This was accomplished, he indicated, by not only by setting aside time for conference calls with counterparts but by developing a “really succinct, clear presentation: Here’s how we’re going to assess. Here’s how we rank competencies. Here’s how we create and curate the curriculum that goes along with those competencies so people can achieve that assessment.”

Another of Schejbal’s team members indicated that her primary role was to “create a community out of the member cooperative,” out of the ULS subgroups. She talked about addressing skepticism with external partners as it arose by reaching out to determine the source of the concerns to see it could be addressed through dialogue. She further elaborated on the importance of maintaining the partnerships:

I have tried to, at all costs, to keep a relationship intact because that’s so important in order to work together, and going forward. Because we don’t get to just cut our bait and run on to a different partner. We have to manage these relationships. It’s really important.

She also explained how to she went out of her way to show appreciation, sharing success, and recognizing people publically, whenever possible, to affirm the relationships. As she summed it up, “I need people to want to work with me and my team, for whatever reason it is, but I need them to. So being able to get that buy-in, it’s a process. It’s not just about one action.”

Assigning each of the subgroups a shared task was the strategy the deans decided to use to bring the subgroups together to prompt collaboration and create that community. While the deans provided the structure, they asked the subgroups to come up with the projects they would work on together. As Schejbal sees it,

Most of my work is in being the gadfly to start a process, and then to empower the people who actually do the work to get it done, and to take barriers out of their way and to provide them with the resources they need. So the initial efforts to bring people together, those were mine, but then there were individuals who willingly took on leadership roles.

The first subgroup to meet was the instructional designers across ASG. For that
subgroup, networking around a shared project of their choosing was effective to solidify the group’s working relationship. The instructional design group came up with an online course for faculty on how to teach online. They called it “Best in Show,” and Schejbal indicated that it is still being used by a number of institutions, even outside of ASG. As one of Schejbal’s team members indicated, “I think once you get a successful project, people can agree that, ‘Wow. Look at the value of working together allowed us to create something that was so much more valuable than working in a satellite way.” In working on that project together, the instructional designers “formed the [necessary] social relationships with their counterparts at those other institutions” (Schejbal) to develop trust and generate excitement around working together. The development of the relationship by working on a small project, according to one of Schejbal’s team members, enabled the subgroup members “to put aside some of their concerns with, ‘We don’t like that approach,’ and they’re willing to do it because they see a return on the investment.” In the end, one of Schejbal’s team members notes, “all organizations, including our own, are always sort of calculating the ROI.” Thus, the value of the small projects led to the building of relationships of trust and a shared recognition of the value for each organization of working together for the larger project—ULS.

Subsequently many, though not all, of the other subgroups began following suit. As Schejbal explains, “The deans are creating the structures, but the impetus for it is coming now from our staff. Because once the instructional designers came back and said, ‘Hey, this was great,’ my IT people said, ‘We could use something like that’” (Schejbal). So, the deans came up with ways to bring the various leadership team members together in subgroups when ASG meets. As Schejbal describes it,

They are building their own communities, which they have found to be incredibly valuable, not just around The Learning Store, but they’re now able to have two-day retreats that aren’t conference-like, but they’re actual real conversations about, ‘Hey, what are you doing in your
Schejbal indicates that now there’s also a marketing group that’s evolved in similar ways with leadership from his staff, because his office just “tends to be the ringleader.”

The perception of the usefulness of those communities may be different by partner, however. One ASG partner dean indicated that the marketing people got together and were sort of like, “Why are we here? What are we doing?” At least that’s the report that I got back. Okay? So, we’ve struggled a bit with that. I think there’s one exception. I think the instructional designers have done a better job.

Other leadership team members were simply not interested in meeting in subgroups. Schejbal explains:

I know that [one partner] has really wanted the chief financial officers to come together but has been completely unsuccessful in convincing the chief financial officers that they really want to do it…. And, we haven’t brought programming people or student services people together, so it’s really the techies that seem to benefit the most from this.

Thus, it seems a perceived benefit to collaboration rather than simply collaborating for collaboration’s sake was necessary for building successful sub-networks around the innovation.

**Part 2 – National Media & Educational Organizations.** The second part of Schejbal’s extended network, which was specifically for promoting the ULS, was the national media and key national educational support organizations. Schejbal leveraged his contacts with individual members of the media in key positions to, as he put it, “create buzz, interest, publicity, etc.” around the project. Certainly, the involvement of the partners from the ASG group garnered initial media attention and provided validation for the ULS concept and its promise. As one of Schejbal’s team members indicated,

once we were able to expand the circle of influence by including the ASG Group, people then started to say, ‘Hmm. Not only is this one reputable organization, but there’s others;’ so you start that grassroots effort and it grows and becomes something more than grassroots.

The challenge is keeping the media’s interest as the partnerships develop and the concept works its way to implementation. Schejbal referred to “either working with or
keeping warm” reporters he personally knows from Inside Higher Ed, and PBS News Hour. The purpose of these media contacts is to create interest and excitement around ULS. Schejbal has maintained these contacts because, he says, he wants to make sure that they are aware of what ULS doing at every stage of implementation.

Another key member of Schejbal’s national network is the Lumina Foundation. It brought together higher education institutions exploring the use of competency-based education as it was gaining national attention. Lumina originally invited representatives of about 20 institutions, including UW-Extension, their regional accrediting bodies, and the Department of Education to an initial meeting. “But then Lumina kind of culled the herd,” as Schejbal describes it, “and reduced it to seven institutions that were invited back,” including UW-Extension and Southern New Hampshire University. Those seven institutions comprised the nucleus of what’s now the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN).

After the establishment of C-BEN, on which Schejbal served as president and is now on the board, he shared, Lumina paid for quarterly face-to-face meetings, often bringing in the accreditors and representatives from the Department of Education to really talk about competency-based education. This, support, Schejbal explained, started to give a competency-based education network of higher education leaders “some shape and form, and to encourage institutions to develop competency-based programs.”

Schejbal’s relationship with the Lumina Foundation preceded his ULS work, as he also had experience with them when they supported UW-Extension in the development of their Flexible Option competency-based online degree, for which Lumina provided a $1.2 million grant (Schejbal). This previous project gave Schejbal and his UW-Extension team credibility in working with Lumina, which is also “very interested in what we’re doing because we’re starting with The Learning Store to build pathways into our business degree competency-based program” (Schejbal).
Schejbal has maintained contacts within the Lumina Foundation and the Department of Education. Both of these organizations, according to Schejbal, “see the same problem in terms of getting Americans to [their educational] milestones, and that it's not going to happen through traditional credentials, through associate and baccalaureate degrees. It's going to have to happen through a bigger effort.” These organizations are interested in innovative approaches with the capacity to bring about change in the way education is delivered and credentialed, so, as Schejbal puts it, "they're looking at anything from coding camps to The Learning Store, to pretty much anything else." Unlike providers offering credit-based CBE programs, however, Schejbal and his partners in ULS aren't maintaining connections to these organization as a result of "worrying about regulations and permissions, because there really aren't any" in the unregulated, non-credit ULS (Schejbal).

Each of these relationships became interconnected through the attention they drew to the innovation in an increasing rippling effect. As Schejbal explains,

There’s a snowball effort with lots of feedback loops. So bringing R1 schools together to do something like this is by itself newsworthy. So then Paul Fain [of Inside Higher Education] writes this great article, which then makes all the principal deans feel really good, so now they're more committed. Lumina Foundation notices this and people at [the Department of] Ed notice this. Now they want to know more, so now they're engaged. Then they get engaged, and then the principal deans feel even better. They're hearing from their provosts and their chancellors, "Hey, that was a great article. I didn't know that Washington was involved in this. Do more of that."

Thus through this process of networked engagement, continued interest and involvement generated even further involvement and commitment, helping the innovation to grow in visibility and importance for the partners, media and support organizations.

**Conclusion.** Originating in a whitepaper, a potentially revolutionary continuing education concept was refined through reviews and feedback by a series of established, concentric networks, and validated and promoted through extended networks. Relationships were leveraged to design the model, identify and validate the curriculum,
build infrastructure capacity, construct a prototype, assign responsibilities and build
relationships within a multi-institutional partnership, and foster a sense of accountability.
Furthermore, promotion was used not only to draw attention to the model but to enhance
partner commitment. All of this took place while partnering units juggled multiple, and, at
time, competing responsibilities with limited budgets and no formal agreement.

**College for America**

This section presents the data regarding the networking of the second of the two
innovations for this study, *College for America*. Data are formatted to include a short
introduction to the innovation followed by the detailed facts of the study in response to the
research questions. Data were gathered through a review of available documents and
interviews with the leaders, their relevant leadership staff, and members of key external
stakeholders in their networks. For College for America, interviewees included the
innovation leader, Paul LeBlanc; direct reports and other key members of his CfA leadership
team; his first business-to-business partner; and representatives from the regional
accrediting organization and the Department of Education. Analyses, by innovation, follows
in a subsequent chapter.

**The Innovation and the Institution.** Piloted with 400 students over a nine-month
period beginning in January 2013, *College for America* (CfA) is a distinct division of Southern
New Hampshire University (SNHU), one of three separate colleges within the private, non-
profit university. Founded in 1932, SNHU’s traditional campus, referred to internally as
University College (UC), offers a residential college experience to approximately 4,000
students. In 1995, the university launched SNHU Online, which is known internally as COCE
(College of Online and Continuing Education), and has had tremendous nationwide success.
Today, COCE serves another nearly 100,000 students. Separate from both of these while still
under the umbrella of SNHU, CfA is, according to its website, “dedicated to making a college
degree achievable for every working adult,” by providing “flexibly scheduled, uniquely
applicable, competency-based education for just $3,000 per year (or less),”
(http://collegeforamerica.org/about-college-for-america/). CfA today serves approximately
8,000 students.

CfA is potentially disruptive to American Higher Education, based on a number of factors. First, it offers fully-accredited, online, credit- and degree-bearing competency-based
education, at a significantly lower price point than similar degrees offered by traditional
institutions. Second, it operates on a business-to-business model whereby companies
partner with CfA to provide access to their employees to this degree program. CfA was also
the first college in the United States to be granted approval by the U.S. Department of
Education to offer students federal financial-aid funding for credit instruction based on
competency mastery rather than traditional time spent receiving instruction (Spin Ed,
2013). In short, it appreciably moved the national dial on access to, and innovative delivery
of, competency-based education in ways none of its predecessors had.

The way students who are enrolled in CfA earn their degrees is by demonstrating
mastery of a set of competencies (120 for the Associate’s Degree and 240 for the Bachelor’s
Degree) rather than by earning credit through taking structured courses. In addition to
having no structured courses, CfA utilizes no teachers. Instead, content is delivered online
from open educational resources available on the Internet. Furthermore, “unlike a
traditional online class, where the professor usually acts as a moderator and assigns
readings,” CfA “encourage[es] students to become independent learners who make effective
use of the Internet” (Spin Ed, 2013). As a result, what tends to happen is that “students rely
on each other—not teachers [as there are none]—to learn and complete relevant, real-
world tasks” (Spin Ed, 2013). Then, rather than taking exams, students demonstrate
mastery through projects that reflect such real world outcomes such as developing spreadsheets. They can take as much or as little time as needed to achieve mastery before submitting their tasks for review. Then, rather than receiving a grade, they are either told “'Congratulations, you have achieved mastery' and move on, or 'Not yet,'” explains SNHU President, Paul LeBlanc (qtd. in Spin Ed, 2013). When assessments indicate that students have not achieved mastery, students are given feedback on how to improve before trying again. Successfully completed tasks are also accumulated in an ePortfolio, which students can share with their employers or others who may wish to see the evidence of their learning. In this way, the educational focus shifts from the process of learning to its outcomes—the final products the students produce.

The Concept & its Inception. The initial concept for this innovative model for educational delivery emerged from a white paper entitled “The Next Big Thing,” penned by SNHU President Paul LeBlanc, on a plane trip back to the United States from Malaysia, in 2011. That paper in its entirety was subsequently published via a link embedded in an article about the model in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Parry, 2011).

In this earliest vision of what would become the CfA model, LeBlanc references Clayton Christensen, who was the keynote speaker at the March 2011 American Council on Education conference, where, according to LeBlanc, Christensen outlined the ways that higher education, with a seeming lock on the industry, might come to be disrupted by innovative new entrants into the marketplace using technology to address concerns around access, cost to students, completion rates, learning outcomes, unsustainable funding models, and quality. (LeBlanc, 2011)

To take those on, LeBlanc boldly claimed, ”We believe we have the conceptual design for the next iteration of online learning, one that addresses the issues we face as entry and one that stands to dramatically alter the nature of higher education” (2011).

LeBlanc's conceptual model identified many of the features of what became CfA:
online, self-paced, instructorless, using formative assessments with feedback, peer counsel, access to subject-matter experts, and being offered “close to free of charge” (2011). The centerpiece, or “game changing idea,” as LeBlanc (2011) called it, is that “when we have the assessment right, we should not care how a student achieves learning.” In short, the method of content acquisition should be irrelevant. As a result, LeBlanc forcefully asserted, “We can blow up the delivery models and be free to try anything that shows itself to work” (2011, underlined in original). Furthermore, LeBlanc (2011) stressed,

If we get it right, then almost any organization can become a higher education provider or at least supporter by providing access to technology, on-site support and coaching, and peer gatherings for students wishing to use our courses, online support, and eventually our assessment.

In fact, in that paper, LeBlanc foresaw the possibility of such partnerships in multiple forms, recognizing that all the features of the model could “be supported locally and independently by the Urban League, though it could as easily be a church group, a local social service agency, an employer’s workplace, or high school.” This claim later served as the seed from which the business-to-business partnership model developed.

Tuition, LeBlanc reasoned, could be “close to free of charge” because “the cost of faculty is removed from the equation,” and instead of paying for textbooks, students would utilize “Open Courseware and other free content.” All that students would need to pay for would be “a modest fee for ... access to an actual expert in the field,” the “‘real’ assessment at the end of the course (including proctoring), and the credits at the end” (LeBlanc, 2011).

Furthermore, LeBlanc recognized that the component parts of his model were not new. Portfolio development for prior learning assessment has been incorporated into higher education for quite some time, and “other parts of the model exist is some form today” (2011). He acknowledged:

Western Governor’s University is using mentoring faculty and peer-to-peer learning support. Straighter Line and the Gates Foundation are working on self-paced models. Open courseware initiatives at Carnegie Mellon and MIT are proving rich learning materials online
and in the former case, excellent assessment. The Lumina Foundation is working on agreed upon learning outcomes for courses in its Tuning Project and the Gates Foundation has an effort underway to better measure learning outcomes.

What made LeBlanc’s concept not only innovative, but potentially disruptive, in his mind, was the integration of these existing features: “What is radical is the notion of bringing them all together and blowing up the delivery models” (2011). LeBlanc (2011) saw this delivery model as a reversal of traditional education, in which seat time is fixed and learning is variable; in his new model, “seat time [would be] variable and learning fixed.” Through this reversal, LeBlanc (2011) boldly predicted, “We stand to revolutionize higher education.”

**The Revolutionary Process & Its Networks.** Also in the initial vision captured in “The Next Big Thing” whitepaper, LeBlanc (2011) suggested the means by which he would implement this revolutionary model development. Again, he turned to the work of Clayton Christensen, a member, not insignificantly, of LeBlanc’s personal and professional network (discussed below). Referencing Christensen’s 1997 book, *Innovator’s Dilemma*, LeBlanc (2011) believed that “disruptive innovation first takes hold on the margins” and, thus, “we propose to start, working with community partners to pilot the program.” The plan was to expand on that pilot as the program experienced success: “With proof of concept and a track record,” LeBlanc (2011) indicated, “scalability [will be] easy since there are virtually no capital costs involved.”

As he moved the CfA idea from concept to implementation, LeBlanc leveraged multiple networks to achieve his goals. The objectives accomplished at multiple stages to advance CfA serve as a useful framework for exploring and tracking the network engagement employed to each stage and its respective impact upon the next objectives. While the objectives and their stages are listed here primarily chronologically, there is some overlap in their actual pursuit. For the purposes of this analysis, the objectives are explored
as follows: 1) develop the model, 2) secure initial validation (via a Gates grant and regional accreditation) for direct assessment, 3) launch a pilot 4) gain Department of Education approval to distribute Title IV student federal financial aid in a direct assessment program, and 5) scale up the model, expanding the partner networks.

**Objective 1: Develop the Model.** LeBlanc’s approach to developing the model started with assembling and intentionally segregating a team, separating it structurally from SNHU’s traditional campus and College for Online and Continuing Education (COCE). This tactic was influenced by the work of Clayton Christensen, with whom he’d had a long personal and professional relationship. LeBlanc met Christensen while in his Master’s degree program at Boston College, long before Christensen became famous for his work on disruptive innovation. The two played basketball together, built a relationship and stayed in touch, LeBlanc explained. Then, when LeBlanc worked at Houghton Mifflin in the 1990s, he hired Christensen, as a strategy consultant, when Christensen was just emerging as an expert in disruptive innovation. The two co-wrote an article in the 1990s on innovation in higher education, which was published in the New England Board of Higher Education magazine called *Connections* at that time. Today, LeBlanc refers to that collaboration as “prescient,” saying “we kind of called a lot of what’s been played out.”

When LeBlanc came to SNHU, he persuaded Christensen to join SNHU’s board. At that point in time, LeBlanc explains, Christensen was so famous that when people would hear he was on SNHU’s board, “they’d be like, ‘Who are you guys again? Why don’t we know about you?’” Thus, Christensen’s membership on the SNHU board in and of itself was “a huge, validating presence,” according to LeBlanc. More than just a board member, however, Christensen had a more direct impact on the development of College for America. As they were working through the model development, LeBlanc shares, “Clay was a good source of counsel.” As LeBlanc describes:
We followed his playbook. I mean everything I'm talking about: separate good people in the room to play by different rules, serve an underserved market first because that's where innovation gets the most traction. Those are all the jobs to be done. That's all out of Clay's research.

This is a same process LeBlanc had used before in the development of SNHU's online college, COCE, when it was implemented as a separate unit from the traditional campus. With College for America, he returned to that process.

Employing "the Christensen playbook," LeBlanc first brought together those already within his organization with the greatest expertise to move the new project forward, reassigning them to a separate and new unit for the new work. Those two individuals, like Christensen, not incidentally, were also longtime members of LeBlanc's network. Both were working in other capacities for SNHU at that time, and, before that, knew LeBlanc from other relationships. Before coming to SNHU, the first indicated she and LeBlanc had overlapping social circles, in that their children went to school together, and the other was introduced to LeBlanc through a mutual professional contact who encouraged both to meet one another over lunch. In both cases, the team members were tapped, or recommended, for their expertise in software development and marketing, respectively, and hired initially by SNHU in other capacities but then pulled out of their existing units to begin to work on the CfA concept. When LeBlanc identified the two of them to work on the new model, one recalls this conversation with LeBlanc:

We said, "How are we going to do this?" He said, "We're going to really airlift you out. We're going to put you in a spot where people don't know where you are." It was like a secret operation. We call it Room 106, Robert Frost 106, and he said, "We've got to figure this model out, and we've got three months."

This sequestration of units, LeBlanc indicated, is a Christensen concept to keep the organization from competing with its own other offerings. LeBlanc recalls conversations with Christensen in which LeBlanc indicates, "We were saying 'College for America is so much cheaper than online. We're going to cannibalize our online revenues and really can't
afford to do that. That’s too big a source for us.” Sequestration of the new unit—and targeting the new model to a different market (discussed below)—helped to decrease that threat. Ultimately, however, LeBlanc points out, “That’s one of the biggest problems that incumbent organizations face when they create their own disruptions: how do we not disrupt ourselves in the act?”

Next, LeBlanc added to his sequestered team to two. He did this primarily by tapping his existing external professional networks for those who he knew had the needed expertise, and from there, the emerging CfA team followed suit, tapping their own networks to grow the team further. One new CfA team member LeBlanc had met years before at Houghton Mifflin and was already serving on the SNHU board. Another knew him from his work at his previous institution (Marlboro College), had stayed in touch, and called when looking for a career change. Yet another met LeBlanc and one of the two originally reassigned SNHU team members at a professional meeting on assessment. LeBlanc was impressed with her expertise and followed up, initially hiring her as a consultant to help CfA write for a Gates Foundation NGLC grant and later bringing her on board with CfA full-time. A team of two came to CfA together as a result of existing relationships with LeBlanc and another CfA team member. While at least two of the initial team members were hired without a previous connection to LeBlanc or other senior team members, the array of connections in the initial team is striking in comparison to the instances of their absence. And, of the two hires without a prior connection, one subsequently expanded the LeBlanc network by assembling his own team by drawing from his network from previous professional relationships.

The leveraging of existing networks to build most of the new team accomplished a number of objectives, according to LeBlanc and his team. First, it ensured getting proven expertise for the new work. As LeBlanc describes it, “I feel like my job is largely the talent
recruitment business, and then putting the right talent in the right seats.” Given the importance of that task to the success of the model, there is an assurance in hiring those with proven ability. As LeBlanc explains,

I don’t want to do a search if I don’t have to. Searches are bets. I like to take risk out of the equation. The danger is that maybe you’re not interviewing somebody who would be even better or that your network doesn’t have enough diversity in it, so you’re never getting diverse as you should be. So I try to balance my bias. Like, I’m conscious that it’s a bias. I’m also thinking, “Is this a case where you do a search?” or is this a case where “No, no, let’s reach into the network because we know somebody”? It’s kind of a case-by-case.

By utilizing primarily an established network to build the initial team, LeBlanc and his new team members brought in successful professionals who they knew were equipped to handle the challenge of the project and had the expertise to succeed.

In many cases, finding the best hires meant tapping these talented individuals from LeBlanc and his team members’ professional networks outside of academia. This diversity of experience became an important strategy when “advocating for a different type of higher ed[ucation],” according to LeBlanc’s team member who leads CfA as its Executive Officer. Some key hires were telling. For example, the assessment expert came from Educational Testing Services (ETS), though had also served formerly as a faculty member elsewhere.

The business development team intentionally sought out people who could “talk to businesses, business leaders, CEOs, and Chief Human Resource people,” the Executive Director shared, and thus were tapped from business-to-business sales and workforce consulting. For the Chief Marketing Officer, CfA's Executive Director explained, “I wanted somebody with a background in policy and advocacy, and regular old marketing who had a good business sense who could help us do this kind of thought leadership and content marketing.”

Trust is another critical component of LeBlanc’s network tapping, not just for the initial team building but for also for the process, based on Christensen's innovation
principles. LeBlanc indicated, "We often go to our network to say, 'Who do we know that can do this for us?" He is suggesting not just the search for expertise but also for reliability and, ultimately, trust. Over and over again, team members referenced the correlation between knowing someone well, having witnessed their professional competency, and trusting them.

Furthermore, seeking Clayton Christensen's counsel on the model also exhibited LeBlanc’s trust in Christensen, which developed over the course of their relationship. LeBlanc shared that Christensen was “very helpful” in CfA’s decision to use a Business-to-Business format for CfA partnerships. He trusted Christensen’s expertise on approaches to disruptive innovation and, in particular, on the recommendation to deliver CfA initially only to incumbent employees of partner businesses, in what is referred to as a Business-to-Business (B2B) model. This approach enabled SNHU to implement the model without jeopardizing their other higher education offerings. As LeBlanc explained:

That was a Clay bit of counsel. At some point, you have to disrupt yourself because if you don't do it, others will. But in the interim, what you want to try to do, he said, is try to keep a very different sales channel. In other words, direct it to a very different customer. That's why we did B2B in some part.

Finally, network tapping, whenever possible, accomplished the objective of bringing in individuals who would generate significant enthusiasm, energy, and commitment to the CfA project. Almost without exception, LeBlanc’s team members interviewed shared a passion about the CfA project and its potential to disrupt higher education. Of course some of this enthusiasm could be attributed to what one team member called “The Paul Effect.” As she described it, “he’s enormously charismatic and really a visionary whose vision and sense of excitement, and some purpose, makes people think, ‘Oh! I could do this!’ or “Yes, we could do that!” LeBlanc describes his role, and the role of any college president, in generating that kind of enthusiasm from his team as that of a “Chief Storyteller.” He elaborates, “It’s an important part of our jobs... [It's] the ability to outline a vision that
inspires people…. Human beings are story-consuming machines. We love narrative. So [it’s] the ability to craft the narrative that people [can] get behind.”

While the vision LeBlanc described was clearly highly motivating, he also tapped people who would respond with great enthusiasm. As that team member went on to explain, “One of the things that’s unusual about Paul is that there are many visionaries, but there are not too many people who are as strategic as he is about making that vision happen.” That strategy includes targeting the right people to carry out that vision. As she further explains, “I don’t think he’s particularly interested in the details of implementation and there’s no reason why he should be, but he’s pretty good at getting people who are.” Thus, this particular team member was excitedly accepting the invitation to join CfA at the end of the dinner at which LeBlanc extended the invitation. Similarly, another team member recalls responding rather quickly to the invitation with “Sign me up!” That vision—and the use of it with networked individuals moved to enthusiastic action by the promise of the vision—also later helped to gain CfA partners in the models’ implementation.

**Objective 2: Initial Validation: Gates Grant & Regional Accreditation.**

*Gates Grant.* Even before the full CfA team was assembled, the early team members worked to write a grant proposal for the EDUCAUSE Gates’ Foundation Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) Grant. For help writing that grant, LeBlanc and one of the first two CfA team members reached out to an assessment expert from ETS. She then invited them to a January 2012 meeting at ETS. She recalls having “a great time” meeting the early CfA team, and she began working with them immediately to write the Gates’ grant, which CfA was awarded. Six months later, she left ETS and formally joined CfA.

That ETS meeting turned out to be pivotal for introducing LeBlanc to a number of individuals who would be important connections later in the advancement of CfA. At ETS, he and the early team members met not only the assessment expert they would hire but also a
representative from the Gates Foundation and a former Department of Education (DOE) member. According to LeBlanc, the Gates Foundation representative was encouraging about CfA’s pursuit of the NGLC grant. The former DOE member he met that day recalls “being really impressed with [LeBlanc] and thinking, ‘He’s somebody who I need to know. He’s going to be an important ally in this work, and he’s just an incredibly dynamic thinker.’” She was later instrumental in helping CfA navigate Washington in pursuit of approval for student federal financial aid for direct assessment. That meeting’s networking was so key to a series of CfA goals that LeBlanc referred to it, jokingly, as “that fateful ETS meeting.”

The Gates NGLC Grant provided not only capital for new models projects ($1M) but metrics for success of the developing model, what one team member referred to as “the 5-5-5 challenge”: 5,000 students in five years with over a 50% graduation rate at less than $5,000 per year in tuition. Thus, as LeBlanc explained, “the actual writing of the grant sharpen[ed] [our] thinking.” With the NGLC grant, LeBlanc explained that not only did they suddenly have resources but also another stakeholder to which they had to be accountable. Receiving the grant also provided important validation as they pursued regional accreditation and, later, Department of Education approval for Title IV funding.

**NEASC Approval.** Approval from SNHU’s regional accreditor, the New England Association of Colleges and Schools (NEASC), was necessary for CfA to offer degrees based on direct assessment. LeBlanc and his team moved quickly from securing the Gates grant to redirecting their efforts to securing regional accreditation for the new model. As LeBlanc indicated, it was a “kind of key milestone” for CfA to bring the direct assessment model to NEASC for approval. As the President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) at NEASC explains, “it was a substantive change, and [when] an institution wants to propose a substantive change, we work with them and try to help them make sure they are presenting all the information the Commission wants to know” to understand and
make a final decision about approving that change.

In preparation for bringing CfA's direct assessment model to NEASC, LeBlanc invited the CIHE President to SNHU for what he described as “an early preview” of what they were doing and to answer her questions, so that “she felt increasingly comfortable.” This wasn’t, however, their first meeting or LeBlanc's first time working with her or NEASC. In fact, LeBlanc describes how he had known the CIHE President for many years going back to his time at Springfield College as a faculty member when she was a candidate for a search.

LeBlanc explains, “She didn’t get the job, but we really hit it off and stayed in contact.” Later, when LeBlanc was president of Marlboro College, he joined the CIHE, where “she was the second in command.” LeBlanc served as a commissioner from 2000-2006 and was on the search committee that hired her as CIHE President. This relationship, according to LeBlanc, established SNHU and, thus, CfA as “a trusted agent.” Furthermore, he indicates,

We [SNHU] were an institution that was doing good work. We had just had a 10-year accreditation visit, and there were no conditions, which is rare. Like, literally, no follow-ups. It was a clean bill of health. So we were very well known. We had just had a thorough-going inspection. I think I was a trusted player for [the CIHE President] as somebody who had known her for a long time, but she had also seen my work on the Commission. She knew that I understood accreditation. We weren’t lowering or compromising the standards; we were just meeting them in very different ways.

While the CIHE President was cautious in how she characterized her support for CfA—clearly distinguishing that it was more about supporting SNHU through the process than having an opinion on the model, which was left to the Commission itself—she did share that she’s “a big fan of Paul's.” She indicated, “I always learn something from him, and I think our Commission was lucky, and I think in some ways accreditation was lucky, that the first proposal of this kind came in very well-done and from a place that is respected.”

Furthermore, when presenting to NEASC, LeBlanc shared, “we were able to show the Commission how we had cross-walked the competencies to existing [SNHU] associate’s degrees, establishing its equivalency.” This made a difference. As, the CIHE President
described,

It wasn’t that they were just proposing something out of a whole cloth. They could say, "Here’s this program that we’ve had for many years [a traditional Associate’s Degree], and we can do a translation and show that this program [direct assessment] is... going to get students to the same level of achievement as the program that we’ve offered for a long time to traditional students.”

In short, while “a lot of people can criticize the credit hour,” according to the Commission’s President, LeBlanc and his team brought credibility to that critique by being able to demonstrate they were not only able to—but already had—adapted traditional education to that alternative format. Knowing that, according the Commission’s President, was very helpful to the Commission.

The CfA model also offered an opportunity to the Commission to be on the leading edge of accrediting potentially disruptive innovation. As LeBlanc stated, “I do think that NEASC liked the idea that they would be the first of the regionals to approve such a program.” And, being in a place to approve a groundbreaking innovation, “it’s a lot easier when you have a trusted agent coming forward with an idea that looks very unfamiliar to you and may push you out of your comfort zone.” Thus, in October of 2012, CfA was extended NEASC accreditation to offer direct assessment.

**Objective 3: Launch Pilot: the First Partnership.** With NEASC approval in hand and the NGLC Gates’ Foundation Grant funding as well as the accompanying validation of their model from both sources, LeBlanc and his fledgling CfA team secured their first business-to-business partner, Anthem New Hampshire. The partnership model is essential to CfA because it is its enrollment strategy. CfA creates agreements with corporate partners to offer their employees access to CfA as the pathway to enrollment. There are rare exceptions to this model. This strategy not only provided a new pipeline for students but also served to insulate the CfA offerings from internal competition (with COCE and University College). Networking played a critical role in the development of the first B2B
partner. The President of Anthem in New Hampshire had known LeBlanc for years, though didn’t recall how they met: “It’s almost like in New Hampshire, it’s a small world. And it’s one of the things I love about it, but everybody does know everybody. If you’re leading an organization or a company, you’re going to see those people at events.” That informal professional relationship, nevertheless, opened the door to her receptiveness to LeBlanc when he called to ask for a meeting. She recalled,

I might not have ever taken that first meeting if it weren’t for my pre-existing knowledge of and relationship with Paul. I’ve got a lot of people coming at me that have something that, you know, I can’t live without. And usually, I don’t take the meeting. So, without a doubt, the connection was an important part of why I listened in the first place…. Without a doubt, it sort of greased the skids, in a way.

When LeBlanc and a member of his early team came to see her, the Anthem President recalled, “I really had no idea what the subject was going to be, but they explained it to me, really, from the ground up.” A part of that explanation was that they had taken this grant from The Gates Foundation, which lent credibility to their model which sought to break through the barriers to higher education for non-traditional, working students.

What ultimately won over the Anthem NH president, however, was a line of reasoning targeted directly at her perspective as an employer, the one piece of the narrative she recalled distinctly:

I remember one thing they told me is in the traditional approach to education, time is the constant, and how much you learn is the variable. Competency-based education flips that around. They related that to, as an employer, who is paying for tuition reimbursement, you give people this money, they go off, they take a class. And when they’re done and, let’s say, they got a B, so that qualifies for reimbursement, all you really know is, "Well, they arguably learned a little more than the person who got a C and a little less than the person that got an A. But what do you really know about what they know how to do?” So, this idea of competency-based education, in general, but especially as it relates to an employer’s perspective on it, is if you’re going to be making an investment in peoples’ education, wouldn’t it be nice to have a really clear understanding of what competencies they’ll be bringing back to the workplace?

In short, the argument was tailored to the employer’s perspectives and interests, and immediately she thought, “I knew they were absolutely right.”
Once they had won her over, the Anthem NH president indicated, “The ask was would I consider letting our workforce at Anthem New Hampshire be part of the pilot.” Of course, part of that offer was that Anthem employees would be able to participate in the pilot free of charge, which meant neither the enrolled employees nor the employer paid for classes for the nine-month pilot period. The grant funding enabled CfA to offer Anthem this opportunity without financial investment. “So, from that perspective,” she reasoned, “why wouldn’t we?” The combination of relationship, reason, opportunity, and reputation sealed the deal. She summed it up:

From day one, I honestly got hugely excited about what they were up to. Then, in practicality, why wouldn’t we try it? You know? I couldn’t see any downside to trying it. And, ... I knew, in general, what Paul and what Southern New Hampshire were up to, that they really were doing good stuff, and that their reputations preceded them with me. And I knew, again, this is a very innovative place, doing good stuff.

The enthusiasm of their first company partner helped CfA officially launch the pilot, when the company president generated excitement among employees by sending out an email, encouraging them to join. She recalled, “it said something along the lines of, ‘If you ever wish you had your college degree but didn’t think you could make it work, please read this.'” She said that the interest in the pilot, from the beginning, was tremendous, but it was the success that made the difference. She shared, “We had people get their Associate’s Degree in record-breaking time—a matter of months.”

When Anthem NH’s president began to witness success—captured in metrics from the pilot as well as individuals telling her their experience in the pilot was “life changing”—she shared that she was inspired to make a personal commitment to the CfA model, speaking on panels and attending a conference on their behalf to give the employer perspective. LeBlanc also credits her with coming up with an analogy he often uses to tell the story of CfA, comparing the model to the first time suitcases came out with wheels. The concept made so much sense, LeBlanc shared, “You wondered, ‘Why the hell did it take so
long for someone to figure this out?” Before long, LeBlanc invited her to serve on the SNHU board. Reluctant at first, already being on a number of external boards, she agreed, and shared that “honestly, it is the board that I am most excited about and bought in to.” Her continued enthusiasm and commitment would later be instrumental in taking CfA to a national level (which is discussed under Goal 5 below).

**Using Networks to Address Resistance back on Campus.** Of course, the success of launching a new initiative, including landing the Gates NGLC grant and a first business-to-business partnership, created some institutional resistance within the other divisions of SNHU, which LeBlanc anticipated and addressed through structural sequestration along with reaching out via his internal network. He described how just as the “online [program] had to be buffered from the traditional campus as [SNHU] grew it and moved it,” which “really allowed it to operate differently than the main campus,” CfA had to be similarly isolated. As LeBlanc sees it, “People talk about silos as being always a bad thing, but there’s some useful aspects to silos. And among those are that there are boundaries, and they’re hard to cross.” Such voluntary isolation allowed the group “a safe little space,...to let them plunge forward,” LeBlanc shared, “so, in many ways, CfA was quarantined.”

Ironically, however, not seeing this as the same kind of essential separation that COCE, the online division, had themselves experienced from the main campus when they were developing, “COCE really wanted to own it.” LeBlanc indicated, “There was a big conversation internally, with people wondering, ‘Why can’t we have it?’ And as it took shape, there was bit of, I think, internal jealousy.” LeBlanc attributed that jealousy to a fear of being superseded:

So, like when Mom and Dad bring the new baby home, the older kids are a little bit like, “Hey, wait a minute. We’re being displaced.” COCE was such a success story, and they got so much attention. It was like, you know, “But we’re the most beloved, you know, smart child.”

The media attention surrounding CfA exacerbated those fears. As LeBlanc explained,
CfA got so much attention, which compounded the jealousy, that other units responded with “Why don’t we have as much press? Why aren’t you talking about us as much?” Of course, LeBlanc said, he talks about everything, but “I can’t control what reporters want to talk about.”

So, in addition to separating the CfA unit, LeBlanc said, “there was that set of conversations to be had” to help the rest of SNHU accept the new unit’s growth and autonomy. For LeBlanc, the conversations that led to that acceptance came through “the ability to describe a very different audience for the program so that UC [University College] wasn’t threatened...and COCE didn’t feel threatened,” to get to the place they could recognize, “You’re not going to cannibalize us.” Furthermore, it helped that SNHU had been through this process before when COCE was developed and implemented. As LeBlanc explained, “The experience of having done it [sequestration of a new unit] once, successfully, with online [COCE], actually made people trust the process more when we tried to do it with College for America.”

LeBlanc and the CfA team also had to address questions related to CfA not using existing institutional processes, such as the curriculum review process, over which faculty typically exercised rights. The CfA team’s assessment expert addressed these concerns, leveraging her credibility as an academic. She shared,

I had been a college professor, I have pretty good bona fides in this department, so I think I could be reassuring in the sense that I could speak their language. I could certainly understand what it’s like to be a professor, and at the same time, we obviously had our own agenda, which was getting this thing up and running.

Thus, she indicated, “I was always being trotted out to talk to faculty” as she had been to the accreditors during accreditation “to show that what we were doing was equivalent to courses that already existed, or to programs that already existed.” To the faculty, “we made it clear that it had really strong academic foundations and the person who
was designing it had a Ph.D. from Cornell, worked at ETS, and all that...” she explained, which was similar to "part of our pitch to the accreditors...that really this was just another modality."

Another key point that LeBlanc underscored is the mutual benefits to the rest of the institution. He explained, for example, that “when we did Online, we made promises that people share in the success, and Online’s financial success would be good for the whole.” Those benefits not only materialized but in a very visible and palpable ways. LeBlanc explained, “you see that on the main campus with buildings we’ve built...We [had] pay raises in the middle of the recession. We’re on the Chronicle’s Best Colleges to Work For list, year after year. All that stuff matters to people.” In short, the success of each new unit of innovation creates “benefits that everyone enjoys.”

**Objective 4: Gain DOE Title IV Approval.** While the pilot was being launched, and with resistance on campus addressed, LeBlanc indicated, the CfA team could then pursue direct assessment approval from the U.S. Department of Education, which they submitted immediately upon NEASC approval. The primary reason for this DOE pursuit, LeBlanc asserted, was not, in fact, about the availability of financial aid for students; rather, it “would be important for validating to the world at large that this new fangled way of thinking about education was legitimate....” Each consecutive level of approval had provided a new level of validation: first Gates, then NEASC, and now DOE. By this stage, LeBlanc said, CfA was “going to go forward with or without it.” Thus, as they prepared their documentation, LeBlanc shared,

It wasn’t a question of persuasion. It was more education. Like, “Can I come in and walk you through what we’re trying to do? What the logic model is? How it works? Why I think you can be confident in it, in terms of quality and protections for consumers and other things that regulators worry about?”

As to the outcome, for LeBlanc, “It was just a question of whether our students
would have access to Title IV. Because our price points were so low, at $2,500 a year at the
time, it wasn’t clear to us if students needed a Title IV.”

Again, networks came into play in CfA’s DOE Title IV pursuit. The former
Department of Education representative who LeBlanc first met at “the fateful ETS meeting”
helped him that very meeting by pointing out that while direct assessment was originally
written into Title IV policy for Western Governor’s University, they were not using it. The
language, LeBlanc recalls, read: “‘In lieu of the credit hour, federal financial aid can be
disbursed on the basis of’—and the key phrase ‘direct assessment of student learning’.”
Thus, according to LeBlanc, the early CfA team members came out of that meeting thinking,
“‘Wow. So rather than trying to do a credit-hour-based program, we really could try to do
this other thing.’” So, they set out, from the beginning, to do direct assessment.

From their first introduction at the ETS meeting in January 2012, that same former
DOE representative helped LeBlanc navigate Washington, which, she said, “was a new space
for him, so he didn’t necessarily know who the players were and what some of the issues
were, or... how framing an issue differently for particular audiences could help.” Thus, that
Washington insider’s advice sometimes took the form of,

“Okay, look. Your desire is going to be to push really hard on this thing, but there’s a danger
if we push too hard too fast on the innovation that it then just gets opened... it gets opened
up really broadly and a bunch of terrible actors will come in and ruin the space and end up
harming students.”

LeBlanc listened, took that advice to heart, and “he would temper his comments,”
she said. Over time, he came to understand some of those issues—

why some of the barriers were in place, at least the intention of the barriers—and was
willing to be a leader in the field who people turned to, to not just say, "We need to take
down these barriers" but "We have to be careful about ensuring that we have some
protections for students at the same time."

Other individuals connected both to LeBlanc and his team played key roles in the
DOE approval process. This included Martha Kanter, who was then Under Secretary of
Education, and David Bergeron, who was Deputy Under Secretary. LeBlanc knew Kanter previously, as did the CfA team’s assessment expert. While LeBlanc did not remember how he and Kanter first met, he had known her for some time. His CfA assessment expert, who had worked previously at ETS, knew Kanter when Kanter served on an ETS advisory council while Chancellor of Foothill-DeAnza Community College District. Her prior relationship with Kanter, as well as their shared background at ETS, CfA’s assessment expert reasoned, “gave us credibility in terms of assessment” which she believed would help Kanter see that CfA’s direct assessment not “a wild and crazy idea.” And based on LeBlanc’s prior relationship with Kanter, he said he felt comfortable enough to be able to call upon her to say, “Would you help sort of pull all the parts together?” That influence was powerful. LeBlanc recalls:

I still remember being down in Washington where we went down to explain what we were trying to do and how we were trying to do it, and there were career people from the Department in the room who were clearly skeptical and were reading the rules in a pretty rigid way. And it was Martha and David who sat in on that meeting, and again and again sort of stepped in to say, “Well, yes, you could read it that way, but we could also read it this way, right?” And I think it was the force of their presence and their sort of commitment to try and figure this out that really allowed us to get Departmental approval.

DOE Title IV funding approval for College for America was granted on April 8, 2013. Reflecting back, LeBlanc shared, “both at the accreditation level and at the U.S. Department of Ed level, it was people and relationships that were very helpful in driving forward our progress.”

**Additional National Validation and Support.** Other critical national support and validation came from organizations like Lumina, which supported the development of the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) and from the Gates Personal Learning Network, which grew out of the Next Generation Learning Challenge.

Lumina, from its initial meeting with dozens of institutions exploring CBE in April 2013 to its subsequent investment of $10M in supporting additional meetings and providing grants for individual institutions, provided critical sponsorship. The institutions
which participated in the founding of C-BEN mutually shaped it even as it supported their efforts, according to the former DOE representative. The openness of C-BEN members to inter-institutional idea exchange has been critical: “for the most part, there really was a willingness to share—intellectual resources, lessons learned in the good and bad way, failures—and really trusting in this group.” This value of this open exchange was affirmed by CfA’s Executive Director, who indicated, “the relationships within C-BEN have been important to us. I think it has sustained the team, here, in terms of feeling like we’re not alone.” Through sharing not only of best practices but what she referred to as “war stories,” CBEN members from multiple institutions have worked through having “to reinvent financial aid policies and practices, registrar policies and practices, technology, implementation, integration.” In short, “you run into a lot of walls and having people who are successfully going through those walls is really important.”

The Gates Foundation also provided not only financial but convening support through their Personal Learning Network (PLN). The CfA team member responsible for the development of the online architecture found this support to be extremely beneficial:

So, we had a cohort, if you will, of grantees that went through [the NGLC grant process] together. So we met periodically. Then from that group and other groups, the Gates Foundation put together other kinds of networks for different kinds of challenges. So there were technology groups and there was a personalized learning network....

PLN members from other institutions, who she characterized as “in the throes of their own innovations” provided tactical and emotional support for CfA leaders. Thus, relationships of individuals going through similar challenges and experiences provided an important social support system to undergird the innovation process.

**Objective 5: Scale up Model & Promote Nationally.** Both simultaneous and subsequent to Department of Education approval, CfA began to scale up its model, by leveraging team members’ existing networks for the development of new business
partnerships. This became the ripple effect of LeBlanc’s initial networking. One of the first of these was the expansion of the Anthem partnership from a New Hampshire focus to a national effort. Key to that was the outreach to the national corporate headquarters by the president of the Anthem NH, who indicated she used her “relationships, inside Anthem, where I hope I have some credibility.” She explains, “I went to them and said, ‘Hey, we’re trying something up here in New Hampshire I think you guys should really pay attention to.’” According to Anthem’s then HR Director of the Northeast Region, who, not coincidentally now works for CfA in Partnership Development & Strategy (covered below), it took the Anthem NH President’s position to get the leadership to listen after numerous failed attempts to get a national partnership considered by moving the idea up through the corporate ranks. The two worked together tenaciously on the expansion of the Anthem partnership to a national level because both believed so strongly in the CfA experience. As the then-HR director said of the Anthem NH President, “She’s like a dog with a bone when it comes to this kind of stuff. When she wants you to hear it, you’re going to hear it.” It also helped that CfA was in the national spotlight and invited Anthem to send representatives to a meeting at the White House, which was arranged by CfA. As the Anthem NH President recalls:

One of the things that I think turned out to be really nice in terms of just galvanizing everything: College for America was invited to be at the White House for the upscaling convening or seminar, whatever you want to call it, that the Administration was doing, and we were invited to be a part of that. At that point, our Chief Human Resource Officer got involved directly, and I really think that was a really strong galvanizing event for us. Just being there and being a part of it directly, it put a sharper focus on it.

Today, Anthem is the biggest partner for College for America, in terms of enrollment, and, according to their former HR director who now serves in CfA’s partnership unit, is having “phenomenal success in regard to their metrics.”

Working today in CfA’s Partnership Development and Strategy division, the former
Anthem HR Director of the Northeast Region has the responsibility "to connect with and develop relationships with potential business partners to potentially bring them into the fold of College for America." Rather than a sales job, however, she sees it as about networking:

I look at it more as a relationship-building position where I kind of spread the word about College for America, what we do, how we do it, and why employers would really want to consider this seriously as part of their workforce development, their internal workforce development strategy and part of their talent management initiatives.

Not coincidentally, she landed the CfA job in part because she was a known quantity and pivotal player in the established network between CfA and her former employer. When the Northeast region HR director position was eliminated at Anthem, she reached out to her contacts at CfA, looking for a possible career move. The response was quick: “Well, it wasn’t more than two minutes later, I swear to God,” she said. “Two minutes later I get a call from the Director of Partnerships here who I knew and had been working with, trying to elevate this up through Anthem.” Two and a half months later, after going through the application and interview process, she began working at CfA.

In general, the scale-up process proceeded through leveraging a set of established networks, much like it did with Anthem. The challenge, according to CfA’s Executive Director, has been “finding enough employers that are willing to scale up the model, to scale it within their companies.” CfA has addressed the challenge of enrollment growth, according to the Executive Director, by “hiring good people who can talk to companies, through content marketing, conference attendance, [and] media presence.” They intentionally used their capacity to build and leverage networks with potential providers of enrollments. The CfA team also “worked hard on identifying the kind of employer [to] target, and what sectors have career pathways and an interest in working to develop their employees.” The insurance and health care sectors have been particularly successful arenas for CfA
expansion. The networking process, according to the Executive Director, looked like this:

So we started out focusing on individual employers. [For example], we built a relationship with Partners Healthcare in Boston. They essentially run all the big, famous hospitals in Boston—Mass General and Brigham Women’s—and they're a huge organization. We focused on them, rolling out our programs. Now we're looking at, “How, within New England, can we leverage those relationships through associations like the Mass Hospital Association, and others, to get into more intimate contact with other employees?” That's really it: how to leverage and build on those existing relationships.

One way to extend CfA’s reach was to begin to join professional associations for sectors into which they would like to make inroads. For example, the manager of the Partnership Development division indicated CfA joined the Massachusetts Hospital Association because, she said,

Their network is enormous and very influential. We just thought, "Well, here's a network that's designed to help people like us, members, connect to all these other entities that are in need of, in our case, education services." So we'll see how that works out, but it gives us a legitimacy and a way of introduction that is really great even though we've paid for it.

Furthermore, CfA hired a team of people who had previously established its own Workforce Strategy Center and had over a dozen years’ experience in business outreach, Those team members brought with them access to their network of employers, which has had a rippling out effect. One team member explained:

Having worked with Workforce Strategy Center for 13 years, we made lots of relationships there, so a lot of it comes from building out those relationships that we have had from the past, and it's also getting introduced to other people. We'll be talking to our colleagues that we know from the field about what we do and they'll say, “Gee, such and such could really benefit from this;” or “Have you thought about experimenting with a group like this?” so often we'll look to sort of build out that network.

One example of a relationship that came out of the Workforce Strategy Team’s network is CfA’s Indiana project. A networked colleague from a team member's previous work at the Center took a position at a foundation "looking to fund different kinds of models of higher education targeted to working adults." According to the CfA team member, that previous relationship “opened the door for a conversation.” Today, with grant funding from an Indiana workforce agency of the state, focused on increasing the state's degree attainment, CfA has hired and embedded someone in Indianapolis, who started just this past
When reaching out to businesses or leveraging their team members’ networks, CfA’s strategy is to identify a “mobilizer” within the external organization, which the Partnership division manager defines as a “true believer” with “social capital” and “a passion” for what CfA is trying to do, that they’re willing to share. Every town has them, one team member explained: “Money, power, charity. It’s such a tight network when you get up to the people that are really powerful or making decisions, or, really, social leaders.” The President of Anthem New Hampshire was one such mobilizer. How are others typically found?

According to the CfA Partnership division manager,

It’s referrals. Going to conferences helps because a lot of these people are out on the circuit. It’s reading, [staying] tuned in to a lot of education and workforce development, talent development, HR kind of media. But more and more...it’s going to somebody that I have a good working relationship with already and saying, "Who should I be talking to?"

She goes on to explain that initially the Partnership and Business Development division strategy was primarily “vertical,” by specific industry sectors, but now they also employ a “horizontal strategy,” recognizing that all kinds of industries have front line people who could benefit from CfA:

They all need customer service. They all need business acumen. They all need to be digitally fluent. So that’s a way to create a whole other series of networks that can be driven by industry partners, but also allows us to spread out in a very different way than we have.

The key in these networked relationships is to tap into their cross-industry professional circles. For example, she explains, “Call centers, as an operational area, have such a strong tribe. I mean they have their own events and media, and trade papers, and it’s incredible how much people are invested in that specific operational area.” One of the members of CfA’s Workforce Strategy Team explains how they connect to these circles by demonstrating

thought leadership, where we’ll publish pieces, short reports, [and] blogs; do webinars, go to conferences to talk about what we’re learning, about what’s happening with this crossroads of economic development and higher ed or, in particular, workforce development and higher
ed, and competency-based learning”

In short, as CfA grows, they are utilizing the networking strategies modelled by their leader and are, according to the Partnerships division manager, “really evolving in that way to see there are many layers of networks, and you kind of need to run parallel strategies.”

**The Media & Message Promotion.** Media has also been a powerful lever in the distribution of the promotional message to bring in new partners. *Inside Higher Ed, The Chronicle, The Wall Street Journal, NPR, Bloomberg* and *Yahoo* all covered the emerging model and its expansion. “Paul is great with the media,” explained CfA’s Executive Director. “You don’t have to go very far to find an article by or about Paul, plus we’d had many things written about us and our program.” Getting the Gates grant, receiving funding from Lumina, helping to found C-BEN, being the first to secure regional accreditation for direct assessment, and being the first to gain DOE approval for Title IV funding for CfA put SNHU and the model in the spotlight time and again. Such extensive coverage also further validated the model.

Additionally, LeBlanc, the CfA staff, and initial partners spoke at conferences and meetings, offered webinars, and wrote whitepapers, which showcased their belief in and commitment to the program. The message in these arenas was often different from what was delivered to SNHU traditional faculty and accreditors. As CfA’s assessment expert explains,

> there were places where emphasizing the Christensen and flash disruptive nature of this was what we emphasized, and there were other places where we made it clear that it had really strong academic foundations….it wasn't that either was untrue, it’s just that it was really a question of who the audience was.

Thus, CfA team members and their partners tailored their messages to underscore the features of the model that appealed most to their audiences.

As a result, potential partners began to reach out to CfA. Among the partnerships
which formed as a result of this widespread message promotion was a unique relationship with Kepler University in Rwanda and the pilot of a model working with a charter school, Match Education, in Boston. In the Rwanda example, some members of Kepler’s board heard LeBlanc speak at a New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) meeting in Boston and contacted CfA to explore, as CfA’s Executive Director described it, “a new model for higher education for Africa.” Today, there about 400 students and 100 SNHU graduates in Rwanda. For the charter school, CfA’s Executive Director shared, Match Education works with their young alumni who have not been successful and “provides extensive coaching and support, tutoring and mentoring services,” now in partnership with CfA.

**Conclusion.** From its inception as a white paper written on an airplane six years earlier to its enrollment in the Fall of 2016 of thousands of students around the United States (and in some other parts of the world), College for America has relied upon, and continues to leverage, connections made through relationships of networked individuals to bring in expertise, gain credibility, receive validation, cultivate partnerships, and grow in strength and prominence. At the helm of that model is a leader who, according to the former DOE representative who helped him navigate Washington, “sees opportunities everywhere and recognizes that relationships are critical to helping move things” and who is “able to build and maintain relationships across a huge variety of players and types.” Self-described as the institution’s “Chief Storyteller,” and in many ways its chief networker, LeBlanc—and by extension, his team—crafted the messages of the promise of the model first to recruit the expertise to build the model, and then to secure the authorizations to market it and the partners to invest in it, each time, according to one team member, “underscoring different aspects of the model”—at times emphasizing the disruptive nature of the innovation and at other times its foundation in traditional higher educational practices, always mindful of the audience and the relationship.
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

Introduction

This qualitative study provides insights into how leaders developed and leveraged networks to design and implement two potentially disruptive innovations, University Learning Store and College for America. In this chapter, the two sets of networks are analyzed—both individually and in comparison—to identify the important networks, their nature, structure, and functions engaged in the advancement of each innovation.

In the first part of the chapter, the nature and functions of each of the models’ networks are considered as well as the strategies used to activate, develop, and leverage networks. The nature of a network, for the purpose of this analysis, refers to its structure, scope, and stability. Structure addresses a network’s prescribed organization, whether formally-created (such as a unit or department within an organization), informally developed (as individuals come together of their own accord for a specific purpose), or organically emergent (with seem to develop spontaneously as individuals gravitate toward one another based on idea and vision alignment). Scope refers to the range of membership across institutional boundaries, such whether it is a network internal to an institution, cross-institutional within higher education, or external to higher education, as well as the degree to which the network is open or closed to new or fluctuating membership. Stability reflects a network’s longevity or duration, which typically corresponds to the strength of its membership ties and relational trust, all concepts central to the Social Network Analysis literature. The function of a network here refers to its purpose with respect to supporting and advancing the innovation. It is what the network does or provides. Finally, the strategies for activating, developing, and leveraging networks are explored after both nature and functions, addressing how leaders prompt and guide networks to address the work to be
The conceptual framework of Social Network Analysis (SNA) offers a complementary set of descriptors that are helpful to understanding different aspects of the cases. These include ten network strategies that will be explored following the analysis of the nature and functions of each set of networks, respectively by case. For ease of identification and clarity, these strategies are organized into three general categories by the type of engagement tactics they employ to generate commitment to, and promotion of, the innovation by relevant stakeholders: (1) Activating Pivotal Individuals, (2) Developing Support Structures, and (3) Leveraging Alliances. Emergent network features are also included under those general headings as well. These strategies will be defined when first identified and described within a network. The elements in Figure 1 below will be referred to throughout the analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activating, Developing, &amp; Leveraging Networks</th>
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<td>Engagement Tactic</td>
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</table>
| Activating Pivotal Individuals | ➢ Central Actor/Leader  
➢ Opinion Leader  
➢ Brokers/Bridges  
➢ Managing the Indecisive/Resisters  
➢ Storytelling (emergent) |
| Developing Supporting Structures | ➢ Inter-organizational Linkages  
➢ Diverse Ties  
➢ Adjusting Hierarchies  
➢ Snowball Effort (emergent) |
| Leveraging Alliances | ➢ Strong Ties  
➢ Relational Trust  
➢ Densely Connected Sub-Networks |

Figure 1. Engagement Tactics & Strategies. This figure organizes individual strategies from SNA literature, as well as emergent strategies of this study, for activating, developing, and leveraging networks into three categories by the type of engagement tactic they utilize.

In the latter portion of the chapter, the leaders’—and by extension, their team members’—networking strategies are compared to reveal common emerging patterns and insights that might be attributed to certain types of engagement, whether intentionally
designed or organically evolving. Likewise, the cross-model analysis in the next chapter exposes the similarities and differences that exist among their uses of networks.

The analysis is framed to respond to the research questions in both sections, though in the innovation analysis, those responses are organized by institutional case. In cross-case analysis section, in the next chapter, the commonalities and differences are examined beneath individual headers denoting bases for comparison. The research questions, as noted previously, are the following:

1. What is the nature of the relevant social networks of higher education leaders around potentially industry-disruptive innovation?
   a. What different types of networks are leveraged around the innovation?
   b. What types of people are in those networks and what are their roles in the innovation advancement?
   c. To what extent did the leaders use existing networks or did they create new ones?

2. In what ways do leaders activate, develop, and leverage those networks?
   a. In what order do they build or utilize networks?
   b. How do leaders engage internal and external networks differently? Around what issues?
   c. What strategies do leaders use to amplify engagement and support for the disruptive innovation within those networks while managing and countering resistance to it?

**The University Learning Store**

The University Learning Store portion of this study focused on the ways Dean David Schejbal, his counterpart deans from three of the ULS partner institutions, and their respective leadership teams utilized connections—whether from existing relationships or
by building new ones—to further their innovative model. The key elements of the study focus on both the nature and functions of the networks engaged (RQ 1) and the strategies used to engage them (RQ 2).

The Nature of the Networks. The University Learning Store case was organized around the concept’s introduction into three discrete sets of networks, described by a member of the Schejbal’s leadership team as a series of concentric circles, expanding outward in scope: (1) Schejbal’s internal leadership team at UW-Extension, (2) his team’s expanded (primarily regional) networks, and (3) Schejbal’s national networks of both the ASG and national media and educational organizations. While these networks are defined by their scope—the range of their membership, whether organizationally internal, cross-institutional or external (regional or national) as well as their openness to new or fluctuating membership—their scope is only one aspect of their nature. The networks as they emerged in the study are also explored by the nature of their structure (formal, informal, or organically emergent), and stability (longevity/duration and strength of membership ties).

The Nature of the First Layer. Schejbal’s internal leadership team was an established, stable, formally-structured, internal unit within UW-Extension’s office of Continuing Education, Outreach and E-Learning (CEOEL). As a team with longevity, its members had a pre-existing and ongoing formal working relationship along with an informal rapport and understanding of one another’s strengths and skills. They were, as group, well-connected with each other as well as with their leader. They were also a closed network, as no new members were added to the team as they took on the ULS project. The strength of their existing ties with one another, frequent interactions, history of completing other projects together, and relational trust enhanced their ability to work together on complex projects and subsequent productivity. The impact of this nature of their network
on their work on ULS will be addressed in the “Functions” section and on their activation as a network will be addressed in the “Activating, Developing, and Leveraging Networks” section following that.

*The Nature of the Second Layer.* Within the second layer of the concentric circles, Schejbal’s team members’ expanded networks, there were an array of formally structured and informal networks engaged. These serve as an extension of Schejbal’s own network in terms of the expanded scope of the outreach via his team members both within the UW System and to regional business leaders. Similar to the first concentric circle of internal formal working relationships, the CEOEL unit’s relationship with the University of Wisconsin System office pre-existed, was formally, structurally determined, and was a closed, internal network of members working within the university. Given the hierarchical protocol of that formal structure, it became necessary for Schejbal’s team to work with members of the UW System office on the contract process for securing a ULS delivery platform provider. However, as one of Schejbal’s team members pointed out in the interview, the informal relationships that had been nurtured over the years—network member to network member—made the difference in getting an alternate protocol for securing a vendor approved. Thus, while the formal network made the connection necessary, the informal relationship made it productive for Schejbal’s team. Like within the internal network of Schejbal’s immediate leadership team, informal relationships within these system relationships coupled with the formal, structural ones, strengthened member ties and relational trust, leading to a greater receptivity and response to the request to go outside the protocol for an exception based on the very specific needs of the organization for the ULS project.

Informal professional relationships were likewise important in the outreach of Schejbal’s team members to their expanded, external networks within the regional business
community to provide content suggestions for the ULS. While the business community members who were tapped had pre-existing connections in some way to a web of established relationships with one or more members of Schejbal’s leadership team, they were not necessarily connected to one another. Thus, they, as a group, did not constitute an established network. Instead, these regional business leaders had discrete, individual professional connections to individual members of Schejbal’s team. In short, Schejbal’s team and their work on this project established them quite loosely as a network, and a temporary or intermittent one at that, for very specific roles. Each business leader came to the table to share information with Schejbal’s team based on the strength of their individual relationships and, by extension, their trust in the competence and expected positive outcomes of Schejbal’s team’s work. While external to the academic organization, they were similarly a closed group, in that no new relationships were developed in this process. More on their purpose will be discussed in the “Functions” section later.

Informal, external relationships round out the second layer of the concentric circles, though with a new and emergent association to Schejbal’s ULS team. One of the very few new relationships in the ULS story developed when Schejbal’s team reached out to the CEO of Fidelis, based on a team member’s awareness of company’s reputation for building customized delivery platforms for other higher education institutions pursuing disruptive innovation. The key to the successful establishment of that new connection was for Schejbal’s team members to observe which of them developed the most natural, informal rapport with Fidelis’ CEO and then to foster that relationship as the primary source of contact between the two organizations, even as a more formal, contractual relationship between the two organizations was established. The organic emergence of that rapport between the Fidelis CEO and the member of Schejbal’s team who went on to become the program manager for the University Learning Store at UW-Extension was key to CEOEL
feeling comfortable working with Fidelis on the delivery platform.

**The Nature of the Third Layer.** The final layer of the concentric circles encompasses Schejbal’s national networks, including ASG. Like many of the networks in the inner concentric circles, ASG was a pre-existing and stable one, of significant duration. Having representation from select continuing education deans from around the country, this network’s scope was cross-institutional. While there were no formal contracts or structural policies governing their engagement, there were agreed-upon criteria for membership in what was, in Schejbal’s own words, “an exclusive club.” Membership was comprised, very strictly, of leaders only from R1 institutions with decision-making autonomy, and, as Schejbal characterized it, “significant clout and power and money.” Thus, while it began as an informal, professional colleague network, it became more rigidly defined and increasingly closed off to peer deans as the focus became exclusively on the ULS, with those members choose not to partner opting out and others not allowed in.

The ASG sub-networks, comprised of the members of the leadership teams of each of the partnering institutions, were created out of the pre-existing, formal leadership teams from each partner institution, and their coming together cross-institutionally was formally arranged and expected by their leader deans. In other words, a network of leaders (deans in ASG) created new networks within their functional areas. The relationships in the collective subgroups themselves did not exist prior to the ULS project but were intentionally orchestrated by the ASG deans. They were also not a contractual or organizationally formal structure, though the dean leaders assigned projects to these sub-networks, which imposed some structure upon them. This proved more successful in some instances than in others, with possible reasons for this inconsistent network-building explored in the discussion chapter. At this point, it is important to acknowledge that while these relationships remained informal structurally they were intentionally designed, not evolving naturally but
by arrangement of the dean leaders of each partner continuing education unit. Their membership access was also closed as it was limited to partner team members.

The final network explored in the outer ring of concentric circles is Schejbal’s external relationships with national educational organizations and media. These relationships, again, were primarily pre-existing, with both formal and, over time, informal elements. Schejbal had worked formally with the Lumina Foundation on a grant for a previous competency-based education project at UW-Extension, so he was a known as a leader with a successful earlier CBE innovation. This existing professional relationship is part of why Lumina invited him to their initial meeting of select higher education leaders working on CBE—a closed network. That invitation and the developing ASG partnership brought about greater media attention, bringing back reporters with whom Schejbal had existing informal professional relationships as they sought to cover his and his partners’ development of this new, promising higher education delivery model.

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** Nature of ULS Networks. This figure depicts the scope, structure, and stability of each of the ULS networks, highlighting that ULS networks were largely internal or cross-institutional, closed, and pre-existing.

In summary, the nature of the networks engaged in the development, implementation and promotion of the ULS model were primarily *pre-existing* and *closed*. While there were networks of various scope, four of the seven are internal or cross-institutional, which means they are comprised exclusively of university employees. While
both formal and informal networks were engaged, formal relationships provided the structure while informal relationships provided the interest and investment by network members to carry out the work. It is also significant to note (for later discussion) that the ASG Deans’ relationship was the only network that had only informal ties without any structural formality.

**The Functions of the Networks.** ULS was developed and implemented as a national partnership to bring greater visibility to, and to enhance the reputations and market primacy of, a set of continuing education units of R1 institutions. In fact, ASG was established as a network with the explicit function of identifying an idea around which to build a partnership to leverage the strength, credibility, resources, and autonomy of these institutions. Thus, when the ULS concept emerged, it became ASG’s focus. It also served as a response to a growing perception that higher education was losing ground as a provider of continuing education while non-academic companies filled the market as disruptors. It became a means to take on the market challengers. When Schejbal wrote his whitepaper on the ULS concept, in it he identified ASG as the group to “jointly develop the criteria for the student experience, including size, style and format of modules; criteria for assessments, size, type, and form of credentials, etc.” Hence, it appears not only that the network preceded the model’s concept but also that the concept was developed with the specific network in mind as the primary group to cultivate and implement it. In this sense, the model was not only network-dependent but it prioritized the network. The network was the starting point, and the concept was introduced and developed as a means around which to implement the network’s goal that justified the network’s existence.

To carry out those overarching functional goals, the other sets of networked relationships within the two inner concentric circles of ULS served a variety functions, which emerged from the case, including those associated with operationalizing the model
(idea-testing, concept-refinement, prototype-building, etc.) and those necessary to work with counterparts at partner institutions with whom no formal agreements existed. These functions are explored by networked group below.

**Functions of Schejbal’s Leadership Team.** The initial primary role of Schejbal’s leadership team was to operationalize the ULS concept. This included the functions of idea-testing and practical concept refinement, infrastructure- and capacity-building, and risk-minimization. They had to figure out how to build a prototype—which included determining the curriculum (the competencies, the course content, and the assessments), the delivery platform, and the processes by which registration, enrollment and completion would be managed and documented—all while managing the risk of exploring a new model that may or may not prove financially successful.

**Functions of Team’s Extended Networks.** To build out the prototype’s functions, Schejbal’s team tapped members of their existing extended networks. They convened a group of one another’s external business relationships for the purpose of building the curriculum. The team determined the content of the courses based upon identified employment skills gaps. The employer group also served secondarily as a validating source for the ideas the team had from their research, namely that soft skills—which the model ultimately called “power skills”—were in great demand. Schejbal’s team members also tapped their contacts within the University of Wisconsin System office to gain approval to go outside the typical RFP process to work with a partner to develop a unique delivery platform based on a risk- and revenue-sharing model. Furthermore, the team drew upon information they had learned about innovative technologies through their development of informal professional relationships with other innovators at conferences.

A later added role of Schejbal’s team was to foster working relationships and develop trust networks with their existing counterparts at the ULS partner institutions.
within ASG. The means by which to accomplish this relationship-building was through assigned projects, that were structured by the partner deans, to get their various unit counterparts working on together. When these projects were considered meaningful and valuable by the group members (i.e. the "Best in Show" project by the instructional designers across the partner institutions), the project—and by extension, its relationship-building aim—proved successful. When value was not perceived (i.e. among marketing and financial team members) the team members responded with confusion or resistance.

*Functions of National Organizations and Media Relationships.* Within ULS, Schejbal served as the conduit to national organizations and the media, which served the functions of providing funding, credibility, and promotion. Given UW-Extension’s previous relationship with The Lumina Foundation (which had supported the development of the UW Flex Option with $1.2M in funding), Schejbal had credibility with Lumina, which generated its interest in the ULS. Reciprocally, Schejbal’s invitation to attend the Lumina Foundation meetings (attended also by representatives of the DOE) lent credibility to his new work on the ULS. The Lumina Foundation also provided funding by paying for subsequent quarterly meeting attendance for representatives from the seven institutions (including UW-Extension) that they invited to participate and become a part of the founding of C-BEN.

The media’s interest in the ULS Schejbal attributed to the unprecedented collaboration of highly reputable (R1) academic institutions on the model. Their primary function—as carried out by *PBS New Hour* and *Inside Higher Ed*, given their relationships with Schejbal—was to “create buzz” (Schejbal) by promoting each new stage of the model’s implementation. They also served the secondary function of enhancing the commitment of the ULS partners to the model (a process described in more detail later in this chapter, under Snowball Effort).
Figure 3. Functions of ULS Networks. This figure depicts the functions of the ULS networks as well as the extended networks they tapped to assist them (by performing an extended function) in carrying out their functions.

In sum, the primary function of the ULS networks was to serve the overall goal of creating a partnership among credible academic brands to disrupt the non-academic market disruptors. This was accomplished through the engagement of internal and extended networks with a variety of functions that served the overall goal. These functions included developing a prototype (working model), curriculum (by developing content based upon market need and validating research), gaining approval for alternate protocols to infrastructure- and capacity-build while sharing risk, and fostering working relationships with a set of new partners with whom no binding agreement existed. The partners and their team members networked primarily within pre-existing, closed, academic groups, infrequently tapping non-academic networks and for particular information and validation functions (i.e. content to address employer skills gaps) and building a new relationship (with Fidelis) when necessary to build a customized model to facilitate delivery. Meanwhile, national organizations and the media served to provide credibility and promotion for the model while enhancing partner commitment to it.
**Activating, Developing, & Leveraging those Networks.** This section explores ways the leaders activated, developed, and leveraged various networks to generate buy-in and prompt network members to address the functions they needed to carry out with respect to the innovation. The general order in which the networks were tapped and the differences in strategy use internally versus externally are also addressed, where relevant. Most strategies examined in this study are drawn from the literature of Social Network Analysis (SNA), though some emergent strategies were observed and are documented as well. All are grouped here according to the similarity of the leadership engagement tactics, which emerged in the analysis. The three primary tactics include (1) Activating Pivotal Individuals, (2) Developing Supporting Structure, and (3) Leveraging Alliances. Under each of these three tactical approaches the strategies are grouped for ease of identification and clarification. Please refer to Figure 1 on page 108 for the full list of leadership strategies used to activate, develop, and leverage the networks, as each is described in the next section.

**Activating Pivotal Individuals.** One key engagement tactic involves activating pivotal individuals to spur to action and to manage the networks. From the SNA literature, a number of roles are identified that leaders can activate, such the following: (1) the central actor/leader, who has both expertise and social closeness to the team, (2) opinion leaders, who can sway other team members and impact public opinion, (3) brokers, who serve to bridge gaps through their ties to separate networks, and (4) individuals, often leaders, who actively manage indecisive and resistant team members. Furthermore, within the study, the additional role of storyteller emerged as a strategy. While any network member may craft the innovation story, the leader adopts it, uses it to gain buy-in and acceptance of the innovation, and shares it with others who then perpetuate its use throughout the network.

*Central Actors/Leaders.* Schejbal’s leadership team was among the first of the
networks engaged in the ULS concept, and it engaged initially, primarily, with its leader. Schejbal and his team spent many sessions together talking through an understanding of his vision for the model, its ultimate form, and the potential target population of students for the model. Through this process, Schejbal’s team members came to understand the concept and the necessary component parts well enough to begin to develop a working model in alignment with their leader’s vision. The ongoing discussions also provided repeated exposure to the model’s concept via the network’s central actor/leader and innovator (namely, Schejbal) as well as time to consider the necessary components to operationalize it. As one team members described it, these sessions helped the concept to “bake.” Such “baking” involved repeated opportunity for the central leader to communicate and solidify his vision, and for his team to provide their feedback and idea-testing, a process by which the leader gained buy-in and commitment by the team.

Similarly, Schejbal served as the central leader with the ASG group, and, subsequently, the ASG deans who partnered on the project served as the central leaders communicating the ULS vision back to their institutions and their teams. In each case, the central leader was the first to introduce the idea to their respective networks, served as the primary champion of the innovation, and engaged repeatedly with their respective networks to gain their buy in and commitment around the innovation. Central leaders can also emerge in subgroups, based on their expertise, access to information, and strong ties with others. This was the case with Schejbal’s team member (who became ULS Project Manager) who developed a relationship with the CEO of Fidelis. Both served as central leaders within their respective organizations for the development of the ULS delivery platform, and their connection to one another served to expedite both the formal (contractual) and informal working relationship of CEOEL’s partnership with Fidelis.

*Opinion Leaders.* Opinion Leaders are champions of the model or innovation who are
placed in strategic positions by the leader to further promote the idea by swaying the opinions of others. Schejbal activated a couple of his team members to serve as opinion leaders in reaching out to their counterparts within ASG to share their excitement for, and understanding of, the ULS model. Some of the other ASG deans also utilized opinion leaders. One mentioned placing individuals he brought with him from his previous institution in leadership roles to champion the ULS idea among the remaining team members. Schejbal also activated the media to sway public opinion by reporting on the model’s unique R1 multi-institutional partnership, its inclusion by Lumina in the initial set of C-BEN institutions, and it subsequent development and launch.

*Brokers/Bridges.* Brokers/Bridges are individuals who serve to connect disconnected teams to promote the sharing of information and resources (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006). They also serve as cultural conduits (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003) between the teams. The ASG partner dean who had previously worked at UW-Extension served as a bridge by sharing with his new team his first-hand understanding of and excitement for CBE as one of the initial innovators at CEOEL. In short, his knowledge of, and passion for, CBE helped him bridge the relationship between his new team and his prior one around this innovation. Furthermore, Schejbal’s team members served as bridges to the individual business leaders with whom they each had relationships in the formation of the regional business leader group. For example, one of Schejbal’s team members was a member of the local Association for Talent Development and knew the president, so he was the one to present to their board. Another had associations with a number of business leaders from prior continuing education work and thus was the one to reach out to them. The team members with the connections each reached out to the specific individuals with whom they had those connections to create a bridge by which to gather the information they needed from those businesses.
Managers of the Indecisive & Resisters. According to the SNA literature, indecisive change recipients need frequent information and interaction to reduce resistance, while resisters are best kept a distance to decrease their impact on the indecisive (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003). Certainly, within the ASG group, the evolution of the focus of the group exclusively to ULS managed the indecisive and the resistant. After Schejbal and his team members made their case for ULS, ASG members chose to opt in or opt out. Furthermore, the exclusivity of the ULS partnership management by the member deans shielded the group from external resistance. Cross-institutionally, Schejbal activated members of his team to reach out to their counterparts at the ULS partner institutions to sway the indecisive. Internally, some of the ULS deans also activated individuals to manage resistance. For example, the partner dean who had brought with him champions from his previous institution that he placed in leadership roles served to manage the resistance of other team members, though, as that partner indicated, perhaps not always successfully. Perhaps the strongest example of frequent interaction with the indecisive was Schejbal’s team member who shared her interactions with UW System representative to convince them to approve a non-standard RFP protocol for the development of the delivery platform for ULS. Through an iterative process of give and take, the careful meting out of information, and simultaneously relationship- and trust-building, the indecisive System members were won over, and the alterative protocol was approved.

Storyteller. Finally, a strategy that Schejbal didn’t overtly discuss but which he demonstrated both in his interview and in media coverage on the ULS is the strategy of storytelling to promote an understanding of, and immediate affinity to, the ULS. Schejbal likened the ULS to purchasing articles of clothing, made by a variety of manufacturers, to wear with others already within one’s closet. This story creates a strong analogy and communicates a sense of familiarity for every person who hears or reads its as everyone
can relate to the personalized process of completing one's wardrobe with the essential pieces one needs to fit with others already possessed. In short, it combines the notions of the convenience of off-the-rack availability and choice with the individualization of selecting only the garments (or courses) one needs to complete one's wardrobe (or education). Thus, this narrative appeals not only to potential students but also to team members, potential partners, educational organizations, the government, and others whose approval, investment, promotion or assistance might be sought in furthering ULS.

**Developing Supporting Structures.** A second key engagement tactic of leaders is to develop supporting structures to create or restructure networks to support the innovation. From the SNA literature, the individual strategies include (1) capitalizing on inter-organizational linkages, (2) maximizing a diversity of ties to individuals and across different types of networks, and (3) adjusting hierarchies within organizations to further the innovation. Another strategy, that emerged from the study, was what Schejbal called the “Snowball effort,” which leveraged the integrated links between organizations to enhance commitment to the innovation.

**Inter-organizational Linkages.** A common means employed by all the ULS partner deans to engage their continuing education units across the partnership was the development of ASG sub-networks by functional area. This inter-institutional linking of partner team members was designed to facilitate trust-building between their respective work units to foster strong working relationships for the ULS. The deans asked their teams to come up with a project on their own. This worked well for the instructional designers, who developed a project they perceived as both meaningful and valuable—“Best in Show.” It was less successful in facilitating relationship-building in other units. The strategy failed for teams (i.e. marketing and financial) that were unable to discover a valuable project worthy of their combined time and attention. Thus, it appears that the inter-organizational
linkages need to have a perceived shared value for both organizations to be effective.

Successful attempts at inter-organizational linking took place when Schejbal’s team members reached out to their extended network of business leaders to provide feedback and validate their curriculum ideas. While the interaction was more transactional in nature—as the investment of a few meetings was not relatively significant—there was a perceived mutual benefit to the linkage on both sides. Schejbal’s team received the curriculum information and validation they sought, while the business leaders received assurance that their input would go into developing a product that would have potential value to their employees. Similarly, a mutually beneficial inter-organizational linkage was developed in CEOEL’s new relationship with Fidelis to build a delivery platform for ULS. Both organizations benefited not only from a vendor-client relationship but also intrinsically, in terms of creating an exciting new model of higher education delivery, and extrinsically, in terms of generating credibility and branding through their partnership.

Diverse Ties. Diversifying ties happens when leaders develop or activate existing relationships with varied individuals across a variety of networks. Given the relatively closed nature of the networks in ULS, this feature is not as prominent as others. Indeed, most of the connections in ULS were among individuals within pre-existing academic settings. A striking exception was the information shared by one of Schejbal’s team members who discussed seeking out individuals at conferences who worked in innovative arenas outside of higher education. Such networking fed her thinking on innovation, planting seeds for entrepreneurialism and helping her to envision the direction higher education might take for potentially disruptive innovation.

Adjusting Hierarchies. Sometimes existing policies, structures, and hierarchies within organizations can create barriers to network collaboration (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Thus, according to SNA literature, loosening of hierarchies is sometimes necessary to
facilitate collaboration. At the same time, strengthening ties that cut across those formal organizational boundaries to facilitate change (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003) may be necessary. The partners addressed such perceived barriers and developed supporting structures to counter them very differently. One ULS partner dean tackled a perceived incongruity between the work of his unit and the work of ULS by formally incorporating the concept of “reimagining learning” into his unit’s strategic plan. This represented an adjustment of the current structure to align with the prioritization of the innovative model. Simultaneously, that partner dean provided data on current trends and exhorted his team with the importance of disrupting the disruptors who were threatening higher education’s market primacy. Another partner created ad hoc task forces, independent of the standard structure of the unit, to assign individuals limited-time roles related to the ULS model. This move represented a loosening of the hierarchies of the structural unit with respect to the innovation to facilitate completion. While these strategies varied by partner institution, the goal was the same—to remove barriers while encouraging buy-in and support for the model.

**Snowball Effort.** One emergent means by which Schejbal developed a supporting structure to encourage commitment to the continued and increased engagement of the partners was through the recurring coverage of the evolving story by the media. Schejbal shared what he described as a “snowball effort with lots of feedback loops,” through which coverage by the media spurred additional excitement and commitment by the partners, which got the attention of groups like the Lumina Foundation and the Department of Education, which, in turn, garnered more media attention, and so on. Thus, maintaining the media’s interest not only served to promote ULS but it was a strategy that cut across formal institutional boundaries to renew partner enthusiasm and commitment as well.

**Leveraging Alliances.** The final engagement tactic of leaders is to leverage alliances
within networks to solidify commitment to the innovation. From the literature of SNA, three individual strategies support this tactic: (1) leveraging strong ties in existing networks, (2) developing relational trust, and (3) activating densely-connected networks to lead change. In each of these, the leader leverages existing relationships to further the innovation.

**Strong Ties.** Strong ties develop through frequent interaction, extended history, reciprocity, and trust-based interactions within a network. SNA literature indicates such ties are necessary for assimilating complex information (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003). Such was the case with Schejbal’s ties to his team members when he worked with them to facilitate the process of developing their understanding and subsequent commitment to the model. Similarly, Schejbal had strong ties to his fellow deans in ASG. Their frequent interaction, extended history, and reciprocal, trust-based interactions led them not only to assimilate complex information but to willingly work together on a project on which they had no formal, written agreement. At the same time, the lack of strong ties, for the partner deans new to their individual institutions, could explain some of the reticence on the part of their teams to take on this new project.

**Relational Trust.** Relational trust is often associated with strong ties and mutual identification (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003). Because of the overlap, this section will explore the development of relational trust, as opposed to its pre-existence prior to the introduction of ULS. Certainly, relational trust is a part of strong ties. But where ties are not as strong, developing relational trust can strengthen them. One way, for example, that a partner dean new to his organization worked toward engendering such trust was by giving his team a sense of control by honoring their decision on whether to pursue the ULS partnership. Relational trust becomes important in networks that are more than transactional in nature. For example, relational trust was less important when Schejbal’s team members sought curriculum information and validation from regional business leaders because the
investment and risk on both sides was nominal. When the team members needed greater commitment from relationships than simple feedback or validation of ideas, however, the network activation required more concentrated efforts to develop relational trust. For example, pursuing a significant departure from the standard contract practice within the UW system required a great deal of information-sharing and trust-building by Schejbal’s team, building upon a foundation of prior positive rapport and a pattern of successful ventures in CEOEL. One of Schejbal’s team members described in detail how the relationship-building required “an ongoing dialogue” in which she meted out information slowly, building the capacity for—and an investment in—understanding and assisting. She also described the importance of giving the partner in the relationship as sense of control and decision-making in the process. Such trust development, buy-in, and a mutual sense of ownership for the project took time to cultivate and a degree of give-and-take.

Similarly, when a new relationship was established with Fidelis, for the ULS delivery platform, success was dependent upon building strong rapport, alignment of the visions of the two organizations, and joint decision-making. That connection emerged organically, based upon the comfort of those engaged in the rapport. When Fidelis’ CEO met with Schejbal’s team, the team observed the development of an easy rapport between one of Schejbal’s team members and the Fidelis CEO. The two, according to Schejbal’s team member, shared a similar vision and convergence in their thinking that led to that bond. In short, they developed the relational trust that facilitated the partnership between their two organizations.

*Densely Connected Sub-Networks.* Densely connected sub-networks are highly connected teams with strong and frequent communication among members (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006). The comfort they have working with one another, based on strong ties and relational trust, make them particularly productive. Furthermore, when they embrace
change, they often do so as a unit and begin to work together effectively to implement it. They can be readily contrasted to loosely coupled units which often offer more resistance to change (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003).

Schejbal's team is a primary example of a densely connected sub-network. Following their repeated meetings with Schejbal on the ULS concept, the team worked to determine the prototype, including infrastructure- and capacity-building, identifying a marketable curriculum, and determining the appropriate delivery platform for the model. The team members drew not only upon their leader's vision but their knowledge of, and trust in, each other's expertise in various functional areas as a result of their having strong ties with one another, having worked together over time and having become a densely connected sub-network. They also worked together to identify the best means to tap their extended networks and to build new relationships to further the innovation.

While Schejbal and his team members were working with one another within their unit at CEOEL and subsequently reaching out through their extended networks to external partners, the ULS partner deans were working within their institutions and continuing education units to generate buy-in for partnership. Because those units were not interviewed for this study, however, the denseness of their connectivity could not be ascertained.

The ASG deans group themselves, while a sub-network, were not as densely connected as Schejbal's team members who had both formal and informal roles and relationships and who had worked together on a variety of projects. Instead, the ASG dean's group—and later the subgroup of ULS partner deans—were connected largely informally, and the ULS was the first large project on which they and their team members engaged. Thus, while an important pre-existing network, with longstanding ties, they were not as densely connected.
Summary. An analysis of the nature and functions of the ULS networks, as well as the leadership tactics and strategies at play to activate, develop, and leverage those networks, reveal a clearer picture of how relationships served to develop and promote the model. The nature of the ULS networks was primarily closed, internal, and pre-existing, comprised largely of academic continuing education professionals. The overall function of the ULS was to serve as a partnership to secure visibility and market primacy for a team of R1 institutions hoping to disrupt the non-academic market disruptors. The functions of the sub-networks were to accomplish those goals by building and launching a prototype to deliver a curriculum that addressed market skills gaps utilizing a delivery model that would be convenient, inexpensive, and authentic (outcomes-based). Finally, the engagement tactics and strategies to activate, develop, and leverage networks to bring these goals to fruition included a variety of approaches documented in SNA literature as well as some emergent strategies. These will be explored more both in the comparison to the strategies employed by SNHU (after the College for America analysis) and in the discussion chapter.

College for America

The next portion of this chapter focuses on the ways Southern New Hampshire University President Paul LeBlanc, and the leadership team he assembled, utilized networks—whether from existing relationships or by building new ones—to further their innovative model, College for America. The nature and functions of the networks are explored in the general order in which the relationships were tapped, cultivated or established to advance the model’s development, regional and national approvals, launch and scale up, and promotion. Following an analysis of the nature and functions of the networks, the strategies used to activate, develop, and leverage those networks are examined, as organized by the three engagement tactics introduced earlier.
The Nature of the Networks.

The CfA Team. To assemble his CfA leadership team, LeBlanc tapped a wide range of individuals, both internal and external to Southern New Hampshire University. As a result, the network he assembled had an expansive scope. While members were primarily handpicked from pre-existing professional relationships with LeBlanc from various settings and time periods of his career, they were new to one another. Most of those selected did not already know or work with one another as part of an established network. Structurally, joining CfA meant the creation of a new formal college, and, in terms of stability, the relationships among the team members was new.

Two of LeBlanc's selections were already internal to Southern New Hampshire University. LeBlanc pulled them out of their existing academic units to start the new CfA unit. In addition to their formal relationships with LeBlanc as their institutional leader, both had prior informal associations with him through other channels as well. Thus, the nucleus of his team was created from two established individual relationships with LeBlanc, from which he started a new formal unit.

To staff the balance of the CfA team, LeBlanc assembled the remaining members externally. Some had formal or informal professional relationships with LeBlanc in other academic settings. One team member LeBlanc had met years before at Houghton Mifflin and was already serving as an SNHU board member, at LeBlanc's prior invitation. Another knew LeBlanc from his work years earlier at Marlboro College, had remained in contact, and called LeBlanc when looking for a career change.

A few members of the CfA leadership team were drawn not only from external sources but either from extended informal network associations or entirely new connections, without prior relationship to LeBlanc at all. A team of two from a workforce strategy center came to CfA together as a result of one of them having prior relationships
with LeBlanc and another CfA team member. Others, LeBlanc met while building the team. LeBlanc met the assessment expert at a professional meeting. Impressed with her expertise, LeBlanc hired her initially as a consultant to help CfA write for the Gates NGLC grant, and, later, he invited her to join CfA full-time. Two of the initial team members, the Chief Technology Officer and the Senior Director of Research and Analytics, were hired without a previous connection to LeBlanc or other senior team members at all. Both of those two subsequently expanded the LeBlanc network by assembling their own teams by drawing from their networks from previous formal professional relationships.

Furthermore, the network remained open to new individuals, as was demonstrated when the former regional HR director of Anthem New Hampshire joined the CfA team after leaving Anthem following the pilot. The team remained fluid and open to expanding expertise via the extended networks of all of the team members.

In short, LeBlanc assembled his team by selecting individuals he knew from a wide scope of internal and external sources. While most of those invited to be on the team were networked with LeBlanc, they were new to each other. He also utilized the networks of those new team members to access additional team members. Very few new members were hired without prior relationships with LeBlanc or his network. Those hired with out previous connection subsequently brought some of their team members with them, expanding the network further.

**Accreditation.** When it came time for CfA to pursue regional accreditation and national approval for direct assessment, LeBlanc again tapped both existing and new, formal and informal external relationships. Thus, the networks had a blend of stability (pre-existing and new) as well as were structurally diverse (formal and informal) and with a wide external scope.

In preparation for taking CfA to the New England Association of Colleges and
Schools (NEASC) for approval for direct assessment, LeBlanc invited the President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) to SNHU. He had worked with her formally on the Commission, on which he served from 2000-2006, during which time she was hired as President. He had met her many years before that, informally, at Springfield College, when she was a candidate for a position she did not get. They had stayed in touch over the years, so reactivating this relationship came readily. Of course the commission itself is an open network, as commissioners change over time and as outside individuals (like LeBlanc and his team) come in to present and seek approval for various programs.

When it came time to navigate Washington to secure DOE approval, LeBlanc accessed a not only new, but organically emergent relationship with a former DOE representative whom he had only recently met at the ETS meeting. He also leveraged a prior formal relationship between his assessment expert and Martha Kanter, the Undersecretary of Education, as well as his own prior informal relationship with her. Kanter and her deputy undersecretary, with whom LeBlanc developed a new relationship, helped to further CfA’s argument for direct assessment with the Department of Education. Like NEASC, the DOE itself is an open network, and LeBlanc’s access to, and success within, it is a testament to his inclusion. In the end, these networked relationships proved critical to the formal approval process for CfA to offer direct assessment.

**Pilot Launch.** The launching of the CfA pilot was also dependent upon an external, pre-existing relationship. LeBlanc and his team reached out to the Anthem NH president, who agreed to meet with them initially only because of their pre-existing informal professional relationships in the “small world” of New Hampshire organizational leaders. Because the pilot was limited to Anthem NH employees, one might characterize the nature of the network as closed. However, within the scope of the internal organization at Anthem, the opportunity was open to all employees. Furthermore, the Anthem NH President also
brought in her regional HR director to help implement the program. Thus, the scope of the network, while internal to Anthem NH, was open within that internal scope. The structure of the network, which began informally, developed into a formal relationship, and the network was new (and evolving) in terms of stability.

**Scaling up Business-to-Business Partnerships.** The CfA model’s later scaling up had perhaps the broadest scope of the networks engaged with a wide external reach to all types of companies. Initial outreach was through key stable, pre-existing relationships, structured both formally and informally. The Anthem NH President activated her extended internal organizational network to help expand the Anthem-CfA relationship from a regional to national scale. As the CfA model scaled up, many of LeBlanc’s team members either activated existing—or sought out new—formal external relationships to develop new possible business-to-business partners. The Workforce Strategy Team members, for example, activated their existing, external formal relationships with a wide variety of businesses to start a conversation about the possible benefits of a CfA partnership. And when they had exhausted their existing external networks, CfA team members developed new ones. For example, the Partnership Division manager joined the Massachusetts Hospital Association to gain access to additional health care providers. In many ways, the entire business-to-business model for delivering the educational opportunities available through CfA is based upon networking, as businesses develop a formal relationship with CfA to provide their employees with access to CBE degrees. Those formal relationships, however, often started with more informal, and even organically emergent connections and rapport established between individuals from each organization as they met at meetings and conferences.

**Christensen Relationship.** Perhaps the seminal relationship for the development of CfA was LeBlanc’s relationship with Clayton Christensen. While the scope of this single
relationship, with only two members, is quite narrow, the impact it had on the model was substantial, and thus it must be included in the analysis. In terms of stability, the relationship was a long, pre-existing one, and structurally it had formal, informal, and organically emergent components. LeBlanc had a formal relationship with Christensen, who wrote the 1997 “playbook” on disruptive innovation, *Innovator’s Dilemma*, in that Christensen served on SHNU’s board. Spanning back to their graduate student days together, however, LeBlanc first had a long-standing informal, friendship-based relationship with Christensen as they stayed in touch over the years. The relationship had emerged organically when they first played basketball together those many years before. This relationship, and its functions (described in the next section) were the crucial foundation for the development and implementation of CfA.

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<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Stability</th>
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<tr>
<td>CfA Leadership team</td>
<td>Internal + External</td>
<td>Informal + Formal</td>
<td>New</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEASC</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Informal + Formal</td>
<td>Pre-Existing &amp; New</td>
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<td>Department of Education</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Organically Emergent, Informal + Formal</td>
<td>New + Pre-Existing</td>
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<td>Pilot with Anthem NH</td>
<td>External to CfA; Internal to Anthem</td>
<td>Informal + Formal</td>
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<td>Business-to-Business Partnerships</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Formal, Informal + Organically Emergent</td>
<td>Pre-Existing + New</td>
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<td>Christensen Relationship</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Informal + Formal + Organically Emergent</td>
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*Figure 4. Nature of CfA Networks.* This figure depicts the scope, structure, and stability of each of the CfA networks, highlighting that CfA networks were largely external, open, and new.

In summary, the nature of the CfA networks was primarily expansive in scope—external and open. The structure of the networks was typically a blend of informal and formal with some organically emergent relationships as well. In terms of stability, the networks, while often initiated through a pre-existing relationship, overwhelmingly developed into a new network as a result of a restructuring or introduction of new...
members based upon the goal for the model.

**The Functions of the Networks.** Deliberately fashioning the model using Christensen's tenets of disruptive innovation, LeBlanc developed and implemented CfA for the purpose of disrupting the higher education market, addressing growing national concerns around access, cost, completion and outcomes. With no specific network in mind to carry out the functions, LeBlanc had to build the network to serve the vision. In this sense, the model was *vision-centric*. The vision was the starting point, and the network was built as a means to implement the vision.

To carry out the many functional roles in building a new model, getting the necessary regional and national approvals, pilot testing and then implementing a full-scale launch, LeBlanc created and accessed a number of networks to serve a variety of functions, which emerged from the case. The many functions of the networks engaged in the model's development and implementation are addressed in this section.

**Functions of Christensen Relationship.** In addition to being influenced by Christensen’s work, LeBlanc received direct advice from Christensen on the development of CfA. In particular, that relationship served the function of providing significant counsel to LeBlanc on how to disrupt the market without undermining SNHU’s own traditional University College (UC) or College for Online and Continuing Education (COCE). Christensen’s counsel helped LeBlanc to recognize that when incumbent organizations initiate disruption, they ultimately disrupt themselves. He also learned that by sequestering the unit, he could delay that self-disruption. LeBlanc worked to accomplish that goal by segregating the CfA unit from the rest of the campus, as Christensen suggested, as well as focusing on getting the best people for the individual jobs to be done. In making his selections for assembling the CfA leadership team, LeBlanc considered the types of expertise that would be needed for the individual roles in each functional area. This meant
tapping individuals with proven expertise, typically people who had already earned his trust or that of at least one member of his evolving team. In short, it meant leveraging networks to staff the CfA team primarily from existing, external—and sometimes extended—networks to find the very best people to fill the jobs while minimizing risk. Hiring those known to him and his team members, as he mentioned in his interview, “takes risk out the equation.” These decisions were based upon key pieces of advice from Christensen for structuring the unit and staffing it.

**Functions of the Gates NGLC Grant.** One of the first jobs to be done was to apply for the Gates NGLC Grant. This needed to be completed before the CfA team could be fully assembled. LeBlanc leveraged members of his small but evolving team as well as reached out to hire an assessment expert as a consultant to write the proposal for this grant. The function of that grant was not only to provide funding to build the model—and later launch a pilot of it, free of charge—but also to provide validation to the model’s concept and, by virtue of the grant’s metrics, to sharpen the defining criteria for the model. In short, the small team that worked on the grant addressed multiple functions in writing and securing the grant for CfA.

**Functions of the CfA Leadership Team.** The functions of the CFA team members were to work out the details of the model and to assemble their own area teams to develop and implement it, in accordance with the criteria of the LeBlanc’s early vision and within the metrics of the newly acquired Gates NGLC grant. They also assisted LeBlanc in reaching out to potential partners, as well as NEASC and the DOE. Finally, LeBlanc called on some members of the CfA leadership team to help address internal institutional concerns with the launch of the model.

The primary task of the CfA team involved the development of the model, which included the functions of idea-testing and practical concept refinement, infrastructure- and
capacity-building, and risk-minimization. The team had to figure out how to build a prototype—which included a competency-based curriculum (in alignment with SNHU’s existing degrees), a delivery platform, and a student management process. This had to be accomplished within the guidelines of LeBlanc’s vision of significantly low cost, high success, measurable outcomes, and high completion rates. With the Gates NGLC grant in hand, those metrics were further defined at serving 5,000 students in under 5 years at a cost of under $5,000, and with a 50% graduation rate. Furthermore, they were operating within a strict timeline, needing to launch the pilot within a matter of months.

The CfA team also served the function of working to identify potential partners, managing internal organizational concerns, and assisting LeBlanc in navigating the NEASC accreditation and DOE approval processes. One team member accompanied LeBlanc to the first meeting with Anthem NH to secure a pilot partner. Another was called upon to address concerns by faculty and staff in other SNHU colleges who felt threatened by the emergence of CfA. Others participated in preparing materials for presentation to NEASC and the DOE as well as reaching out to their extended networks to provide introductions and evidence, lending credibility to the program and its features.

**Functions of NEASC and DOE.** LeBlanc very carefully reached out to his and his team members’ extended networks to gain regional accreditation and national Title IV approval for direct assessment. The function of tapping or activating those networks was to provide additional information, to test the narrative, and to leverage trust and credibility to improve CfA’s chances of garnering approval. The individuals tapped also served as allies in the process, whether helping the CfA team to navigate the processes or actually speaking up for the model to convince the ultimate decision-makers. As LeBlanc looked back on those processes, he shared, “both at the accreditation level and at the U.S. Department of Ed level, it was people and relationships that were very helpful in driving forward our progress.”
**Functions of Pilot Launch & Scale Up.** When it came to launching the pilot and scaling up, LeBlanc and the CfA team based the very model of the program—a business-to-business arrangement—on a foundation of networking. The function was to secure business partners that would serve as conduits to their employees for recruitment and enrollment into CfA. The outreach, initiated by a CfA team member, was designed to identify and build a relationship with a “mobilizer,” someone within the businesses that CfA sought to partner with, who then served as a champion for the CfA program within that organization. The mobilizers, by extension, then tapped their own extended networks within the companies to persuade other employees to enroll in CfA. This approach was used from the very beginning, when LeBlanc met with the Anthem NH President, who served as a “mobilizer” or champion for CfA not only within her regional unit but also to the national corporate office. In example after example, CfA team members reached out to individuals they knew in various organizations who, by extension, reached out within their internal company networks to promote CfA. When existing individual networks were exhausted, CfA turned to organizational memberships to develop new relationships to begin the process anew.

**Functions of National Organizations and Media.** As CfA gained visibility and enrollment through expanded business-to-business partnerships, they also gained media coverage and increased validation and financial support by national organizations. This exposure and validation led to invitations to team members and early partners to present at conferences and publish papers. Thus, these opportunities, designed to report on and showcase the new model, also served the function of generating interest among new potential business-to-business partners, whose employees subsequently enrolled in CfA. Thus, the networks began to perpetuate themselves.
Figure 5. Functions of CfA Networks. This figure depicts the functions of the CfA networks as well as the extended networks they tapped, which performed extended functions, to further their model.

In sum, the primary function of the CfA networks was to serve the overall goal of disrupting the higher education market with a low cost, outcomes-based, highly accessibly alternative to higher education with high completion rates. The development and implementation of the model was accomplished through the engagement of an ever
expanding series of external networks. The initial functions of those networks included assembling teams, developing the model, managing internal organizational concerns, identifying potential partners, gaining regional accreditation for direct assessment, gaining DOE approval for Title IV funding, and launching the pilot. In addition to those initial functions, LeBlanc and his CfA team members also prepared for longer-range functions, including leveraging networks in an ongoing fashion to continue to generate enrollment. These ongoing functions included working with extended networks to identify potential mobilizers within various organizations, following up on referrals, speaking at conferences, writing articles, and joining professional organizations, all of which not only promoted the model publically but caught the attention of additional employers whose subsequent partnerships expanded CfA enrollment.

Activating, Developing, & Leveraging the Networks. This section explores the ways the CfA leaders activated, developed, and leveraged the networks to generate buy-in and to prompt network members to address the functions they needed to carry out to advance the model. Following the structure outlined in the previous analysis, of ULS, most of the strategies are drawn from SNA literature. The strategies are grouped under the three leadership engagement tactics, which emerged in the analysis. Again, these tactics include (1) Activating Pivotal Individuals, (2) Developing Supporting Structure, and (3) Leveraging Alliances. Please refer back to Figure 1 on page 108.

Activating Pivotal Individuals. One primary engagement tactic involves activating pivotal individuals to spur to action and to manage the networks. From the SNA literature, a number of roles are identified that leaders can activate, such the following: (1) the central actor/leader, (2) opinion leaders, (3) brokers/bridges, and (4) managers of the indecisive and resisters. Furthermore, within the study emerged the additional role of storyteller. Each is examined individually below, as identified in CfA.
Central Actors/Leaders. LeBlanc, with individual connections to each of the CfA leadership team members whom he hand-picked for those roles, served as their central leader. He not only was the central connection among them—most of whom had no prior relationships with one another—but he had extended histories with each of them, social closeness, and trust-based interactions. Reciprocally, he knew they had expertise and initiative, and he trusted them.

It is worthy of note that the CfA leadership team was the first network created for the model's development and implementation, and that successive created networks followed the same process. Each time, central leaders, with expertise, assembled trusted individuals with whom they shared a social closeness from an array of extended networks to serve specific roles. For example, each new member of the CfA leadership team subsequently built his or her own team and served as central leader within the respective unit. Like LeBlanc, they accessed their own networks, whenever possible, to bring in individuals with whom they also had an informal or formal history, whom they trusted and they knew had the expertise and initiative. When they did not have such individuals within their networks, they hired externally based on needed expertise. Some of those individuals either brought with them, or subsequently hired, members from their extended networks. Thus, the process perpetuated itself, in subunits, with the individuals with the strongest ties to the team, by virtue of expertise and social closeness, serving as its central leader.

In many ways, Christensen also served as a central actor/leader in the dyadic relationship with LeBlanc. The two had a long history characterized by social closeness. As Christensen came to develop and become recognized for expertise in disruptive innovation, LeBlanc turned to him for both information and social support, characteristics of providing central leadership. LeBlanc heeded Christensen's advice on sequestering the CfA unit and selected team leaders according to their expertise in the individual jobs to be done. This
counsel had been ongoing, as LeBlanc indicated he had used the same methods when launching COCE. Thus, when it came to implementing potentially disruptive innovation, Christensen served as LeBlanc’s central leader.

Other central actors/leaders played different, specific—albeit temporary—roles with respect to a particular process in the advancement of CfA. The CIHE President at NEASC, for example, provided expert advice and counsel to LeBlanc when CfA sought approval for regional accreditation of direct assessment. Similarly, the former DOE representative served as a central actor, helping LeBlanc to navigate Washington and the DOE approval process for Title IV funding. She indicated that LeBlanc heeded her advice and adjusted his approach, accordingly, to secure that approval. Each time, an individual with expertise and social closeness served as the pivotal point person, the primary source of information for the network, which performed better when relying upon the guidance of that leader.

**Opinion Leaders.** CfA also activated opinion leaders, who served as champions of the model, not only helping to promote it but actively swaying others to adopt it. The CfA partnership division manager referred to such individuals as “mobilizers.” These individuals, as she described them, are “true believers” with “social capital” and “a passion” for what CfA is trying to do, that they’re willing to share. In sharing, they are able to make a difference in swaying the opinions of those around them. One key opinion leader was the Anthem NH President. She not only sent an enthusiastic email to her employees, encouraging them to enroll in the program, but she later convinced Anthem Corporate to expand the program within the company nationally. Her championship of the model was so great that she willingly served as a speaker on panels and at conferences, representing CfA. Eventually, she formally took a role on SNHU’s board.

Opinion Leaders were also identified through the extended networks of CfA
leadership team members. Activating existing professional relationships they had with individuals in a variety of companies, they worked to generate enthusiasm for the model so that, in turn, that individual would serve as a spokesperson for the model within their own organizations. Initially, CfA team members worked their networks by sector, what the partnership manager referred to as a “vertical” approach, actively seeking to identify opinion leaders in different types of industries. After some time, the CfA team members began to use a “horizontal” approach, seeking to identify and activate opinion leaders by roles that cut across multiple industries, such as customer service. Once they had exhausted their extended network leads, CfA team members began joining organizations to develop new relationships with individuals who could either potentially serve as opinion leaders or introduce them to others who could. In short, recognizing the significant impact of opinion leaders on affecting thresholds and critical mass, CfA team leaders aggressively pursued identifying and activating such individuals to promote the model.

Brokers/Bridges. Working within a business-to-business model, CfA team members needed to connect to a variety of businesses. To facilitate that connection, they hired and activated individuals who understood and could communicate well with businesses, addressing their needs while providing information on the CfA program model. These individuals served as brokers (or bridges) between CfA and the business partners, bringing together the otherwise disconnected teams and serving as vital cultural conduits. The CfA Executive Director described the importance of hiring people who could talk to companies. This included a team of two individuals who had previously established their own workforce strategy center. They brought with them over a dozen years’ experience in business outreach and a myriad of pre-existing and extended network connections. Adapting to the means by which businesses communicate, the CfA team also tapped experts in content marketing, conference presentation, and media facility. In short, they consciously
selected and activated individuals to serve as brokers to bridge the expanse between the university and the interests of the potential business partner.

While the primary enrollment model was dependent upon bridging, bridging was also used on a smaller scale where gulfs needed spanning. For example, the CfA assessment expert, as a former faculty member at a different institution, was called upon to serve as a bridge to help explain the CfA model to the SNHU faculty at University College and COCE. (This will be addressed further under the next section, on managing the indecisive and resisters.) She also served in a more minor capacity as a bridge to the DOE, given her prior formal working relationships with Martha Kanter. Subsequently, Martha Kanter and her deputy undersecretary of education served as bridges, or brokers, to the Department of Education, helping to interpret the direct assessment policy to garner CfA’s approval to access Title IV funding. In similar fashion, NEASC’s CIHE President served as a bridge to the Commission when LeBlanc and his CfA team sought accreditation for the use of direct assessment, and the former DOE representative served as a bridge and cultural conduit for LeBlanc to navigate Washington. In each case, whether in a short, temporary fashion or over the course of an extended interaction, these key individuals help to introduce and translate ideas to enhance communication and bring people from disparate arenas together to reach understanding to advance the CfA model.

Managers of the Indecisive/Resisters. While CfA developed and launched its model, faculty and staff in SNHU’s other colleges—University College and COCE—did not have as much access to information and interaction with those directly involved in the sequestered new program. Despite—and perhaps even as a result of—physically and structurally isolating the new unit, such gaps in information and engagement led to the questioning of the new model’s value, its place within the university, and the application of policies to its functions. Unaddressed, those concerns could lead, potentially, to internal resistance.
LeBlanc indicated, there was some “internal jealousy” and fear of being superseded, which was exacerbated by heightened press coverage of CfA. LeBlanc addressed those concerns by meeting with faculty and staff from those other units. In that capacity, he served as the manager of the indecisive and potential resisters. His primary message was reassurance that the new model would not displace existing programs or cannibalize them. He provided this reassurance by explaining the difference in targeted audiences. He also likened the development and implementation process of the new model (including sequestration) to the process used to develop and implement COCE. In short, as he indicated, acceptance came sooner when faculty and staff realized this approach had been used before and had not damaged University College, the traditional program in place when COCE was launched. LeBlanc also underscored that the revenues of new programs (like CfA, and COCE before it) benefit the entire university. He pointed out the pay raises they had received, the new buildings on campus, and the recognition SNHU had received as one of the Chronicle’s “Best Colleges to Work For.”

Furthermore, LeBlanc managed resistance by activating his assessment expert, who has a Ph.D. from Cornell and had been a college professor at another university, to vouch for the quality of the program. She indicated that she was “always being trotted out to talk to faculty to show that what [CfA] was doing was equivalent to courses that already existed or to programs that already existed.” Such repeated exposure to interaction with, and information from, someone who was perceived to have strong academic foundations and to understand faculty values helped to reduce resistance.

The CfA assessment expert was similarly activated to address accreditors and potential partners, though with a different emphasis. She recalls “underscoring different aspects of the model,” depending upon the audience. For example, while with the SNHU faculty, the message highlighted the similarity of CfA to the university's traditional
programming, with external audiences, the message was typically the disruptive nature of the innovation. Both were true, but the emphasis of the message changed, depending on the nature of the impediments to acceptance exhibited by the given audience. By customizing the message to the needs of the audience, and providing the needed information in frequent interactions, LeBlanc and his team were able to manage concerns that may have created barriers to advancing the model.

_Storyteller:_ Storytelling emerged again in this case as a strategy for promoting an understanding of, and affinity to, the innovative model. LeBlanc, who characterizes himself as the institution’s chief storyteller, adopted the story that became the primary analogy for the CfA model from the Anthem NH President, whom he credits with its invention. The story compares the CfA model to the first time suitcases came out with wheels. LeBlanc says the concept made so much sense that “you wondered, ‘Why the hell did it take so long for someone to figure this out?’” The implication in that analogy is that the CfA model makes so much sense that higher education should have been using it all along. It is intuitively logical. And, once it is recognized as logical, why would you choose anything else? Using the analogy causes individuals who hear or read it to draw the conclusions of its logic, efficiency, and effectiveness without someone else overtly having to point them out. In that sense, the story brings the reader or listener to the conclusion in a way the storyteller doesn’t have to.

Furthermore, as LeBlanc points out, people are drawn to stories. As he indicated, “Human beings are story-consuming machines. We love narrative.” Thus, when a story can be used to capture the essence of an idea, it appeals all the more to its audience or readers. LeBlanc believes that storytelling is, therefore, a key role of a university president. He elaborates, “It’s an important part of our jobs... [It’s] the ability to outline a vision that inspires people.” As a result, when LeBlanc heard the Anthem NH president characterize CfA in an analogy that suggested its logic, effectiveness, and efficiently, he seized the
opportunity to use it as the narrative for the model. He indicated that it’s important to be able to craft narratives that people can get behind. In appropriating this short but effective analogy, he accomplished that.

**Developing Support Structures.** A second key engagement tactic of leaders is to develop supporting structures to create or restructure networks to support the innovation. From the SNA literature, the individual strategies include (1) inter-organizational linkages, (2) diverse ties and (3) adjusting hierarchies. These were apparent in the CfA networks. Furthermore, the emergent strategy which Schejbal referred to the “Snowball effort” appeared in CfA as well.

*Inter-organizational linkages.* Inter-organizational linkages are really a centerpiece of the CfA model as enrollment is entirely dependent upon them. Indeed, it is through business-to-business partnerships, whereby businesses promote CfA to their employees, that CfA recruits its students. Each of CfA’s partners represent a discrete organizational link, which means the network effectiveness in those relationships is a determinant of CfA’s success. In fact, in that sense, those linkages very strictly determine CfA’s very organizational survival.

On a more concentrated scale, inter-organizational linkages also served to advance the CfA model at various stages of the development and approval processes. For example, LeBlanc’s and his team members’ external relationships with individuals at NEASC and the DOE assisted them in successfully navigating the NEASC Commission and DOE review processes. In many ways, those powerful linkages not only provided guidance in those arenas but directly affected outcomes, in that LeBlanc was able to do what other institutions offering CBE in the past have been unable to accomplish, namely secure regional accreditation for direct assessment and national Title IV funding.

*Diverse ties.* A diversity of ties to a broad range of external individuals, from
academic and non-academic settings, formed the basis of the success of CfA. As the program's Executive Director indicated, diversity is an important strategy when "advocating for a different type of higher ed." Thus, diversity of backgrounds was a valued characteristic and was consciously employed from assembling the team to identifying business-to-business partners to gaining regional and national approvals. LeBlanc recruited team members from ETS; business-to-business sales; workforce development; marketing, policy, and advocacy backgrounds; research and analytics; information and technology; and book publishing. The CfA team formed partnerships with individuals and organizations in the arenas of health, insurance, state government, secondary and higher education, external foundations, and even organizations in other countries. Relationships were leveraged with NEASC and the DOE to garner approvals and validation for the model. Organizations such as the Gates PLN were tapped for tactical and social support. And business leaders and other champions of the model were leveraged to promote the model to others. Over and over again, the diversity of ties not only plays prominently in the CfA story but leads to the development of additional ties, which continue to support and perpetuate the model.

Adjusting hierarchies. Recognizing that existing policies and structures can create barriers to network collaboration and the introduction of innovation, LeBlanc sequestered his new CfA unit as soon as he began assembling his team. LeBlanc did so, based on the counsel of Clayton Christensen. He also had to addressed how traditional university policies and hierarchies would impact the new unit. In particular, the established curriculum approval process posed an obstacle for a program that did not offer traditional courses. Thus, existing structures created impediments. Fortunately, LeBlanc had encountered these issues before in the development of COCE and understood what had to be done. By isolating the new unit, physically and structurally, it became its own college, with its own opportunity to develop its own, separate norms, policies and procedures. This restructuring
accompanied the resistance management addressed above. Together, these strategies created opportunity to test a new model without undermining the structure and hierarchies of the existing models.

SnowBall Effort. An emergent strategy evidenced in the ULS case and emerging also in the CfA case is what Schejbal called “Snowball Effort.” The strategy involves generating a supporting structure of recurring validation and promotion of the model to encourage continued and enhanced engagement and commitment to it by existing and new networks. LeBlanc and other members of his CfA team noted how each successive stages of the CfA model’s development and approval provided validation and support for the next stage. For example, the validation of receiving the Gates NGLC grant was an important facet of securing the pilot with Anthem NH and lending credibility to direct assessment for NEASC’s consideration. Both the Gates grant and NEASC accreditation had a positive impact on the DOE as they considered approval for Title IV funding. The Anthem NH pilot and DOE approval, as well as the subsequent invitation to White House, “turned out to be really nice in terms of galvanizing everything,” to get Anthem Corporate to agree to a national partnership with CfA, according to the Anthem NH President. Time after time, referrals and media coverage, conference presentations, webinars, and whitepapers caused more potential partners to reach out to CfA, leading to increased enrollment in the program.

Leveraging Alliances. The final engagement tactic of leaders is to leverage alliances within networks to solidify commitment to the innovation. From the literature of SNA, three individual strategies support this tactic: (1) strong ties, (2) relational trust, and (3) densely-connected networks. In each of these, the leader leverages existing relationships to further the innovation.

Strong ties. LeBlanc had individual strong ties, characterized by an extended history, trust-based interactions, and reciprocity, with each of the experts he called upon to join the
CfA leadership team. These strong ties, coupled with a clear understanding of their abilities, commitment, and work ethic, enabled LeBlanc to launch CfA quickly and efficiently, capitalizing upon their strengths. Similarly, team members leveraged their extended networks to populate their individual teams with known, trustworthy, effective employees. Understanding and already feeling comfortable with the relationship dynamic allowed the team leaders to begin the work promptly, to communicate and assimilate complex information, and to proficiently work with LeBlanc from the start.

Likewise, LeBlanc’s strong ties to Christensen, and extended history with him not only on a personal and professional level but also in having utilized his “playbook” for disruptive innovation before, enabled him to proceed with confidence in implementing CfA. LeBlanc also had access to Christensen and could turn to him as needed for additional counsel as CfA unfolded.

*Relational Trust.* Once again, to distinguish relational trust from strong ties, in which such trust already exists, this section focuses on trust engendered in new or newly-activated relationships. Over and over again, LeBlanc and others interviewed for CfA referenced him, and by extension, SNHU, as a “trusted player” or “trusted agent” with a history of good performance and successful operations. With that reputation preceding him, LeBlanc and his team members benefited from being received as well-respected. As LeBlanc explained, SNHU’s having just completed a 10-year reaccreditation process with no conditions was rare, and established him as a “trusted agent” when he approached the Commission for accreditation for direct assessment. Additionally, he arrived prepared to walk the Commission through translation of SNHU’s traditional Associate’s Degree to the competencies in the CfA model. As the NEASC’s CIHE President indicated, “a lot of people can criticize the credit hour,” but LeBlanc brought credibility to that critique. Similarly, LeBlanc and his team were prepared in their pilot pitch to Anthem NH to explain CBE
tailored to employer’s perspective. Such preparation, coupled with a strong reputation that preceded them, helped LeBlanc and team to establish relational trust.

Another prominent feature of the CfA story is that of LeBlanc’s capacity to network and maintain connections over the years, building relational trust. As his team members and members of his extended network describe him, he has a charismatic approach to building relationships, and a strategic sense of the value that others bring to the equation, igniting in them a passion for a shared vision. The former DOE representative, upon meeting LeBlanc, recalls “being really impressed with him and thinking, ‘He’s somebody who I need to know. He’s going to be an important ally in this work, and he’s just an incredibly dynamic thinker.” One CfA team member referred to it as “The Paul Effect.” She said that he makes people think, “Oh! I could do this!” or “Yes, we could do that!”

An important component to this relational trust is its reciprocity and mutual benefit. The individuals and organizations working with LeBlanc believed they benefited as much as they assisted. NEASC was the first regional accrediting organization to approve direct assessment, and they were able to do so with a trusted agent they felt confident would represent their interests well. Anthem NH received access to a free pilot for their employees to complete their degrees and a documented set of skills, by an institution known for successful traditional and non-traditional educational opportunities. Some team members contacted years after first meeting LeBlanc were offered employment opportunities to work with him on developing and launching a promising new model for higher education. And the former DOE representative saw him as an important ally in the work needed to be done on the national level to disrupt higher education.

Another key component in relational trust is the willingness to listen and take counsel. LeBlanc demonstrated this not only in his relationship with Christensen but by heeding the advice of the former DOE representative. She advised him on being careful to
reframe his arguments for direct assessment to DOE, cautioning that if "it gets opened up really broadly, ...a bunch of terrible actors will come in and ruin the space and end up harming students." LeBlanc listened. He tempered his message. This mutual exchange is important in relational trust and appears to be one of the reasons LeBlanc—and by extension, CfA—has been successful.

**Densely Connected Sub-Networks.** Of course, working with teams already highly connected has the benefit of the members already having a comfort working with one another, strong ties, and existing relational trust. While LeBlanc’s CfA leadership team had these qualities only with their central leader, there are other teams in the CfA story whose densely connected sub-networks benefited CfA. LeBlanc himself was a member of the network of social leaders in his community. As one CfA team member explained, every town has them: "Money, power, charity. It’s such a tight network when you get up to the people that are really powerful or making decisions, or, really, social leaders.” It was through his membership and engagement in that network that LeBlanc was able to get a meeting with the Anthem NH President to discuss CfA and to invite her to participate in the pilot.

Furthermore, the CfA team identified other densely connected sub-networks that would benefit CfA and worked to immerse themselves into those networks. First, they leveraged networked relationships to gain access to vertical networks (organized by industry sector, such as health care). Then, they approached networks horizontally, seeking to gain access to employees who network by job function (such as front line service). They leveraged referrals from their extended networks, and when their existing networks were exhausted, they joined organizations to access additional densely connected sub-networks.

In short, they accessed and joined densely connected sub-networks to be able to deliver their message about the value of CfA from the inside, as an internal member.

**Summary.** An analysis of the nature and functions of the CfA networks, as well as
the leadership tactics and strategies at play to activate, develop, and leverage those networks, reveals a clearer picture of how relationships served to develop and promote the model. The nature of the CfA networks was primarily open and external in scope, comprised of a combination of pre-existing and new relationships with a wide range of professionals from both inside and outside of the academy. The structure of those networks reflected a blend of formal, informal, and organically emergent relationships. The overall function of CfA was to disrupt the higher education market by developing and implementing a low-cost, outcomes-based, highly accessible alternative to higher education, with high completion rates. This goal was accomplished through the engagement of an ever-expanding series of networks whose functions included developing the model, cultivating business-to-business partners, gaining regional accreditation and DOE approval, and leveraging networks in an ongoing fashion to continue to generate subsequent partnerships and enhanced enrollment. Finally, the engagement tactics and strategies to activate, develop, and leverage networks to bring these goals to fruition included a variety of approaches documented in SNA literature as well as some emergent strategies. These will be explored further both in the comparison to the strategies employed by ULS (in the next chapter—Cross-Case Analysis) and in the Discussion chapter.
CHAPTER 6: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

This is a study of two networks of potential higher education disruption and the leaders who drove them. Both innovations started at about the same time. Both leaders were part of the Lumina Foundation’s select innovative institutions with promise, and both served in the foundational group to develop the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN). Beyond those shared networks, which distinguished these two leaders and their innovations as worthy of investigation, this study revealed a number of key similarities and differences in the nature and functions of their networks, and the leadership engagement tactics employed within their respective networks to advance their innovations. This section explores those comparative elements, revealing themes and insights that emerge from a cross-case analysis. It first examines the nature of the networks, including their stability, scope, and structure. Then it examines their functions and explores the engagement tactics utilized to prompt the networks to action and to manage them. Finally, it identifies some emergent political challenges to the perceived non-neutral act of deliberately leveraging networks within the culture of higher education.

The Nature of the Networks

**Stability.** Both leaders developed and launched their innovations working with team members with whom they had pre-existing relationships of extended duration. Schejbal had a nine-year relationship with the deans in ASG and an established working relationship with his team members, the two primary networks that helped to develop ULS. Similarly, LeBlanc had long-standing relationships with the individuals he recruited to serve on the CfA leadership team, though the group members were new to one another. The strength of the existing ties with the central leader, based on relational trust, helped the team members in both cases not only to understand and assimilate the complex ideations of their leaders but to eagerly work with them to develop and implement the model. At the
same time, the leaders could be confident of the skills of their team members, having had prior experience working with them.

Many of the relationships with members of the extended networks of both innovation teams were pre-existing, facilitating their access and engagement. Schejbal’s team members had established individual relationships with the regional business leaders who could be quickly pulled together for curriculum development input and validation. The existing relationships with UW System representatives enabled the team members to leverage their reputation for prior successful innovation as well as the system’s investment in their continued entrepreneurialism. Similarly, LeBlanc and his team had pre-existing relationships with representatives from NEASC, the DOE, and Anthem NH (their first business-to-business partner). The trust and strong ties of these long-standing relationships helped not only for LeBlanc to gain access to key individuals but to gain their support in expediting the approval processes. Finally, the CfA team members’ extended networks included connections to representatives from a wide range of businesses who were engaged to become business-to-business partners. Tapping into those existing relationships, CfA team members were able to gain access to individuals who could introduce CfA within those organizations, generating enrollment for the model.

Some of the relationships in both networks were also new. New relationships were constructed for a number of reasons. In ULS, a new relationship with Fidelis was created for the practical purpose of expanding the infrastructure-building capacity of Schejbal’s team. ULS needed an outside vendor to develop a delivery platform as CEOEL did not have the capacity to build it for themselves. The ASG sub-network members, however, were brought together to develop small projects (i.e. “Best in Show”) as a means to facilitate trust-building and rapport so the cross-institutional units would work well together on ULS. The small projects themselves were not integral to the launching of ULS, but the working relationships
of the cross-institutional teams were. In CfA, new relationships were developed with outside businesses once the team members’ existing relationships were fully tapped, as a means to generate additional enrollment for the model. More on the functions of the networks appears below.

Key insights emerge from an examination of the degree of stability of the networks in the study. Pre-existing relationships can immediately build upon a foundation of trust, knowledge of the skills of the individuals within the network, and a strong rapport. These strong ties enabled team members to hit the ground running when it came to working together closely to develop new projects. Within the multi-institutional ULS, a number of complete networks were pre-existing and fully intact when the model concept was introduced to them. These included each of the continuing education units of the respective ULS partner institutions as well as the ASG group of R1 dean leaders. While CfA networks were not intact, but had to be assembled for the innovation, pivotal individuals (discussed more below) had strong, pre-existing relationships with the central leader. Those relationships, and the trust upon which they were based, facilitated organizing them into new networks for the purpose of the development and implementation of the innovative model. This included the CfA team that LeBlanc assembled, the business-to-business partnerships established, and the individuals tapped to gain access to information and, ultimately, to gain approval for regional accreditation and national Title IV funding.

Entirely new relationships were also necessary to fill in capacity gaps and to develop rapport among new individuals working together. These included the Fidelis relationship with ULS and the new partnership relationships with CfA. In these cases, the purposes of the relationships and their mutual benefits were clear to both organizations entering into the relationship. In contrast, when the ULS deans organized their respective leadership team members to meet with their functional counterparts from the partner
institutions, the purposes of those ASG sub-network meetings and their mutual benefits were less clear, which seemed problematic. When the instructional designer sub-network was able to develop its own meaningful objective for the network creation, they were successful not only at developing a useful small project but also at developing a trust-based rapport, which seemed to be the objective of the ASG deans in bringing those groups together. But the other ASG sub-groups struggled to find purpose.

**Scope.** Over the course of developing and implementing their innovations, the leaders of the study tapped networks including internal institutional, cross-institutional, and external. Schejbal utilized both his existing leadership team (internal) and the ASG deans group (cross-institutional) to develop the concept and determine the features of the ULS model. ULS also worked cross-institutionally to develop a rapport among the partners' leadership team members in their respective functional areas to implement the ULS model. Externally—meaning outside of higher education—Schejbal’s team members reached out to their extended networks to tap business leaders to determine and validate the curriculum. A member of Schejbal’s team also worked internally within UW System to gain approval to pursue a non-standard external partnership with Fidelis for developing a delivery platform. Overall, the majority of ULS networks were internal or cross-institutional, comprised of individuals working within higher education. Only two networks had an external outreach (business leaders and Fidelis) and both were designed for very specific, limited purposes.

The scope of CfA networks, in contrast, were largely external in focus. While LeBlanc identified two of his CfA leadership team from other departments internal to SNHU, the rest of the team members were assembled from external sources, many from outside of academia. Furthermore, external networks were tapped for gaining regional accreditation and national Title IV funding approval. Finally, the CfA enrollment model itself was based upon business-to-business partnerships, which required external outreach.
In addition to the differences in the outreach scope of the models’ networks (internal, external, or cross-institutional), there were also differences in the extent to which their membership intentionally changed. ULS networks were primarily closed in nature. Schejbal’s leadership team, for example, pre-existed and no new members were added for the development of the ULS. Given the very strict criteria of membership in ASG, which was a precondition of institutions partnering in ULS, participation was relatively closed to new members. The business leaders tapped by Schejbal’s leadership team had pre-existing relationships with individual members of the team, and no mention was made of surveying a wider array of businesses outside of those contacts in Northeastern Wisconsin. Thus, that network remained closed as well. Similarly, cross-institution teams were comprised of formal employees of the respective continuing education units of partner deans. Each network engaged in the ULS model had a relatively static membership.

In contrast, CfA networks were largely open and expansive. While many members had prior relationships with LeBlanc or another team member, the networks were newly created with individuals brought in based on their expertise for the work to be done. Not only was the CfA leadership team assembled this way, but so were the networks involved in seeking the NEASC regional accreditation for direct assessment and the DOE Title IV funding approval. Individual CfA team members who had connections in the networks with which CfA would need to interface (namely, NEASC and DOE) helped in the outreach to those organizations. The same approach was used for connecting to potential external partners, such as Anthem NH (for the pilot) and other businesses for the scaling up of the model. Members of the CfA team sought ways to penetrate external business networks through existing relationships with individuals within those networks. When existing relationships were exhausted, CfA team members formally joined professional business organizations to be able to enter into those networks as new members to develop the
informal rapport necessary to commence a more formal relationship through CfA.

Some important insights emerge from the scope of the networks in the study. In the ULS, as a result of a multi-institutional partnership, a great number of connections needed to take place cross-institutionally to develop rapport, determine the responsibilities of the partners, and garner buy-in from team members from five institutions. This would explain why their networks were largely internal and cross-institutional in scope and comprised of primarily university staff members. This would also explain why their external outreach was limited to specific purposes, as so much energy and effort was focused on aligning the partner institutions. In contrast, CfA, functioning as the sole academic institution launching the model, did not have cross-institutional networks to manage. Thus, they could focus their energies on generating external partnerships. So, while in CfA, external relationships continued to evolve and develop as needs changed (i.e. Gates, NEASC, DOE), ULS did not cultivate external networks to the same degree or extent.

The differences in the depth of relationships was also an important observation in the scope of the study. Some relationships were transactional in nature, while others required the developing of a close relationship. For example, Schejbal’s team tapped the regional business leaders for input on the curriculum and for validation of its alignment with industry need. Those exchanges were limited in frequency and required very little investment or commitment on the part of either organization. Thus, those networks could be considered transactional in nature. In contrast, relational exchanges require the building of strong rapports and trust-based relationships, as the investment on both sides is greater. Examples of relational networks included Schejbal’s team member’s relationship with the Fidelis CEO, Schejbal’s team member’s relationship with UW System representatives, and CfA’s relationships with business-to-business partners. In those relational exchanges, it took a shared vision or understanding and the building of trust to reach the point where a
commitment could be made to the relationship and an agreement on the exchange of support or services. When considering the depth of the exchanges throughout both networks, CfA demonstrated significantly more external relational exchanges at all stages of the development and implementation of the model, from pursuing the Gates grant, through NEASC accreditation and DOE approval, to the pilot and scale up. Repeatedly, CfA team members needed to tap or cultivate trust-based relationships to win over external partners to advance their innovative model.

A final insight on the scope of the networks relates to their openness to new or fluctuating membership. ULS networks were closed in that they didn’t add new members. Leveraging existing closed networks means relying upon the assumption that those already within the networks are both the best equipped to do the work and accordingly committed to it as well. It also means there is little opportunity for external input or influx of new ideas. In contrast, in CfA, all but the dyadic relationship between LeBlanc and Christensen were open. This offered an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and input into the model’s development and implementation, which will be discussed further, in the section later in this chapter on engagement tactics.

**Structure.** Structurally, both innovative models incorporated a blend of informal and formal networks. Informal networks, again, are those that develop when individuals come together of their own accord for a specific purpose; formal are those created, such as a unit or department within an organization. Schejbal and LeBlanc’s respective relationships with their leadership teams had both formal and informal elements. While they had a formal working relationship, they also had informal rapports. Schejbal had been working with his team for many years, and they had developed a comradery and social comfort level. LeBlanc had existing informal relationships with his leadership team members, whom he then assembled into a formal unit. Similarly, many of the institutional external relationships
of both leaders and their teams were a blend of informal and formal. Schejbal’s team members’ relationships with regional business leaders and the UW System representatives had both formal and informal qualities. Likewise, CfA team members’ connections to representatives from NEASC, the DOE, and many of the business with whom they ultimately partnered on the CfA model were comprised of informal and formal elements. In many instances, informal relationships preceded formal ones, such as the ongoing relationships LeBlanc had with individuals he later formally invited to join the CfA team or the relationships Schejbal’s team members had with regional business before they were brought in for input on the ULS curriculum. When the reverse was the case, with formal relationships preceding informal ones, development of informal rapport became important for completing the work within the formal structure. Such was the case with Schejbal’s team member who worked with UW System representatives on an alternative protocol for engaging a delivery platform provider, and for the ASG sub-networks who were brought together by their respective deans to work on ULS.

A few relationships within both sets of networks were organically emergent. These developed spontaneously as individuals gravitated toward one another based on idea and vision alignment. Relationships that emerged tended to develop strength quickly, based on mutual identification, such as the relationship between the ULS team member and the Fidelis CEO, and the relationship between LeBlanc and the former DOE representative. In contrast, less successful were attempts to impose an informal rapport on a formally structured group, such as the ASG sub-networks, brought together to co-develop smaller projects while creating a network for launching ULS.

In every instance, with one notable exception, the networks engaged in the potentially disruptive innovation had at least a formal component. The exception was the ASG deans, who had only an informal agreement. Typically, organically emergent or
informal relationships evolved into or included a formal structure as well, such as Schejbal’s team member relationships with the business leaders, the Fidelis CEO, and UW System representatives. This means that in addition to an informal rapport among the membership there either were pre-existing formal expectations already in place (i.e. CEOEL with UW System) or they were established over the course of the model’s development and implementation (i.e. CEOEL with Fidelis). The terms of a formal structure are typically embedded into the organizational hierarchy or agreed to by contractual agreement.

The notable exception to the presence of any formal structure was the ASG deans’ “Gentleman’s agreement,” as one of Schejbal’s team members described it. The strictly informal agreement to the partnership facilitated buy-in from the partner institutions, which retained a sense of control over their level of commitment and financial exposure. The lack of codified responsibility, however, created inconsistency in actual investment of time, resources, and the less tangible but important quality of perceived commitment to the ULS. In short, that lack of formality may have contributed to the perception of the project as “experimental” on the part of a number of the partners. Furthermore, accountability became difficult to impose. The consequences of failure to deliver were limited to embarrassment and disappointment.

This cross-case examination of the nature of the ULS and CfA networks underscores the impact of choices about the stability, scope, and structure on the innovation. Stable, pre-existing networks benefited from a foundation of trust, strong rapport, and ready access, but when closed, suffered from a lack of infusion of varied perspectives and expertise. Internal and cross-institutional networks were necessary to develop rapport among members, to gain buy-in, and to assign responsibilities, but such limited scope focused significant time and resources on the partnership as opposed to external outreach to promote the model. Furthermore, depth of relationships was an important feature, as
transactional exchanges required only limited investment and commitment by both parties whereas relational exchanges, where the investment is greater, require strong rapport and trust to reach a point of commitment. Finally, structurally, networks were strongest with a blend of informal or organically emergent relationships with formal relationships among the membership. Those relationships which emerged organically seemed to develop strength quickly, based on mutual identification. Whether blending informal or organically emergent with formal, however, blended relationships enjoyed a social closeness and rapport while also being held accountable by a formal organizational structure or contractual agreement.

**Functions**

The study demonstrates that leaders build and access networks for a variety of purposes. This section will explore the specific functions that emerged from the cases that both leaders needed to ensure were carried out to advance their innovations: (1) developing the model, (2) identifying talent & capacity, (3) securing financial resources, (4) testing the model in the marketplace, (5) gaining necessary approvals, (5) generating sponsorship, and (6) actively promoting the innovation. It will also examine individual functions pursued that were unique to each of the models. These include cross-institutional network cultivation (in ULS) and using networks for counsel (in CfA). Finally, this section will consider the order in which networks were engaged and the composition of those networks to carry out these functions.

**Developing the Model.** Both Schejbal and LeBlanc engaged trusted individuals with whom they had long-standing relationships to develop their respective models. For Schejbal, that included both his leadership team and the ASG deans group. For LeBlanc, that included a leadership team he assembled from trusted individuals from a cross a number of his existing networks. Each team, or set of teams, was tasked with developing the model.
Sub-functions of that development included clarifying ideas, refining concepts and building a prototype. Those sub-functions took place inside those leadership teams.

**Identifying Talent & Capacity.** To carry out the function of developing the model, the leaders needed team members with both the talent and the capacity in their workloads to focus on the model. The two components go together because one is not effective without the other. Because Schejbal brought his idea to two existing networks—his leadership team and the ASG deans—there were a pre-existing set of skills and a capacity within those teams that were not necessarily customized to the project. As a result of what was described by one of Schejbal’s team members as a lack of capacity, ULS needed to partner with Fidelis to build infrastructure for a customized delivery platform. This necessity introduced a new relationships and an additional level of partnering—and its accompanying risk- and revenue-sharing—for the model’s development function. Meanwhile, LeBlanc built his CfA leadership team from existing relationships based upon the expertise need for the model, enabling him to hire the key individuals needed to carry out the jobs to be done. As LeBlanc shared in the interview, he considers his job as primarily talent recruitment. Thus, CfA found and hired an IT director with platform development expertise, who then subsequently hired his own IT team to address the development of platform for CfA. Because LeBlanc was assembling his team from scratch and sequestering the unit from other responsibilities, he was able to get individuals with the requisite skill sets and the capacity to focus on CfA.

The impact of the focus and prioritization of the work of the respective leadership teams is important to underscore. Schejbal’s leadership team and those of the other ULS partners had responsibility for multiple projects within their units. ULS was only one of many initiatives on which they had to work. Such multi-functional focus necessarily diluted their efforts and attention. For the ASG partner institutions, the other competing needs of...
their respective continuing education units also reduced the priority of the ULS project. This manifest itself not only in a lack of exclusive attention to ULS but also in a competition for finite resources among the variety of each unit’s projects. As a result, for many partners, only very limited resources were devoted to ULS, and the project was deemed “experimental.” Meanwhile, within CfA, the leadership team was not only physically sequestered from other units of the university but they were also structurally and functionally sequestered. The team members could make CfA not just their primary— but their exclusive—responsibility. This concentration of attention and resources enabled them to fully operationalize the model within a matter of months.

**Securing Financial Resources.** An important function of the networks was to identify and secure financial support. For ULS, each partner dean determined the extent of his financial commitment to the model. Many shared that they had limited that commitment as they had higher priorities to address within their unit’s financial constraints. Meanwhile, LeBlanc secured a Gates NGLC grant that provided financial support for the model’s development. It should be noted that both models may have had additional funding from other sources that just did not emerge in the data.

**Testing the Model in the Marketplace.** Ideas cannot be potentially disruptive if they don’t have value in their respective higher education markets. Thus, testing the models was an essential function. While Schejbal’s team tapped external networks for capacity-building, and LeBlanc’s team for financial resources, both teams utilized external networks to test their models in the marketplace. In the ULS case, the team pulled together a network of regional corporate leaders for very focused, limited conversations. Meanwhile, CfA developed a relationship with a pilot company, Anthem NH, to test the model and then expanded business relationships out from there.

**Gaining Necessary Approvals.** Networks were also essential for the functions of
gaining approvals, processes which can serve as a means to remove obstacles or to pro-
actively advance the innovation. Schejbal’s team needed to leverage internal relationships
with representatives from UW System to gain approval to pursue a non-standard
contractual relationship with a vendor to provide a customized delivery platform. This
approval removed a roadblock to their launching the innovation. Meanwhile, CfA secured
multiple approvals to advance its innovation. By leveraging relationships with
representatives from NEASC and the DOE, CfA gained authorization to offer direct
assessment under the institution’s accreditation and Title IV funding, respectively. The
distinction between obstacle removal and innovation advancement can be a fine one.
Obstacles can be deal-breakers in moving forward at all. Schejbal’s team required a delivery
platform to offer ULS; they could not have done so without it. CfA needed approval from
NEASC for accreditation and from DOE for Title IV funding. Accreditation is clearly
important for CfA’s credit-based degree model, whereas it was unnecessary for the ULS,
which offers entirely continuing education. But, interestingly, LeBlanc indicated that he was
not even sure CfA would want or need DOE Title IV student financial aid funding, given the
low cost of the model. In fact, he shared that the function of the DOE approval was primarily
national validation. Thus, while both innovation teams used networks to gain approvals,
one did so primarily to address a development need and the other to enhance and expand
the model’s marketability. One also worked internally on those approvals while the other
worked externally to gain those approvals.

Generating Sponsorship. Both leaders and their teams also engaged with national
organizations, which served the function of providing sponsorship through the distribution
of resources, social support, and validation for their models. Both were recognized by the
Lumina Foundation for their work on competency-based education (CBE) and invited to the
original April, 2013, meeting and subsequent meetings sponsored by Lumina. Both
benefited from the $10M in funding Lumina invested in bringing together leaders of CBE from institutions across the country, and in founding C-BEN, the Competency-Based Education Network. Through their engagement with Lumina, both models also received national validation. By receiving the Gates NGLC grant, CfA was further validated, and the CfA team had access to the Gates’ Personal Learning Network (PLN). While the leaders did not highlight the importance of the social support these organizational networks offered, at least one CfA team member recognized PLN as providing critical social support through the development and implementation process. Given the Lumina and Gates’ Foundations respective roles in the launching of the models, the significance of their network functions should not be undervalued.

**Actively Promoting the Innovation.** Finally, networks were important to the function of actively promoting the models for both innovations. Both ULS and CfA leveraged the media to cover their innovations to draw in potential new students, with the added benefit of gaining enhanced commitment by existing team members and partners who were excited to receive positive press regarding their participation. This function was so important that it is explored further, with examples, in the next section on engagement tactics (under the Development of Supporting Structures). CfA also utilized “mobilizers” from within companies to champion and endorse the model to their fellow employees. This function is also covered further, in the next section (under “Leveraging Pivotal Individuals.”)

What is important to note here is that CfA actively leveraged their mobilizers, moving those whose endorsements were particularly compelling from the more limited arenas of promoting the model exclusively within their respective companies to the broader arenas of representing CfA at conferences and to the national media. Such was the case with Anthem NH’s president, who went on to represent CfA not only as a panel presenter and speaker but, eventually, serving on SNHU’s board. In this way, CfA created a steady stream of new
advocates whose seemingly unbiased testimony served as compelling narratives in the advancement of the model.

**Functions Unique to Individual Models.** In addition to functions shared by networks within both innovation models, there were individual functions that existed only within one of the two sets of networks.

*Cross-Institutional Network Cultivation (ULS):* Within the ULS, as a multi-institutional partnership, relationships needed to be fostered cross-institutionally. While the ASG deans had a pre-existing, trust-based relationship, their teams did not. Recognizing the importance of relational trust and strong ties in working relationships, the deans worked to bridge those institutional divides. Members of Schejbal’s team were tasked with outreach to their respective counterparts at partner institutions. Furthermore, the ASG deans brought their teams together for meetings and assigned them small projects to develop, for the function of developing informal relationships and a strong rapport. This necessity to forge ties between multiple institutions to partner on developing and implementing the model itself was a challenge that only ULS had to address, and it had to do so within its already limited time, resource, and prioritization constraints.

*Using Networks for Counsel (CfA):* Within CfA, LeBlanc developed relationships for a function that was unique within his set of networks—that of the central leader securing outside counsel. LeBlanc sought counsel first and foremost from Clayton Christensen, who advised him on sequestering the CfA unit and building his leadership team based on the work to be done. LeBlanc also sought outside counsel from the NEASC CIHE President on the best way to present the CfA model to the Commission for accreditation for direct assessment. Furthermore, he sought counsel from the former DOE representative on how to navigate Washington D.C., and from Kanter, the DOE undersecretary, on presenting to DOE. The theme of seeking out individuals with knowledge or expertise in different arenas and
heeding their advice came up repeatedly in CfA. This is not to say that Schejbal and his team did not seek outside counsel; if they did, however, it did not surface in the data.

**Goals Matter to Functions.** While most of the functions of the respective models’ networks were the same (with just a few unique functions) they differed primarily in what the two leaders sought to accomplish from the networks, from the very beginning. In the ULS innovation, the primary purpose of the model was to serve as a partnership among a pre-existing group of continuing education leaders of R1 institutions. The partnership was the point. The network existed, first and foremost, to serve the network. Secondarily, the network served as a means to accomplish something unique and potentially disruptive. But, the partnership was considered key. Since the partnership was only one component of the work of a set of otherwise separate and distinct continuing education units, it would not receive the priority of the other work of those units—the pre-existing work to which they were already committed and that generated their ongoing revenue sources. In short, the model necessarily existed as a lower priority, as an experiment.

In the CfA innovation, the primary purpose of the model was to disrupt the higher education market (degree-based, as opposed to continuing education) with a low-cost, highly accessible, outcomes-based alternative that generated high completion rates. The disruption of the market was the point. The means to do so was not pre-determined, nor were the networks that would be engaged even yet in existence. By sequestering the unit from all other responsibilities and processes of the university and by assigning the team an exclusive focus on the model development and implementation, LeBlanc positioned it as a priority. It also had an infusion of resources from the Gates NGLC grant, for which there were no competing projects. With this single-minded focus and resource allocation, the team was able to move forward, putting the model’s development and implementation first, over all other matters.
Order of Network Engagement. One of the research questions sought to understand the order in which networks were developed. In general, networks were engaged in the order necessary to implement their functions, chronologically: 1) developing the model, (2) identifying talent & capacity, (3) securing financial resources, (4) testing the model in the marketplace, (5) gaining necessary approvals, (5) generating sponsorship, and (6) actively promoting the innovation. In other words, the requirements for developing the innovation needed to be identified before the essential networks could either be built or tapped to address them. After being built, the model needed to be tested in the marketplace for initial feedback. Approvals were less strictly chronological, as they were related more to the obstacles that arose (i.e. needing to find capacity) or advances to be secured (i.e. accreditation or Title IV funding), which could arise at various stages in the process. Similarly, gaining the validation and social support of sponsorship was ongoing through the development and implementation process. The final function, promotion, happened to lesser degrees throughout the process and to a greater extent once the model was up and running.

Composition of Networks by Function. Another research question focused on the types of individuals involved, which was related to function. Basically, three types of people were engaged in the study’s networks: (1) people currently internal to the organizations that had previously established relationships, (2) newcomers that the networks had to identify and bring in, and (3) individuals and organizations external to the universities that were needed to advance key functions.

Established relationships were the primary networks employed for the model’s development. Both leaders selected individuals they personally trusted to share the idea and to help them work through the model concept to determine how to build a prototype. For Schejbal, that included two primary networks—this leadership team and the ASG deans.
For LeBlanc, he assembled a single, new leadership team from those he knew had the skills and with whom he had a personal connection.

Newcomers were brought in only when needed to address gaps in skills or capacity. For LeBlanc, those newcomers were hired as members of the CfA team. Those on the new leadership team either had the talent and capacity themselves or subsequently hired others to address talent and capacity gaps. LeBlanc was very involved in talent acquisition for CfA, at least at the leadership team level. Schejbal’s leadership team and ASG network remained closed, as no newcomers were brought in.

Finally, external individuals and networks were tapped in both cases to address specific, key functions. In the ULS, Schejbal’s team tapped the regional business leaders to identify the curriculum. They also engaged Fidelis to address infrastructure capacity-building needs. In CfA, LeBlanc secured a Gates NGLC grant to provide financial resources to launch the innovation. LeBlanc also engaged NEASC and the DOE for the external approval processes—regional accreditation and national Title IV funding. Finally, both leaders were involved in the promoting their respective models to the media. LeBlanc and the CfA team also cultivated external promoters to speak on behalf of the organization and the model in public venues.

It is worthy of note that LeBlanc personally engaged more in talent acquisition to build the model and with external networks to address functions to advance the model than Schejbal, who delegated that responsibility to his leadership team, who made contacts based upon their individual relationships.

**SNA Engagement Tactics**

The means by which the leaders engaged their networks to accomplish the functions required of them is the subject of this section. Social Network Analysis (SNA) provides ten strategies that leaders use to activate and leverage networks. These strategies prompt
networked individuals to address the functions described above; thus, these strategies are really about how the leaders deployed the networks. These ten strategies are organized here into three general categories by the type of engagement tactics they employ to generate commitment to, and promotion of, the innovation by relevant stakeholders: (1) Activating Pivotal Individuals, (2) Developing Support Structures, and (3) Leveraging Alliances. Emergent network features are also included under those general headings as well.

Despite their primary goal differences, both leaders employed similar engagement tactics. The differences in their use of these engagement tactics tended to be in the scope of the networks in which they were employed, based upon the primary goal of their innovation—whether to develop a cross-institutional partnership or to launch a nationally disruptive model of higher education.

**Leveraging Alliances.** The engagement tactic of leveraging alliances includes how each leader capitalized on (1) strong ties between individuals, (2) relational trust, and (2) densely-connected sub-networks to achieve his goal for the innovation. Both leaders leveraged alliances in the relationships they built with others and the relationships those others had with their own extended networks. Both tapped existing members of their trusted circles to convey their concept ideas to develop the model. For ULS, this included Schejbal’s leadership team and the ASG deans; for LeBlanc, this was the leadership team he assembled. The strong relationships the leaders had within these networks enabled them to readily communicate complex information and to trust the members of the network to help drive the change. Next, the leaders leveraged the extended network of their team members, who then subsequently tapped their trusted circles for carrying out their sub-unit tasks. This is a key strategy of leaders—to identify where relationships are strong and individuals work well together to be able to quickly assimilate information, divide up tasks, and carry
out assigned functions. By leveraging those alliances, leaders can expedite processes and be more confident not only of buy-in but also of ultimate results, working with individuals who can readily and confidently assume the roles they need to within a team to address their assigned functions.

In this study, the alliances leveraged varied in scope, based on the primary goal of the leader. When the primary goal was to build a multi-institutional partnership, as in ULS, the focus of the extended alliances became cross-institutional. With densely connected sub-networks pre-existing among unit team members, by institution, the focus became developing new ties with strong relational trust with counterpart sub-networks at partner institutions. In essence, the ASG deans sought to build among the counterparts of their individual units the same kind of strong alliance they had among themselves, as counterpart deans. This explains why the ASG deans attempted to organize their sub-units to collaborate on small projects, such as the “Best in Show.” Furthermore, some of the ULS partner deans, being new to their institutions, simultaneously worked to develop strong ties and relational trust with their new team members. They were looking to address the gaps in strong alliances among the cross-institutional units to achieve their goal of a strong partnership. In short, the alliances prioritized the partnership.

In contrast, when the leader’s primary goal was to build a higher education model that disrupted the market, as in CfA, the focus for creating and leveraging alliances was external. Such alliances were about advancing the effort beyond the institution. LeBlanc and the CfA team reached out to NEASC and the DOE, leveraging strong ties and relational trust with the CIHE President, the former DOE representative and the DOE Undersecretary, to garner needed approvals and get counsel. CfA team members reached out to their extended, external networks to leverage existing strong ties with individuals in other businesses and business sectors to advance the innovation model. They also worked to develop new ties
and relational trust to enter into existing densely connected networks through memberships in various professional groups. The focus on developing those relationships was to gain approval for, to promote, or to enroll students in CfA. In short, the alliances prioritized bringing a potential disruptive innovation to market.

**Activating Pivotal Individuals.** The engagement tactic of activating pivotal individuals involves how each leader positioned various individuals in specific roles to prompt networks to action. From the SNA literature, some individuals who are activated include (1) central actors/leaders, (2) opinion leaders, (3) bridges/brokers, and (4) managers of the indecisive/resisters. To this list, one additional type of pivotal individual emerged in the data: (4) storytellers. This section identifies how leaders activated these pivotal individuals, within each of the case networks, to prompt the respective networks to carry out their relevant functions.

**Central Actors/Leader.** Both LeBlanc and Schejbal served as central leaders for their respective innovations. They also served as central leaders within their leadership teams, personally activating them to develop the model.

In CfA, where a single academic institution launched the innovation, there was one internal central leader, and then sub-unit leaders were brought on board to activate and manage their respective individual sub-units. This central leadership was aligned in that the sub-unit leaders were hired by the innovation’s central leader and had strong ties with him. This alignment of internal central leadership facilitated the flow of information as well as social support.

For ULS, with a primary goal of developing a successful multi-institutional partnership of R1 institutions, Schejbal served as the central leader to activate the ASG group, not only to assist in developing the model but to engage their respective sub-units, and to serve a gatekeeping function in maintaining a closed network. With five institutions
involved in the partnership, each with its own continuing education units, each ASG dean served as a central leader for the model within his own institution and his own unit.

Without a direct reporting structure, however, central leadership was not as clearly aligned as in CfA. Thus, multiple central leaders shaped the commitment to, and information flow about, the ULS project within their institutional units.

**Opinion Leaders.** Both LeBlanc and Schejbal, as well as the partner ASG deans within ULS, worked independently and within their respective units to generate champions or opinion leaders for the model. In ULS, the scope of opinion leadership was narrow and largely internal or cross-institutional. Before ASG deans could become central leaders for their institutions and their units, they had to serve as opinion leaders to compel their institutions to embrace the ULS model. One ASG dean then strategically placed individuals he brought with him from his previous institution in leadership roles to champion the ULS idea among the remaining team members within his unit. In contrast, in CfA, opinion leaders tended to have an external focus. They were activated largely for external outreach to advance the innovation. Dubbed “mobilizers,” these individuals from outside of CfA came to represent CfA to external networks, providing third-party testimony to the value of CfA. By activating external opinion leaders, LeBlanc and the CfA enhanced the credibility of the model and helped CfA to draw in new partners. In fact, the work of such external individuals created a ripple effect in expanding the partnership reach of CfA.

**Bridges/Brokers.** Bridges are individuals who serve as brokers to connect disconnected teams and to promote the sharing of resources. Both leaders used bridges, but, again, the scope of the networks they spanned differed by model. In ULS, the partner deans served as cross-institutional bridges between their universities and UW-Extension and between their continuing education units and those of their partners. Furthermore, Schejbal activated some of his team members to serve as bridges to reach out to their
counterparts at the partner institutions to explain ULS. Finally, the partner deans also formally brought the functional counterparts of their leadership teams together to work on shared projects in an attempt to span the gap between their respective organizational units. In addition to the primarily internal and cross-institutional focus of bridging, some pivotal individuals were activated for external outreach. Schejbal’s team members served as bridges, for example, to reach out to business leaders to gather input on the curriculum, and Schejbal reached out to the media for ULS promotion. Overall, however, the majority of the bridging was based on a multi-institutional partnership, needed to address internal and cross-institutional connections.

LeBlanc, however, by assembling the CfA team from scratch from largely external networks, and then reaching out to existing regional and national networks for approvals, tended to utilize external bridges. When hiring leadership team members, LeBlanc hired individuals who could relate to, or had existing network associations with, various business sectors. This positioned these individuals to serve naturally as bridges to those businesses. LeBlanc and key members of his leadership team also served as external bridges to NEASC and the DOE, when they reached out to individuals they knew within those networks to span the gaps between CfA and those respective regional and national organizations from whom they sought approvals. LeBlanc and team also continued to identify and leverage potential bridges from one organization to the next as they developed relationships and new business-to-business partnerships. Thus, they bridged from network to network, by leveraging key individuals with whom some member of the CfA had developed a relationship.

Managers of Indecisive/Resisters. In order to protect their growing new innovations from negative forces, both leaders also needed to manage the indecisive and resisters. Within the ULS, Schejbal and the other partner deans managed the indecisive and
resisters within ASG by framing the innovation as something which members needed to choose to join in or opt out of and then making the group an “exclusive club” for which they approved membership. Within the closed partnership, Schejbal activated members of his leadership team to reach out cross-institutionally to sway their indecisive counterparts, and partner deans used members of their unit staff to sway other members of their staff. Finally, one of Schejbal’s team members served to manage the potential resistance by UW System to the non-standard RFP protocol. In CfA, LeBlanc recognized the need to manage the potential resistance of faculty and staff in SNHU’s University College and COCE. LeBlanc himself worked to allay their fears about being displaced, and then activated his assessment expert, with her faculty credibility, to address their concerns over losing control over the university curriculum. It is interesting to note that her message to this group differed from her message to external networks. With the faculty, she underscored that CfA was rooted in traditional higher ed; while her message to external organizations was that CfA was disruptive. Both were true. Customizing the message is part of the management of the indecisive and the resistant, appealing to the issues relevant to their interests in order to advance the innovation. In each instance, however, a key individual who was in the best position to address others’ uncertainty or resistance to the model was positioned to do so.

*Storytellers.* Identifying and activating individuals to deliver a compelling story about the innovation is the final significant leader-activated role, which emerged in the study outside of the SNA framework. Both sets of networks employed the use of storytelling, with the central leader serving as the primary storyteller. It seems significant that the story be associated with, and embraced by, the leader, though it can originate with others and others can share it. In fact, the story is best if it is compelling enough to circulate, to continually promote the model. The stories need to resonate with a wide range of people, as well as play well in the media. Both innovation’s stories, shared by the leaders of this
study—one about customizing a wardrobe and one about equipping a suitcase with wheels—meet these criteria. With CfA, the story originated with an external partner, not only outside of the university but also not personally benefitting from the innovation, generating even greater credibility. Either way, by serving as storytellers delivering a compelling, re-tellable narrative, the leaders advanced the work of the innovation.

**Developing Support Structures.** Using the final engagement tactic, developing support structures, leaders exploited the SNA strategies of (1) inter-organizational linkages, (2) diverse ties, and (3) adjusting hierarches. Furthermore, in the data, the support structure of the "snowball effect" emerged as a means to prompt or enhance network engagement. In both CfA and ULS, support structures were developed to support the innovation within their respective internal organizations as well as between their organizations and others important to the advancement of their models.

**Inter-organizational Linkages.** Inter-organizational linkages are important connections between organizations that have a significant impact on outcomes. Thus, they are important to leaders to establish and maintain. In the ULS, the inter-organizational linkages were primarily academically cross-institutional. With an innovation pursued as a means to establish and sustain a partnership, the links between partnering organizations became crucial. These included dean-to-dean relationships as well as unit counterpart-to-counterpart relationships. Ironically, while the deans focused on trying to generate informal rapport among members their units, which at times was perceived as awkwardly imposed, they failed to formalize their own relationships with a codified structure to cut across institutional boundaries. This left them with the only inter-organizational linkage in the study missing a necessary formal component.

Inter-organizational linkages external to academia were rarer in ULS. Two stood out as important examples: Schejbal’s team members’ outreach to regional business leaders and
to Fidelis. The business leader linkages had a transactional quality, in that there was a mutual exchange at distinct moments in time, but the external relationships with respect to the innovation were not ongoing and relational. The strongest external support structure initiated by ULS was the partnership with Fidelis. The partnership was not only formally contractual but included an organically emergent rapport developed through elements of shared vision in the creation of an exciting new, potentially disruptive delivery platform for higher education.

In contrast, in CfA, the inter-organizational linkages were entirely external to academia and the primary strategy in the marketing of the model. LeBlanc and his team used inter-organizational connections to develop relationships with companies, which was the means by which students were recruited. So, those relationships became the crux of the model. They were also deliberately identified and activated in navigating the external approval processes.

**Diverse Ties.** Generating and maintaining diverse ties is a strategy for ensuring one’s network is broad enough to provide access to all types of individuals across a broad range of networks, and it facilitates diffusion of the innovation. This strategy was far less apparent in the ULS data than in the CfA data. The strongest instance of it in ULS emerged in the description by one of Schejbal’s team members of seeking out entrepreneurial people outside of academia at professional conferences to make connections. That team member recognized that exposure to innovative ideas outside of one’s primary industry could plant seeds to be germinated and nurtured as one day applicable to higher education. In contrast, the CfA model was actually developed from a diversity of ties, as LeBlanc hired his team primarily from individuals outside the academy. Furthermore, the more diverse the team members’ ties to individuals in various business sectors, the greater the opportunity to recruit a broad range of business-to-business partners. Thus, the diversity of ties became a
primary strategy for developing and implementing the model.

*Adjusting hierarchies.* Another key means of developing a support structure for the models was having the ability to adjust the hierarchy of the organization to facilitate the model’s development. This was not implemented as formally or as substantially within the ULS as within CfA.

In the ULS, over time, one of Schejbal’s team members emerged as ULS Program Manager, though, at the time of the study interviews, formal changes had not been made to the organizational hierarchy. Within partner institutions, ASG dean leaders varied in their approaches to making such adjustments. One incorporated “reimagining learning” into the strategic plan, and another created ad hoc task forces for carrying out the work of ULS. Overall, structural changes were small, and more informal than formal, likely because of the persisting (and often competing) non-ULS responsibilities of each of the partner continuing education units.

In contrast, at SNHU, hierarchy change was a decisive strategy, as CfA was sequestered both physically, and, by extracting its accountability from the rest of university, structurally, as its own college. This gave CfA considerable freedom and flexibility to focus first on developing a prototype and then, externally, on launching and operationalizing a very different type of higher education model. LeBlanc very intentionally focused the responsibilities of team members, their time, resources, priorities, and commitment exclusively on the development and advancement of the model. That singular focus and commitment, pulled directly from “the Christensen playbook,” served CfA well in prioritizing and expediting their work.

*Snowball Effort.* The final support structure that emerged both with the ULS and CfA was what Schejbal dubbed the “Snowball Effort.” The distinctive use of the word “effort” (rather than “effect”), by Schejbal, suggests an intentionality in the ULS management of
media coverage to renew partner excitement and commitment. The concept serves as a support structure in that one form of network engagement was designed to generate or encourage another form of network engagement—such as being recognized by Lumina as an innovation of promise generating national media coverage, which then enhanced team member commitment and engagement, which led to additional coverage, and so on. The process created a spiraling loop of promotion efforts to enhance renewed commitment to, and promotion of, the innovation. For Schejbal, the deliberateness of the effort became apparent not only in his choice of the word “effort,” but also in his reference to keeping his media sources “warm.” His strategy was to make sure the media knew what was happening at every stage of ULS implementation in order to create interest and generate excitement.

LeBlanc did not similarly identify such an overt effort or effect, though he did reference the positive impact of recurring validation and promotion of the model to generating support at each consecutive stage of its approval and scale up. For CfA, the cycle was prompted and became self-perpetuating through the cultivation of “mobilizers” within companies, who were then leveraged to tell the CfA story. That external partner passion generated additional enrollment, and the media came to recognize it and cover it, which brought in more companies interested in exploring a business-to-business partnership.

Political Perceptions of Deliberate Network Leveraging

The preceding descriptions of network leveraging suggest an intentionality—either overt or implicit—that may carry with it non-neutral or even politically-charged associations. Over the study of network engagement hangs the unspoken question of whether their deliberate leveraging has ethical implications. This facet of networks is addressed here in the cross-case analysis because when it surfaced in the study—albeit rarely and typically only in nuanced statements—the participants were either extremely guarded in their wording or, when speaking freely, unwilling to have their observations
attributed within the individual cases. A few participants were particularly careful to suggest that they did not provide unfair advantages to those within their extended networks when it came to navigating official processes. At the same time, one participant was also quick to request complete de-attribution of some negative observations about a leader's attempts to activate, leverage, or manage networks. It is important to note for the study, however, that while uncommon in the interviews, these few instances of politically value-laden network observations did emerge. Perhaps the most poignant was one participant’s perception of a leader’s passion for moving the innovation forward interfering with that leader’s ability to take counsel and to adjust goals and expectations to adopt a more measured approach to engaging with a particular, validating external network. Impulsive, albeit well-meaning, actions can create rifts in relationships, generating fissures in important or essential networks, which are potentially detrimental to the implementation of the model on an industry-wide scale. Accompanying political relationship strains within networks could impede the progress and dissemination of the innovation. That finding must be acknowledged here, even as the details of its emergence in this study must remain opaque. This finding also points to the potential dangers of not being strategic and intentional with network strategies, as such spontaneous (non-deliberate) actions may have unintended negative consequences. These political implications will be explored further in the next chapter.

**Summary**

The two innovations of the study have tremendous similarity in their networks as well as some very fundamental differences in terms of how they were structured and what they did. While both ULS and CfA represent potentially disruptive innovations in higher education, and both relied heavily on networked relationships, they approached the development and implementation of their innovations very differently, based upon the
primary function of their models. One served as the sole academic provider of the model; the other partnered with other academic institutions. One tapped a broad range of individuals with diverse backgrounds to build networks; the other introduced the model’s concept into existing academic networks. One developed a new unit and sequestered it, physically and structurally, from other university programs; the other sequestered the networks, keeping membership strictly closed to outsiders. One developed and cultivated networks for the primary purpose of disrupting the higher education market; the other for the primary purpose of creating a multi-institutional partnership.

The nature of the networks engaged and the tactics used to engage them were directed by those primary purposes. For ULS, a great deal of networking effort went into managing internal and cross-institutional closed networks to support a multi-institutional partnership. Furthermore, competing unit projects vying for team member time, prioritization, and resources diluted attention to ULS. Added to this, no formal agreement on the partnership existed to impose accountability among the partners. This all added up to an experimental pursuit by a handful of academic partners.

For CfA, in contrast, with the primary function of disrupting the higher education degree market, most of the networking effort was externally-oriented within open networks, geared toward gaining approvals and generating enrollment for the program. With a sequestered unit and a team assembled based upon their functional expertise, little work needed to be done internally and none cross-institutionally as SNHU served as the sole academic provider. By cultivating and leveraging external “mobilizers,” CfA not only secured business-to-business partners but generated additional connections, through the extended networks of those mobilizers. The team also recruited mobilizers to serve as external champions of the model, creating a ripple effect to further extend their outreach.

In short, the nature, functions, and engagement tactics of the two sets of networks
reflected and supported the primary functions of those networks. Choices related to scope, structure, and stability of networks can be traced back to their functions, as can strategies employed to engage those networks and to prompt them to action.

The next chapter will address the impact of those choices, including practical lessons for leaders and implications for future research. It will also explore the relationship between Social Network Analysis (SNA) and the literature of innovative disruption.
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This research is about networks that leaders used to implement and advance potentially disruptive innovation in higher education. It was undertaken to understand better the role that networks play in the innovation gaining traction and why some leaders seem to be able to take ideas further than others. It sought to identify specifically what leaders do to develop, activate, and leverage networks to further their innovations. The findings provide some important lessons about the fundamental role of networks and offer meaningful contributions both to the literature and for other leaders who might seek to disrupt the market with innovative ideas. This chapter discusses insights from the research and concludes with a series of recommendations for leaders well as ideas for future research.

Key Research Findings

One expects networks to do certain things: develop strong ties and relational trust among the members, facilitate communication and the transfer of information, and provide social support and mutual identification. These findings emerged in the cases in this study and are not surprising results. Thus, this section explores the findings that are not so obvious and which are particularly important to the goal of leading disruptive innovation within the higher education sector. Because this study examined the networks of only two leaders implementing potentially disruptive innovation in higher education, the findings are not meant to be transferrable to other innovations and their networks. However, an examination of these two sets of networks revealed some implications for the literature of Social Network Analysis (SNA) and the practice of leadership that may be worthy of consideration. Key findings demonstrated the following:

Purpose drives Networks. A key finding of the study was that the leaders’ primary purposes drove the creation and utilization of networks. The important take-away is that
the primary purpose may not be the innovation itself. For ULS, the innovation was a vehicle to serve a collaboration among members of the ASG deans network. The collaboration of the network was primary, and the innovation (as a means to disrupt the industry) was secondary. The distinction is that an existing network decided to do something collaboratively, as opposed to a network being developed for a specific purpose. In ULS, the network itself was the priority over other considerations. This explains the use of pre-established networks, a multi-institutional partnership, and the choice to close off the networks to new membership. These choices were not necessarily the best to develop and launch a potentially disruptive model; they were the best to prioritize the partnership. In contrast, CfA prioritized the development and implementation of an industry-disruptive model. The networks were then assembled and tapped, accordingly, to advance the model. The networks served the innovation, as opposed to the innovation serving the networks.

Neither of these approaches is “right” or “wrong,” per se. They just prioritize and advance one purpose over another. If the primary purpose is disruptive innovation, that purpose must lead decision-making on network utilization.

Another way to consider this distinction is the locus of the networks—whether for ownership or implementation. The locus of the ULS network was the partnership and its ownership of the model. The ULS was owned by the network of the five partner continuing education deans. They developed strict membership criteria for their “exclusive club,” and they customized the model to serve their specific unit needs. Their ownership of ULS superseded implementation of the model for disruptive innovation. Thus, the network continued while the partners struggled with providing product for the Store and coming to agreement on expectations and accountability. In contrast, CfA had no ownership network. With the model being offered by a single institution, the locus of the networks was on implementation. Each played a key function in advancing the innovation.
Networks evolve to match the demands and needs of the primary purpose in disruptive innovation. When the innovation was the primary purpose, the networks were developed or tapped and deployed to address the needs of the innovation as they were identified. Within CfA, for example, networks were assembled and dispersed as needed for the completion of their functions. For example, temporary networks were formed to secure the Gates NGLC grant, to gain NEASC accreditation for direct assessment, and to obtain DOE Title IV funding approval. When those implementation tasks were completed, those networks were dispersed. The networks came into and out of existence, as necessary, to serve the innovation. In fact, since the assembling of the data for this study, the researcher has learned that CfA no longer exists as a stand-alone unit of SNHU but has been absorbed into the College of Online and Continuing Education (COCE). When the networks had completed their functions for implementing the model, their existence was no longer necessary, and they were dismantled.

Broad, open networks serve disruptive innovation. When networks served the potentially disruptive innovation (rather than vice versa), they remained open to accessing any number of individuals internal or external to the organization in order to advance the innovation. The networks not only remained open but they were widely diverse.

Both leaders of the study started the innovation process by engaging people they knew to refine the idea and to help them develop the model. Thus, knowing and having a wide array of talented individuals within one's existing networks was a critical starting point for the pursuit of innovation. But new relationships were also necessary for the innovation; existing networks by themselves were insufficient. In addition to tapping established trusted networks, the leaders created new networks, some of whose members were known prior to, and intentionally recruited for, the innovation. Other relationships were entirely new, emerging to serve the innovation. Such new relationships were essential
to fill the gaps in talent and expertise, according to the needs of the innovation.

Only one leader of the study continued to access broad open networks, which the findings suggest are important for disruptive innovation. While in ULS, the closed, collaboration-centric networks were comprised exclusively of individuals within higher education, in CfA, a broad range of individuals were engaged in the creation of networks to assist in the development and implementation of the disruptive-centric innovation. This was true from gathering talent externally to develop the model, through interacting with NEASC and the DOE to gain necessary approvals, to cultivating and developing “mobilizers” to promote the model. While implementing innovation on an organizational level may not need such a broad range of networks, when the goal is to disrupt an industry, many of the key individuals needed to make it happen may come from a broad range of backgrounds, academic and otherwise.

An important related component of broad, diverse ties is their relative weakness compared to the strong ties of established networks. It appears that when wide-spread change is the goal, such as in disruptive innovation, diverse (albeit weaker) ties seem more advantageous than strong, established, densely connected sub-networks. In many ways, this may seem counterintuitive. One might think that tapping well known and well-established networks would more readily facilitate change to advance the innovation. That was not the case for the two potentially disruptive innovations in this study. While dense networks in which members have strong ties with one another is valuable for information-sharing (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003; Balkundi & Harrison, 2006), their tendency to have fewer non-network ties reduces the opportunity for external influence and diffusion of the model (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, while a great deal of SNA literature underscores the stability of long-term relationships, their support for change processes (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Cole & Weinbaum, 2010; Kezar & Lester, 2009), and their facilitation of complicated and enduring
change (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003), they also have a narrower scope, as individuals within a densely-connected network often move within the same circles (Granovetter, 1973). In contrast, new relationships introduce diversity of perspective, and their weaker ties are related in the literature to access to new information (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Moody & White, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003; Nelson, 1989) and innovative ideas for change (Tsai, 2002). While both leaders in this study brought in trusted agents with whom they had pre-existing relationships to help them share their ideas and to build the model, beyond that, CfA repeatedly developed new networks to test, validate, and promote the innovation. This openness to new and broad networks seems a critical feature of industry disruptive innovation, where the need for external influence and promotion may exceed that of other, more local innovations.

Perhaps the most critical element of such weak and diverse ties within the context of disruptive innovation is their effectiveness at widespread promotion. The sharing of information via weak links is very much the means by which ideas go viral. A weak link picks up the information and shares it within his/her own circles, which has a rippling out effect. Granovetter (1973) captured the paradox of the “strength of weak ties,” sharing that “weak ties, often denounced as generative of alienation (Wirth, 1938) are...indispensable to individuals’ opportunities and to their integration into communities; strong ties, breeding local cohesion, lead to overall fragmentation” (p. 1378). In other words, strong ties often close off a network to the larger community (as they did in ULS), whereas weak ties create links within a larger community. The same is true of the relaying of information within networks with strong and weak ties: weak ties facilitate the spreading of information as weakly-tied individuals move in different circles, and serve as bridges to very different networks than members of densely connected networks. CfA leveraged such weak ties through its use of “mobilizers,” a type of opinion leader (discussed further, later in this
chapter, as pivotal external individuals) who garnered support from new businesses, and
who CfA then utilized to provide their testimony in wider venues. These mobilizers were
critical to the distribution of information on the model because they served as important
bridges to transmit information. The literature supports that personal outreach is an
important complement to mass-media, as individuals tend to respond to media only when a
personal link delivers that information (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 1962;
Granovetter, 1973). So, CfA’s mobilizers provided the weak link (to complement CfA’s
outreach and the media’s coverage) to bring in new communities of business-to-business
partners and enrollees for the model. This type of viral promotion is ideal for potentially
disruptive innovation.

Potentially disruptive networks need the right mixture of formality and
informality in relationships. Structurally, both sets of networks in this study utilized
formal, informal, and organically emergent relationships. These terms differ from the
language of SNA literature, which distinguishes knowledge or instrumental networks, which
are formed for the sharing of information or expertise, from friendship or expressive
networks, which have the function of providing social support (Kezar, 2014, referencing
Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Within this study, all networks were
instrumental networks but many included expressive components. For the purposes of this
study, formal was defined as organizationally or contractually structured. Informal
networks, then, referred to relationships developed when individuals came together of their
own accord for a specific purpose. Organically emergent relationships in this study were
developed spontaneously based on a shared vision (i.e. for solving a problem) and a shared
passion. While many informal and emergent relationships had expressive components, they,
like formal relationships, were also instrumental and existed in the workplace, as all of the
networks in this research were studied based upon professional rather than personal
relationships.

The study revealed the importance of a blend of formal with informal or organically emergent relationships within networks of potentially disruptive innovation. All of the networks in the study had a formal component other than the ASG deans in the ULS. What distinguished the formal from other instrumental networks in the study was the presence of an employment agreement or contract that specified expectations and accountability. This distinction emerged as significant in this study. Without a business plan or contractual agreement, while the ULS partnership was instrumental, in the SNA literature definition of the term, it relied exclusively on the informal relationships of the partner deans to manage their commitments. This proved to be problematic. In fact, a lack of formality seemed to stress the informal relationships, as Schejbal needed to “bug” or “embarrass” his counterparts to goad them into delivering product for the ULS. No such issues were found in the CfA data, where formal relationships accompanied informal ones.

At the same time, informal and organically emergent relationships provided necessary rapport to maximize formal ties. In short, formal structures worked best when blended with informal or emergent. Many formal relationships grew out of informal ones, as individuals with whom the leaders had personal or social relationships evolved into contractual ones, such as LeBlanc’s hiring for CfA. Emergent relationships tended to gather strength very quickly, based upon mutual identification, such as Schejbal’s team member’s with the Fidelis CEO or LeBlanc’s with the former DOE representative. Where a blend of formal with informal or emergent occurred, the relationships were strongest and most productive. On the flip side, when formality was imposed where no informal relationships pre-existed, such as with the ASG sub-networks, the potential for problems arose. Success in those sub-networks was dependent upon perceived mutual value in the relationship. It is interesting to consider, as a point of comparison, that the imposition of formal ties with no
pre-existing informal relationships takes place all the time when new individuals are hired within organizations having no established relationships with other members of their work teams. In those instances, however, position descriptions and reporting structures provide clarity on expectations, and the purpose of the employment unit conveys the value of the relationships. Thus, the informal rapport evolves naturally within the formal structures.

This would have been the case with the outside hires for CfA’s evolving team. Within the ASG sub-networks, however, the small projects assigned to partners’ counterparts did not relate to the ULS, and these small partnerships did not further any other formally stated goals of the individual institution’s continuing education units. The value of the projects to the formal structures was not readily apparent. Thus, creating projects for the sake of generating informal rapport proved ineffective. Only when a greater formal value was imposed by the sub-networks themselves were the projects—and the subsequent development of the informal relationships—effective. The lesson here is that formal relationships are critical for accountability, but they can’t be imposed unless there is perceived mutual value within the formal structure.

**Focused networks support disruptive innovation.** Another key finding of this study was the impact of the prioritization of the innovation on its development and implementation. Within ULS, UW-Extension’s CEOEL unit as well as its counterpart continuing education units of the other ULS partners had to juggle competing priorities while trying to build and launch the ULS. These competing projects diffused their effort as well as their resources, with ULS receiving only limited allocations of each by the partner institutions. As a result, development of inventory for the Store was delayed as partners devoted their time and energies to other institutional priorities over the ULS. Furthermore, the very necessity of developing cross-institutional networks within a multi-institutional partnership also diffused the efforts of the partner universities, detracting from external
network-building. This included the ASG sub-network teams developing small projects that were unrelated to the ULS in an effort to build rapport and trust. The cross-institutional network building, together with the competing priorities of each unit, reduced resources, time, and energy for devoting to the model’s development and launch. In contrast, CfA’s leadership team devoted all of its time and energy exclusively to the development and implementation of the innovative model. To ensure that exclusive focus, LeBlanc sequestered the unit from other colleges within SNHU. This enabled the team members to have no competing responsibilities and to be able to channel all of their resources into this one task.

The lesson here is that formal hierarchies and policies may need adjusting to enable networks to support innovation. Whether the innovation is sequestered, run by a separate college or unit of the university, or otherwise removed from competing priorities, it was important for the networked team members working on the innovative model to have access to one another and freedom from restrictive procedures to develop and implement the innovation. This type of flexibility was especially prominent in CfA and, no doubt, contributed significantly to CfA’s ability to launch the model within months of its conception. Such prioritization and the exclusive focus of time and resources on the innovation were important for the development and implementation of the potentially disruptive innovation.

A related lesson is that partnering adds coordination costs. As Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden* (1854), “The man who goes alone can start today, but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready.” Varying levels of commitment of time, effort, and resources, as well as necessary efforts at cross-institutional network building added partnership costs for ULS that CfA did not face.

**Disruptive innovation benefits from singular network leadership over**
diffused leadership. This finding is a natural extension of a number of others already described. The lack of a formal agreement, varying levels of institutional commitment to the innovation, and competing responsibilities among academic partners diffused the leadership in the ULS and the potential for a singular focus on the innovation. In contrast, within CfA, the sequestration of the unit, its responsibilities, and its resources as well as the exclusive focus of its team on the innovation prioritized the model, all in a direct line of accountability to a single leader. Such central leadership provides not only a clear structural hierarchy and expectations but a central point from which to manage and leverage networks. A central leader can assess the networked relationships of team members and key external individuals and develop strategies for specific engagement to further the innovation. Such was the case with Paul LeBlanc, in CfA, from each strategic step of the model’s development and piloting, through regional accreditation and national DOE approvals, and for ultimate scaling up.

Pivotal external individuals are activated in disruptive innovation. The SNA literature identifies a number of types of pivotal individuals activated in networks to further innovation and change, such as opinion leaders and brokers/bridges. The findings of this study, however, suggest that in the arena of industry disruption, such pivotal individuals need to be cultivated externally. Within the academic partnership of the ULS innovation, opinion leaders and brokers served primarily to bridge divides internally and cross-institutionally between partnering university continuing education units or between the academic institution staff and their already-networked business leaders. Within CfA, however, external opinion leaders and brokers were cultivated to serve as bridges between their own employers and CfA or from one business partner to another, expanding the outreach of the CfA model. Dubbed “mobilizers,” such external champions of the innovative model served to sway public opinion from outside of the model’s institution, lending
external validation and credibility to their testimony. These external champions were critical for promoting the model and getting it widespread industry exposure.

Furthermore, pivotal external networks provided relevant just-in-time counsel. One new role for pivotal actors in the network that emerged in this study was the use of nascent networks for counsel. In navigating the array of new networks necessary to attempt industry disruptive innovation, LeBlanc sought help from others who had experience with the processes. He turned not only to Christensen, who wrote "the playbook" on disruptive innovation, but he sought counsel often from individuals within the very networks whose approval he needed to proceed with his innovation (i.e. NEASC and DOE) as he prepared to engage those networks. This approach not only provided good information but helped in developing a strong informal rapport to enhance the formal relationship of the network engagement. It also enhanced the investment of the individuals to whom he turned for counsel in seeing the innovation become successful. Thus, the counsel served a dual function, contributing to the advancement of the innovation.

**Network relationship depth is an important factor for industry disruptive innovation.** The case studies and cross-case analyses revealed varying depths in the networked relationships studied, from transactional in nature (i.e. limited to an exchange of information, products, or services) to relational exchanges, based on a shared vision, understanding, and commitment to the innovation. Within ULS, not only did the academic partners have varying levels of commitment to, and investment in, the innovative model themselves but the commitment from external partners was largely transactional in nature as well, with the exception of Fidelis, the infrastructure platform provider. Within CfA, in contrast, business-to-business partners often became personally convicted of the value, and invested in the success, of the innovation, ultimately participating as champions in promoting it. Furthermore, the regional accrediting organization and the DOE developed a
vested interest in the success of the innovation, recognizing benefits to their own agendas for promoting expanded access to higher education. This greater investment was cultivated in large part through the relational exchanges among individuals across the networks. As a result of those exchanges, the individuals (and, thus, their organizations) took a keen interest in the innovative model, became convinced of the value it offered, and became committed to supporting its success. This depth of relationship within the networks generated critical investment that propelled the innovation forward, thus serving as a lesson in the importance of developing strong relational exchanges when seeking to implement industry-wide disruptive innovation.

**Networks play a critical role in the social acceptance on the innovations, both internal and external to the institutions launching them.** This is an important, though readily overlooked, function of networks. As the SNA literature had demonstrated, networks are integral to innovation because “innovation is both a change process and a social process” (Suciu & Petrescu-Prahova, 2011, p. 17). As a social process, it must be adopted and supported to take hold and be sustained. Whether used to address indecisiveness and resistance, to remove obstacles, or to cultivate proponents, networks were leveraged to win over individuals to support the innovations. Those individuals’ ultimate acceptance of the models also served the role of validation of the innovation. While not as tangible as other roles of networks, these functions were critical for advancing the innovations.

Furthermore, when the goal is industry-disruptive innovation, and the institutions leading the disruption are internal to the industry, embracing of the innovation had to come from those both inside and outside the institution. Internal skeptics could impede processes within the organization, and external skeptics could keep the innovation from advancing. Both had to be won over because “change comes not from plans" but change “must be
appropriated by participants and incorporated into their patterns of interaction” (Mohrman, Tensaki, and Mohrman, 2003, p. 321). On the scale of industry-wide disruption, appropriation had to take place across a very broad spectrum of participants. This may well be a key reason some innovations take hold in larger arenas and thrive while others do not.

A concept or model may be incredibly promising, but if it is not widely embraced, supported, and diffused, it cannot bring about change on an industry-wide scale.

**External approval processes enhance network outreach.** Another key finding of the study relates to the enhanced value of external networks, especially those providing regional and national approvals. The ULS did not need—and thus did not seek—regional and national approvals for its non-credit continuing education model while CfA did for its credit-based degree program. While seeking those approvals created required additional network engagement work for CfA, the benefits of interaction with those external networks exceeded gaining their approvals. Those approvals also provided significant external validation as well as regional and national coverage of the CfA model that ULS did not enjoy. The approvals served as endorsements and effectively provided promotion of the model that led to surges in interest by new business-to-business partners and increases in enrollment. The lesson here is that a path filled with external hurdles to clear may be the path of greatest benefit when the goal is industry disruption. In fact, the more processes required for approval, the greater the innovation’s exposure and, ultimately, opportunity for promotion.

**Adapted network messaging advances disruptive innovation.** There emerged in the study at least two narrative accounts to each disruptive innovation—one that underscored how the innovation was distinct and unique from traditional approaches (i.e. disruptive) and the other that explained how it met needs as well as the traditional approaches. Versions of those two accounts were adapted for the different networks to
whom that the innovation was pitched. The study revealed how internal institutional networks as well as accrediting bodies were interested in how the disruptive innovations maintained the quality of traditional approaches, while under-served markets and the media were interested in how the approaches were uniquely disruptive. It was important for the leaders and their teams to adapt the message to the receiving network, accordingly. Both innovations also shared a common story among their networks—a compelling analogy of the innovation to a process in which most people find value and to which they can readily relate. That story served as a simple, central narrative to promote the innovation.

**Snowball efforts enhance commitment to, and exposure of, the innovation.**

Exposure is important to developing commitment to the innovation—both by internal team members and by external network members. Snowball efforts at exposure refer to cyclical, potentially orchestrated exposures that prompt renewed team member or partner commitment as well as provide broader disbursement of information on the model to the general public, in recurring cycles. While both leaders described garnering public attention through a snowballing effect, Schejbal’s use of the term “effort” imbues the process with an intentionality that could—and perhaps, *should*—be considered for harness by leaders seeking to implement disruptive innovation on an industry- or sector-wide scale. Such intentionality could provide the leader with yet another tool for managing networks and gaining widespread acceptance for the innovation.

**The Downplayed Politics of Networks**

While much of the literature of SNA observes and records the processes of network engagement, very little of it approaches such analysis from a position of intent. Indeed, as came out in a number of the study's interviews, interviewees were typically reluctant to ascribe deliberate intent to their networking strategies. There was almost an implicit undertone that networks leveraged to advance ends were somehow Machiavellian. Thus,
participants described relationships as they evolved, as opposed to as how they might have been intentionally cultivated and managed. And yet, the findings of this study suggest that intentional engagement of networked relationships is not only beneficial but may be essential to effective disruptive innovation on an industry-wide scale. This seeming cultural divide between an acceptance of overt network management and its necessity, if it persists, could serve as a barrier to effective disruptive innovation within the higher education sector in the future.

**Implications for leaders**

This section outlines potential key lessons for leaders seeking to implement disruptive innovation as they create, tap, and benefit from the networks they create.

**Be intentional and prioritize the disruptive innovation.** Both leaders of this study sought to disrupt higher education from the beginning. That was their intention, written into their white papers when the innovation concepts were formed. Leaders should be deliberate in decision-making on how to invest time and resources—whether in sustaining existing networks or in advancing the innovation. The insights shared above suggest that the disruption should be the primary priority. Assemble, activate, leverage, and disassemble networks accordingly, serving the development and implementation of the innovation.

**Deliberately employ network engagement tactics.** An understanding of the strategies available to leaders to engage networks makes their deliberate and intentional use possible. This study has examined the use of ten SNA strategies from the literature and uncovered two more that emerged in the data. Recognizing and understanding their use and value enables leaders to consciously select and implement them as needed to further their innovations. (See Figure 1, *Engagement Tactics and Strategies*, on page 108) Some of the most significant with respect to industry-wide disruptive innovation included utilizing
bridges to link disconnected teams to promote sharing of information and resources (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006) as well as to serve as cultural conduits (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003); opinion leaders, who can dramatically alter public opinion (Valente, 2005); and inter-organizational linkages, which are vital connections between organizations that significantly impact outcomes, competition, and potentially the organization's [or the innovation's] very survival (Tensaki & Chesmore, 2003; Baum & Oliver, 1991; Kratz, 1998; Uzzi, 1996). Deliberately identify and activate these individuals, both inside and outside the university, to address the needs of the networks to advance the innovation.

**Be prepared to address perceptions of intentionality.** While at the same time as being deliberative and strategic about network engagement, however, leaders need to be mindful of potentially negative perceptions of their intentionality. Intentional, strategic use of networks need not be synonymous with manipulative or deceptive practices, as some might assume. In fact, forthright sharing of benefits as well as potential challenges of the innovation goes a long way toward engendering the relational trust that is so important to the development of strong ties. In developing relational exchanges of sufficient depth to support disruptive innovation, authentic and honest discourse is essential. While messaging can and should be adapted to different networks and their purposes (see Customize Narratives by Network, below), deception is never appropriate. Openly address and outline challenges, as well as allay fears, while underscoring benefits. Also, be prepared that, despite one's bests efforts at transparency, some may never be comfortable with, or able to ultimately embrace, the political aspects of intentional network strategizing.

**Develop relational exchanges (with depth) rather than just transactional ones.** One way to ensure healthy network exchanges is through developing relationships that have depth. Leaders should work toward generating network participant interest in, and commitment to, the innovation rather than simply transactional exchanges for its support.
Cultivation of such relational exchanges goes a long way toward not only creating network participant comfort with the strategic use of the networking but also toward developing the inherent passion and investment in the innovation on the part of the networked individuals furthering the model. An important feature of such exchanges is shared vision and mutual benefit from the innovation. Leaders should consider the benefits the network participants will receive from the relational exchange. With the appropriate depth in relational exchanges and the reciprocity of mutual benefit with participants in their extended networks, leaders will be able to cultivate strong external networked relationships that perform critical extended functions to further the innovation.

**Consider the network implications of academic partnership (or go it alone).**

Working alone means the academic institution can focus its efforts exclusively on cultivating and tapping diverse, external networks to advance the innovation. Working with academic partners means the need for additional network development internally and cross-institutionally which takes up time and resources, diluting external efforts. Furthermore, if existing institutional networks will be used for development and implementation, the underlying assumption is that those already within those networks are both the best equipped to do the work and all equally committed to it as well. Be sure that is the case. Leaders should employ a formal agreement to ensure that if and when obstacles arise, the agreement can address expectations and accountability. If such a formal agreement cannot be mutually arrived at, or if the resources needed for cross-institutional investment jeopardize those needed to further the innovation, leaders should consider going it alone rather than partnering in the venture.

**(Re)organize hierarchies to facilitate networks.** In addition to carefully weighing the costs and benefits of partnership, leaders should examine existing institutional policies and structures to determine if they facilitate or create barriers to network collaboration on
the innovative model. Then, reorganize as necessary. If the unit is sequestered, ensure that it is the work on the model that is siloed, not the networks themselves. Reassign competing priorities for those carrying out the work of the disruptive innovation so that they can give the new model the necessary attention and resources to successfully lead to disruption.

**Work with internal networks for buy-in.** Innovations need buy-in to advance. If the disruption is coming from inside a traditional higher education institution, this necessitates acceptance by the rest of the organization. Leaders would do well to appeal to those networks. Explain the process. Describe the mutual benefits. Ensure, as much as possible, the continuity of other operations while the innovation is tested and gains footing in the marketplace. Leaders overlook their internal constituents at their own—and the innovation's—peril. It is important to facilitate an embracing of the innovation both internal and external to the organization.

**Tap diverse, open, and flexible networks.** If the disruption is the priority, then leaders need to find and put the right people in place to address the necessary steps to developing and implementing the innovation model. To accomplish this, leaders may access existing networks but need to do so without letting them limit the innovation, which may be better served by outside networks for new ideas, to resolve challenges, and to diffuse the innovation. Tapping diverse networks opens access to getting people with the greatest expertise. Thus, leaders should look both within and beyond the organization to find the needed talent. The diversity of perspective will also help hone the innovation. Closed networks keep out individuals; they also keep out ideas. Individuals within networks with strong ties to one another tend to have fewer non-network ties. In short, they move in the same circles and are exposed to the same kinds of ideas. In contrast, innovations originating on the margins are often rich in weak, external, diverse ties. As Granovetter (1973) discerned, “Those with whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different
from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive” (p. 1371). These weak ties produce crucial information not only for implementing the disruptive innovation but also for diffusing it. Leaders shouldn’t underestimate the value of weak, diverse ties. This may mean not only going outside of the institution and one’s professional circles but also outside of academia. Better still, develop those diverse ties all along so they are available if and when they are needed. Keeping one’s networks open to such richness ensures access to talent, individuals who can assist in navigating approval processes, and those who can promote the innovation on a larger scale.

**Seize opportunities for nascent external counsel.** Everyone has limits to their knowledge and expertise. Leaders should talk to others who have taken similar paths and/or have experience with the networks that need to be engaged to further the innovation. Doing so not only increases information but can provide valuable social support and validation for the model. It may also help to cultivate external champions who become willing to provide their own, independent testimony and support for the emerging disruptive innovation. Such opportunities for counsel, and for alliance on various aspects of the innovation’s development and launch, may wax and wane over the course of the model’s implementation. Leaders should be open to developing—and, when no longer of use, disbanding—networks for counsel and assistance, as needed, to further the innovative model.

**Customize narratives by network.** With disruptive innovation, there are multiple narratives. Potential students, employers, and legislators may be interested in what makes this model substantially different, essentially disruptive. How does it upend the status quo and bring welcome change to the market in terms of price, convenience, and value? Internal networks, accreditors, and the DOE may be interested in how it ensures at least the same level of quality and consistency as existing products. Leaders should customize the
narratives by networks to underscore the values important to the given the audience. This does not mean being contradictory or inaccurate across networks. It means highlighting the features that are important to the specific network membership. Part of this includes creating a compelling story about the unique value of the model, as was part of the two innovations in this study. Such a story becomes something most people can identify with and will be able to readily remember and share, serving also as a means for diffusing the innovation.

**Activate external mobilizers to diffuse the innovation.** A particular type of opinion leader surfaced in this study that CfA team members referred to as a “mobilizer.” These individuals were external opinion leaders who diffused the innovation not only within their own company but who also shared their testimonies on the value of the innovation at conferences and meetings, with the media, and with approval-granting organizations like the regional accrediting body and the DOE. Furthermore, such mobilizers cultivated their own mobilizers, spreading the innovation in a chain reaction or viral fashion. This concept was identified in early SNA literature as the value of weak and diverse ties, which are the best way to diffuse difficult [i.e. disruptive] innovations (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1367). Leaders would do well to consider ways to mobilize and reproduce such important external champions for spreading the word on the power of their potentially disruptive innovation, sending the idea viral. Thus, this should be considered as a strategy for any leader seeking to implement industry-wide disruptive innovation.

**Beware of overzealous tactics that can backfire.** Relationships take time to develop and cannot be forced. While recognizing that informal rapport is important within formal relationships to generate relational trust and strong ties, leaders can inadvertently sabotage their efforts at network engagement by trying to artificially construct opportunities for the development of informal relationships within their networks. The
strongest relationships (organically-emergent, followed by informal) evolve when individuals work together on meaningful projects that support the overall primary function of the network. Leaders thus would do well to construct those opportunities for meaningful exchange on the goals of the innovation, providing opportunity for informal relationship-building to occur in the process, without trying to overly-manage the development of the informal relationships themselves. Instead, by providing opportunities to work together toward the accomplishment of the primary purpose—the development of the disruptive innovation—they simultaneously provide fertile ground for the development of the informal rapports that contribute to solid relational exchanges.

**Implications for future research**

This research on the social networks of higher education leaders seeking to implement disruptive innovation moved the focus of change leadership research in this sector from almost exclusively at the institutional level to a broader framework. As Kezar (2014) pointed out, “the most fundamental shift in a future research agenda is to alter the focus of change research from the campus (organization) as the only analytic unit to the network (or network in combination with the campus)” (Kezar, 2014, p. 107). This broader focus needs to continue. Additional studies could examine the networks of other potentially disruptive innovations in higher education to determine if the findings of this study are unique to these two sets of networks. Furthermore, while this study explored the networks of two innovations emerging from inside traditional higher education, how might networks differ when disruption is coming from inside an industry (or sector) versus outside of it, such as when pursued by a non-academic, external company? The innovations of this study were also intended to be disruptive; how might the strategies be different in a study that compared intentionally disruptive to non-disruptive change? That would be worthy of exploration.
Additional research might also explore the deliberate and intentional use of network strategy. While it emerged as a feature of in this study, it was not the focus of the primary research questions. Of course, qualitative research on intentionality would require participants to be forthright about their deliberate use of strategy. Thus, researchers would need to explore the means to get beyond the political reticence of participants in sharing such information. If this could be accomplished, it would provide an important addition to the literature on SNA and disruptive innovation.

Whether researched as intentional or evolving, future studies might also explore the presence in other networks of some of the strategies that emerged in this study, including the use of storytelling, the significance of external nascent counsel, and the “snowball effort.” How, if at all, are they used to further other disruptive and non-disruptive change?

Further study might also be devoted to the ways leaders develop individual relationships. How do they, for example, lay down the foundation in relationship development, making it ripe for future tapping for the development of significant innovation? What role, if any, does the disposition of the leaders play in the network development? Are there some leaders who are naturals at it? (i.e. Is “The Paul Effect” a part of LeBlanc’s personality, or can the strategies be learned?)

Another really interesting thread for future study is the role of money, clout, and power in networks. In ULS, institutional membership was limited to R1 universities with significant resources, autonomy, and prestige, in an effort to brand and promote the innovation. In CfA, as one team member pointed out, external mobilizers tended to have position, reputation, and means. While these findings surfaced in this study, they were not integral to the specific research questions of this study, but their emergence suggests they may be worthy of additional exploration.

Finally, future study might consider the ways in which some networks may exist to
preserve or maintain the status quo, challenging the emergence of disruptive innovation. To what extent do existing networks promote and sustain the status quo, and what specific strategies might be necessary to move such networks forward when the intent is industry- or sector-wide disruption?

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the ways two higher education leaders used networks to advance disruptive innovation and whether it proved true in their attempts at sector-wide disruption that “the building block of innovation is a networked individual” (Suciu & Petrescu, 2011, p. 19). This study confirmed the importance of networks to the two innovations studied. The leaders of both ULS and CFA created or tapped networks at virtually every stage of the development and implementation of their innovations. Networks helped them refine their ideas, acquire the talent necessary to develop the models, remove obstacles, address resistance, secure financial support, receive validation, advance and promote the innovations. Neither innovation came to market before first the concepts and then the models themselves had been introduced, tested, vetted, approved, and endorsed by a myriad of networks, both internal and external to the institutions. Along the way, these networks provided important input and feedback to improve the model, address its market alignment, and validate its value in the eyes of the public. These networks played vital roles. The value of their functions cannot be understated. Indeed, as the SNA literature contends, “The structure and composition of an individual’s network of informal contacts allows him or her to identify strategic opportunities, marshal resources, assemble teams, and win the support for innovative projects that benefit the organization” (Sparrowe & Liden, 2015, p. 505). Such was the case with these potentially disruptive innovations.

While the literature review documented that higher education leaders play a
primary role in change processes (Kezar, 2001; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1991; Kotter 1985; Schein, 1985), very little research explored the leadership associated with industry- or sector-disruptive change in higher education and even less focused on the role of social networks. The two factors did not intersect within any of the literature discovered and reviewed for this study. That which considered higher education leadership did not address social networks or industry disruption. That which considered social networks was primarily quantitative and also did not address sector-wide change. This study pursued a qualitative inquiry, with a focus on networks activated, developed, and leveraged to advance potentially disruptive innovation in higher education.

The findings of this research show that there were some important connections between the scale of the disruption and the scale of the networks. While this study explored only potentially disruptive innovations (as opposed to non-disruptive innovations), a number of the findings point to the scale of the undertaking. The external networks in disruptive innovation, in particular, tended to have a broad scale, including not only regional but national organizations, businesses outside of academia, and a diverse range of professional organizations.

The study also revealed some important insights and implications for leaders considering implementing sector-wide disruptive innovation. Perhaps most surprising was the importance of the unstated purpose guiding the networking and the need to prioritize the innovation over people, existing networks, and competing priorities within an organization. Also noteworthy was the strength of weak ties in developing external partners and sending ideas viral. Ultimately, the research elicited a set of ideas for leaders to consider. The list, while not exhaustive, implies the need for leaders to be intentional about leading disruptive innovation and about developing, activating, and leveraging networks to accomplish that innovation.
In the end, this research uncovered just how important networks are to potentially disruptive innovation in higher education. While the scope of sector-wide change is substantially broader than that of other, non-disruptive innovations that might be pursued, the significance of the social networks is equally broad. In the end, this SNA literature truism holds: “the network of relationships within which we are embedded may have important consequences for the success and failure of our projects” (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, p.1-2).
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

University Learning Store

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Program Leader: David Schejbal:

1. When you think about the process to develop The University Learning Store, when and how did it start? Can you tell me the story of its inception, who was involved, and how?

2. How did this evolve and who were the key players at various stages?

3. Tell me about the people involved. In what ways did you know some of the key players beforehand, from other contexts? (if so, what were those contexts?)

   a. How did previous networks help (or possibly hinder) your advancement of this project?

   b. How did you have to tap new people and build new networks?

4. How did you identify, approach and engage each of the key players (internal and external to the institution)?

   (I.e. Did you tap your existing networks [people you already knew] to connect with those you didn't know beforehand)?

5. Please describe some of the first contacts (on this project) with the key players. What were those first conversations like?

6. Who were the innovators and change agents to champion the process? At what stage were they identified? How (and how frequently) did you interact with them?

7. Who were the key opinion leaders (internally, and perhaps externally to the institution) that needed winning over to the program? What strategies did you use to engage and win them over?

   a. How did you keep your finger on the pulse of sentiment toward the project?

8. Tell me about the structures you put in place to facilitate this work.
a. Did you organize committees or workgroups to generate ideas, to problem solve, or to develop or implement portions of the innovative program? (If so, what were the groups’ charges?)

b. How were group/committee members determined? (What type of representation and/or diversity were you seeking to achieve and why? How did you ensure proper committee composition?)

c. How did committees communicate with one another? With you? What was the report-out process? Did it follow standard departmental and hierarchical structures, or did it differ for this project?

9. What was the design of your communication system for the project? How did you and/or committees communicate stages in the process, share knowledge, work to shape attitudes, & problem-solve? What measure were put in place to ensure forward-moving momentum? Accountability?

10. What were some of the obstacles encountered? How did you (or your staff, as assigned by you) work with others to address these obstacles? Who were the key players and what were there roles?

   a. Internal obstacles/resistance

   b. External obstacles

11. When you think back on your engagement with pivotal people in these processes, did you use different strategies for gaining support (or reducing resistance) from different individuals? Please describe.

12. To what extent have you engaged with individuals from national organizations related to this kind of innovation (i.e. CBE or microcredentialing)? Which individuals and which organizations? Tell me about those exchanges. What value added did those networks provide to your work on this project?
13. Given our conversation here and the reflections you have shared, besides A, B, and C, at UW-Extension and X, Y, and Z at partner institutions, are there other key network players I might need to interview for this study? Was there anyone else we missed?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Other Participants – Schejbal’s Network

1. Would you please take me back to the beginning and tell me about how you first heard about the concept for The University Learning Store and how you became involved? Can you describe the first conversation of this project that got you involved?

2. Tell me about your relationship with David Schejbal or whomever introduced you to The University Learning Store. How did you know him/her/them? In what capacity? Did you know him/her/them before this project?

3. Why did you choose to become involved? What ultimately persuaded you? Was it the premise of the project? The people involved? Or some other factor(s) or combination of factors?

4. Describe your role in the project? How did it evolve over time, if it did? What have been your primary contributions?

5. Did you have any reservations? How were those addressed (and by whom?)

6. Were you called upon to—or did you on your own—help address others’ reservations? Or nurture champions? How did you do that?

7. How as the project rolled out? What was your role in that process?

8. Were you called upon to—or did you on your own—leveraging your relationships with others to further this project? What kind of relationships? (Internal and
external). How did you engage those differently?

9. Did you form new relationships with new people over the course of this project roll out? With whom? What was your and their roles?

10. Where were there gaps in the network of necessary relationships to get the project done? How were those gaps bridged?

11. To what extent were formal hierarchies utilized and when and how were alternate structures formed, as necessary, to accomplish the work?

12. Who else do you see as pivotal players in helping to make The University Learning Store successful? (both those currently at the table and those you may still need to recruit)

**College for America**

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Program Leader: Paul LeBlanc**

1. When you think about the process to develop College for America, when and how did it start? Can you tell me the story of its inception, who was involved, and how?

2. How did this evolve, and who were the key players at various stages?

3. Tell me about the people involved. In what ways did you know some of the key players beforehand, from other contexts? (if so, what were those contexts?)
   
   a. How did previous networks help (or possibly hinder) your advancement of this project?
   
   b. How did you have to tap new people and build new networks?

4. How did you identify, approach and engage each of the key players (internal and external to the institution)?
   
   (I.e. Did you tap your existing networks [people you already knew] to connect with those you didn't know beforehand)?
5. Please describe some of the first contacts (on this project) with the key players. What were those first conversations like?

6. Who were the innovators and change agents to champion the process? At what stage were they identified? How (and how frequently) did you interact with them?

7. Who were the key opinion leaders (internally, and perhaps externally to the institution) that needed winning over to the program? What strategies did you use to engage and win them over?
   a. How did you keep your finger on the pulse of sentiment toward the project?

8. Tell me about the structures you put in place to facilitate this work.
   a. Did you organize committees or workgroups to generate ideas, to problem solve, or to develop or implement portions of the innovative program? (If so, what were the groups’ charges?)
   b. How were group/committee members determined? (What type of representation and/or diversity were you seeking to achieve and why? How did you ensure proper committee composition?)
   c. How did committees communicate with one another? With you? What was the report-out process? Did it follow standard departmental and hierarchical structures, or did it differ for this project?

9. What was the design of your communication system for the project? How did you and/or committees communicate stages in the process, share knowledge, work to shape attitudes, & problem-solve? What measure were put in place to ensure forward-moving momentum? Accountability?

10. What were some of the obstacles encountered? How did you (or your staff, as assigned by you) work with others to address these obstacles? Who were the key players and what were there roles?
a. Internal obstacles/resistance
b. External obstacles

11. When you think back on your engagement with pivotal people in these processes, did you use different strategies for gaining support (or reducing resistance) from different individuals? Please describe.

12. To what extent have you engaged with individuals from national organizations related to this kind of innovation (i.e. CBE)? Which individuals and which organizations? Tell me about those exchanges. What value added did those networks provide to your work on this project?

13. Given our conversation here and the reflections you have shared, who are the other key network players I might need to interview for this study? Was there anyone else we missed?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Other Participants – LeBlanc’s Network

1. Would you please take me back to the beginning and tell me about how you first heard about the concept for College for America and how you became involved? Can you describe the first conversation of this project that got you involved?

2. Tell me about your relationship with Paul LeBlanc or whomever introduced you to College for America. How did you know him/her/them? In what capacity? Did you know him/her/them before this project?

3. Why did you choose to become involved? What ultimately persuaded you? Was it the premise of the project? The people involved? Or some other factor(s) or combination of factors?

4. Describe your role in the project? How did it evolve over time, if it did? What have been your primary contributions?
5. Did you have any reservations? How were those addressed (and by whom?)

6. Were you called upon to—or did you on your own—help address others’ reservations? Or nurture champions? How did you do that?

7. How as the project rolled out? What was your role in that process?

8. Were you called upon to—or did you on your own—leverage your relationships with others to further this project? What kind of relationships? (Internal and external). How did you engage those differently?

9. Did you form new relationships with new people over the course of this project roll out? With whom? What was your and their roles?

10. Where were there gaps in the network of necessary relationships to get the project done? How were those gaps bridged?

11. To what extent were formal hierarchies utilized and when and how were alternate structures formed, as necessary, to accomplish the work?

12. Who else do you see as pivotal players in helping to make College for America successful? (both those currently at the table and those you may still need to recruit)


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