

Navigating complexity: Leadership decision-making in community college instructional offerings

by

Marie Huntsinger

A.A., Chandler-Gilbert Community College, 2006

B.A., Arizona State University, 2008

M.A., Arizona State University, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Community College Leadership Program
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

This qualitative single-case study examined how community college leaders identified, interpreted, and integrated internal and external stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions at a public community college. Guided by an overarching stakeholder-theory lens and informed by the conceptual frameworks of Burke's accountability triangle and Schein's three levels of organizational culture, the study drew on nine semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders, on-site observation memos, and institutional document analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and explanation building. Findings indicated that leaders identified stakeholder interests through layered engagement structures, including shared governance, cross-functional teams, advisory relationships, data systems, and community listening processes. Leaders interpreted those interests through institutional mission, a student-centered culture of care, and market, political, and academic accountability pressures. Stakeholder interests were integrated into decision-making through iterative, collaborative processes such as program incubator review, curriculum workflows, enrollment and scheduling adjustments, and program redesign under resource constraints. The study found that workforce responsiveness did not displace broader educational commitments related to transfer, general education, and liberal arts; instead, leaders attempted to balance those commitments through cross-functional planning and mission-based interpretation. The study contributes a practice-based explanation of stakeholder-responsive instructional decision-making at the program level and shows how community college leadership is shaped simultaneously by public accountability, institutional culture, and community obligation.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Poppy and her baby sister, who have given this work deeper meaning. Poppy, your curiosity, joy, and love carried me through this journey in ways you may not yet understand. To my unborn daughter, you have already been part of this story, reminding me that persistence, hope, and new beginnings can coexist even in demanding times of life.

This work is also dedicated to my family, whose love and encouragement helped sustain me throughout this long process.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Community colleges remain one of the most important access points in American higher education. As open-access institutions, they enroll a large share of the nation's undergraduates and serve multiple public purposes at once: transfer preparation, workforce education, community development, and economic mobility (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2024; Tollefson, 2009). Their instructional choices therefore matter well beyond the campus. Decisions about what programs to launch, revise, schedule, stack, or discontinue shape who is served, what opportunities remain available, and how colleges define their missions in practice.

At the same time, community colleges operate in an increasingly demanding environment. Funding structures, accountability systems, local public oversight, and labor-market expectations place steady pressure on colleges to demonstrate short-term outcomes and workforce relevance (Ortagus et al., 2024; Tollefson, 2009). These pressures do not replace the community college's broader educational and civic commitments, but they do complicate them. Leaders are expected to maintain transfer pathways, preserve access, support equitable mobility, and respond quickly to regional economic needs, often while working with constrained resources and heightened scrutiny.

The context for instructional decision-making has also widened beyond curriculum alone. Research on basic needs insecurity, mental health, advising, and student support makes clear that colleges cannot treat program planning as separate from the conditions under which students attempt to persist and complete (Broton et al., 2022; Donaldson et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018). Leaders increasingly must consider whether new or revised programs are

affordable, stackable, transferable, financial aid eligible, and realistically navigable for students balancing work, family, transportation, and other responsibilities.

These choices are rarely made by a single decision-maker acting in isolation. Community college program decisions are shaped by formal governance structures, informal interactions, public accountability channels, advising systems, employer partnerships, and cross-functional planning routines (Kater, 2017; Kater & Levin, 2005; Kater & Miller, 2024). Yet despite a substantial body of scholarship on mission tension, governance, accountability, and student success, limited research explains how leaders actually identify, interpret, and integrate stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions. This study addresses that gap.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the limited practice-based understanding of how community college leaders navigate competing stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions. Existing literature documents the broad tensions community colleges face: workforce responsiveness versus educational breadth, external accountability versus internal governance, efficiency versus equity, and credential completion versus long-term student mobility. However, those tensions are often examined at the policy, funding, or mission level rather than at the level of actual program decision-making.

Instructional program decision-making is consequential because it includes more than approving or closing programs. It also includes decisions about credential sequencing, transfer alignment, delivery modality, scheduling, advising implications, financial-aid eligibility, and the support capacity required for implementation. In practice, these decisions require leaders to weigh market demand, faculty judgment, student needs, public expectations, and institutional

mission at the same time. Scholarship has established that these forces matter, but it has been less successful in showing how leaders work through them on the ground.

This gap matters for both theory and practice. Without a clearer understanding of how leaders identify stakeholder priorities, interpret their significance, and integrate them into actionable program decisions, colleges risk relying on narrow metrics, informal power, or crisis-driven responses. A more grounded explanation of leadership decision-making is needed if community colleges are to remain responsive to workforce change while still preserving transfer opportunity, educational breadth, and equitable student support.

Background of the Problem

The following sections situate the problem historically and organizationally by tracing how community college mission, accountability structures, governance practices, and student-support expectations shape instructional program decision-making.

Community college mission and instructional program choice

Community colleges have long been defined by a comprehensive mission rather than a single purpose. They emerged as institutions committed to broad access, local responsiveness, and multiple educational pathways, and that complexity remains central to their identity (Tollefson, 2009). In current practice, instructional program decisions are one of the primary ways that mission is expressed. Choices about whether to expand a short-term credential, preserve a low-enrolled transfer pathway, or redesign a sequence into stackable options are not only technical matters; they are statements about what the institution values and whom it is designed to serve.

Recent reform efforts have intensified this complexity by pressing colleges to improve completion while also strengthening labor-market alignment. Research on advising reform and

student support redesign shows that broad-access institutions are being encouraged to move beyond access alone and to build systems that carry students through to credential completion (Karp et al., 2016; Klempin & Karp, 2018). As a result, leaders are asked to think simultaneously about academic quality, workforce relevance, pathway clarity, and student completion in ways that make instructional planning increasingly strategic and contested.

Accountability, funding, and public obligations

Community college leaders do not make decisions in a vacuum. Governance and funding structures create accountability relationships that influence what institutions are expected to prioritize. Tollefson (2009) argued that in community colleges authority often “follows the money,” meaning that the relative influence of state and local actors is closely tied to the sources of institutional support. More recent work suggests that these funding patterns continue to shape institutional possibilities unevenly. Local funding can expand overall resources, but it can also intensify inequities for rural institutions and colleges serving larger shares of low-income students (Ortagus et al., 2024).

These public obligations are especially significant in community colleges because they are deeply place-based institutions. Boards, local taxpayers, employers, and community partners often expect visible outcomes, and those expectations influence how leaders define viable programs, acceptable returns, and mission fidelity. Program decisions may therefore be judged not only by internal educational criteria but also by their public legitimacy, affordability, and perceived community value.

Stakeholders, governance, and layered decision structures

A large body of research confirms that community college decision-making is shaped by many stakeholders, but governance is more complex than formal organizational charts suggest.

Faculty have historically exercised influence in academic areas such as curriculum and evaluation, while administrators and governing boards hold broader operational authority (Kater & Levin, 2005). Yet, faculty conceptualizations of governance emphasize that trust, communication, and the ability to have one's professional voice heard are just as important as formal structures (Kater, 2017).

Recent governance scholarship extends this point by arguing that much of shared governance is hidden in everyday interactions, hallway conversations, committee work, and informal cross-functional collaboration rather than only in senates or official votes (Kater & Miller, 2024). This perspective matters for instructional program decisions, which often require faculty, advisors, student services, institutional research, finance, and senior leadership to interpret the same proposal from different vantage points. Governance, in this sense, is not simply a structure for approval; it is a process through which competing claims are surfaced, debated, and translated into action.

Student-centered mission, culture of care, and integrated support

The contemporary community college mission also includes an expanded understanding of what student success requires. Research shows that food insecurity, housing insecurity, and mental health challenges are strongly associated with lower academic performance and persistence among community college students (Broton et al., 2022). In response, some colleges have moved beyond isolated support services toward integrated, institution-wide approaches that treat student care as part of the educational mission rather than an external add-on (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018).

Advising is especially important in this regard. Enhanced advising models rely on assigned advisors, sustained engagement, mandatory contact, and proactive educational planning

to help students navigate pathways more effectively (Donaldson et al., 2020). Likewise, integrated planning and advising for student success reforms seek to transform support from a clerical, registration-oriented function into a more holistic and coordinated system of student guidance (Karp et al., 2016). These developments suggest that instructional program decisions are best understood in relation to the broader systems of care, planning, and support through which students experience the college.

Leadership's Role in Navigating Institutional Challenges

Because community colleges face overlapping market, political, academic, and social pressures, leadership in this sector is fundamentally interpretive work. Leaders do not simply receive demands and apply them mechanically; they frame, sequence, and translate them for others. Eddy (2003) described this process as leadership framing, showing that community college presidents guide interpretation by directing attention to particular priorities and communicating change through talking, walking, writing, and symbolizing the frame. In similar fashion, Mokher et al. (2020) found that institutional transformation in community colleges depends on collaborative interpretation and organizational learning involving a broad range of campus stakeholders.

This challenge is not only presidential, and it is also cultural. Research on transformative change in broad-access colleges indicates that meaningful reform requires multitiered leadership, with senior leaders and midlevel leaders aligned around a shared and actionable vision (Klempin & Karp, 2018). When this alignment is absent, colleges may implement new structures or technologies without changing the underlying processes, attitudes, and cultural assumptions needed for deeper transformation. This insight is especially relevant for instructional program decisions, which frequently move through cross-functional review processes and depend on

leaders' ability to connect mission, feasibility, student support, stakeholder expectations, and organizational culture.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to examine how community college leaders identified, interpreted, and integrated the diverse interests of internal and external stakeholders when making decisions about instructional programs at a public community college.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do community college leaders identify the interests and priorities of internal and external stakeholders?

RQ2. How do community college leaders interpret the significance of stakeholder interests in relation to institutional goals?

RQ3. How do community college leaders integrate stakeholder interests into instructional program decision-making processes?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study used stakeholder theory as the broad theoretical lens; Burke's accountability triangle and Schein's three levels of organizational culture served as the two complementary conceptual frameworks. Together, this theoretical lens and these conceptual frameworks supported analysis of who influenced instructional program decisions, what forms of accountability leaders were balancing, and how institutional culture shaped leaders' interpretations of those demands.

Theoretical Framework: Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory provided the broad theoretical foundation for the study. Freeman (1984) argued that organizations must account for the interests of multiple groups that affect and are affected by institutional action. In a community college context, these stakeholders include students, faculty, administrators, employers, policymakers, accrediting bodies, community organizations, and the broader public. Stakeholder theory was appropriate because the study focused specifically on how leaders recognized, weighed, and responded to multiple constituencies whose interests were not always aligned.

Conceptual Framework: Burke's Accountability Triangle

Burke's accountability triangle offered a more focused framework for understanding the competing pressures that shape community college leadership decisions. The triangle differentiates among market accountability, political accountability, and academic accountability (Burke, 2005). In this study, market accountability captured pressures tied to labor-market alignment, employer expectations, and workforce outcomes. Political accountability captured pressures linked to funding structures, public scrutiny, policy requirements, and governing-board expectations. Academic accountability captured pressures tied to disciplinary standards, faculty governance, accreditation, and the broader educational mission. Burke's framework helped organize how leaders described the tensions embedded in instructional program decision-making.

Conceptual Framework: Schein's Three Levels of Organizational Culture

Schein's (2004) model of organizational culture provided a complementary lens for understanding how leaders interpreted stakeholder demands within an institutional context. Schein differentiated among artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions.

Artifacts include the visible structures, language, routines, and policies through which organizational priorities are expressed. Espoused values include the mission statements, strategic commitments, and stated goals that leaders use to justify action. Basic underlying assumptions refer to the deeper, taken-for-granted beliefs that shape how members of an institution interpret what matters. This framework was especially useful because the study examined not only what leaders decided but how institutional norms, values, and assumptions appeared to shape their interpretations of stakeholder interests and accountability pressures.

Across this theoretical lens and the two conceptual frameworks, the study used interpretation to describe the leadership work of connecting stakeholder claims, accountability expectations, and cultural assumptions to action. Stakeholder theory identified who influenced decisions, Burke's model clarified the accountability pressures attached to stakeholder claims, and Schein's model explained how institutional culture shaped what leaders understood those claims to mean.

Overview of Methodology

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design. A single-case approach was appropriate because the purpose was to develop an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of how leaders worked through stakeholder complexity in one institutional setting. The case study design also allowed leadership decision-making to be examined through multiple forms of evidence rather than through interview data alone.

Data sources included nine semi-structured interviews with leaders connected to instructional program decision-making, on-site observation memos, and institutional documents such as governance materials, accreditation evidence, public webpages, outcomes reports, and program-related materials. The interview protocol was organized around the research questions

and conceptual frameworks; stakeholder theory served as an overarching lens for recognizing relevant actors rather than as a separate interview-question map.

Alignment of the Study

To maintain coherence across the dissertation, an alignment table connects the problem statement, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and data sources. The table is included in Appendix A and is referenced again in Chapter 3.

Delimitations and Assumptions

Several delimitations shaped the study. First, the research focused on a single public community college, which provided depth but not institutional variation. Second, the study centered leadership perspectives on instructional program decision-making rather than collecting direct interview data from students, employers, or community partners. Third, the study focused on instructional program decisions and the processes surrounding them rather than directly measuring student outcomes. These delimitations made it possible to examine leadership processes closely while maintaining a manageable scope for a single-case design.

The study also rested on several assumptions. It assumed that participants would provide reflective and reasonably candid accounts of their work, that institutional documents would offer credible evidence of organizational priorities and processes, and that triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents would strengthen the study's credibility. It further assumed that although the case was unique, it could support analytic insight relevant to other community colleges confronting similar tensions among mission, accountability, and stakeholder responsiveness.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a persistent gap in the literature on community college leadership. Prior research has generated valuable insight into governance, funding, workforce alignment, advising reform, and organizational change, but less is known about how these forces come together in actual instructional program decisions. By centering the work of leaders who must respond to multiple constituencies at once, the study contributes a more practice-based understanding of how stakeholder complexity is navigated at the program level.

The study is also significant for theory. It uses stakeholder theory as an overarching lens alongside Burke's accountability triangle and Schein's model of organizational culture. This analytic combination supports a multidimensional understanding of leadership decision-making by showing how external stakeholder claims, competing accountability pressures, and internal cultural assumptions interact in one setting.

Finally, the study is significant for practice. Instructional program decisions affect access, transfer, affordability, workforce mobility, and the degree to which institutions preserve their comprehensive mission. Findings from this study are therefore relevant to governing boards, presidents, vice presidents, deans, faculty leaders, advising and student-services professionals, and institutional research staff seeking clearer processes for stakeholder-responsive planning and decision-making.

Definition of Terms

Accountability. The structures and expectations through which institutions are expected to demonstrate performance, compliance, and responsiveness to public, market, and academic demands (Burke, 2005; Tollefson, 2009).

Culture of care. A student-centered institutional orientation in which policies, services, and daily practices are organized to reduce barriers and support students' academic, financial, and personal well-being (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018).

Instructional program decision-making. The processes through which institutional leaders and other stakeholders create, revise, sequence, schedule, deliver, review, expand, or discontinue academic programs, pathways, and credentials (Bailey et al., 2015; Burke, 2005; Karp et al., 2016).

Interpretation. The process by which leaders assign meaning to ambiguous or competing information and translate that meaning into action. In this dissertation, the term refers to leaders' interpretation of stakeholder information in relation to mission, accountability, culture, and feasibility (Eddy, 2003; Mokher et al., 2020).

Shared governance. A collaborative and participatory process through which faculty and administrators contribute expertise to institutional decision-making through both formal structures and informal interactions (Kater, 2017; Kater & Miller, 2024).

Stakeholders. Individuals or groups that affect, or are affected by, organizational action and whose interests must be considered in institutional decision-making (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010).

Student-centered mission. An institutional commitment to organizing programs, services, and policies around student access, learning, support, and long-term success within the comprehensive community college mission (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018; Kisker et al., 2023).

Workforce responsiveness. The degree to which institutional programming reflects labor-market demand, employer expectations, and regional economic needs while remaining

connected to broader educational goals and long-term mobility (Bailey et al., 2015; Kisker et al., 2023; Tollefson, 2009).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the study by situating instructional program decision-making within the broader context of the community college mission, public accountability, stakeholder complexity, and student-centered support. It established the problem addressed by the study as the limited understanding of how community college leaders actually work through competing stakeholder interests in program-level decisions. The chapter also outlined the study's purpose, guiding questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodological overview, delimitations, assumptions, significance, and key terms.

Taken together, these sections position the study as an inquiry into how leaders navigate complexity while attempting to preserve the comprehensive mission of the community college. The next chapter reviews the literature that informs this study, including scholarship on mission, governance, accountability, culture, advising, and leadership decision-making in community colleges.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study, defined the problem, and presented the study's purpose, research questions, frameworks, and significance. Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to community college mission, stakeholder influence, governance, accountability, culture, student support, and leadership decision-making. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative single-case methodology, including site and participant selection, data collection, analytic procedures, and trustworthiness strategies. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the case study. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to prior literature and

the study's frameworks, identifies implications for practice, and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Community colleges remain the most visible open-access sector in American higher education, enrolling a substantial share of undergraduates while carrying multiple public responsibilities at once. They are expected to provide affordable transfer preparation, workforce education, community responsiveness, and opportunities for social mobility. At the same time, they operate in environments shaped by constrained public funding, changing labor markets, public scrutiny, and increasingly outcome-oriented accountability systems (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2024; Kisker et al., 2023; Tollefson, 2009).

These conditions make instructional program decision-making especially complex. Choices about whether to sustain, revise, expand, merge, or discontinue programs are rarely only academic. They are also financial, political, relational, and cultural. Leaders must weigh community expectations, employer demand, transfer function, faculty expertise, student access, and institutional capacity while also responding to external accountability pressures. In many states, those pressures are intensified by declining state support, increased tuition dependence, and uneven local funding structures that can widen inequities among colleges serving different communities (Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Ortagus et al., 2024; Tollefson, 2009).

The current literature provides important insight into these pressures, but it often examines them separately. Mission studies analyze tensions between transfer and workforce preparation. Governance studies examine faculty participation, trust, and institutional politics. Student success studies document the importance of advising, basic-needs support, and pathway design. Organizational change studies explain how reform takes root. What remains less fully developed is how community college leaders identify, interpret, and integrate these various stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions in practice.

This review foregrounds six strands of literature especially relevant to the study: student-centered mission as a culture of care; layered and informal engagement structures; the role of advising and student services as instructional decision actors; integrated planning and cross-functional program review; place-based public accountability; and leadership interpretation and framing. The review is organized into seven sections: the evolving mission of community colleges; stakeholder influences on institutional decision-making; theoretical and conceptual frameworks; institutional challenges in balancing priorities; academic pathways and holistic student development; institutional strategies for navigating competing priorities; and decision-making in community college leadership. It concludes by identifying the research gap addressed by this study.

The Evolving Mission of Community Colleges

Community colleges were created to serve local communities by expanding access to higher education and by offering both transfer-oriented and occupational programs. Over time, that mission broadened into what is commonly understood as a comprehensive mission: academic transfer, workforce preparation, developmental education, community service, and regional economic responsiveness. The sector's breadth is one of its defining strengths, but it also generates recurring tension because these purposes do not always point leaders toward the same programmatic choices (Kisker et al., 2023; Tollefson, 2009).

Recent scholarship often describes a growing shift toward workforce responsiveness. In a policy environment that rewards completion, credential attainment, job placement, and alignment with regional labor demand, community colleges are under sustained pressure to privilege programs that promise measurable labor-market return. This emphasis is not inherently inconsistent with the community college mission; indeed, workforce development has long been

part of that mission. The tension arises when workforce responsiveness is framed too narrowly, causing institutions to evaluate program value primarily through short-term market demand rather than through educational breadth, transfer opportunity, and long-term mobility (Bailey et al., 2015; Kisker et al., 2023; O'Banion, 2016).

Accordingly, the contemporary mission of the community college is best understood not as a binary choice between liberal education and workforce preparation, but as a continuing effort to hold those commitments together. Comprehensive institutions must prepare students for work, but they must also prepare them for transfer, further learning, civic participation, and changing career trajectories over time. Instructional program decisions therefore become an important site where institutional mission is interpreted and enacted.

A growing body of literature further suggests that the mission of the community college cannot be separated from student support conditions. Burmicky and Duran (2022) show that community college presidents increasingly understand student success through a holistic lens, drawing not only on performance data but also on personal values and contextual knowledge when deciding how to respond to students' needs. Similarly, research on Florida College System institutions documents that colleges increasingly address food, housing, transportation, childcare, and related needs as part of their core educational mission rather than as peripheral services (Nix et al., 2024). In this sense, a student-centered mission increasingly includes what some institutions explicitly describe as a culture of care.

The Amarillo College case study offers a particularly vivid example of this logic. Goldrick-Rab and Cady (2018) describe a college-wide effort to address poverty through emergency aid, case management, academic support, cross-campus training, and community partnerships, arguing that the college's work exceeds isolated student services and instead

represents a comprehensive culture of caring woven into the institution's practices. This literature matters for the present study because it suggests that leaders' decisions about instructional offerings may be shaped not only by what programs students want or employers need, but also by beliefs about what conditions students require to persist and complete those programs.

Stakeholder Influences on Institutional Decision-Making

Community colleges operate within dense stakeholder environments. Different groups claim authority, resources, legitimacy, expertise, or moral standing in relation to instructional programs. Leaders must therefore identify not simply who the stakeholders are, but which interests matter in a given decision, how those interests are communicated, and how competing claims are weighed against one another. Stakeholder influence is both external and internal, and the literature increasingly suggests that it is expressed through formal governance structures as well as everyday interaction, cross-functional collaboration, and hidden or informal channels of influence.

External Stakeholders

Policymakers, Government Agencies, and Public Accountability

State and local governments have always been central to community college governance because they authorize, fund, regulate, and publicly evaluate institutions. Tollefson (2009) argues that governance and accountability in community colleges generally align with funding sources; in practical terms, authority tends to follow the money. State appropriations, local appropriations, tuition, and federal aid structures shape what colleges can afford to offer and what they are expected to produce. This makes policymakers and public agencies especially powerful stakeholders in program decisions.

Recent scholarship sharpens this point by showing that public funding structures do not simply support colleges; they also differentiate them. Using national data, Ortagus et al. (2024) found that reliance on local funding is associated with higher overall revenue for the pooled sector but is negatively related to institutional revenue at rural colleges and colleges serving above-average shares of low-income students. Their findings suggest that local funding may supplement institutional resources in some places while deepening inequity in others. For leaders, this means instructional planning unfolds within a place-based public accountability environment in which local tax base, community wealth, and public governance shape what becomes feasible.

Employers and Industry Partners

Employers and industry partners are among the most visible external stakeholders in instructional program planning. Their influence is often strongest when colleges are determining whether to open new programs, redesign curricular sequences, revise equipment and facilities, or prioritize short-term credentials. Employer influence is not limited to a request for technical skills alone; broader workforce literature and community college scholarship suggest that employers increasingly expect graduates who can communicate, adapt, solve problems, and work across contexts. Consequently, employer interests can reinforce both technical specialization and broader curricular goals, depending on how those interests are interpreted by leaders and faculty (Bailey et al., 2015; Kisker et al., 2023; O'Banion, 2016).

Recent workforce-partnership literature reinforces the need to understand employer engagement as a structured relationship rather than a one-way request for training. D'Amico et al. (2019) argue that community college workforce programs require attention to transfer, noncredit-credit alignment, and employer expectations, while Domenech et al. (2023) identify

effective partnerships as those that are symbiotic, sector-oriented, data-informed, and connected to student readiness across the college. For instructional program decision-making, this means employer input can be productive when it is translated through faculty expertise, student mobility goals, and institutional capacity rather than treated as a simple mandate to add or remove programs.

Accreditors and Regulatory Bodies

Accrediting agencies and regulatory bodies function as external stakeholders because they define institutional legitimacy, monitor compliance, and influence which forms of evidence count in evaluating program quality. Although accreditors do not typically prescribe specific programs, their emphasis on outcomes assessment, student learning evidence, planning documentation, and institutional effectiveness shapes internal decision routines. In practice, accreditation requirements often push colleges to formalize review processes, clarify learning outcomes, and demonstrate that new or continuing programs are mission-aligned, appropriately resourced, and effective. These demands become especially salient when colleges are making decisions under fiscal constraint and must justify not only what they offer but why.

Nonprofits, Faith-Based, and Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations, nonprofits, and faith-based groups increasingly shape instructional priorities through service partnerships, wraparound supports, and local problem identification. Nix et al. (2024) document how colleges collaborate with community organizations to address students' basic-needs insecurity, while Goldrick-Rab and Cady (2018) describe partnerships with local agencies, businesses, and donors as central to sustaining a culture of care at Amarillo College. These organizations do more than fill service gaps; they help

colleges interpret community needs and determine what kinds of supports need to accompany programs if students are to succeed.

Internal Stakeholders

Faculty and Shared Governance

Faculty are central internal stakeholders because they hold disciplinary expertise, shape curriculum, assess student learning, and often function as guardians of academic integrity. In unionized settings and nonunion settings alike, faculty voice has historically been tied to the ideals of shared governance. Tollefson (2009) describes the evolution of governance as part of the broader history of community college funding and accountability, while Kater (2017) shows that faculty conceptualize shared governance less as a purely structural arrangement and more as a sociopolitical process shaped by voice, trust, transparency, and the risk of disengagement.

This relational view is especially important for the present study. Kater and Miller (2024) argue that shared governance is too often understood only through formal bodies such as faculty senates, when much of its actual force lies in everyday, informal, and cross-role interactions. They describe a hidden or iceberg-like dimension of shared governance in which hallway conversations, committee work, policy interpretation, and faculty participation in academic program management all contribute to institutional decision-making. This reframing is useful because program decisions often emerge through precisely these layered, informal, and semi-formal spaces rather than through a single authoritative vote.

Students

Students are obvious stakeholders in community colleges, but the literature increasingly warns against treating them only as abstract beneficiaries of institutional decision-making. Students influence instructional programming through enrollment patterns, expressed goals,

persistence challenges, and their lived experience of college structures. Research on basic-needs insecurity underscores the importance of taking students' material conditions seriously in planning programs and support. Broton et al. (2022) found that students facing food and housing insecurity were substantially more likely to report depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, and that students facing both food and housing insecurity experienced especially elevated risk. These findings suggest that instructional decisions cannot be separated from the conditions under which students attempt to participate in college.

The literature on student support also indicates that students' needs are often more complex than a narrow program-planning model assumes. Nix et al. (2024) show that colleges are increasingly responding to basic-needs insecurity through multiple forms of assistance, while Goldrick-Rab and Cady (2018) describe how a student-ready, no-excuses approach requires colleges to address barriers that are often labeled nonacademic. Students, then, are not merely recipients of programs. Their barriers, aspirations, and patterns of engagement constitute an important source of institutional intelligence about which programs are viable, which supports are necessary, and where pathways create hidden inequities.

Advisors, Enrollment, and Student Services Personnel

Advisors, enrollment professionals, and student services personnel play a central role in instructional decision-making, extending beyond traditional support functions. Donaldson et al. (2020) found that enhanced advising programs are associated with increased student participation, stronger engagement, and the proactive development of educational plans. Advisors in that study emphasized their ability to identify barriers, points of confusion, and unmet needs that are not visible when curriculum is considered in isolation.

Scholarship on technology and integrated planning reinforces this perspective. Karp et al. (2016) argue that technology is most effective when it supports transformation in advising rather than simply automating existing practices, while Klempin and Karp (2018) highlight the importance of shared vision and multilevel leadership in achieving institutional change. Together, this literature positions advising, financial aid, enrollment, and student support units as key interpreters of pathway viability. These actors identify bottlenecks, surface tensions between program design and student affordability, and assess whether pathways that appear coherent in design are navigable in practice.

Administrators

Administrators serve as mediators among stakeholder groups. They allocate resources, coordinate planning processes, translate external expectations, and frame institutional priorities for others. Burmicky and Duran (2022) found that community college presidents make decisions about holistic student needs by drawing on data, personal values, and lived experience, suggesting that administrative decision-making is both analytical and interpretive. Administrators are therefore not neutral processors of information. They select which signals matter, how issues are framed, and what kinds of action are institutionally possible.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study is grounded in stakeholder theory as the overarching theoretical framework, while Burke's accountability triangle and Schein's three levels of organizational culture serve as the two conceptual frameworks. Stakeholder theory frames the broader issue of competing stakeholder interests, while Burke's accountability triangle and Schein's organizational culture framework provide analytic frameworks for examining accountability pressures and institutional culture. The review also draws on leadership framing and organizational culture/learning

literature as complementary scholarship, recognizing that leadership involves not only balancing external pressures but also interpreting them through institutional contexts, routines, and shared narratives.

Stakeholder Theory in Higher Education

Stakeholder theory provides a useful framework for examining how institutional leaders navigate competing claims from groups that can affect, or are affected by, institutional action (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010). In higher education, the theory is particularly useful because colleges are accountable to multiple constituencies at once, including students, faculty, employers, boards, funders, accreditors, and community partners. Rather than assuming that one set of interests dominates, stakeholder theory directs attention to how leaders identify relevant stakeholders, assess the legitimacy and urgency of their claims, and attempt to balance them.

For community colleges, stakeholder theory is especially apt because the sector's mission is both comprehensive and public. Open-access colleges must respond to labor-market needs, but they are also expected to promote transfer, equity, democratic access, and regional service. Stakeholder theory helps frame these pressures as inherent to the institution rather than as anomalies. It therefore supports the central questions of this study: how leaders identify stakeholder interests, how they interpret their significance, and how they integrate them into program decisions.

Stakeholder salience literature further refines this lens by explaining why some stakeholder claims become actionable while others remain advisory, symbolic, or deferred. Boesso and Kumar (2009) emphasize that organizations prioritize and engage stakeholders in ways that shape whose interests are treated as consequential. Neville et al. (2011) argue that salience is best understood as a dynamic and context-dependent concept rather than a fixed

stakeholder attribute. Chan (2021) similarly shows that perceived stakeholder salience can influence how performance information is used in higher education decision-making. This literature is important for the present study because community college leaders may recognize many stakeholders, but they still must decide which claims carry urgency, legitimacy, credibility, or institutional consequence in a specific program decision.

Burke's Accountability Triangle in Higher Education

Burke's accountability triangle offers a more specific conceptual structure for examining how community college leaders navigate competing demands. Burke (2005) argues that higher education institutions are accountable in at least three overlapping ways: to market demands, to political actors and public oversight, and to academic standards and professional norms. Community colleges are a particularly strong fit for this framework because their program decisions routinely sit at the intersection of all three.

Market accountability is visible in pressure to align programs with employment demand, employer partnerships, and regional economic priorities. Political accountability appears in funding formulas, legislative mandates, public scrutiny, and governing board oversight. Academic accountability emphasizes peer review, curriculum quality, transferability, disciplinary integrity, and student learning. Burke's model is especially useful because it does not presume these forms of accountability align neatly. Instead, it captures the reality that leaders often confront overlapping demands that are individually legitimate but collectively difficult to reconcile.

Schein's Three Levels of Organizational Culture

Schein's (2004) model adds an internal cultural dimension to the analysis. At the level of artifacts, colleges express their priorities through visible structures such as meeting routines,

committee arrangements, advising systems, support centers, strategic plans, and public language. At the level of espoused values, institutions articulate commitments such as student success, equity, care, transfer, responsiveness, and excellence. At the deepest level, basic underlying assumptions shape how members of the institution understand students, programs, authority, and risk.

This framework is important because it explains why similar external pressures can produce different institutional responses. Two colleges may face the same labor-market conditions or funding rules yet respond differently because of cultural assumptions about who their students are, what counts as a successful outcome, or whether broad educational development is compatible with workforce preparation. Schein's framework therefore complements Burke's model by illuminating how internal culture mediates external accountability.

Leadership Framing, Organizational Culture, and Learning

Leadership framing and organizational culture/learning literature complements the study's conceptual frameworks by explaining how leaders communicate, translate, and revise institutional priorities in practice. Eddy (2003) showed that community college presidents frame change through language, presence, writing, and symbolic action, while Mokher et al. (2020) emphasized collaborative interpretation and organizational learning during community college reform.

This perspective is important because instructional program decisions often involve ambiguous signals. A program may be low enrolled but mission-relevant, employer-requested but financially difficult, or politically required but culturally contested. Leaders therefore must

interpret not only what stakeholders ask for but what those requests mean in relation to mission, accountability, and culture.

Taken together, the literature suggests that stakeholder-responsive leadership requires both structures and interpretation. The stakeholder-theory framework clarifies whose interests are present, Burke's model clarifies the accountability pressures surrounding those interests, and Schein's framework clarifies how institutional culture shapes what leaders understand as legitimate, urgent, and mission-consistent.

Institutional Challenges in Balancing Priorities

Community colleges face multiple, overlapping challenges when balancing institutional priorities. Funding pressures, performance expectations, equity concerns, student basic-needs insecurity, and shifting governance conditions all influence what leaders view as possible and prudent. The literature increasingly suggests that these challenges do not operate independently; instead, they compound one another, creating decisions in which mission, money, and student need must all be negotiated at once.

Financial Constraints, Local Funding, and Performance Pressures

Funding remains one of the most persistent constraints. Tollefson (2009) documents the long-term shift from predominantly local support toward a more mixed funding model that includes state appropriations, tuition, and local revenue, noting that this transition has intensified scrutiny over productivity, efficiency, and accountability. In the current policy environment, these pressures are further amplified by performance-based funding systems that tie public support to metrics such as completion, progression, and labor-market outcomes (Dougherty & Natow, 2020).

The problem is not simply that community colleges have limited resources, but that the distribution of resources is uneven. Ortagus et al. (2024) demonstrate that local funding can widen disparities for rural colleges and colleges serving larger shares of low-income students. Their findings matter for instructional decision-making because they imply that program mix is never determined solely by demand or mission. It is also shaped by a college's fiscal environment, tax base, and public accountability context. Leaders may therefore experience pressure to favor programs that appear financially sustainable, politically legible, or externally rewarded, even when those choices complicate broader commitments to access and equity.

Resource constraints are especially consequential in career and technical education because workforce-oriented programs often require specialized equipment, facilities, industry-aligned technology, credentialed faculty, and employer-placement capacity. The Workgroup on CTE Cost Analysis (2023) argues that cost studies are necessary because they clarify the resources required to provide effective career preparation. At the institutional level, these costs intersect with broader inequities in community college funding. Yuen (2020) documents a substantial revenue gap between community colleges and public four-year institutions, and McKinney and Hagedorn (2016) caution that performance-based funding models may disadvantage colleges serving higher shares of historically underserved students. Together, this literature suggests that workforce responsiveness is not only a curricular issue; it is also a resource-allocation and equity issue.

Student Pathways, Equity, and Stratification

The completion agenda has generated renewed attention to structured pathways, but pathway design itself can create inequities if institutions are not attentive to how students move through programs. Bailey et al. (2015) argue for community colleges to move from cafeteria-

style choice toward clearer program structures supported by advising and coherent planning. Yet pathway reform can also stratify opportunity if low-income and racially minoritized students are disproportionately steered into narrow short-term pathways without clear avenues to transfer or longer-term advancement. The challenge for leaders is therefore not only to create clear pathways, but to ensure that clarity does not become premature sorting.

Equity concerns are especially salient for short-term credentials. Research on the short-term credential landscape cautions that these programs may provide immediate access but can become terminal pathways when they are not connected to credit-bearing degrees, transfer, or wage progression (Ositelu et al., 2021). Li and Kennedy (2018) similarly found that performance-funding incentives can increase short-term credential completion in ways that may not align with longer-term mobility. For leaders, the practical question is not whether short-term credentials exist, but how they can be designed as stackable, affordable, and transferable pathways rather than as narrow tracks that stratify opportunity.

Basic Needs Insecurity, Mental Health, and the Culture of Care

A second major challenge concerns the relationship between poverty, basic needs insecurity, and educational participation. Broton et al. (2022) show that food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness are strongly associated with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among community college students. They further argue that institutions often address these concerns in silos even though they are deeply interconnected. Nix et al. (2024) extend this literature by showing that colleges are already doing substantial basic-needs work, often through multiple units and partnerships, even when such efforts are not fully integrated or recognized as central to institutional mission.

This literature helps explain why culture of care functions as more than a normative slogan. Goldrick-Rab and Cady (2018) describe a college-wide poverty initiative in which emergency aid, social services case management, food support, academic policy, and hiring expectations were coordinated as part of a broader culture of caring. Their analysis suggests that care becomes organizationally meaningful when it is built into institutional systems rather than left to isolated acts of individual goodwill. For the present study, this means that leaders may integrate stakeholder interests partly by asking what students need to participate meaningfully in the programs the institution offers.

Faculty Governance and Academic Accountability

Finally, community colleges must manage tensions within governance itself. Kater (2017) found that faculty leaders conceptualize shared governance through the language of trust, transparency, voice, and disengagement, suggesting that governance effectiveness depends on social and relational conditions as much as on formal structures. Kater and Miller (2024) further argue that the hidden, everyday practices of governance matter because they shape how ideas surface, circulate, and gain legitimacy. These studies suggest that academic accountability is sustained not only through official curricular approvals but also through the quality of the relationships that underpin governance work.

Academic Pathways and Holistic Student Development

Academic pathways are not simply technical maps of credits and requirements. They also communicate what the institution values about learning, support, and student development. The literature on advising-as-teaching and structured pathways suggests that students benefit when program maps are coherent, advising is sustained, and educational planning is tied to both career goals and broader learning outcomes (Bailey et al., 2015; Donaldson et al., 2020).

At the same time, a holistic view of pathways requires attention to the conditions under which students progress. Donaldson et al. (2020) found that enhanced advising programs are characterized not only by assigned advisors and mandatory engagement but also by stronger student participation and more proactive educational planning. Karp et al. (2016) similarly argue that advising technologies are valuable only when they support a broader redesign of student support. This literature suggests that pathways are developmental and relational, not merely procedural. A pathway that is clear but financially inaccessible, overly rigid, or detached from students' real obligations is not truly student-centered.

This point is especially relevant for colleges attempting to maintain a comprehensive mission. General education, transfer preparation, and career pathways need not be treated as mutually exclusive alternatives. Rather, the challenge is to design programs in which technical preparation, long-term educational mobility, and holistic student support can coexist. O'Banion (2016) captures this broader view by arguing that community colleges help students make both a good living and a good life. This is a useful reminder that instructional offerings are also statements about what kinds of futures a college believes its students deserve.

Research on humanities and liberal arts education supports this broader interpretation of community college pathways. Pippins, Belfield, and Bailey (2019) challenge narratives of simple decline by showing that humanities and liberal arts coursework remain a significant component of postsecondary education, including in STEM and health pathways. Pippins and Belfield (2019) further connect humanities and liberal arts coursework in community colleges to transfer and four-year college outcomes, while Bickerstaff et al. (2020) emphasize the role of humanities education in access, general education, and democratic learning. Finley (2021) adds an employer-facing perspective, showing that employers continue to value communication,

teamwork, critical thinking, applied learning, and the ability to use knowledge in real-world settings. This literature strengthens the argument that broader academic learning is not separate from workforce readiness; it is one of the conditions that makes workforce preparation durable over time.

Institutional Strategies for Navigating Competing Priorities

In response to these challenges, colleges have developed a range of institutional strategies. The literature most relevant to this study emphasizes that no single strategy resolves the tension between mission, market, and equity. Instead, effective colleges appear to combine partnerships, cross-functional planning, curricular integration, structured pathways, and reform-minded leadership into coordinated systems.

Community Partnerships and Place-Based Collaboration

Community partnerships are a longstanding strategy in the sector, but recent literature highlights the importance of place-based collaboration and civic identity. Crossland (2023) argues that placemaking functions as a hidden curriculum by shaping belonging, democratic participation, and institutional identity. This perspective suggests that community colleges act not only as service providers but also as anchor institutions whose spaces, symbols, and relationships communicate obligations to the communities they serve. This is particularly relevant to instructional planning because place-based commitments can shape which programs are prioritized, how community need is interpreted, and how institutional legitimacy is sustained.

Goldrick-Rab and Cady (2018) and Nix et al. (2024) both show that partnerships with external agencies are essential when colleges attempt to respond to poverty, health, childcare, transportation, and other barriers. These are not merely add-on collaborations; they often influence the viability of programs because they help determine whether students can access and

complete them. Place-based collaboration therefore becomes part of the infrastructure of instructional decision-making.

Integrated Planning and Cross-Functional Coordination

A second strategy, and one especially important for the present study, is integrated planning across academic and student support units. Karp et al. (2016) found that colleges are most effective when reforms are conceptualized as transformations of student support rather than isolated technical fixes. In these contexts, institutions redesign structures, behaviors, and practices so that advising, program planning, and student intervention become integrated and sustained. Similarly, Klempin and Karp (2018) found that transformative change requires multilevel leadership, a shared vision, and particularly strong midlevel leadership capable of translating broad institutional goals into coordinated, cross-functional practice.

Mokher et al. (2020) reinforce this conclusion by showing that institutional transformation in Florida's developmental education reform depended on collaborative interpretation and organizational learning practices that involved broad stakeholder participation. Together, these studies suggest that effective program planning cannot remain siloed within academic affairs. New program development, pathway revision, and support design are strengthened when financial aid, advising, registrar functions, academic leaders, faculty, and student affairs personnel are all involved early enough to identify constraints and possibilities before a decision is finalized.

Program Review and Discontinuance as Stakeholder Integration

Academic program review and discontinuance represent especially visible points where stakeholder interests converge. Decisions to revise, merge, suspend, or discontinue programs require leaders to weigh enrollment, completion, cost, workforce demand, transfer function,

faculty expertise, accreditation requirements, student progression, and mission alignment.

Program prioritization literature emphasizes that institutions cannot offer every program indefinitely and therefore need transparent criteria for assessing academic quality, relevance, and resource use (Fannin & Saran, 2017; Michael, 1998).

These decisions also have direct consequences for students, faculty, and community partners. Trudeau and Graber (2018) emphasize that program review and prioritization is best connected to student development and institutional planning rather than treated as an isolated administrative exercise. In community colleges, program review therefore functions not only as quality assurance but also as a stakeholder-integration mechanism. It requires leaders to translate data, faculty judgment, student advising implications, workforce demand, and public accountability into decisions that are explainable and actionable.

Curriculum Innovation and Integrative Models

Curriculum innovation is another strategy for holding together multiple mission commitments. Integrative curricular models seek to connect technical skills, general education, and broader developmental outcomes rather than forcing colleges to choose between them. O'Banion (2016) argues that institutions can resist reducing education to narrow job training alone, while O'Banion (2022) documents innovations in liberal arts programming that intentionally connect humanistic learning with contemporary institutional priorities. These models are important because they suggest that curricular design can be used to preserve breadth even when external stakeholders emphasize market value.

Guided Pathways and Stackable Credentials

Guided Pathways and stackable credentials both aim to improve coherence in student progression, though through different mechanisms. Guided Pathways simplifies student choice

and clarifies course sequencing, while stackable credentials create multiple entry, exit, and reentry points between education and employment. Supporting systems that enhance planning, track student progress, and enable targeted intervention can strengthen these reforms by making pathways more visible and navigable. Bailey et al. (2015), Karp et al. (2016), and Jenkins et al. (2025) suggest that these approaches are most effective when combined with proactive advising, transparent program maps, and structures that help students understand the long-term implications of short-term decisions.

Balancing Equity, Mission, and Market Pressures

Taken together, these strategies underscore a central point: colleges rarely navigate competing priorities by simply selecting one value over another. More often, they attempt to build hybrid arrangements in which transfer, workforce development, basic-needs support, general education, and accountability can be addressed together. Whether these hybrids are genuinely equitable depends on the processes through which they are designed and the cultural commitments that guide them.

Decision-Making in Community College Leadership

The final body of literature most relevant to this study concerns leadership decision-making itself. Community college leaders do not merely collect stakeholder input and apply data to problems. They interpret competing claims, assign priority, create meaning, and construct processes through which some ideas advance, and others are revised, deferred, or rejected. The literature on evidence use, framing, interpretation, and adaptive leadership is therefore particularly useful in understanding instructional program decisions.

Evidence-Based and Data-Informed Decision-Making

A culture of evidence is widely promoted in community colleges, and for good reason. Systematic use of data can clarify where students stop out, which programs experience low enrollment or weak completion, and where reforms may be needed. Jenkins and Kerrigan (2008) argue that evidence-based decision-making supports stronger planning in community colleges, while Karp et al. (2016) show that advising technologies can generate useful information when institutions redesign processes around it. Yet the literature also makes clear that data do not eliminate judgment. The challenge is not only collecting information but interpreting it in a way that is mission-sensitive and equity-aware.

This point is especially clear in Burmicky and Duran's (2022) study of community college presidents. They found that leaders rely on both data and core values when deciding how to respond to students' holistic needs. Likewise, Mokher et al. (2020) show that organizational learning depends on groups that review, question, and interpret data rather than merely receiving it. Data-informed decision-making, then, is best understood as a social and interpretive process rather than a purely technical one.

Leadership Framing, Organizational Culture, and Learning

Leadership framing literature helps explain how leaders move from information to action. Eddy (2003) found that community college presidents frame change in ways that shape campus goals and strategies, and that they communicate these frames by talking, walking, writing, and symbolizing them. Her distinction between visionary and operational framing is particularly useful for understanding instructional decision-making. Some leaders frame change around a broader institutional future; others frame it around solving concrete operational problems. Both

approaches matter, but they prioritize different forms of attention and can lead campuses to interpret the same pressures differently.

Mokher et al. (2020) extend this logic by showing that change becomes institutional when stakeholders engage in collaborative interpretation and organizational learning. In other words, reform is not just announced; it is interpreted, tested, revised, and embedded. This is highly relevant to program decisions because leaders must often translate stakeholder claims into institutional language that others can act on. Employer demand becomes a question of curricular fit. Student need becomes a question of pathway design and support capacity. Public accountability becomes a question of evidence, resources, and mission alignment. Interpretation is the mechanism that links these spheres.

Multilevel, Stakeholder-Centered, and Ethical Leadership

Finally, the leadership literature suggests that transformative decisions require both vertical and horizontal coordination. Klempin and Karp (2018) found that broad-access colleges were most successful at transformative reform when upper-level leaders and midlevel project leaders shared a commitment to a common vision. Their findings suggest that leadership is multilevel and that project leaders, often the people closest to implementation, are crucial translators of institutional priorities. This is an important insight for program decision-making, which frequently depends on deans, chairs, directors, advisors, and analysts as much as on presidents and vice presidents.

Stakeholder-centered leadership also has an ethical dimension. Hornak and Garza Mitchell (2016) show that community college presidents make complex decisions through personal values and organizational considerations, while Wood and Hilton (2012) provide five ethical paradigms: justice, critique, care, profession, and local community that help leaders think

through institutional dilemmas. These frameworks are useful for community college decision-making because they remind leaders that program choices are not merely strategic. They are also moral decisions about whose needs are recognized, what forms of knowledge are protected, and how an institution defines its obligations to students and community.

Community college leadership competency literature also reinforces the applied nature of this work. The AACC competencies identify organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, advocacy, and professionalism as central to effective community college leadership (AACC, 2018). Nevarez and Wood (2012) similarly argue that community college leaders need structured ways to examine information, identify underlying problems, analyze dilemmas through multiple lenses, and connect theory to practice. These perspectives align with the present study's focus on how leaders move from stakeholder information to program-level action under conditions of complexity and constraint.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here affirms that instructional program decision-making in community colleges is shaped by far more than labor-market demand or internal academic preference alone. Program decisions occur at the intersection of comprehensive mission, stakeholder influence, public accountability, organizational culture, student need, and resource constraint. Recent scholarship strengthens this understanding by showing that leaders operate within cultures of care as well as funding systems, within formal governance structures as well as hidden ones, and within decision processes that rely on interpretation, integrated planning, and cross-functional collaboration.

At the same time, an important gap remains. Existing studies offer substantial insight into mission, funding, governance, advising, basic-needs support, and change management, but fewer

studies examine how community college leaders actually identify, interpret, and integrate stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions. More research is needed on how leaders move from stakeholder voice to program action; how they weigh public, market, academic, and accreditation accountabilities simultaneously; and how institutional culture shapes those judgments. This study addresses that gap by using stakeholder theory as the overarching theoretical framework, Burke's accountability triangle and Schein's organizational culture model as conceptual frameworks, and leadership framing and organizational culture/learning literature as complementary scholarship to examine how leaders navigate these overlapping demands in practice.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology used for this qualitative single-case study. It outlines the research design, site selection, study participants, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis process, ethical considerations, limitations, and study-quality strategies. The chapter also explains the researcher's role and the procedures used to support rigor, confidentiality, and alignment with the study's purpose and research questions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to examine how community college leaders identified, interpreted, and integrated the diverse interests of internal and external stakeholders when making decisions about instructional programs.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do community college leaders identify the interests and priorities of internal and external stakeholders?

RQ2: How do community college leaders interpret the significance of stakeholder interests in relation to institutional goals?

RQ3: How do community college leaders integrate stakeholder interests into instructional program decision-making processes?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) served as the overarching theoretical framework for the study. It directed attention to the multiple internal and external groups that influenced instructional program decisions and helped the researcher identify stakeholder categories represented in the literature, institutional documents, and interview data.

Burke's (2005) accountability triangle and Schein's (2004) three levels of organizational culture functioned as complementary conceptual frameworks. Burke's model helped organize attention to market, political, and academic accountability pressures, while Schein's model helped focus attention on artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions evident in interviews, observations, and documents.

Together, the literature review, theoretical lens, and conceptual frameworks informed the study design. Stakeholder Theory guided attention to stakeholder influence, while Burke's Accountability Triangle and Schein's organizational culture framework shaped the study's focus on accountability pressures, institutional culture, and leadership decision-making. These frameworks also informed the development of interview questions about how leaders identified stakeholder interests, interpreted competing priorities, and integrated those interests into instructional program decisions.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative single-case study design. Case study methodology was appropriate because the study asked how and why leaders made instructional decisions in a contemporary setting over which the researcher did not exercise control (Yin, 2018). The design was explanatory because it sought to account for how stakeholder interests were surfaced, weighed, and translated into action within a real institutional setting.

A single-case design allowed for an in-depth analysis of stakeholder complexity, accountability pressures, and organizational culture within one bounded institutional context. The case was bounded as one public community college and the leadership processes associated with instructional program decision-making at that institution. The unit of analysis was the

institution as a case, while individual participants, documents, and observations served as embedded sources of evidence that illuminated the larger case (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2006).

Site Selection

The site for the study was an anonymized public community college referred to throughout this dissertation by the generic pseudonym Horizon Community College. The pseudonym was intentionally broad so that it protected confidentiality without signaling geographic location or institutional identity. Horizon Community College was selected purposively because it offered a strong case for examining how leaders navigated workforce responsiveness, transfer pathways, student support, governance, and public accountability within a comprehensive community college mission. Public materials and accreditation documents associated with Horizon Community College showed an organization that was simultaneously attentive to workforce demand, student success, shared governance, and community engagement, which made it a rich setting for this inquiry.

Horizon Community College also provided a well-bounded and information-rich case because instructional program decisions were visible through formal structures such as program review, curriculum workflows, strategic planning, advisory relationships, and public board oversight. These conditions supported the collection of triangulated evidence from interviews, observation, and documents.

Study Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to identify institutional leaders whose work placed them in direct relationship to instructional program decisions, planning, stakeholder engagement, or governance (Patton, 2015). The sample included nine participants representing executive leadership, academic leadership, student services, instructional support, institutional research,

and faculty governance. The participant group included the college president, vice presidents, deans, and the faculty senate leader. Participants were selected because they were especially knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study and because their roles provided varied perspectives on the same decision environment.

The use of participants across multiple leadership functions strengthened the depth of the case by allowing the study to compare how stakeholder interests were surfaced, interpreted, and acted upon from different institutional locations. Participants were identified in the findings chapter through de-identified labels (P01-P09).

Instrumentation, Researcher Role, and Data Sources

This study uses three primary sources of evidence: semi-structured interviews, an on-site observation memo, and institutional document analysis. These sources support triangulation by allowing participant accounts, observational notes, and institutional documents to be examined together.

The researcher serves as the primary qualitative instrument, with reflexive notetaking used to support awareness of how researcher assumptions and prior experiences may shape interpretation. Detailed procedures for interviews, observations, document analysis, data management, and coding are described in the sections that follow.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source. The interview protocol was organized around the study's research questions and conceptual frameworks while allowing participants to explain their decision processes, examples, and priorities. As part of researcher preparation, the questions were reviewed and refined for alignment with the study purpose, research questions, and approved protocol.

Nine interviews were conducted with institutional leaders. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, were audio recorded with permission, and were transcribed verbatim. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify examples, probe reasoning, and explore how participants connected stakeholder interests to mission, accountability, culture, and instructional program decisions. Interviewing leaders across roles made it possible to identify both common patterns and points of difference.

Observation

Observation served as a contextual data source. A structured observation guide focused attention on leadership presence, stakeholder participation, student-facing spaces, visible institutional practices, accountability references, and cultural cues. In the completed study, observation took the form of a naturalistic site visit and an accompanying observation memo rather than repeated meeting observations. The observation did not attempt to capture every aspect of the campus. Instead, it provided contextual evidence about the institutional environment and helped the researcher interpret how espoused values and publicly visible institutional practices appeared in lived settings.

The observation memo recorded features such as the physical environment, patterns of interaction, visible symbols of mission, and examples of how the institution represented student support, workforce preparation, and community engagement. Reflexive notes accompanied the descriptive record so that observation remained analytically useful without being treated as a neutral or exhaustive account.

Document Analysis

Document analysis served as a third source of evidence and included public webpages, governance materials, accreditation materials, outcomes reports, program publications, and other

institutional texts relevant to instructional decision-making. Documents were reviewed for references to stakeholder engagement, mission framing, accountability, planning structures, program development, leadership strategies, change over time, and cultural language.

Document review helped corroborate interview accounts, identify formal structures, and trace how institutional priorities were communicated publicly. Because documents were socially and institutionally produced texts, they were not treated as neutral or definitive records. Instead, they were read critically for what they highlighted, how they framed decisions, and what they revealed about institutional priorities and assumptions.

Data Collection and Management

Data collection followed a structured case study process that included researcher preparation, institutional review and site access, participant recruitment, informed consent, interviewing, observation, document collection, and creation of a case study database. These steps are described separately below to preserve a clear chain of evidence and to show how data moved from collection to analysis.

Researcher Preparation

Before data collection began, the researcher reviewed case study interviewing guidance and refined the interview protocol for alignment with the study's purpose, research questions, and conceptual frameworks. The protocol was reviewed for question wording, sequence, and clarity. This review served as an instrument-alignment process rather than a formal pilot of the interview questions.

Institutional Review and Site Access

The researcher obtained Kansas State University Institutional Review Board approval and any required site-level permissions before collecting data. Copies of the Kansas State University

IRB approval and the site IRB approval letter are included in Appendix G and Appendix H.

Access to the case site was negotiated through institutional leadership, and data collection began only after required approvals and permissions were secured.

Participant Identification, Recruitment, and Consent

Once permission was secured, purposeful sampling was used to identify leaders with direct knowledge of instructional program decision-making. Potential participants were contacted by email and received a concise description of the study, the time commitment, and the voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent materials explained the purpose of the study, the use of audio recording, the right to decline questions, and the right to withdraw. Consent was obtained before each interview began.

Interview Procedures

Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants and were conducted either in person or through a secure video-conferencing platform, depending on access and participant preference. The researcher began each interview by reviewing consent, confirming permission to record, and reminding participants that they could skip any question.

During the interview, the researcher used the semi-structured protocol as a guide rather than as a script. Field notes were written during and immediately after the interview to capture contextual detail, notable phrasing, preliminary analytic ideas, and any follow-up needs. Interview transcripts were checked against the audio for accuracy before formal coding began.

Observation Procedures

Observation occurred during the site visit and was documented in an extended observation memo. The memo recorded the setting, people present, salient interactions, visible artifacts, patterns of participation, and other contextual details relevant to stakeholder-responsive

leadership. Immediately after the visit, brief jottings were expanded into fuller field notes so that descriptive and reflexive detail was not lost.

Document Collection

Document collection occurred before, during, and after interviewing so that public and institutional texts could inform both questioning and interpretation. Documents were cataloged by title, source, date, and analytic relevance. This catalog included a short note describing why each document mattered to the study, such as whether it spoke to mission, workforce responsiveness, governance, accountability, student outcomes, or program planning.

Case Study Database and Data Management

All interview audio files, transcripts, observation notes, analytic memos, matrices, and collected documents were organized in a secure digital repository that functioned as the case study database (Yin, 2018). Files were labeled consistently by source and date so that evidence could be traced from raw data to coded excerpts to interpretive claims.

Printed materials used during hand coding were stored securely while analysis was underway, and digital files were maintained on password-protected storage. Data will be secured for five years after completion of the study and then deleted or destroyed in accordance with IRB expectations. The case study database functioned as the evidence base for the findings and supported the chain of evidence required in case study research (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis combined Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with Saldaña's (2013) practical coding methods and Yin's (2018) explanation-building strategy for explanatory case study research. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data and describe the process as recursive

rather than linear, requiring movement back and forth between the full data set, coded extracts, and the developing analysis. Saldaña (2013) complements this approach by treating coding as an iterative process that moves from first-cycle to second-cycle methods and by emphasizing analytic memos, codebooks, and visual mapping as bridges between raw data and interpretation. Together, these sources provided a clear framework for analyzing interview, observation, and document data while keeping the researcher active and interpretive in theme development.

In practice, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's recursive phases of familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, theme review, theme definition and naming, and analytic writing. Within these phases, coding was treated as cyclical and iterative in Saldaña's (2013) sense: first-cycle coding generated provisional labels, and second-cycle coding reorganized those labels into broader analytic patterns. The research questions, Burke's accountability triangle, and Schein's levels of culture functioned as sensitizing concepts during coding, but the researcher did not force the data into a fixed frame. Instead, provisional codes were revised, expanded, collapsed, and reorganized as repeated patterns became clear across sources. Thematic analysis provided the structured coding process, while explanation building used the final themes to develop a coherent account of how leaders navigated stakeholder complexity within the case.

The conceptual frameworks were used during analysis to sensitize the researcher to stakeholder groups, accountability pressures, and cultural indicators, but they did not predetermine themes. Coding remained iterative and inductive within the broader framework-informed analysis, allowing patterns to be constructed from the data while still connecting findings back to the study's purpose and conceptual design.

Familiarization and Transcript Review

The researcher began by immersing in the data through repeated reading of each transcript, close review of the observation memo, and careful reading of each document. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this phase as the bedrock of analysis because it is during familiarization that patterns, tensions, striking language, and possible lines of interpretation start to become visible before formal coding begins. During this stage, the researcher wrote brief analytic notes in the margins and maintained running memos that captured early impressions, questions, and possible connections across data sources. Saldaña (2013) characterizes analytic memos as a bridge between coding and conceptual development; accordingly, these memos were used to record hunches, comparisons, and possible explanations to revisit in later rounds of analysis.

Because interview transcripts were central to the study, transcript review also functioned as an analytic act rather than a mechanical check. The researcher listened back to audio as needed, corrected obvious transcription errors, and noted pauses, emphasis, or phrasing that helped preserve meaning. At the end of each transcript review, the researcher prepared a short contact summary that recorded salient issues, possible tensions, and tentative links to the research questions. Familiarization continued throughout the analytic process because transcripts and documents were revisited repeatedly as codes and themes were refined.

First-Cycle Hand Coding and Color Coding

Initial coding was conducted by hand. This choice was intentional. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that thematic analysis can be conducted manually through notes, highlighters, colored pens, and other tactile systems, and that manual coding can support close engagement with the data. Saldaña (2013) similarly recommends beginning with hard-copy printouts in

small-scale studies because physically manipulating the data can increase familiarity, control, and analytic ownership. In this study, the researcher worked line by line through printed transcripts and printed or annotated copies of documents, highlighting meaningful segments and writing short analytic labels in the margins.

The first complete read of each transcript was used to regain a holistic sense of the interview. On the next pass, the researcher applied a first-cycle hand-coding approach that drew primarily on descriptive, in vivo, and process coding in the broad sense described by Saldaña (2013). Descriptive codes summarized what a segment was about, in vivo codes preserved especially vivid participant language, and process-oriented labels captured actions such as weighing, negotiating, aligning, revising, and responding. Yellow was used for stakeholder identification, blue for interpretation and prioritization, and green for integration and action. Pink margin tags flagged accountability pressures connected to Burke's framework, and purple margin tags flagged cultural and mission cues connected to Schein's framework. Especially vivid participant phrasing, in vivo language, and decision-oriented verbs were underlined or circled so that nuance was not lost when excerpts were later collated.

Table 3.1

Working Hand-Coding Color System

Color / marking	Primary analytic use	Illustrative focus
Yellow highlight	RQ1: Stakeholder identification	Listening sessions, faculty input, student demand, employer feedback, advisory councils, environmental scanning
Blue highlight	RQ2: Interpretation and prioritization	Mission fit, student success, feasibility, social value, competing priorities, interpretation
Green highlight	RQ3: Integration and action	Program incubator work, curriculum workflow, scheduling, redesign, approval, revision, sunset decisions

Color / marking	Primary analytic use	Illustrative focus
Pink margin tags	Accountability pressures	Market, political, and academic accountability indicators tied to Burke's framework
Purple margin tags	Culture and mission cues	Artifacts, espoused values, underlying assumptions, culture of care, collaboration, community accountability

The color system organized first-cycle coding without reducing excerpts to a single meaning. A passage could receive more than one color or margin tag when it simultaneously addressed, for example, stakeholder identification, accountability pressure, and cultural framing. This inclusive coding approach reflected Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance that one excerpt could legitimately fit multiple codes or candidate themes.

After coding each transcript or document, the researcher transferred highlighted excerpts into a hand-built analytic matrix. Each entry in the matrix recorded the participant or document source, page reference, excerpt, initial code, color category, conceptual link, and a short memo explaining why the segment mattered. Alongside the matrix, the researcher maintained analytic memos that elaborated why excerpts mattered, how codes were shifting, and which relationships required further testing. This memoing practice reflected Saldaña's (2013) position that memos help generate categories, questions, and analytic direction rather than functioning as an afterthought. The transfer step made it possible to collate all excerpts connected to a code, compare the same code across participants and data sources, and notice where a code was becoming too broad, too narrow, or conceptually unstable.

Second-Cycle Coding, Codebook Revision, and Theme Development

Second-cycle coding focused on pattern development. Consistent with Saldaña's (2013) description of second-cycle methods, this phase moved the analysis from a large set of first-cycle

labels toward more conceptually meaningful pattern-level categories. Here the researcher reviewed the full set of first-cycle codes, looked for overlap and distinction, and grouped related codes into broader categories. Some codes remained strong and traveled forward; some were merged; some were split; and others were discarded because they did not help explain the case. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that this phase is iterative and recursive. The researcher moved repeatedly between the full data set, the collated coded extracts, and the developing thematic structure until the categories became coherent and analytically useful.

The working codebook remained provisional rather than fixed. Following Saldaña (2013), codebook entries tracked the code name, a concise definition, inclusion parameters, and an illustrative exemplar so that analytic boundaries remained visible as the analysis progressed. After each round of review, code names, definitions, boundaries, and inclusion rules were revised to better reflect the data. When a new code was added or an existing code changed meaning, earlier transcripts and documents were revisited so they could be recoded consistently. This return to previously coded material was a central feature of the analytic process, not a sign of error. It allowed the researcher to test whether a code really traveled across sources and whether the developing structure still fit the case as a whole.

A condensed codebook excerpt appears here to make the analytic logic visible, whereas the full working codebook remained an evolving research tool rather than a static product. Saldaña (2013) notes that longer documents such as dissertations can include fuller descriptions of coding procedures and selected tables or figures that make the analytic process transparent. Accordingly, this chapter presents the logic of the codebook, the iterative revision process, and sample entries.

Table 3.2*Condensed Excerpt From the Evolving Working Codebook*

Provisional code	Working definition	Typical evidence	Likely conceptual link
Layered stakeholder input	Processes used to surface stakeholder interests across formal and informal channels	Advisory councils, listening sessions, advising feedback, employer outreach	Stakeholder theory / RQ1
Mission as decision filter	Use of mission, student success, and community responsibility to judge priorities	Student-centered language, transfer mobility, family-sustaining wage framing	RQ2 / Schein
Accountability weight	References to policy, funding, transfer requirements, or external reporting that elevate some interests over others	Low-enrollment rules, financial-aid requirements, performance metrics	Burke
Workforce-transfer balance	Efforts to balance labor-market responsiveness with liberal arts, transfer, and comprehensive mission commitments	Stackable credentials, general education, university partnerships	RQ2-RQ3
Cross-functional integration	Structures through which competing interests are translated into action	Program incubator, curriculum workflow, program review, scheduling decisions	RQ3 / explanation building

Theme development proceeded through sorting, clustering, and mapping. The researcher used handwritten lists, page-level summaries, analytic matrices, and simple visual maps similar to Saldaña's (2013) code mapping and landscaping techniques to test how codes related to one another. Candidate themes were then reviewed at two levels: first against the collated extracts assigned to that theme, and then against the entire data set. This review helped ensure that each theme was internally coherent, clearly distinguishable from other themes, and still grounded in the full case rather than in a small set of vivid quotations. Theme prevalence was judged by explanatory value and patterning across the case, not by frequency counts alone.

Analytic Propositions

The explanatory case analysis was guided by several analytic propositions developed from the literature, the stakeholder-theory lens, and the conceptual frameworks. These

propositions did not function as rigid hypotheses. Instead, they provided provisional expectations that helped focus explanation building and sharpened attention to rival interpretations:

- Leaders interpreted stakeholder interests through overlapping accountability demands, especially market, political, and academic pressures.
- Organizational culture mediated how leaders interpreted and responded to stakeholder demands by shaping what felt legitimate, urgent, and mission consistent.
- Stakeholder interests were not addressed in isolation; they were interpreted, negotiated, and integrated through cross-functional decision processes.
- External accountability pressures often carried disproportionate weight, but mission and culture shaped how those pressures were translated into instructional action.

Explanation Building and Cross-Source Interpretation

Once themes were sufficiently stable, the researcher used Yin's (2018) explanation-building strategy to move from themes to an explanatory case account. Explanation building involved iteratively asking how the themes related to each other and how stakeholder interests moved from identification to interpretation to integration. Chapter 4 reports the resulting themes and evidence; Chapter 5 interprets those findings in relation to the research questions, frameworks, literature, and implications for practice.

Interview data, observation evidence, and documents were compared continuously during this stage. Patterns that appeared in one source were checked against the others. Cases of tension, contradiction, or partial fit were retained rather than smoothed away because they clarified how leadership judgment operated under constraint. The resulting explanation remained grounded in the case while also engaging the broader literature on stakeholder theory, accountability, and organizational culture.

Ensuring Analytic Rigor

Several strategies strengthened analytic rigor. First, triangulation was built into the design using interviews, observation, and documents. Second, the researcher maintained a transparent audit trail that included transcript checks, color-coded annotated texts, analytic matrices, codebook revisions, and memos. Third, transcripts were checked against audio as needed for accuracy, and quoted excerpts were reviewed for accuracy, context, and fit with the surrounding interpretation. Fourth, member checking was conducted by sending the excerpts and related interpretations used in the findings to all nine interviewees and giving them one week to respond. This process gave participants the opportunity to confirm accuracy, clarify context, or raise concerns before the findings were finalized.

The analysis also reflects Braun and Clarke's warning against treating themes as if they simply emerge on their own. The researcher was positioned as analytically active by identifying patterns, testing boundaries, revising codes, constructing themes through sustained engagement with the data, and checking those themes against rival interpretations and contradictory evidence. The findings chapter uses verbatim quotations, paraphrasing to preserve anonymity, and document-based evidence to show the connection between claims and data.

Alignment Table

The alignment table appears in Appendix A.

Limitations

Transferability

The study offered analytic and transferable insights that may be useful to similar community college contexts, but its conclusions remained grounded in one institution. Thick

description and transparency about the case context support readers in judging whether the findings are transferable to their own settings.

Participant and Institutional Variability

The participant sample privileged leadership perspectives and reflected the institutional roles available and willing to participate. Leadership accounts provided rich insight into the decision environment, but they were shaped by role, responsibility, and vantage point. Institutional decision-making was also time-sensitive; priorities could shift with leadership transitions, policy changes, enrollment patterns, or funding conditions.

Access and Scope

The study depended on available access to institutional actors, observation opportunities, and documents. Faculty, students, employers, and community partners appeared primarily through the accounts of leaders and through documentary evidence rather than as separately interviewed participant groups. As with all case study research, interpretation was shaped by the researcher's analytic judgment. The iterative coding process, audit trail, and triangulation were used to reduce but not eliminate that interpretive responsibility.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed institutional review requirements and standard qualitative research protections for informed consent, confidentiality, secure data storage, and transparent reporting. Because the study examined leadership decision-making in a professional setting, ethical attention extended beyond basic consent procedures to include reputational risk, contextual confidentiality, and careful treatment of institutional detail.

Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

Participants received information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the approximate interview length, the use of audio recording, and their right to decline questions or withdraw. Consent was obtained before each interview began. These procedures were designed to preserve participant autonomy and to ensure that participation remained informed and voluntary throughout the study.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Interview recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and analytic files were stored securely, and identifying details were limited in the write-up through participant labels and the institutional pseudonym Horizon Community College rather than personal or institutional names. Data will be secured for five years after completion of the study and then deleted or destroyed in accordance with IRB expectations. Documents were treated carefully to avoid revealing institutional identity through unique or easily searchable details. Member checking was conducted by sending the excerpts and interpretations used in the findings to all nine interviewees and giving them one week to respond with corrections, clarifications, or concerns.

Institutional Permissions and Gatekeepers

Institutional permission was secured before recruitment began, and communication with gatekeepers focused on access rather than on influencing participant responses. Once recruitment was underway, participants decided independently whether to participate. This distinction helped reduce perceived pressure and supported a more ethically grounded relationship between institutional access and individual consent.

Professional and Contextual Risk

Because participants held visible leadership roles, confidentiality had to account for professional and contextual risk in addition to identity protection. The dissertation therefore reports findings at a level of detail that preserves analytic usefulness without exposing participants unnecessarily through highly specific operational details. Attention to context remained important, but contextual description was balanced against the obligation to avoid avoidable harm.

Commitment to Ethical Standards

The study adhered to Institutional Review Board expectations and to widely accepted standards for ethical qualitative research. Ethical practice was treated as an ongoing responsibility rather than a one-time approval step, and that responsibility continued through data handling, analysis, interpretation, and writing.

Study Quality

Study quality was supported through methodological coherence, triangulation, transparency, and analytic depth. The topic was worthy because it addressed a central leadership problem in community colleges: how to make instructional decisions amid multiple stakeholder demands and competing accountability pressures. The study sought rich rigor by using multiple data sources and a clearly described analytic process. Sincerity was supported through memo writing and reflexive attention to the researcher's role in interpretation.

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation, transcript checking, a visible audit trail, protocol alignment review, member checking of used excerpts and interpretations, and attention to contradictory evidence. For member checking, all nine interviewees received the excerpts and related interpretations used in the findings and had one week to respond. This

process supported credibility by giving participants an opportunity to confirm accuracy, clarify context, or raise concerns before the findings were finalized. Resonance was pursued through thick description and the use of verbatim quotations in the findings chapter. Significant contribution lay in offering a more detailed explanation of how leaders navigated stakeholder interests in instructional program decisions.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology for a qualitative single-case study of instructional program decision-making at Horizon Community College, a pseudonym for an anonymized public community college. The study used purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviews, an on-site observation memo, and document analysis to build a triangulated case. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and incorporated Saldaña's (2013) emphasis on first-cycle and second-cycle coding, analytic memo writing, manual code mapping, and iterative codebook revision, while Yin's (2018) explanation-building strategy guided the move from themes to an explanatory account of the case. The chapter also addressed limitations, ethics, and study quality so that the findings presented in Chapter 4 were clearly grounded in a transparent and rigorous methodology.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative case study examining how community college leaders identify, interpret, and integrate internal and external stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions. Findings are drawn from nine semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders, on-site observations, and the review of institutional documents.

Findings are presented as themes that describe recurring patterns in participant accounts relevant to the study's purpose and research questions. Themes were developed through an iterative thematic analysis process following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, as described in Chapter 3. In keeping with a thematic reporting approach, each theme is supported through direct excerpts from participant interviews and, where relevant, field notes and institutional documents. The intent in this chapter is to report what participants described and what was observed.

The chapter begins with a brief description of participants and data sources, followed by an overview of the five themes. The chapter closes with a short summary.

Participant and Institutional Context

Participants represented a range of leadership positions connected to instructional program decision-making, including the college president, vice presidents, deans, and faculty governance leadership. Across roles, participants described decision-making as a shared responsibility distributed across academic units, student services, and administrative functions. Table 4.1 summarizes participants' roles and the program decision-making focus described in each interview.

Table 4.1*Participants, Roles, and Described Decision-Making Focus*

Participant	Role	Primary decision-making focus described
P01	Vice President for Administrative Services and Treasurer (CFO)	Budget, funding, resource allocation, employer-responsive initiatives, policy compliance
P02	Dean overseeing applied and technical academic areas	Applied/workforce programs, industry partnerships, program relevance, academic credit and mobility
P03	Dean of Arts and Humanities; Associate Provost for university partnerships	Transfer pathways, curriculum review, partnership programming, program review and sunseting
P04	Mathematics faculty member; Interim division dean (science and mathematics)	Course scheduling, general education and support courses, curriculum workflow, compliance
P05	Vice President with Institutional Research background	Data systems, dashboards, outcomes reporting, strategic investment planning, pathway design
P06	Faculty senate leader	Shared governance, faculty voice, program closure communication, responding to external mandates
P07	Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Services	Student pathways, labor market alignment, program incubator review process, environmental scanning
P08	Dean of Teaching and Learning Support	Academic support services; consultation with academic divisions during course and program planning; faculty and student support; assessment and continuous improvement of learning support operations
P09	College President	Mission/vision alignment; academic quality expectations; integrated planning and cross-functional decision-making

In addition to interview data, the study incorporated researcher-generated on-site observation memos and analysis of institutional documents (e.g., college web pages, accreditation materials, outcomes reports, program publications, and institutional communications). These sources, summarized in Table 4.2, were used to contextualize and triangulate participant accounts throughout the themes.

Table 4.2*Non-Interview Data Sources and Decision-Making Relevance*

Source	Type	Decision-making relevance described in findings
On-site observation memos (site visits)	Observation	Visible practices of student engagement, campus culture, and service orientation (e.g., student center activities and career-readiness supports).
College public “About” page	Public webpage	Mission framing; student-centered language; transfer/workforce commitments; affordability and wraparound support messaging.
College public “Board of Trustees” page and governance materials	Public webpage/governance materials	Formal governance structures, public accountability mechanisms, and board oversight of institutional direction.
College Completion Agenda webpage (culture of care; student support services)	Public webpage	Institutional articulation of a “Culture of Care”; operationalization of student-centered values through wraparound support structures and barrier-reduction strategies.
Accreditation self-study and evidence materials	Accreditation document	Planning processes (e.g., multi-year strategic visioning initiative); student support services; general education/transfer frameworks; program review and accountability structures.
Accreditation review criterion summaries (selected criteria)	Accreditation document	External expectations for integrity, teaching/learning quality, assessment, and integrated planning that shape program decisions.
Graduation, transfer, and job placement rates report	Public outcomes report	Examples of publicly reported metrics used in accountability, benchmarking, and institutional communication about outcomes.
Program and recruitment publications (e.g., short-term credential materials; institutional communications)	Public documents	Public descriptions of workforce pathways, transfer initiatives, and industry partnerships that complement participant accounts.

To protect the case institution’s identity, institutional documents are described generically rather than by official title, URL, or proper noun. These documents were treated as case-study data from the document-analysis database, not as publicly cited sources in the reference list.

Taken together, these non-interview sources provided additional evidence of the institution's public mission framing, community engagement, employer-partnership practices, and accountability structures. Deidentified institutional materials also portrayed the college as a community convener that uses environmental scanning, employer advisory committees, and recurring labor-market review to inform program development.

Overview of Themes

Across five themes, participants described decisions as anchored in mission and a culture of care; shaped through layered engagement structures; interpreted through data use and accountability mandates; balanced between workforce responsiveness and broader educational commitments; and enacted through iterative, collaborative processes within resource constraints.

Although participants repeatedly described a caring and collaborative campus, the data were not uniformly harmonious. Faculty governance accounts, low-enrolled program decisions, uneven faculty engagement across divisions, and politically sensitive curriculum changes showed that collaboration operated within clear limits. These discordant data are reported because they reveal where culture, governance, and stakeholder voice met policy authority, resource constraints, and unequal influence.

An interpretive thread also ran across the themes: leaders connected ambiguous or competing signals to mission, accountability, and culture before translating them into program action. This chapter reports that evidence descriptively, while Chapter 5 discusses the interpretive significance of the pattern.

Theme 1: Mission and a Student-Centered Culture Anchored Decision-Making

This theme describes how participants connected the college's responsibility to local needs with a student-centered culture of care. In their accounts, responsiveness to community

and employer needs was not separate from student-centeredness; both were treated as expressions of the institution's mission.

Across interviews, participants emphasized the community college mission as both externally responsive and internally student-centered. Participants described the college as historically grounded in access, workforce preparation, transfer opportunity, and community development, and they connected those obligations to decisions about which instructional programs to launch, revise, preserve, or discontinue.

The college was founded in the 1960s because local residents wanted access to higher education without relocating. At the same time, regional employers sought middle-skill professionals. Our mission, to support social mobility and meet workforce needs, has remained consistent. (P07)

Participants described instructional program decisions as occurring within a public accountability environment shaped by community expectations and local public investment. P07 noted, "Residents follow our work closely, attend public board meetings, and expect clear outcomes. That accountability influences our culture" (P07). P01 similarly described local public investment as increasing expectations that instructional offerings remain aligned with community needs (P01; paraphrased for confidentiality).

Leaders also described increasing policy oversight and public attention, including recent state-level requirements emphasizing instructional transparency and monitoring. P01 noted that these requirements influenced instructional planning and program decisions (P01; paraphrased for confidentiality).

Institutional communications and documents reinforced participants' descriptions of a broad community college mission. For example, the institution's public "About" page described

a student-centered mission focused on supporting students' personal, academic, and career goals and highlighted both workforce preparation and transfer pathways supported by advising and wraparound services.

Participants consistently framed instructional program decisions as rooted in a student-centered mission and an institutional culture that emphasized care, responsiveness, and community connection. This framing linked the local public mission to the day-to-day question of whether programs were accessible, navigable, and meaningful for students.

Document analysis further clarified how student-centeredness was institutionally defined and enacted. In student-completion materials, the college described a culture-of-care approach that treated students' lived experiences as strengths and emphasized removing barriers, ensuring access to resources, and promoting engagement through student-centered approaches.

This framing positions a culture of care as an operational expression of the college's student-centered mission rather than an informal or emergent construct. Public descriptions of support services reinforce this orientation by highlighting wraparound structures such as a centralized advocacy and resource center, which coordinates assistance related to basic needs, mental health, transportation, housing insecurity, and career preparation. Together, these materials suggest that participant references to a culture of care align with an institutionally articulated value that shapes how student-centered decision-making is understood and enacted.

Accreditation materials similarly emphasized student-centered supports. In the accreditation self-study materials, the college described serving many students who work while enrolled and who balance multiple responsibilities, and it described support structures such as tutoring, accessibility services, and advocacy and resource services intended to reduce academic, financial, and personal barriers to completion.

P01 described the institution's mission orientation as centered on meeting students where they are and supporting students with multiple responsibilities: "As a community college, we are heavily connected to community and workforce needs. We meet students where they are and support them as much as possible. Many students are working adults with family obligations" (P01).

P08, who oversaw multiple teaching and learning support services, similarly emphasized that decision-making was grounded in a student-centered service orientation, even when the work was not directly student-facing: "So, at a high level, my work doesn't often involve direct student contact, but everything we do is ultimately in service of students" (P08).

The mission was described as comprehensive rather than singularly workforce driven. P01 noted that leaders considered incentives and outcomes, but maintained responsibility for the broader educational role of the college: "We must offer a full array of programs, including those that may not generate revenue but are essential to a comprehensive education... Our job is to maintain a strong overall portfolio that balances financial realities with educational mission" (P01).

Several participants used the phrase "culture of care" to describe how the student-centered mission was enacted in everyday decision-making and interactions. P04 characterized the institution as collaborative and relational, stating, "It is a culture of care. Decisions are made collaboratively through multiple shared-governance structures... People here genuinely care about the work and about each other" (P04). P02 likewise described decision-making as values-based and student-centered: "We emphasize a culture of care. Decision-making focuses on helping students succeed and balancing state policy, employer needs, and internal values" (P02).

Participants also described cultural norms that supported collaboration and respectful problem-solving. In describing day-to-day leadership expectations, P01 listed values that were viewed as essential for decision-making in a complex environment: “Shared governance, mutual gains, respect, humility, and collaboration. Leaders focus on problems, not personalities. Many employees were students here, so they understand the college’s mission personally” (P01).

At the executive level, P09 similarly described mission clarity as the anchor for instructional decision-making. P09 defined the president’s role as ensuring ongoing alignment across mission, vision, and strategy and as serving as a steward of institutional culture. While P09 did not describe a separate or formal process for revisiting institutional values, values such as care, collaboration, and shared responsibility were described as embedded in executive decision-making and referenced when navigating difficult decisions and maintaining trust, particularly during periods of disruption (P09).

The on-site observation reinforced participants’ descriptions of visible practices of care and belonging. The observation memo documented an event that linked student engagement, professional preparation, and employee participation:

During the visit, the institution hosted a student fashion show connected to a free professional clothing closet. Employees, including security staff, participated by walking the runway. Students of diverse body types, genders, and racial/ethnic backgrounds modeled outfits. The event was lighthearted, energetic, and supportive. Staff cheered for students and each other. The crowd appeared comfortable, engaged, and celebratory. (Observation Memo, 11/12/2025)

Beyond the fashion show, the observation memo described the student center as a modern, high-traffic space with students studying, socializing, and accessing services. The memo

noted staff moving comfortably through the space and interacting with students in a relaxed and open manner, contributing to a visible sense of approachability and service orientation (Observation Memo, 11/12/2025).

At the same time, participants did not describe mission and culture as eliminating tension. Several accounts showed limits to collaboration when state mandates, funding rules, resource constraints, or final administrative authority narrowed the range of available choices. These disconnects suggest that the culture of care operated as an interpretive and relational anchor, but not as a guarantee that all stakeholder preferences could be reconciled.

Taken together, these accounts showed that leaders repeatedly referenced mission and culture when describing how they evaluated stakeholder interests, explained difficult decisions, and considered program change. Participants described returning to mission language when they needed to explain difficult decisions, prioritize among competing requests, or evaluate whether a proposed program change fit the institution's identity.

Theme 2: Stakeholder Interests Were Identified Through Layered Engagement Structures

Participants described identifying stakeholder interests as an active process that occurred through structures operating at multiple levels of the institution and its external environment. In this study, “layered” refers not simply to the presence of many engagement points, but to a tiered structure in which different mechanisms served distinct functions, ranging from localized, operational input to institution-wide deliberation and external advisory influence. Leaders reported using shared governance groups, routine operational collaboration, cross-functional teams, community listening sessions, advisory models, and partnership networks to surface and clarify stakeholder priorities.

Internal Governance and Operational Collaboration

Internal stakeholder interests were most frequently identified through formal academic governance and routine operational collaboration. P04 explained that decisions about curriculum were not made in isolation and were informed by those closest to instruction and student progression:

Sometimes faculty suggest prerequisite changes; sometimes Enrollment Services identifies issues affecting student progression. I never make curriculum decisions alone, I consult faculty who teach the course, and with their agreement, we move forward. Department chairs in math, chemistry, physics, and biology also play important roles. (P04)

P03 described similar internal consultation across academic and student support groups: “We consult with faculty about curriculum, student demand, and new course ideas” (P03). P03 also described the role of employer-facing conversations, stating, “Externally, we use regional labor market data and collaborate with local employers and nonprofits” (P03).

P08 similarly emphasized that many stakeholder interests are identified through routine, day-to-day collaboration between academic divisions and learning support units.

Most of my work is with the academic divisions, working with faculty and across the college. I don’t interact with students directly as much as I’d like, but the units that report to me have a lot of student interaction at the operational level. (P08)

P08 described this collaboration as structured rather than informal, particularly in tutoring and library services where faculty and academic divisions routinely shaped support practices.

All five units interact heavily with the academic divisions, the deanery, and faculty. For example, with tutoring, we’re very intentional about how we support

academic programs. Each division has a full-time faculty member assigned to work with our tutoring coordinator or manager. They help ensure we're hiring appropriate tutors who can support the curriculum, and they help with training, development, and onboarding so tutors understand how courses are taught, what approaches faculty use, and what assignments look like. (P08)

Faculty governance was described as a core channel for identifying faculty interests, though participants emphasized the advisory nature of governance structures. P06 stated, "I would describe the senate's role as advisory... That's the official level of commitment to shared governance" (P06). P06 further noted that, even within a shared governance framework, formal decision authority remained with administration, explaining that "administration is open to faculty input, but final authority rests there" (P06).

Governance materials (e.g., descriptions of the governing board structure and meeting schedules) described formal accountability channels, including regularly scheduled board meetings open to the public. These structures provided additional context for participants' descriptions of stakeholder engagement and decision authority.

Institution-Wide Planning and Community Listening

Participants described additional mechanisms for identifying internal and community priorities through broader institutional planning. P01 described a recent strategic visioning process that incorporated listening sessions with employees, students, and community partners and framed the work as an opportunity to reaffirm mission and institutional values while setting future priorities (P01; paraphrased for confidentiality).

Document review provided additional detail about the institution's strategic visioning effort. Accreditation materials described a multi-phase strategic planning process that included

environmental scanning, community listening sessions, and structured work sessions involving cross-sector participants. These documents emphasized broad participation from students, employees, employers, and community members in setting priorities and refining institutional direction. External stakeholder interests were identified through employer relationships, community partnerships, and labor market analysis. P02 described using a structured approach that blended multiple sources of evidence:

P09 described drawing on multiple channels to interpret stakeholder interests, including faculty governance, advisory councils, employer partnerships, labor market data, and internal leadership teams. While emphasizing the importance of listening, P09 also noted the need to ensure that no single stakeholder group dominated decision-making (P09).

External and Employer Engagement

We use regional economic development data, labor market research, structured industry advisory models, work-based learning feedback, and communication from our college's workforce and partnership staff. We use a structured advisory model where industry helps rank needed knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Embedded work-based learning also creates continuous feedback loops from employers and students. (P02)

Participants described employer engagement as both formal and ongoing. P02 explained that workforce programming included partnerships and collaborations “with industry offering apprenticeships or employee upskilling,” and that leaders tried to “attach academic credit wherever possible” to support student mobility (P02). P05 likewise described employer engagement across sectors: “We work with regional employers in sectors like manufacturing, technology, healthcare, and others” (P05). While described here in sectoral terms, participants

elsewhere indicated that workforce engagement occurred within a broader policy and accountability environment influencing institutional priorities.

Institutional communications and documents also emphasized the extent of external engagement. For example, the college's public "About" page highlighted partnerships with local employers and the availability of industry-recognized credentials, while accreditation materials described structured partnerships and pathways as key mechanisms through which new students enter the institution. These descriptions reinforced participant accounts of ongoing employer and community input into program development and review. Additional deidentified institutional materials similarly described employer advisory committees, work-based learning feedback loops, and recurring program evaluations that incorporated employer, alumni, salary, and labor-market data to assess program relevance. These relationships also operated within a broader political environment in which local taxpayer accountability, state workforce and transparency mandates, and national attention to talent pipelines influenced the kinds of stakeholder priorities leaders were expected to hear and respond to.

Cross-Functional Review, Advising, and Environmental Scanning

Participants also highlighted cross-functional review structures that combined multiple stakeholder perspectives. P07 described a structured pathway for reviewing new program ideas that incorporated academic, student services, and outcomes considerations:

I'm also involved when we develop new programs through a structured "program incubator" process. When new program ideas come from faculty or community partners, we analyze factors such as financial-aid eligibility, student access, labor-market outcomes, and overlap with existing programs. A cross-functional team contributes to that preliminary design phase. (P07)

P08 also referenced participating in the program incubator structure and clarified that this work occurred through a cross-functional group rather than through the teaching and learning support division alone. In that setting, program ideas were discussed in relation to community need, support implications, and the kinds of academic and course-planning supports that might be needed for faculty and students.

I'm part of a cross-functional "program incubator" group. When faculty or a team of faculty want to launch a new program or make a major revision to an existing one, they come to this group. We talk through what they want to change, how it might impact the local community, and what need they're trying to address. That includes budget analysis, data analysis, and identifying additional resources required. (P08)

Several participants identified enrollment, advising, and student services as important sources of information about student needs and program functioning. P07 explained that advisors "identify bottlenecks, capacity limits, and unmet demand" by observing patterns in student progression (P07). This type of information was described as especially useful for identifying stakeholder interests that were not always visible in institutional reports, such as when students experienced scheduling barriers or when demand exceeded instructional capacity.

Finally, participants described environmental scanning and external briefings as methods of anticipating stakeholder needs and tracking changes in the regional economy. P07 stated, "We put heavy emphasis on environmental scanning... Many of our committees begin with briefings on emerging trends, literature, and national or regional analyses" (P07). In describing how these briefings were used, P07 provided an example: "Changes in information-technology jobs

prompted us to bring in our regional economic-development partner... That helped us reassess our IT programs” (P07).

Theme 3: Data and Accountability Requirements Shaped How Leaders Interpreted Priorities

Participants emphasized that interpretation of stakeholder interests occurred within an accountability environment shaped by policy mandates, funding formulas, transfer requirements, and reporting expectations. Participants framed this environment as not only technical but also political, linking instructional decisions to local taxpayer expectations, state legislative mandates, and broader national scrutiny of higher education outcomes and workforce alignment. While participants primarily described responding to externally established policies, several also referenced internal policy development processes, such as curriculum frameworks, program review criteria, and implementation guidelines, as mechanisms through which institutional values and external requirements were translated into instructional practice. Leaders described using data infrastructure and standardized metrics to translate stakeholder input into program priorities and to justify decisions to internal and external audiences.

Document analysis provided additional examples of the accountability context described by participants. Institutional outcome summaries reported indicators such as retention, completion, transfer, and job placement, reflecting the kinds of measures leaders referenced when discussing performance-based funding and external reporting.

Accreditation materials also described formal data and assessment infrastructure. For example, accreditation materials referenced dashboards used for program review and for monitoring general education outcomes, reinforcing participant descriptions of standardized reporting and evidence-based justification for program decisions.

Participants across administrative roles referenced the development and use of data systems that tracked student progress, completion, and employment outcomes. P05 explained how institutional research functions supported planning and accountability:

In this institution, IR led the development of a data warehouse in collaboration with IT. We also co-chaired enrollment initiatives and built interactive data dashboards. Assessment work is a major component as well. (P05)

P05 described accountability work as extending beyond internal assessment to external reporting and accreditation preparation: “IR manages the federal and state reporting cycles... and preparation for accreditation visits. We also manage performance-based funding metrics and employment outcome data” (P05).

P09 similarly referenced external pressures, including state policy, legislative oversight, accreditation expectations, and performance-based funding, as factors that influence instructional decisions. However, P09 emphasized that these external demands did not replace mission; instead, accreditation reinforced quality standards, and performance metrics were used to guide improvement rather than dictate institutional identity (P09).

Leaders described outcomes as increasingly tied to funding and institutional planning. P05 stated, “Funding here is increasingly tied to student and employment outcomes. We track median earnings, persistence, completion, and employment using wage data. Those metrics drive reporting and guide financial planning” (P05). P05 also connected outcome measures to resource planning: “A portion of our funding formula is directly tied to outcomes and completion factors. Having strong data allows us to plan more intentionally” (P05).

For example, the college's graduation, transfer, and job placement reporting included cohort-based rates for retention and completion, illustrating how outcomes are presented to external audiences and used internally for benchmarking and planning.

Leaders also described using data generated through stakeholder engagement, meaning information produced through structured surveys, participation patterns, faculty interactions, advising feedback, and routine service conversations. These data supported accountability and operational decision-making within instructional support services. P08 explained that within the teaching and learning support division, particularly the Teaching and Learning Center and e-learning, faculty feedback was systematically collected and analyzed to guide service adjustments:

From the support side, a lot of my decision-making is driven by ongoing conversations with divisions and by our own analysis of the services we provide. We use multiple sources of information. For the Teaching and Learning Center, in collaboration with e-learning, we regularly survey faculty, usually once a year, sometimes twice, depending on the survey load for that year. We ask where they want to develop and where they need assistance in their professional growth.

(P08)

P08 described combining structured survey data with informal feedback gathered through routine interactions with faculty.

We also gather anecdotal feedback from our interactions; when faculty visit our spaces, when we work one-on-one with them, when they attend workshops. We combine survey data, participation rates, and qualitative feedback to identify areas where we need to add programming or change our approach. (P08)

This evidence was described as a basis for iterative refinement of services and professional development offerings.

That's an example of how we look at data and participation patterns to adjust what we offer. We try something, assess whether it's working, and then either pivot or scale. (P08)

In tutoring services, P08 similarly described aligning decisions about coverage and scheduling with course patterns while acknowledging limits on staff and available hours.

The same decision-making logic applies to tutoring. We look at the course schedule to determine how and when we can offer tutoring. We don't have the staff or hours to cover every discipline every day, so we try to be intentional. If we see, for instance, that a lot of business classes end at 3:00 p.m. on Mondays, we might schedule tutoring from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. to catch students right after class. (P08)

When students requested additional virtual tutoring options, P08 described seeking external capacity to meet demand.

We also heard from students that they wanted more virtual tutoring. We didn't have the capacity to expand that internally, so we identified and vetted an external vendor to extend our virtual tutoring coverage. Again, that decision was driven by usage data and student feedback. (P08)

Policy compliance was described as a regular condition of decision-making, particularly when external policy changes introduced new requirements affecting instructional transparency and curriculum expectations. P04 described responding to these requirements by adopting standardized instructional tools within the learning management system, such as common course

templates and required syllabus elements, and implementing other mandated changes, noting that faculty concerns during policy development shifted toward implementation once compliance became mandatory (P04; paraphrased for confidentiality).

P01 described recent increases in policy oversight and transparency expectations as affecting instructional planning and program decisions and noted that compliance was required (P01; paraphrased for confidentiality).

P03 also described the policy environment as producing periodic “churn,” particularly for curriculum elements perceived as politically sensitive (e.g., requirements related to diversity, equity, and inclusion) and noted that leaders needed to monitor evolving expectations while maintaining transfer and quality standards (P03; paraphrased for confidentiality).

Leaders also described aligning curriculum processes with external academic frameworks. P04 described a formal workflow and the role of transfer requirements: “Curriculum changes go through a formal workflow in our curriculum management system... Because we are a transfer-focused institution, we work with the statewide transfer framework to ensure courses meet required learning outcomes” (P04). This transfer alignment was described as an important mechanism for maintaining liberal arts and general education integrity while expanding workforce-responsive programming, ensuring that applied and technical offerings did not displace transfer pathways or shared learning outcomes.

In the accreditation self-study materials, the college also described general education and transfer alignment expectations (e.g., statewide transfer frameworks and published general education outcomes), providing additional rationale for the curriculum workflow and compliance practices described by participants. Participants noted that these transfer expectations functioned as important guardrails in decision-making by protecting portability for students and helping

ensure that the expansion of workforce-responsive programming did not displace liberal arts and general education commitments.

Participants described accountability mandates as shaping program viability, particularly when state-defined metrics triggered program review or discontinuation. P06 described a state law requiring the removal of “low-enrolled” programs and noted that two programs, one in agriculture and one in teacher education, were flagged (P06):

“We are dealing with that now. A state law required us to remove low-enrolled programs, and it defined what ‘low-enrolled’ means. Two programs in particular were flagged: an agriculture program and a teacher education program. Many of us wanted to keep them open.” (P06)

P06 described initial efforts to seek waivers for mission-consistent programs and provided an example of how program value was framed beyond enrollment: “The agriculture program maintains natural habitat on campus that students use to study the local ecosystem... It’s part of our educational and community mission. We were going to apply for waivers for both programs, but we were instructed not to apply for waivers.” (P06)

P06 noted that although the stand-alone programs were targeted for removal, leaders attempted to preserve related coursework and learning opportunities to maintain elements of the programs’ educational and community mission (P06; paraphrased for confidentiality).

Participants noted that dominant accountability metrics did not always reflect community perceptions of value. P06 described a misalignment between policy definitions of success (e.g., emphasizing high-paying jobs and large numbers of graduates) and the social importance of certain fields (P06):

I felt their value wasn't captured by the metrics... Teaching, for example, is not high paying but is socially important. The metrics reward big numbers in high-paying jobs. That means producing many insurance salespeople counts as more of a success than preparing early childhood educators. (P06)

Transfer and financial-aid requirements also shaped how leaders interpreted stakeholder needs related to affordability, mobility, and legitimacy of coursework. P03 stated, "Courses must be approved for statewide transfer to qualify for financial aid, which affects curriculum decisions" (P03).

Finally, leaders described accountability mandates as requiring careful interpretation and communication to reduce misunderstanding and avoid unnecessary over-compliance. P06 described a new externally imposed instructional requirement related to emerging technologies and emphasized that faculty retained latitude to engage critically with the topic (P06):

"There is a new requirement... that we have to teach about artificial intelligence... Popular interpretations frame it as a requirement to be an AI booster, but that's not what the law says. Faculty can engage critically with AI; a course focused on the problems and risks of AI would still meet the requirement. I want faculty to understand the nuance... I don't want our faculty to over comply." (P06)

P06 described emphasizing this flexibility in communication with faculty to prevent a chilling effect on academic inquiry (P06; paraphrased for confidentiality).

Theme 4: Leaders Balanced Workforce Responsiveness With Broader Educational Commitments

This theme describes how leaders balanced workforce responsiveness with broader educational commitments related to transfer, general education, and liberal arts.

Participants described instructional program decision-making as a balancing act between workforce responsiveness and a set of comprehensive educational commitments central to the community college mission. In this study, those commitments were primarily described as transfer education, general education and liberal arts coursework, and mission-consistent programs that supported student mobility and broader educational development, even when such programs were not always aligned with dominant outcome metrics.

Workforce responsiveness was frequently described as central to institutional identity, with employer input serving as a primary catalyst for program creation and adaptation. P01 provided an example of employer-driven development and the scale of external engagement involved.

Program materials reinforced this workforce emphasis. For example, descriptions of accelerated, short-term credentials framed these options as preparation for in-demand careers that could be completed in a compressed timeframe, and institutional publications highlighted employer partnerships and career-connected learning opportunities. P01 described the development of an applied bachelor's program driven by substantial employer demand and industry engagement, as well as the creation of a short-term workforce credential developed in partnership with a major employer to address immediate labor needs (P01; paraphrased for confidentiality).

Participants described workforce alignment as extending beyond program creation to continuing partnership and experiential learning opportunities. P02 described workforce programming as including "K–12 partnerships, dual enrollment initiatives," and collaborations "offering apprenticeships or employee upskilling" (P02). P05 described ongoing employer engagement and earn-and-learn models: "We work with regional employers in sectors like

manufacturing, technology, healthcare, and others. We also have earn-and-learn models that support short-term workforce pathways” (P05).

In parallel, participants emphasized that workforce alignment did not replace transfer and comprehensive educational commitments. P02 described intentionally connecting applied programming to academic credit and mobility: “We try to attach academic credit wherever possible. So, I live in both the academic and workforce spaces” (P02).

P03 described transfer partnerships as a response to regional access needs and an institutional strategy to increase bachelor’s degree completion. Because there was no local four-year institution, the college developed a partnership model that enabled students to complete upper-division coursework at the community college location.

Institutional descriptions also emphasized transfer pathways alongside workforce preparation. The college’s materials described general education courses designed for transfer and highlighted university partnership models that allow students to pursue bachelor’s and master’s degrees through partner institutions, reflecting the dual workforce-and-transfer orientation described in interviews. In participants’ accounts, transfer frameworks helped maintain balance by preserving portability, general education expectations, and broader academic options even as leaders expanded workforce-responsive programming.

This partnership model was created because our region does not have a local four-year institution. Originally, partner institutions taught their classes on our campus, but with the rise of online learning and changes after the pandemic, we now use hybrid formats, remote instruction from partner campuses, and specially equipped classrooms to support these offerings. (P03)

Participants described maintaining a broad portfolio of programs as essential to mission fulfillment. P01 stated that funding incentives were considered but not chased exclusively and highlighted the need to sustain programs that were not revenue-generating but were mission-consistent.

Accreditation materials further articulated general education commitments, including published purposes and outcomes intended to foster critical thinking, communication, and transferable skills. These descriptions provided additional context for participants' emphasis on comprehensive education alongside workforce responsiveness.

P03 described advocating for arts and humanities within workforce-oriented conversations and framed general education outcomes as employer-valued transferable skills: "Many of the employers we talk to value those skills, not just the technical aspects... It's kind of the arts and humanities foundation... those broad skills are applicable in any field." (P03)

P03 also described a humanities-to-career initiative that linked humanities coursework to career exploration and design thinking, reflecting efforts to integrate liberal arts commitments with workforce responsiveness (P03; paraphrased for confidentiality).

We consider funding incentives, but we do not chase them exclusively. We must offer a full array of programs, including those that may not generate revenue but are essential to a comprehensive education. Some programs, like business, generate revenue, others with expensive equipment, like engineering, cost more. Our job is to maintain a strong overall portfolio that balances financial realities with educational mission. (P01)

Leaders also described balancing in terms of desired student outcomes. P05 described an institutional expectation that students leave with a clear plan, whether that plan was workforce-

focused or transfer-focused: “Our philosophy is that every student should leave with a path toward a family-sustaining career or a clear transfer trajectory” (P05).

Faculty governance participants described the balancing work as particularly visible when external stakeholders emphasized narrow definitions of success. P06 described external emphasis on high-paying jobs and measurable completions as creating ongoing pressure and described the balancing challenge explicitly: “Initiatives coming from external stakeholders consistently emphasize high-paying jobs and measurable completion metrics. As I said earlier, I often feel I’m balancing community needs against external pressures rather than simply pursuing one directive” (P06).

Across interviews, leaders described balancing as both philosophical and operational. On the philosophical side, participants emphasized maintaining community orientation and supporting broad educational goals. On the operational side, leaders described balancing through program review processes, curriculum frameworks, and the deliberate design of stackable credentials and transfer pathways.

P09 described reviewing programs, including low-enrolled programs, through a mission-based lens rather than treating enrollment alone as determinative. When priorities conflicted, P09 emphasized disciplined choices shaped by resource constraints and the question of where investment could produce the greatest impact for students. P09 noted that not every program could be maintained in response to every stakeholder preference, reinforcing the balancing work described across participant roles (P09).

Theme 5: Stakeholder Interests Were Integrated Through Iterative, Collaborative Processes Under Accountability and Resource Constraints

This theme describes how leaders integrated stakeholder interests through iterative, collaborative processes within accountability and resource constraints.

Participants described integrating stakeholder interests into instructional program decisions as an iterative process that moved from input to action through evaluation, prioritization, and implementation under accountability and resource constraints. Where Theme 2 focused on the structures through which stakeholder interests were identified and voiced, this theme focused on how leaders made tradeoffs among competing interests and translated them into decisions within limits of budget, staffing, facilities, policy, accreditation, and time. Leaders emphasized that integration required coordination across divisions and often involved narrowing, sequencing, or deferring stakeholder requests rather than accommodating all input simultaneously.

Institutional documents (e.g., accreditation materials, governing board materials, and program review documentation) provided additional examples of formal integration structures. Accreditation criterion materials described shared governance bodies and integrated planning processes that connect academic priorities, student success initiatives, and resource allocation. The accreditation self-study materials also described institutional planning cycles and program review structures intended to bring together evidence from outcomes data, community needs, and internal capacity when evaluating programs and support services.

P08 provided a similar description of service and support improvement from the perspective of teaching and learning support services, emphasizing cycles of stakeholder input, response, and reassessment.

Overall, my approach is to understand what's going on with each stakeholder group, get their input, try a response, and then assess whether it's working. If it isn't, I'm very comfortable pivoting. I don't get attached to the way things have always been done. We adjust, try something else, and keep refining so we can support faculty and students as effectively as possible. (P08)

In describing how support units contributed to academic and course planning, P08 clarified that academic divisions retained responsibility for program resources and capacity, while teaching and learning support units were consulted as collaborative partners to support faculty and students.

My unit doesn't have academic programs that report directly to it. We're really a support structure for all academic programs. I do, however, participate in decision-making processes related to programs, even though I'm not the ultimate decision-maker on whether a program is created, revised, or discontinued. (P08)

P08 also described integrating faculty preferences into professional development design, including shifting away from isolated workshops toward offerings that supported application and follow-up.

One shift we've seen is that "one-and-done" workshops with no application component or follow-up are less effective. Faculty want something with more depth and substance, like learning communities or multi-session experiences where they can implement and reflect. At the other end of the spectrum, they also want quick, easy-to-implement resources. For that, we've adopted a virtual micro-learning tool with short, 15-minute modules that provide very practical ideas faculty can immediately use in their courses. (P08)

Resource limitations were described as a practical reality shaping what could be implemented and at what pace. P05 summarized this constraint directly: “It’s a finite pie. Resource allocation requires collaboration and prioritization” (P05). P01 similarly described the need to balance costs across a diverse program portfolio, noting that expensive equipment and facilities could make certain programs more costly even when they served strong workforce needs (P01).

Participants described using structured planning and investment models to guide prioritization over time. P05 explained a long-term investment approach:

Yes, we use a long-term investment model. Sometimes we refer to it as a flywheel, meaning the gains compound over time. I shared this framework with faculty leadership. It centers on people, innovation, transfer, and employment outcomes. (P05)

P05 also described maintaining resources to support strategic initiatives and to invest in areas tied to completion and innovation:

We also maintain a salary reserve that we try to increase annually. Part of that is earmarked for strategic investments that support completion, graduation, and innovation. (P05)

Complementing these descriptions of structured prioritization, P09 described relying on an academic master plan and integrated planning structures to assess whether programs were aligned with mission, sustainable, and responsive to student and workforce needs. P09 characterized integration as collective decision-making through shared governance and cross-functional leadership teams, supported by an executive structure intended to reduce silos and

support coherent implementation across academic affairs, enrollment management, and student services (P09).

Participants described program review and program lifecycle processes as one way stakeholder interests were integrated systematically. P03 described state-required review cycles and an internal approval process that incorporated multiple inputs and forms of evidence:

In accreditation documentation, the college described program review as designed to provide faculty, administrators, and the governing board with information about how well programs function relative to outcomes and community needs, reinforcing participant accounts of iterative review and evidence-based adjustment.

For programs, we follow state requirements to review low-enrolled programs every few years and report whether we will revise, merge, or sunset them. Our internal curriculum process is extensive: new programs go through a full research and approval cycle that includes labor market analysis, transfer considerations, and curriculum mapping. (P03)

Operational integration also occurred through enrollment management and scheduling practices. Participants described using enrollment data, advising input, and operational information to translate student demand into course offerings. P07 described advising staff as key informants about student progression and capacity constraints: “Advisors have a comprehensive view of the curriculum and student pathways. They identify bottlenecks, capacity limits, and unmet demand” (P07). P03 described using enrollment reports and collaboration with advising to adjust course sections to meet demand (P03).

Document review also described student support services as intentionally aligned with mission and career outcomes, including supports intended to address academic and non-

academic barriers. These descriptions complemented interview accounts of cross-functional work between academic divisions, advising, and learning support units when responding to student needs.

Participants described integration work as requiring attention to implementation conditions such as faculty availability and program feasibility. P02 noted that when programs were reduced or discontinued, faculty support often depended on reassignment, professional development, and upskilling: “We don’t have a retrenchment policy. Faculty often shift into related programs, with professional development and upskilling supported through grants” (P02).

Leaders also described integration as a communication practice, especially when decisions were unpopular or externally imposed. P06 emphasized the need to interpret external mandates carefully and communicate possibilities to avoid unnecessary fear or over-compliance. In describing the new emerging technology requirement, P06 explained that communication emphasizing room for values-driven approaches helped reduce a chilling effect (P06).

Participants also described integration as requiring attention to how issues were framed and whose voices carried influence in governance conversations.

P06 noted learning to “sit back... and not just run with either narrative,” describing how different groups could advance competing narratives about the same issue and emphasizing the importance of returning to evidence and, when needed, seeking “a neutral third-party review” (P06).

P09 similarly described a pluralistic environment in which groups could push decisions in particular directions, noting the need to consider “all the viewpoints” and to prevent any one group from dominating decision-making (P09).

Chapter Summary

In summary, the findings showed that leaders navigated stakeholder complexity by using mission and culture, layered engagement structures, accountability data, balancing strategies, and iterative integration processes to make instructional program decisions. Chapter 5 interprets these findings in relation to the study's research questions, conceptual frameworks, literature, and implications for practice and future research.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the study's purpose, research questions, conceptual frameworks, and relevant literature. It then presents implications for practice and recommendations for future research. The chapter is organized to move from interpretation of the findings to practical significance, emphasizing how stakeholder-responsive instructional decision-making occurred within the case institution.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how community college leaders identified, interpreted, and integrated the diverse interests of internal and external stakeholders when making decisions about instructional programs. The study was guided by three research questions. Research Question 1 asked how community college leaders identified the interests and priorities of internal and external stakeholders. Research Question 2 asked how leaders interpreted the significance of stakeholder interests in relation to institutional goals. Research Question 3 asked how leaders integrated stakeholder interests into instructional program decision-making processes.

Stakeholder theory served as the overarching theoretical framework for the study (Freeman, 1984). Burke's accountability triangle (Burke, 2005) and Schein's (2004) three levels of organizational culture provided conceptual frameworks for understanding how leaders weighed competing expectations and how institutional culture shaped their responses. Together, the theoretical lens and conceptual frameworks helped explain who influenced instructional decisions, how those influences were understood, and how they were acted upon within the case institution.

The findings support three central claims. First, stakeholder-responsive instructional program decision-making was mission-filtered: leaders assessed stakeholder demands through a student-centered mission and a culture of care. Second, it was accountability-shaped: market, political, academic, and accreditation pressures influenced which interests carried urgency and consequence. Third, it was cross-functionally enacted: stakeholder interests were translated into action through layered governance, integrated planning, and iterative redesign.

Discussion of Findings Related to Research Questions

Taken together, the findings addressed all three research questions and supported the study's explanation-building approach. Rather than showing three separate stages, the data suggested an interconnected cycle. Leaders first identified stakeholder interests through formal and informal information channels. They then interpreted those interests through institutional mission, accountability demands, and cultural values. Finally, they integrated those interests into program decisions through governance systems, cross-functional review, and ongoing redesign. These stages were analytically distinct, but in practice they often overlapped and informed one another.

The findings demonstrated that stakeholder interests were not handled in isolation. Instead, leaders worked within a decision environment in which labor market signals, public expectations, faculty knowledge, student needs, policy requirements, and resource constraints had to be considered together. This meant that program decision-making required more than collecting input. It required interpretation, prioritization, and translation. The sections that follow demonstrate how the findings addressed each research question in turn.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked how community college leaders identified the interests and priorities of internal and external stakeholders. The findings indicated that leaders identified stakeholder interests through a multi-layered information system rather than through any single mechanism. Internal and external stakeholder priorities became visible through formal engagement structures, data systems, environmental scanning, and ongoing operational relationships. In this sense, stakeholder identification was not episodic. It was embedded in the institution's normal routines for planning, review, and communication. Leaders described a setting in which stakeholder input was expected, structured, and continually revisited rather than only sought at moments of controversy or formal approval.

One important finding was the role of formal engagement structures in surfacing stakeholder priorities. Senior leaders described strategic visioning and planning processes that included listening sessions with employees, students, and community members, and they emphasized that stakeholder voice was built into operations through committees, open forums, and shared governance structures. Dean-level and faculty leadership interviews reinforced this pattern, noting that faculty and students participated on curriculum, assessment, general education, strategic planning, and academic master-planning groups. These findings suggested that leaders did not rely solely on informal impressions about what stakeholders wanted. Instead, the institution had intentionally created formal spaces where stakeholder interests could be voiced and documented before decisions moved forward.

A second finding was the centrality of data and environmental scanning in identifying stakeholder interests. Leaders described using institutional research dashboards, labor market tools, regional economic development information, postgraduate outcomes, enrollment reports,

and program review data to determine where needs were emerging and where programs required attention. In some cases, leaders described daily enrollment monitoring for course scheduling. In other cases, they discussed broader environmental scanning in committees that began with briefings on emerging trends, literature, and regional analyses. The use of institutional data and external scans meant that stakeholder interests were identified not only by what people said, but also by what enrollment behavior, labor market shifts, and outcome patterns revealed.

A third finding was the importance of relational and operational feedback loops. Advisors, enrollment staff, instructors, partnership personnel, and industry partners all functioned as ongoing sources of stakeholder information. Advising staff were described as identifying bottlenecks, capacity constraints, and unmet demand across pathways. Workforce leaders described structured advisory models in which industry representatives ranked needed knowledge and skills, while work-based learning created direct feedback loops from employers and students. Support-unit leaders also described using faculty surveys, participation rates, and qualitative feedback to adjust professional development and tutoring supports. Observation data added another layer to this interpretation by showing that student needs and real-time feedback appeared embedded in daily operations in highly accessible, student-facing spaces.

Overall, the findings addressed Research Question 1 by demonstrating that community college leaders identified stakeholder interests through triangulation. Formal structures provided representation and legitimacy, data systems provided scale and trend recognition, and relational feedback provided context and immediacy. Because the institution was publicly accountable to a defined community and partially supported by local taxes, responsiveness to stakeholder voice was not treated as optional. It was part of how institutional leaders understood their responsibility to the public, to students, and to community partners.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked how community college leaders interpreted the significance of stakeholder interests in relation to institutional goals. The findings suggested that leaders did not interpret all stakeholder interests as equally significant. Instead, they weighed stakeholder interests against institutional mission, student success goals, accountability demands, cultural values, and practical feasibility. In this chapter, interpretation refers to the process by which leaders assigned meaning and consequence to stakeholder information before deciding how to act on it.

A major interpretive filter was mission. Across interviews, leaders described the institution's mission in terms of student success, social mobility, economic growth, and strengthening the community. They framed decisions around helping students achieve family-sustaining wages, supporting transfer, removing barriers, and honoring the belief that students are best met where they are. The observation memo reinforced this interpretation by documenting a campus environment marked by student-centered interaction, belonging, and practical supports.

Because this was a single-case study, the case institution's distinctive culture should be treated as part of the explanation rather than as background context. Across interviews, leaders used similar language about care, collaboration, humility, mutual gains, community obligation, and meeting students where they are. The observation memo added contextual evidence that these values were not only rhetorical; student-facing spaces and events displayed belonging, practical support, and low hierarchy. This cultural coherence matters because it shaped how leaders made sense of external pressure. Workforce demand, state mandates, local public expectations, and outcome metrics were filtered through a shared belief that the college existed

to support students' whole lives and the region's civic, cultural, and economic health. Thus, culture did not simply support decisions after they were made; it functioned as an interpretive frame that helped leaders determine which stakeholder interests carried moral, strategic, or mission-based weight.

The political environment at the time of data collection deserves explicit attention. Participants described a state context marked by heightened scrutiny of higher education, including instructional-transparency mandates, general education revisions, curriculum-content concerns, low-enrollment program requirements, and outcome-based funding expectations. These pressures were not merely technical compliance tasks; they narrowed local discretion and shaped how leaders framed program value. Leaders' diplomatic language can be read as a professional strategy for complying with state mandates while preserving transfer, academic quality, student access, and mission-centered commitments where discretion remained.

At the same time, the findings showed that external accountability structures significantly shaped how leaders interpreted stakeholder interests. State laws requiring the review, revision, suspension, or removal of low-enrolled programs were described as nonnegotiable forces in program decision-making. Accreditation also functioned as an external accountability structure by reinforcing quality assurance, assessment, transfer alignment, and evidence-based program review. Other legislative and policy requirements, such as syllabus posting, revisions to general education outcomes, and politically sensitive curriculum changes, created an environment of continuous monitoring and adjustment.

A third pattern was that leaders interpreted stakeholder interests through ethical and values-based judgments about social value. The faculty senate president offered the clearest articulation of this tension, describing concern that state and other external stakeholders

privileged programs leading to high-paying jobs while undervaluing fields with substantial social importance, such as teacher education. This perspective suggested that leaders were not simply balancing internal and external interests mechanically. They were also asking what kinds of outcomes counted as meaningful and whose definitions of value prevailed when those definitions conflicted. Other leaders expressed similar concerns in less direct ways when they emphasized maintaining transfer pathways, supporting arts and humanities, and contextualizing general education within workforce-oriented settings. These findings indicated that interpretation involved protecting mission and educational breadth even while responding to labor market and accountability signals.

Cross-Cutting Interpretive Insight: Power, Bias, and Narrative Framing

One cross-cutting interpretive insight was that leaders did not treat stakeholder claims as neutral or equally credible. As they interpreted competing perspectives, they also considered who was speaking, how an issue was framed, whose interests were amplified, and whether power, bias, or identity dynamics were shaping the conversation. This finding is supported by the Chapter 4 evidence from faculty governance, where P06 described pausing before accepting a single narrative and recognizing how additional context could change the interpretation of a conflict. Interpreting stakeholder interests therefore required leaders to assess how credibility, role, and power shaped what appeared to count as a stakeholder priority.

The findings also revealed that leaders interpreted stakeholder interests through feasibility and institutional constraints. Financial aid eligibility, transfer approval, accreditation expectations, legislation, news and political scrutiny, faculty capacity, space, and specialized facilities all shaped how leaders weighed potential responses. For example, leaders noted that programs without aid eligibility were difficult for students to access, and that transfer approval

shaped the design of courses and work-based learning opportunities. Space and lab capacity also influenced whether programs could scale responsibly.

Overall, the findings addressed Research Question 2 by showing that leaders interpreted stakeholder interests through a layered process. Mission and student success provided meaning, accountability structures determined urgency and consequence, ethical judgments surfaced concerns about social value and mission drift, political judgments shaped how leaders assessed mandates and public narratives, and institutional constraints shaped feasibility. The significance of stakeholder interests therefore emerged from how those interests interacted with the institution's goals, obligations, power dynamics, and operating conditions.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked how community college leaders integrated stakeholder interests into instructional program decision-making processes. The findings indicated that stakeholder interests were integrated into decision-making through organizational structures that translated input into action. Integration was not a single meeting or decision point. It occurred through formal review processes, cross-functional consultation, curriculum workflows, enrollment and scheduling adjustments, program redesign, and ongoing reassessment. In other words, leaders did not simply hear stakeholder interests and then decide. They relied on institutional mechanisms that forced stakeholder priorities to be tested against policy, transfer requirements, financial aid rules, staffing, facilities, and mission alignment before a program change moved forward.

A central integration mechanism was the cross-functional program incubator. Interviews and institutional documents described the program incubator as an early-stage review space where faculty-, community-, employer-, or economic-development-driven ideas could be

examined by subject-matter experts from multiple areas, including financial aid, registrar functions, the provost's office, accreditation-related areas, and other support units. Leaders described the incubator as a place where proposed programs were analyzed for community impact, labor-market relevance, student access, transfer implications, financial-aid eligibility, overlap with existing offerings, and resource feasibility.

Curriculum governance served as a second major integration mechanism. Institutional documentation described a faculty-led Curriculum Council that reviewed new and revised courses and programs to ensure alignment with mission, goals, learning outcomes, academic standards, and prerequisite structures. The council's premeeting model further strengthened this process by giving a smaller expert group responsibility for vetting proposals for Title IV requirements, contact hours, outcome mapping, and transfer alignment before proposals went to the broader body. Interviews from deans and faculty leaders aligned with this document-based evidence. Leaders described division-level proposal development, faculty consultation, and formal workflow systems that moved curricular changes through review stages. At the same time, the findings clarified that shared governance did not mean equal authority at every point. Faculty voice was meaningful, but final authority often rested with administration and, in some cases, with state or system requirements that narrowed local discretion.

The findings also showed that integration frequently took the form of adaptive redesign rather than simple approval or rejection. Leaders described stackable credential design, mergers of overlapping programs, embedded options in place of discontinued stand-alone credentials, transfer-aligned course revisions, contextualized general education, and schedule changes to address student demand and progression. Advisors identified cases in which students completed entry-level certificates but could not move into the next credential because of seat limitations,

prompting redesign or new program development. Deans adjusted course sections to match enrollment pressure and keep students on track in high-demand areas. Leaders also described shifting course delivery models when prior structures created barriers, as in the case of adding online options in co-requisite English. These examples suggested that integration often meant reshaping programs so that multiple stakeholder interests could be addressed simultaneously, even if no single group got exactly what it wanted.

The case of low-enrolled program removal illustrated this integration process particularly well. Faculty input was heard, and leaders initially considered waiver strategies, but later state clarification constrained what could be done. The resulting compromise preserved courses and learning opportunities while removing the programs as separate credentials. This example demonstrated that integration did not always end in full preservation of stakeholder priorities. Sometimes it produced a partial solution that protected as much mission value as possible within external limits. In that sense, integration was often less about consensus than about constructing workable compromises that reflected both institutional commitments and external realities.

Finally, the findings made clear that resource and capacity constraints were part of integration. Leaders described limits related to faculty workload, specialized space, labs, scheduling, and support capacity. Program requests were therefore evaluated not only for conceptual fit but for whether the institution could sustain them responsibly. This practical dimension is important because it shows that stakeholder integration did not end with agreement on values or priorities. It required operational alignment across academic, fiscal, support, and facilities systems. The study therefore addressed Research Question 3 by showing that leaders integrated stakeholder interests through formal translation mechanisms that connected ideas and pressures to actual program design, approval, implementation, and revision.

Discussion of Findings Related to the Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Stakeholder theory served as the study's broad theoretical lens because it foregrounded the multiple internal and external groups that influenced instructional program decisions (Freeman, 1984). While stakeholder theory was not used to inform interview questions or theme identification, it helped interpret the range of actors named in the data, including students, faculty, administrators, employers, community members, policymakers, governing-board actors, and accreditors.

This interpretation directly connects to stakeholder salience literature. The findings showed that leaders recognized many stakeholders, but the influence of those stakeholders depended on context, evidence, institutional role, and the consequences attached to a claim. This aligns with Boesso and Kumar's (2009) emphasis on stakeholder prioritization, Neville et al.'s (2011) argument that salience is dynamic, and Chan's (2021) finding that perceived salience shapes performance-information use. In this study, salience was not only a matter of who had formal authority. It also depended on whether the stakeholder claim could be linked to law, funding, transfer requirements, labor-market evidence, mission, student access, or moral responsibility.

Burke's Accountability Triangle

Burke's accountability triangle was also strongly reflected in the findings (Burke, 2005). Market accountability appeared in leaders' reliance on labor-market data, employer partnerships, work-based learning, and the creation or redesign of programs in response to workforce demand. Political accountability appeared in state policy requirements, performance-based funding, public scrutiny, local tax accountability, and mandated changes to curriculum and reporting. Academic accountability appeared in faculty governance structures, curriculum review, transfer alignment,

and concern for preserving academic breadth and quality. Most importantly, the findings showed that these forms of accountability were not experienced separately. Leaders encountered them simultaneously and often had to reconcile them within the same decision.

Schein's Organizational Culture

Schein's three levels of organizational culture also helped explain the findings (Schein, 2004). At the artifact level, the case institution displayed visible structures and practices such as listening sessions, open forums, curriculum workflows, advising systems, and cross-functional review mechanisms. At the level of espoused values, leaders consistently referenced student success, social mobility, community service, shared governance, respect, and care. At the level of underlying assumptions, the findings suggested taken-for-granted beliefs that students need holistic support, barriers need reduction, collaboration is preferable to rigidity, and public accountability requires responsiveness to community voice. The cross-cutting attention to bias, power, and narrative framing also pointed to culture as a force shaping whose voices were treated as credible and how legitimacy was constructed in decision-making settings.

Integrating the Frameworks

Taken together, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks worked in combination. Stakeholder theory identified the range of actors involved, Burke's model clarified the competing accountability pressures shaping decisions, and Schein's model explained how institutional culture mediated those pressures. The study therefore offers a practice-based illustration of stakeholder theory in community colleges by showing that stakeholder salience was shaped not only by formal role, but also by the way stakeholder claims intersected with accountability, culture, evidence, and feasibility.

Interpretation functioned as the connective process across the theoretical lens and conceptual frameworks. The findings showed that leaders did not simply gather stakeholder input or apply accountability metrics. They interpreted signals, tested them against mission and culture, and translated them into programmatic choices. This interpretive process explains how stakeholder salience, accountability pressure, and organizational culture became linked in practice: leaders made meaning of competing claims before they could integrate them into decisions.

Discussion of Findings Related to the Literature

The findings aligned with literature describing community colleges as institutions operating under increasing pressure to balance workforce responsiveness, academic transfer goals, political scrutiny, and financial accountability (Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Kisker et al., 2023). Prior scholarship suggests that community college leaders must respond to labor-market expectations and performance pressures while preserving access, transfer, and broad educational opportunity. This study supported that view. Leaders in the case institution described exactly this environment: funding formulas, employment outcomes, transfer demands, general education revisions, public accountability, and continued pressure to demonstrate workforce relevance.

The findings also complemented scholarship on evidence-based and data-informed decision-making. Prior research emphasized the importance of using systematically collected data rather than anecdote while also warning that overreliance on metrics can reduce decision-making to compliance and obscure equity considerations (Jenkins & Kerrigan, 2008; Wang, 2019). The case institution reflected both sides of that tension. Leaders described a strong data-use culture in which dashboards, enrollment reports, labor market tools, and outcome data were expected parts of decision-making. Yet the findings also showed that leaders did not treat data as

self-interpreting. They returned to mission, social value, community context, and student access when assessing what the data meant and how far that thinking should guide decisions.

The findings were similarly consistent with literature on guided pathways, stackable credentials, and concerns about stratification. Research on guided pathways suggests that clearer course sequencing, proactive advising, and intentional pathway design can support student progress and completion, but scholars also caution that short-term incentives and narrowly structured credentials may restrict mobility when transferability and long-term advancement are weak (Bailey et al., 2015; Li & Kennedy, 2018). The case institution's leaders described stackability as a design principle, advising as essential to detecting pathway bottlenecks, and financial aid eligibility as central to whether students could realistically participate. These findings support the argument that pathway design must protect mobility, not simply accelerate short-term completion.

One finding complicated both the culture-of-care and shared-governance literature. The campus culture appeared caring and collaborative, but not all participants experienced decision-making as equally open or locally controllable. The low-enrollment example showed that faculty input could be heard and still be overridden by state-defined metrics or agency clarification. This finding does not reject Schein's framework; rather, it shows that culture shaped how leaders interpreted, communicated, and softened external mandates, but it did not erase power differences or policy constraints.

This finding also shows how the results differed from a more generalized reading of the established literature. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 often frames community colleges as institutions pulled among mission tension, accountability pressure, funding constraints, governance limits, and competing stakeholder claims. Those tensions were present in this case,

but the findings did not show an institution simply choosing workforce responsiveness over educational breadth, or care over accountability. Instead, the distinctive culture of the case institution appeared to translate those pressures into an integrated mission language. Workforce responsiveness was discussed through student mobility, transfer, wraparound support, and community benefit; liberal arts and general education were discussed through employability, civic learning, and long-term opportunity. This difference suggests that organizational culture can mediate mission tension, making integration more plausible when leaders share a durable local narrative about whom the college serves and why.

The findings also complicate a simple workforce-versus-liberal-arts framing. Leaders did not describe transfer, general education, communication, critical thinking, or humanities-related learning as separate from workforce preparation. Instead, they treated these areas as part of long-term mobility and employability. This interpretation aligns with research showing that humanities and liberal arts coursework remain consequential in community colleges and is connected to transfer and four-year outcomes (Bickerstaff et al., 2020; Pippins & Belfield, 2019; Pippins et al., 2019). It also aligns with employer-facing research showing that communication, teamwork, critical thinking, applied learning, and adaptability remain central to workforce success (Finley, 2021).

O'Banion's (2016) *Bread and Roses* metaphor provides a useful interpretive frame for this finding because it positions workforce education as bread, liberal education as roses, and Essential Education as an integrated learning experience that draws from both. From this perspective, the findings should not be read as evidence that workforce responsiveness displaced liberal education. Rather, they show leaders attempting to hold together career relevance, transfer, general education, civic learning, and human development within coherent pathways.

O'Banion's caution against simply pairing vocational and liberal education courses is especially relevant here; integration requires more than adding one set of requirements to another. It requires curricular and organizational decisions that make employability and broader formation mutually reinforcing. The case institution's use of contextualized general education, humanities-to-career initiatives, stackable but transferable pathways, advising, and cross-functional review reflects this integrative logic. The leadership challenge, therefore, was not to choose bread or roses, but to make program decisions that preserved both forms of value in students' educational experiences.

At the same time, the case differed from the literature by showing not only the need for integration but also an institutional context in which integration was already embedded in decision language. O'Banion (2016) critiques the historical separation of workforce education and liberal education; in this case, participants' accounts suggested that leaders were attempting to work inside that divide without always naming it as such. They did not describe a formal Essential Education model, but they repeatedly connected transfer, general education, workforce preparation, advising, and student support as mutually reinforcing. The finding therefore extends O'Banion's argument by showing how an integrative orientation can appear in program review, scheduling, pathway design, and stakeholder interpretation even when it is not formalized as a separate curriculum initiative.

The study also aligned with literature on faculty governance, academic accountability, and political pressure. Prior scholarship has documented faculty concerns about shrinking shared governance space and the challenge of preserving academic integrity in increasingly accountability-driven environments (Kater, 2017; Phelan, 2022). The faculty leadership and dean interviews in this study strongly echoed those concerns. Faculty voice remained meaningful and

embedded in governance processes, but leaders also described clear limits when policy mandates, political scrutiny, or state metrics overrode local preferences. The findings therefore suggest that the central issue is not whether governance exists, but how much discretion remains once legal and funding constraints are imposed.

The findings further extend literature on academic program review and discontinuance. Program review literature emphasizes the need for transparent criteria, academic-quality considerations, and resource awareness when institutions prioritize or discontinue programs (Fannin & Saran, 2017; Michael, 1998). The present study showed how these decisions unfolded in practice: leaders weighed low-enrollment rules, waiver possibilities, faculty input, course preservation, student progression, and state compliance. The findings also support Trudeau and Graber's (2018) argument that program review is best connected to broader student-development and planning considerations rather than reduced to a narrow enrollment calculation.

Finally, the findings supported and extended literature on community partnerships and place-based collaboration. Existing scholarship suggests that partnerships with employers, nonprofits, and community organizations can strengthen responsiveness and access, but they must include authentic community representation to avoid becoming narrowly employer-driven (Perrotti, 2024; Stegeman, 2021). The case institution reflected this caution. Employer feedback clearly influenced program development and redesign, but it did so alongside transfer considerations, faculty input, student access concerns, and community accountability. Local tax support, public board structures, and broad listening processes appeared to anchor workforce responsiveness within a more expansive understanding of community obligation.

The study also differed from the literature in how accountability operated locally. Scholarship often presents accountability as an external force that presses institutions toward

metrics, compliance, efficiency, and performance. In this case, accountability also operated relationally. Local public support, public board visibility, community listening, and a history of place-based obligation created a stewardship ethic that made leaders attend not only to state and market demands, but also to whether program decisions could be justified to students, taxpayers, faculty, employers, and community partners. This relational accountability did not remove political or market pressure, but it complicated the literature's more linear depiction of accountability as something imposed on the college from outside.

Employer partnership literature also helps interpret the findings. D'Amico et al. (2019) frame community college workforce education as a leadership issue involving program quality, alignment, and access, while Domenech et al. (2023) emphasize symbiotic partnerships, sector-level collaboration, regular communication, and hyper-local data use. The case institution's use of advisory councils, employer feedback, work-based learning, and economic-development data reflected this kind of structured partnership model. At the same time, the findings showed that employer input was filtered through mission, transfer, general education, financial aid, and student support considerations rather than allowed to define program value alone.

The findings also align with scholarship on community colleges as place-based institutions that connect education, workforce development, and community development. Crossland (2023) and Perrotti (2024) emphasize that campus-community partnerships work best when colleges do more than respond transactionally to employers; they also engage the social and civic contexts in which students and communities are situated. O'Banion's (2016) argument that community colleges support both career preparation and broader life development further supports this broader interpretation. This literature is consistent with the present study's finding

that stakeholder-responsive leadership is not merely interpersonal; it depends on durable organizational routines that connect external intelligence to internal planning.

The same conclusion is supported by advising and student-success literature. Enhanced advising and integrated planning reforms position advisors and student-services personnel as interpreters of pathway feasibility, student constraints, and program navigation needs (Donaldson et al., 2020; Karp et al., 2016). This strengthens the present study's finding that advising and student-services personnel are not peripheral to instructional planning; they are central interpreters of stakeholder needs and pathway viability.

A further difference concerned the reach of the culture-of-care construct. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 most often connected care to student services, basic needs supports, advising, and barrier reduction. Those elements were visible in the case, but the findings extended the construct by showing care operating as an academic program decision criterion. Leaders used student-centered reasoning when considering whether a program was affordable, financial-aid eligible, transferable, stackable, adequately supported, and realistic for working adults. In this study, care was not only a set of services surrounding instruction; it was a way of judging whether instructional programs were designed so students could enter, persist, transfer, complete, and benefit from them.

The resource dimension of the findings also resonates with literature on community college funding and career and technical education costs. Leaders in this study described limits related to facilities, faculty capacity, labs, scheduling, and support infrastructure. The Workgroup on CTE Cost Analysis (2023) underscores that workforce programming requires careful attention to the resources needed for effective career preparation, and Yuen (2020) highlights the broader funding gap facing community colleges. McKinney and Hagedorn's (2016) work on

performance-based funding further suggests that resource and accountability pressures can create equity risks for colleges serving students with greater structural barriers. These findings reinforce the importance of treating resource feasibility as an equity consideration, not merely a budget constraint.

Overall, the study contributed to the literature by offering a practical explanation of how leaders managed stakeholder complexity at the program level. The literature established the tensions. This study showed how those tensions were worked through on the ground: by building systems for gathering and interpreting stakeholder signals, weighting demands through mission and accountability, and translating competing priorities into workable program decisions. That contribution is significant because it moves the conversation beyond whether leaders engage stakeholders to how institutions can build durable processes that make such engagement meaningful.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest several practical implications for leadership, planning, and policy implementation across community colleges. In particular, the study indicates that community accountability, student-centeredness, and a culture of care shaped not only what decisions were made, but also how leaders justified, communicated, and revised those decisions over time. These implications connect directly to the significance of the study described in Chapter 1: instructional program decisions affect access, transfer, affordability, workforce mobility, and the preservation of the comprehensive community college mission. These patterns have implications for governing boards, senior administrators, academic leaders, faculty, advising and student-services personnel, and institutional research staff.

Implications for Governing Boards and Senior Leaders

For governing boards and senior administrators, the findings suggest the importance of using explicit decision criteria that balance labor market demand, student access, transfer value, community benefit, resource feasibility, and mission alignment. Boards and cabinet-level leaders can avoid relying on wage and completion metrics alone when evaluating programs. Instead, they can ask how a program contributes to community obligation, student mobility, regional needs, and the institution's long-term educational role. Senior leaders can also protect mission alignment by documenting why some programs are preserved, redesigned, merged, or discontinued even when external incentives favor a narrower set of outcomes.

Implications for Academic Leaders and Faculty

For academic leaders and faculty, the findings support strengthening early-stage collaboration rather than limiting faculty involvement to late-stage approval or reaction. The program incubator and curriculum premeeting models provide practical examples of how faculty ideas can be developed with simultaneous attention to transfer, financial aid, accreditation, labor-market relevance, and support capacity. Academic leaders can communicate clearly when faculty input is advisory, when it is determinative, and when external constraints limit local discretion. The findings further indicate that faculty benefit from support during program redesign and discontinuance, particularly when courses or learning opportunities can be preserved even if a stand-alone credential cannot.

Implications for Student Services, Advising, and Enrollment

For student services, advising, and enrollment leaders, the findings indicate that these units need to be treated as central participants in instructional planning rather than peripheral support areas. Advisors were among the most important interpreters of student bottlenecks,

progression barriers, and pathway feasibility. Institutions seeking to improve instructional decision-making can embed advising and enrollment perspectives earlier in program review, new program development, and scheduling decisions.

Practically, this suggests that colleges may benefit from preparing advisors, career staff, and other student-facing employees to speak confidently about labor-market trends, stackability, transfer options, and short-term-to-long-term pathway design rather than reserving this knowledge for a single department. This preparation can strengthen the connection between instructional offerings and students' actual decision-making needs.

Implications for Institutional Research and Planning

For institutional research and planning units, the findings reinforce the need to sustain a culture of evidence while resisting purely compliance-oriented uses of data. Dashboards, labor market analyses, and outcome tracking were valuable in this case because they informed environmental scanning, program review, enrollment planning, and accreditation preparation. Institutional research leaders can continue to pair quantitative indicators with qualitative input from faculty, advisors, employers, and students so that decision-making does not collapse into narrow metric compliance.

Broader Implications for the Field

For the field more broadly, the study suggests that institutions can formalize mission and culture checks in program review and redesign. Before expanding, merging, or closing programs, leaders can ask not only whether a program aligns with labor demand, but also whether it supports transfer, educational breadth, local community needs, and the institution's caring-campus commitments. A mission-and-culture alignment check can help leaders weigh decisions in politically constrained environments by making explicit which values are being protected,

which stakeholder interests are being prioritized, and which tradeoffs require communication to faculty, students, employers, and the public.

Institutions operating in restrictive funding environments may also need to pursue braided resource strategies, such as combining local support, grants, and proof-of-concept investments to pilot and scale workforce pathways without allowing short-term funding incentives alone to dictate the curriculum. This is especially important when local community needs, political expectations, and caring-campus commitments point in different directions. Under such conditions, culture alignment can help leaders determine whether a program decision advances the institution's identity as a community-serving, student-ready college rather than merely satisfying an external metric. Resource feasibility, affordability, and support capacity merit treatment as student-success and equity considerations, not only as budgetary concerns.

A related implication is that leaders can make disagreement visible rather than allowing caring-campus language to imply consensus where tradeoffs remain unresolved. Program review and redesign processes can include a brief "decision rationale" that identifies which interests are aligned, which priorities require balance, and which external constraints limit local choice. This practice would help faculty, advisors, students, employers, and governing boards understand why a decision was made even when the decision does not fully satisfy every stakeholder group.

Leadership preparation programs and institutional professional-development efforts may also include structured opportunities to practice program-level decision analysis. The AACC competencies emphasize collaboration, communication, resource management, advocacy, and organizational strategy (AACC, 2018). The findings of this study indicate that such preparation can include scenarios in which leaders weigh employer demand, faculty governance,

accreditation, legislation, student access, transfer, culture of care, and financial feasibility at the same time.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several avenues for future research emerged from this study. First, a multi-case study would extend the present findings by examining whether similar stakeholder-identification, interpretation, and integration processes appear across community colleges with different state policy contexts, funding environments, and governance traditions. Because this was a single-case study, it provided depth but not variation across institutional settings. A comparative design would be especially useful for examining how much the patterns identified here depend on local tax support, regional workforce relationships, or specific state accountability structures.

Second, it is recommended that future research include a wider range of stakeholder groups directly. This study centered leadership perspectives, even though students, faculty, employers, and community partners were central to the leaders' accounts. Studies that interview or survey multiple stakeholder groups could compare how different constituencies define program value, mission alignment, and accountability.

Third, future research can examine the long-term equity implications of stackable credentials, short-term workforce programs, and program consolidation. The literature raised important concerns about stratification, and the present study showed that leaders were attentive to transfer, advising, and pathway mobility. Future studies could examine whether these design intentions produce durable mobility outcomes for students across demographic groups.

Fourth, future research should examine the relationship between institutional culture and program-level decision-making more explicitly. Comparative studies could examine institutions with similar policy or funding environments but different cultural narratives to determine

whether culture mediates how leaders interpret stakeholder salience, mission tension, and program value. This line of inquiry would help clarify whether the integrative patterns found in this case were primarily a function of formal structures, local public accountability, leadership practice, or the distinctive culture of care that participants and observation data repeatedly identified.

Conclusion

This study examined how community college leaders identified, interpreted, and integrated stakeholder interests in instructional program decision-making. The findings indicated that stakeholder-responsive leadership at the case institution was not accidental or purely personality-driven. It was supported by formal engagement structures, data systems, cross-functional review processes, governance routines, and a culture that emphasized student success, care, and community accountability. Leaders identified stakeholder interests through listening structures, data, environmental scanning, and frontline relationships. They interpreted those interests through mission, accountability demands, social value, and practical feasibility. They integrated those interests through curriculum workflows, program incubators, adaptive redesign, and ongoing reassessment.

The study also showed that instructional program decisions in community colleges are shaped by more than workforce demand or political mandate alone. Leaders worked within a dynamic tension among market accountability, political accountability, and academic accountability, while also navigating the deeper cultural beliefs of the institution. This meant that decision-making often involved compromise rather than clear victories for any one stakeholder group. Even so, the findings suggested that leaders could preserve mission fidelity by building

processes that surface competing interests early, force cross-functional dialogue, and keep student access, transfer, and affordability visible throughout program development and review.

The broader takeaway from this study is that community colleges can respond to changing labor markets, policy pressures, and public accountability without abandoning their comprehensive mission. Doing so requires more than good intentions. It requires institutional structures that connect stakeholder voice to decision-making, cultural norms that support care and collaboration, and leadership practices that treat mission, equity, and educational breadth as decision criteria alongside performance metrics. In that sense, the study's central contribution is practical as well as conceptual: it offers a grounded explanation of how leaders can navigate complexity while still protecting what makes the community college mission distinctive.

Because this was a single-case study, the case institution's distinctive culture is part of the explanation rather than a feature to be bracketed out. The findings should therefore be transferred cautiously. They do not imply that all community colleges possess the same culture or would respond to accountability pressures in the same way. Instead, they suggest that culture can shape whether workforce responsiveness, transfer, liberal education, and student support are treated as competing priorities or as interdependent expressions of mission.

Stakeholder-responsive decision-making depends not only on structures and data, but also on leaders' capacity to interpret ambiguous signals, build shared meaning, and translate competing expectations into program action. This contribution is especially important for community colleges because their instructional decisions must remain responsive to workforce change while still protecting access, transfer opportunity, educational breadth, community obligation, and the culture of care that supports student success.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

The table below shows how the study's problem, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and data sources align across the dissertation.

Research focus from the literature	Research question(s)	Theoretical lens	Conceptual / analytic framework alignment	Data sources
Community college leaders face stakeholder complexity through formal governance, informal engagement, public accountability, and cross-functional collaboration (Freeman, 1984; Kater, 2017; Kater & Miller, 2024).	RQ1: How do leaders identify internal and external stakeholder interests and priorities?	Stakeholder Theory	Schein's artifacts and espoused values	Interviews, observation memo, institutional documents
Leaders interpret stakeholder interests through mission, accountability pressures, organizational culture, and leadership framing as a complementary interpretive process (Burke, 2005; Eddy, 2003; Schein, 2004).	RQ2: How do leaders interpret the significance of stakeholder interests in relation to institutional goals?	Stakeholder Theory	Burke's Accountability Triangle; Schein's espoused values and underlying assumptions; leadership framing as a complementary interpretive process	Interviews, observation memo, strategic/accreditation documents, outcomes reports
Instructional program decisions require leaders to translate stakeholder interests into program action through program review, curriculum workflows, pathway design, and resource allocation (Bailey et al., 2015; Karp et al., 2016).	RQ3: How do leaders integrate stakeholder interests into instructional program decision-making processes?	Stakeholder Theory	Burke's market, political, and academic accountability; Schein's cultural levels	Interviews, document analysis, observation memo
The overall literature gap concerns limited practice-based understanding of how leaders work through stakeholder complexity at the program-decision level.	RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3	Stakeholder Theory	Burke's Accountability Triangle and Schein's organizational culture framework, supported by leadership framing and organizational culture/learning literature as complementary scholarship	All data sources triangulated through thematic analysis and explanation building

Appendix B - Informed Consent Form

Title of Study:

Navigating complexity: Leadership decision-making in community college instructional offerings

Researcher:

Marie Huntsinger, Doctoral Candidate

Kansas State University

Email: marie.huntsinger@ksu.edu

Phone: 480-241-2872

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to participate in a research study that examines how community college leaders identify, interpret, and integrate stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions. The goal is to better understand how institutional leaders respond to competing demands—such as workforce needs, academic goals, and equity priorities—in shaping curriculum offerings and strategic planning.

What You Will Be Asked to Do:

If you agree to participate, you will take part in a 45–60 minute semi-structured interview via Zoom (or phone/in person, if preferred). With your consent, the session will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis. You may also be invited to review and clarify your interview transcript. Your participation may also be complemented by non-intrusive observation (e.g., at public meetings) or document review (e.g., strategic plans, meeting minutes) where applicable. You may decline any part of the process at any time.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or consequence.

Confidentiality: Your identity and institution will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in all transcripts and published findings. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on a password-protected and encrypted device. Data will be secured for five years after completion of the study and then deleted or destroyed in accordance with IRB expectations.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no known physical or legal risks associated with this study. There may be minimal risk related to expressing views about institutional priorities or leadership practices. You may benefit by contributing to a better understanding of leadership decision-making in community colleges.

Questions:

If you have questions about the study or your rights as a participant, please contact the researcher or the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

1. Researcher: marie.huntsinger@ksu.edu | 480-241-2872
2. Kansas State University IRB

Consent Statement:

I have read and understood the information above. I consent to participate in this research study.

Participant Name (Printed): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C - Interview Questions and Script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I'm interested in learning how community college leaders identify, interpret, and integrate stakeholder interests when making instructional program decisions. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes. With your consent, I will record the conversation for transcription and analysis purposes. You may decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time.

Icebreaker / Background Questions

- Tell me about your current role and your primary responsibilities at the institution.
- How long have you been in a leadership role at this institution?
- What pathways led you to your current position in community college leadership?
- Tell me about your college's mission or educational philosophy.

General Leadership Decision-Making

- Tell me about how you approach decisions about instructional programs at your institution.
- How do you go about identifying and understanding the interests of internal and external stakeholders?
- Tell me about how you balance different institutional goals, such as workforce development and academic learning outcomes, when making decisions about instructional programs.

Market Accountability

- Tell me about how labor market trends, such as regional employment data or employer feedback, inform your instructional planning or program development.

- Can you share an example of a recent employer collaboration and how it influenced academic program design, delivery, or revision?

Political Accountability

- Tell me about how state or district-level policies or funding requirements affect your decision-making process.
- How do you respond when external priorities, such as funding incentives or policy directives, favor specific programs or outcomes?

Academic Accountability

- How do you support both career readiness and broader educational goals in your program planning?
- Tell me about how faculty, students, or other internal stakeholders are involved in conversations about curriculum or instructional priorities.

Organizational Culture

- How would you describe the values or assumptions that guide decision-making at your institution?
- In what ways does your college's culture, including shared values, norms, or assumptions, influence how leaders respond to internal and external priorities?
- Tell me about a recent instructional decision that was shaped by your college's values or culture.

Appendix D - Recruitment Letters

D1. Letter to College Presidents

Dear [President's Name],

My name is Marie Huntsinger and I am a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership program at Kansas State University. I am conducting a study on how community college leaders navigate stakeholder interests in instructional program decision-making.

I am writing to request your permission to invite academic deans, vice presidents of academic affairs, workforce development leaders, and governing board members at your institution to participate in this research. The study will involve a 45–60 minute interview conducted via Zoom or in person. Participation is voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential.

This study is designed to contribute to the understanding of how institutional leaders balance stakeholder demands, academic mission, and workforce development. Findings may inform policy and practice in community college governance.

Please contact me at marie.huntsinger@ksu.edu or 480-241-2872 if you are willing to participate or have questions about the study.

Sincerely,

Marie Huntsinger

D2. Letter to Academic Deans

Dear [Recipient's Name],

My name is Marie Huntsinger and I am a doctoral student at Kansas State University. I am conducting a study on how community college leaders incorporate stakeholder interests into instructional program decisions.

I am inviting you to participate in this study because of your role in academic decision-making. You are being asked to take part in a 45–60 minute interview (via Zoom or in person) at a time convenient for you. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential.

The study's findings may provide insights to support effective leadership, planning, and policy implementation across community colleges.

Please contact me at marie.huntsinger@ksu.edu or 480-241-2872 if you are willing to participate or have questions about the study.

Sincerely,

Marie Huntsinger

D3. Letter to Vice Presidents

Dear [Recipient's Name],

My name is Marie Huntsinger and I am a doctoral student at Kansas State University. I am conducting a study on how community college leaders incorporate stakeholder interests into instructional program decisions.

I am inviting you to participate in this study because of your role in institutional planning and instructional oversight. You are being asked to take part in a 45–60 minute interview (via Zoom or in person) at a time convenient for you. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential.

The study's findings may provide insights to support effective leadership, planning, and policy implementation across community colleges. Please contact me at marie.huntsinger@ksu.edu or 480-241-2872 if you are willing to participate or have questions about the study.

Sincerely,

Marie Huntsinger

D4. Letter to Workforce Development Leaders

Dear [Recipient's Name],

My name is Marie Huntsinger, and I am a doctoral student at Kansas State University. I am conducting a study on how community college leaders incorporate stakeholder interests into instructional program decisions.

I am inviting you to participate in this study because of your role in career and workforce program alignment. You are being asked to take part in a 45–60 minute interview (via Zoom or in person) at a time convenient for you. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential.

The study's findings may provide insights to support effective leadership, planning, and policy implementation across community colleges. Please contact me at marie.huntsinger@ksu.edu or 480-241-2872 if you are willing to participate or have questions about the study.

Sincerely,

Marie Huntsinger

D5. Letter to Governing Board Members

Dear [Recipient's Name],

My name is Marie Huntsinger and I am a doctoral student at Kansas State University. I am conducting a study on how community college leaders incorporate stakeholder interests into instructional program decisions.

I am inviting you to participate in this study because of your role in policy-level decision-making and institutional oversight. You are being asked to take part in a 45–60 minute interview (via Zoom or in person) at a time convenient for you. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential.

The study's findings may provide insights to support effective leadership, planning, and policy implementation across community colleges. Please contact me at marie.huntsinger@ksu.edu or 480-241-2872 if you are willing to participate or have questions about the study.

Sincerely,

Marie Huntsinger

Appendix E - Structured Observation Guide and Grid

Observation Focus:

Leadership dynamics, stakeholder engagement, and instructional decision-making strategies in public settings (e.g., town halls, forums, committee meetings).

Observation Objectives:

- Identify how leaders interact with internal and external stakeholders
- Note decision-making processes and communication styles
- Observe references to workforce, liberal arts, or accountability concerns
- Document contextual or environmental cues related to institutional culture

Date	Location/Event	Participants Observed	Leadership Behavior	Stakeholder Engagement	Decision-Making Content	Accountability Type Observed	Cultural Cues	Reflexive Notes
						☐ Market ☐ Political ☐ Academic		
						☐ Market ☐ Political ☐ Academic		
						☐ Market ☐ Political ☐ Academic		

Coding Guide:

- **Leadership Behavior:** Collaboration, directive leadership, conflict management, facilitation, deferral

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Faculty participation, student input, employer presence, responsiveness to concerns
 - **Decision-Making Content:** Program changes, policy implementation, curriculum alignment
 - **Accountability Type Observed:**
 1. *Market* (labor market needs, employer feedback)
 2. *Political* (policy mandates, funding)
 3. *Academic* (curriculum integrity, transfer goals)
1. **Cultural Cues:**
1. Language: Words or phrases are repeatedly used in meetings
 2. Symbols or Rituals: Visual cues, routines, or traditions that reflect institutional values
 3. Interactions: Ways leaders engage with others—directive, participatory, collaborative
 4. Norms: “Taken for granted” in group discussions or decision-making processes
- **Reflexive Notes:** Researcher impressions, potential bias, situational factors

Appendix F - Document Analysis Guide

Purpose:

To systematically review institutional documents for evidence of stakeholder engagement, leadership decision-making, and integration of liberal arts and workforce education.

Document Types May Include:

- Strategic plans
- Institutional mission statements
- Governance meeting minutes
- Accreditation self-studies
- Workforce development partnership agreements
- Curriculum development reports
- Faculty senate records
- Program review documents

Analysis Criteria:

1. Stakeholder Engagement

1. Are stakeholders (e.g., employers, faculty, students) explicitly mentioned in planning or decision-making?
2. What mechanisms are described for gathering stakeholder input?

2. Instructional Decision-Making

1. Are programmatic changes or curriculum decisions discussed?
2. Is there evidence of balancing workforce and liberal arts priorities?

3. Accountability Dimensions (Based on Burke's Accountability Triangle)

1. Market Accountability: Employer feedback, job market alignment

2. Political Accountability: Policy compliance, funding initiatives
3. Academic Accountability: Liberal arts preservation, accreditation goals
4. **Leadership Strategies**
 1. Is leadership involvement in planning and instructional design evident?
 2. Are innovation, collaboration, or conflict resolution approaches described?
5. **Evidence of Change Over Time**
 1. Are there documented shifts in priorities, program design, or institutional focus?
6. **Cultural Indicators**
 1. Are there recurring language patterns that reflect shared beliefs (e.g., “innovation,” “efficiency,” “equity”)?
 2. How is learning or improvement framed—top-down compliance or collaborative development?
 3. What metaphors or narratives suggest how the institution sees its mission or role?

Coding Approach: Inductive and deductive coding based on the above categories using hand-coded thematic matrices. Patterns were cross-referenced with interview, document, and observational data.

Appendix G - Kansas State University IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Margaretta Mathis
Educational Leadership
Manhattan, KS 66506

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 09/09/2025

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Navigating Complexity: Leadership Decision-Making in Community College Instructional Offerings."

Proposal Number IRB-13116

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 09/09/2025

EXPIRATION DATE: 09/08/2028

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

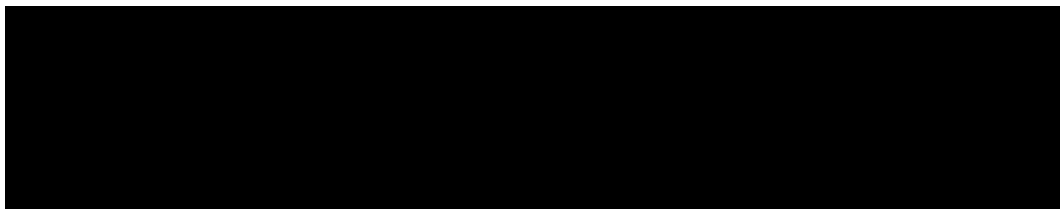
No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 09/09/2025 4:07 PM ET

Appendix H - Site IRB Approval Letter

Note. Site-identifying information has been redacted from this approval letter.



September 29, 2025

Principal Investigator (PI): Marie Huntsinger

Project Title: Navigating Complexity: Leadership Decision-Making in Community College Instructional Offerings

IRB Protocol Number: [REDACTED]

Approval Type: Expedited Review

Approval Date: September 29, 2025

Dear Marie Huntsinger:

[REDACTED] proposal for the study [REDACTED] offerings. Based on the information provided, your study has been classified as *minimal risk* and qualifies for *expedited review* under the criteria specified in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) regulations at 45 CFR 46.110.

The research activities outlined in your protocol have been determined to fall under the following expedited review categories: (Category 7 – Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior, including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior). This protocol has been assigned internal IRB number [REDACTED] for internal IRB tracking purposes. Any proposed changes to your study procedures, participant population, recruitment materials, or consent forms must be submitted for IRB review and approval prior to implementation, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to participants.

We wish you the best as your work moves forward. Please contact us should you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]