

Community College Case Study

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A 2010 study by McKinney and Morris analyzed the launch of new baccalaureate programs at two Florida community colleges known as Conversion and Transition Colleges. These bachelor's degrees were introduced following 2001 state legislation designed to fill specific workforce gaps. Leaders justified expansion by unmet regional workforce needs, limited access to nearby universities, and the needs of place-bound adult learners. Transition College, for example, surveyed about 450 regional employers to confirm demand (McKinney & Morris, 2010). Adding bachelor's degrees required the colleges to obtain State Board of Education approval and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation, and to ensure that at least 25% of the faculty in each new program held a terminal degree. In addition, the colleges were required to upgrade library resources, redesign admissions and financial aid, retrain advisors, and reconsider their institutional identity (McKinney & Morris, 2010).

Key stakeholders included executive leaders, trustees, faculty and staff, students, the state board of education, SACS, employers, the community, and a nearby university that strongly opposed Conversion College's proposal. Conflict arose from a divergence in perspective: executive leaders viewed the transition as a necessary strategic adaptation, while the university, along with certain faculty and community members, doubted its alignment with a community college mission. Leaders also acknowledged they had significantly underestimated both accreditation costs and the number of institutional changes the transition required (McKinney & Morris, 2010). This paper argues the president should replace a primarily top-down implementation stance with a phased, evidence-based process that builds shared understanding and organizational readiness.

Organizational Culture, Communication, and Conflict

The conflict was fundamentally cultural and operational. Community colleges have historically been open-access institutions, whereas the CCB required selective admission, upper-division services, terminal-degree faculty, and expectations for scholarship. At Transition College, 250 prospective students applied for 70 seats, which required a ranking system that departed sharply from the open-door tradition (McKinney & Morris, 2010). For some stakeholders, changes signaled mission drift rather than mission fulfillment, and one administrator captured the identity question directly: “So we are no longer a community college?” (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 203). For faculty members, the transition threatened their professional identities, and the university perceived it as a direct encroachment on prospective enrollment.

Communication methods compounded these misunderstandings. Senior administrators set the direction in cabinet-level discussions and then communicated progress through campus-wide email, convocations, campus newspapers, the college website, and faculty senate meetings (McKinney & Morris, 2010). The channels kept stakeholders informed but missed the causes of their resistance. When one administrator responded to faculty opposition by explaining that “the train has left the station” (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 200), the message signaled that faculty could help implement the decision but not shape it, converting concern into compliance rather than dialogue. This analysis treats resistance as data about culture, identity, capacity, and trust rather than simply as an obstacle.

Disciplines of Learning Organizations

Senge (2006) characterized learning organizations as environments where individuals continuously cultivate the skills needed to achieve desired results. He further proposed that

systems thinking serves as the unifying framework for four core disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning.

Personal Mastery

Senge (2006) argues that personal mastery means using the gap between a clear future vision and an honest assessment of current reality to spark creative tension. Leaders demonstrated this discipline by commissioning external market research, benchmarking against other Florida colleges, and learning the state and accreditation processes (McKinney & Morris, 2010). Mastery was incomplete when the urgency of expansion eclipsed reflection on capacity. One leader noted that each new program required roughly \$125,000 to \$165,000 in start-up funds during budget cuts (McKinney & Morris, 2010). Leaders clearly understood their vision yet failed to accurately assess current reality. This disconnect contradicts Senge (2006), who established that confronting the truth of the present is essential for personal mastery. The college president should model this discipline by examining assumptions about readiness and pace while giving faculty structured opportunities to build capacity for upper-division teaching.

Mental Models

According to Senge (2006), mental models are unconscious, deeply rooted beliefs that dictate how we perceive the world and operate within it. While executives saw the CCB as a logical step toward access, faculty worried new research requirements conflicted with traditional identity. As one leader emphasized, instructors find it exceedingly difficult to balance new scholarship expectations with a heavy teaching schedule (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 203). Because these assumptions remained untested, disagreement became resistance rather than inquiry, causing deeper conflict. Senge (2006) stressed the importance of balancing advocacy

with inquiry to expose hidden assumptions. Leaders can achieve this by asking teams what specific data would prove or disprove their views on capacity, demand, and mission fit.

Team Learning

Senge (2006) grounded team learning in dialogue, in which members suspend assumptions and think together to build capacity. The colleges created task forces, proposal-writing groups, and student-services teams; Conversion College's task force of 30 to 35 people met for several months to weigh the initiative (McKinney & Morris, 2010). At Transition College, senior administrators completed the conceptual brainstorming before passing the initiative to writing teams. Because these teams were responsible only for the "nuts and bolts" (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 199), their role was limited to execution. Team learning would improve if these groups had authority to identify risks, recommend design changes, and report capacity concerns directly to the college president and trustees.

Shared Vision

A shared vision represents a future that stakeholders understand and willingly support. According to Senge (2006), establishing this shared mission is crucial because it inspires authentic commitment rather than compliance. Although the rationale for local bachelor's degrees was compelling, nearly all interviewees believed the president should provide the vision as the "champion of the cause" (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 198). That top-down origin created momentum, but uneven ownership among faculty and community members suggests the vision was communicated, not co-created. The president must facilitate a vision that outlines the community needs the CCB will serve and the core mission elements that will remain unchanged. Furthermore, this vision must establish the specific readiness benchmarks required before expanding.

How the Disciplines Work Together

Senge (2006) called systems thinking the fifth discipline because it integrates the other four. The disciplines were interdependent: untested mental models weakened the shared vision, a weak shared vision limited dialogue within teams, and limited team learning deprived leaders of the accurate view of current reality that personal mastery requires. Empowering teams, co-creating a vision, and openly addressing assumptions creates a reinforcing cycle among the core disciplines. This collaborative approach shifts the college's perspective, allowing them to treat the CCB as a holistic institutional transformation rather than a single new initiative.

A Systems Perspective

Organizational Disability: "I Am My Position"

Of the seven learning disabilities Senge (2006) identified, the most evident in the case is the "I am my position" mentality, which describes when employees focus solely on their individual duties, ignoring responsibility for the organization's interconnected results. Administrators focused on approvals and workforce demand. Faculty focused on workload, qualifications, and identity; student-services staff concentrated on new advising and financial-aid demands; and the university on market protection. Each view was legitimate, but none captured the whole system. Departments such as the library, advising, and human resources navigated the transition in isolation, leaving leaders ultimately caught off guard by the scale of the institutional changes required (McKinney & Morris, 2010). Senge (2006) argued that organizations overcome this disability by helping members see their shared responsibility for system outcomes.

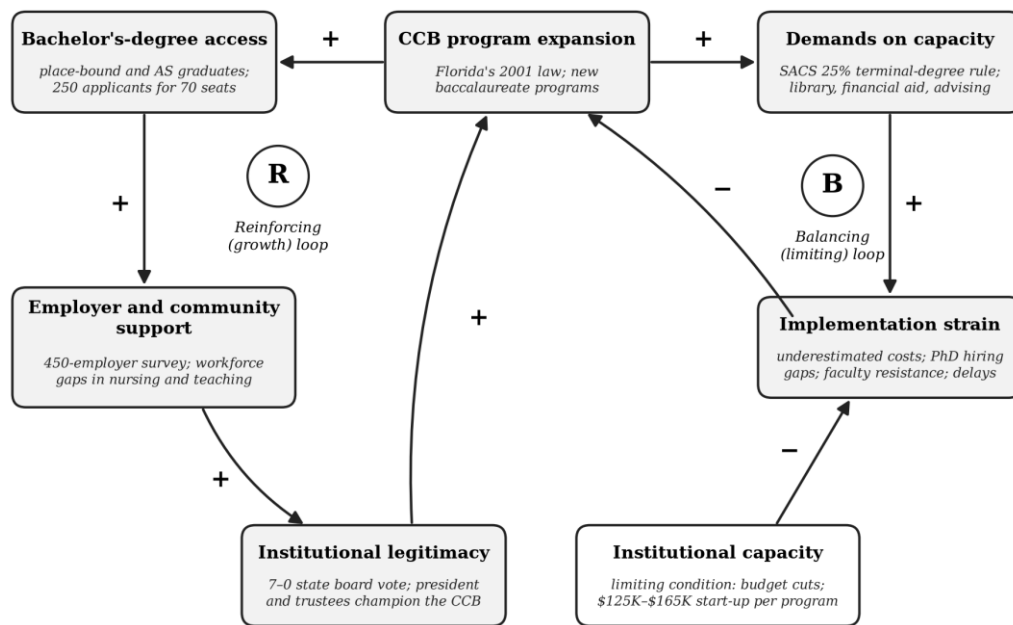
Systems Archetype: Limits to Growth

Senge (2006) described the limits-to-growth archetype as a reinforcing process that produces a spiral of success while creating secondary effects, manifested in a balancing process,

that eventually slow that success. Figure 1 maps this archetype using events from the case. In the reinforcing loop, CCB expansion improves local access, strengthens employer and community support, and builds legitimacy for further expansion; the state board's 7–0 vote for Conversion College's proposal illustrates this momentum (McKinney & Morris, 2010). In the balancing loop, expansion increases demand for terminal-degree faculty, library resources, financial aid, advising, and start-up funding. Expansion slows as demand outpaces institutional capacity, leading to hidden costs, staff shortages, faculty resistance, and delays. Senge's (2006) guidance for this archetype is not to push harder on growth but to remove limiting factors, so the leverage point is resolving faculty capacity and start-up funding before adding programs.

Figure 1

Limits to Growth in the Community College Baccalaureate Transition



Note. The figure was created for this paper based on case events reported by McKinney and Morris (2010) and the limits-to-growth archetype described by Senge (2006). R = reinforcing

loop; B = balancing loop. A plus sign indicates that two variables move in the same direction; a minus sign indicates that they move in opposite directions.

Change Management Strategies

Critical Thinking Tools

Establishing a structured method to evaluate reasoning is a critical first step for stakeholders before they begin choosing strategies. Paul and Elder (2012) identified eight elements of thought (purpose, question at issue, information, inferences, concepts, assumptions, implications, and point of view) and recommended assessing them against intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness. The college president can use these tools to establish a shared problem statement: How can the college expand bachelor's-degree access in fields of documented need while protecting affordability, quality, and its community-college mission? Participants should review employer demand data objectively. They must avoid automatically assuming that immediate expansion is the only option.

These tools are especially useful with faculty who resist the change. Rather than treating opposition as an obstacle, leaders can reason through elements of thought with faculty. What do these groups view as the college's core mission, and what hidden assumptions about workload, quality, and open access fuel their concerns? Paul and Elder (2012) emphasized fair-mindedness and intellectual empathy, the willingness to reconstruct opposing viewpoints accurately before judging them. To demonstrate these traits, leadership must establish mutual accountability by accurately voicing faculty concerns and critically evaluating the administration's biases. Socratic questioning about evidence and consequences then turns resistance into structured inquiry, giving resistant staff a legitimate role in improving the decision.

The Four-Stage Change Process

Stroh's (2015) four-stage process can strengthen the colleges' strategic planning, which relied on a strong rationale and approvals but gave less attention to the systemic structures that determine success.

Build a Foundation for Change

The first stage engages key stakeholders, establishes common ground, and builds collective capacity (Stroh, 2015). The college president should charter a representative CCB council of faculty, student-services staff, students, trustees, employers, community members, and a liaison to nearby universities. The council should establish decision rules and norms for candid inquiry before selecting programs.

Face Current Reality

In the second stage, stakeholders build a shared understanding of what is happening and of their own role in producing it (Stroh, 2015). The council should map current reality using demand evidence, SACS requirements, faculty qualifications, start-up costs, and stakeholder concerns. This visual map exposes the delays and tradeoffs hidden in linear plans, helping leaders see that their "train has left the station" rhetoric caused the resistance they faced (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 200).

Make an Explicit Choice

Stroh (2015) suggests stakeholders show stronger commitment when weighing current system's benefits against their long-term goals before choosing. Leaders should compare a limited pilot, a phased launch, a university partnership, postponement, and full expansion, stating the tradeoffs and readiness criteria of each. Transition College's board resolution to "pursue limited opportunities in workforce areas while maintaining the mission of the community

college” (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 199) offers a starting point because it names both the aspiration and its boundary.

Bridge the Gap

The final stage converts the choice into action through high-leverage interventions, continual learning, and expanding support (Stroh, 2015). The plan should assign owners, resources, milestones, and measures for staffing, accreditation, student support, costs, and trust. High-leverage actions include budgeting the full start-up cost before admitting students and building a pipeline of terminal-degree faculty.

The Inquiry Model

The Applied Improvement Project (AIP) model is a 10-step inquiry cycle organized into planning, implementation, and evaluation phases (Capella University, n.d.). College leadership can use it to plan, implement, and evaluate the next phase of change with stakeholders rather than for them.

Planning

In Step 1, the council diagnoses the problem by examining performance gaps and root causes before proposing solutions (Capella University, n.d.). Stated in one sentence, the problem is that the colleges are expanding baccalaureate programs faster than they are building the faculty, financial, student-support, and stakeholder capacity required. In Step 2, the team generates alternatives, such as a pilot, phased expansion, a university partnership, or delay, and compares their risks and mission fit. In Step 3, it designs an action plan that names the intervention, tasks, timeline, baseline measures, and success criteria, guided by the question: How does a representative readiness process affect stakeholder trust and institutional capacity for a mission-aligned CCB launch?

Implementation

In Step 4, the college implements the plan with one pilot program. In Step 5, the team collects process data, such as meeting records and stakeholder feedback, and outcome data, such as accreditation milestones, budget variance, and enrollment; multiple sources allow triangulation of findings (Capella University, n.d.; Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2020). In Step 6, stakeholders discuss interim findings in open forums and adjust the plan, consistent with the AIP principle that improvement is done with people rather than to them (Capella University, n.d.).

Evaluation

In Step 7, the council evaluates outcomes against the baseline and success criteria while guarding against confirmation bias. In Step 8, participants reflect on what they learned about resistance, identity, and capacity. In Step 9, the council recommends whether to expand, revise, repeat the pilot, partner, or pause. In Step 10, leadership communicates results and next steps to all stakeholders.

Recommendations

Without access to the colleges' published mission statements, these recommendations are based on Transition College's commitment to workforce development and the general community college mandate to serve local needs (McKinney & Morris, 2010). Each recommendation also advances cultural understanding among faculty, administrators, and the community.

- **Create a representative CCB governance council with defined authority.** The council should report to the college president and trustees, publish meeting summaries, and include faculty, students, employers, community members, and a university liaison.

Rationale. Shared authority converts resistance into participation, strengthens team

learning, and builds Stroh's (2015) foundation for change, reflecting the values of inclusion and community responsiveness.

- **Adopt a readiness-gate pilot before expanding additional programs.** The first cohort should begin only after the college demonstrates adequate terminal-degree faculty, library resources, a fully funded start-up budget, and advising and financial-aid capacity. *Rationale.* This step acts on the limits-to-growth leverage point (Senge, 2006) and honors the board's commitment to limited growth that protects quality and affordability.
- **Use two-way communication and a public decision record.** Forums and a decision log should explain what was heard, what evidence was used, and what changed. *Rationale.* Dialogue makes mental models discussable (Senge, 2006), repairs the misunderstanding created by the "train has left the station" message (McKinney & Morris, 2010, p. 200), and reflects a public college's commitment to accountability.
- **Invest in faculty development and a terminal-degree pipeline.** Leaders should expand tuition reimbursement for faculty pursuing doctorates, clarify workload and scholarship expectations, and offer competitive salaries to new doctoral hires. *Rationale.* Staffing was a binding constraint at both colleges (McKinney & Morris, 2010), and developing internal talent respects faculty identity while meeting SACS requirements.
- **Measure readiness and student-centered outcomes.** The college should track staffing gaps, budget variance, access, retention, completion, graduate employment, and stakeholder trust. *Rationale.* These measures support the AIP evaluation phase (Capella University, n.d.) and show the community that growth serves the mission rather than displacing it.

Questions for Stakeholders

These open-ended questions help stakeholders uncover assumptions and collaborate with leadership on continuous improvement.

- **How does the proposed CCB program advance, and potentially strain, the college’s mission of accessible, affordable, high-quality education?** This question surfaces assumptions about identity and mission fit and invites a shared vision rather than compliance (Senge, 2006).
- **What evidence would show that workforce demand and student access needs justify this program, and what evidence would lead us to revise or delay it?** This question applies the intellectual standards of accuracy, relevance, and fairness to a decision that affects students and the community (Paul & Elder, 2012).
- **What staffing, financial, accreditation, and student-support conditions must be in place before the first cohort is admitted?** This question targets the system’s limiting conditions and makes capacity a shared responsibility (Senge, 2006; Stroh, 2015).
- **How might our own decisions and communication have contributed to the resistance we are now experiencing?** Stroh (2015) argued that lasting change requires stakeholders to recognize their own contribution to current reality.
- **How might faculty, students, and community partners share responsibility for designing and improving the CCB?** This question promotes team learning and participatory inquiry (Capella University, n.d.; Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2020).

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