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DEVELOPING SPECIALIZED MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN BUSINESS  
SCHOOLS: THE CONVERGENCE OF MISSION AND MARKETS

A Dissertation Presented  
by  
ELIZABETH J. BRISTOL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2023

Higher Education Program

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DEVELOPING SPECIALIZED MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS:  
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A Dissertation Presented

By

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## ABSTRACT

### DEVELOPING SPECIALIZED MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS: THE CONVERGENCE OF MISSION AND MARKETS

December, 2023

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M.B.A, Babson College  
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Practical problems can emerge when new academic programs are developed. If program development decisions are driven primarily by desires for enrollment growth and revenue generation, new programs may be created without clear connections to institutional missions or organizational core competencies. Additionally, introduction of new academic programs may generate internal conflict and competition for resources diminishing the capacity of both new and existing programs. Misalignment with mission, lack of connection to faculty expertise, and fierce internal competition for resources can create an environment where new academic programs are unlikely to thrive. The purpose of this multi-site case study was to understand how business school leaders develop new specialized master's programs in relation to missions, markets, and organizational core competencies.

Utilizing interviews with administrators and faculty members as well as document analysis, the study uncovered several findings about the development of specialized master's programs. First was a clear connection between institutional mission and institutional identity. Study participants believed that closely linking the new program to institutional

mission and identity would differentiate it from similar programs at competitor institutions. Second, regarding markets, study participants attempted to build upon existing institutional strengths as they developed the program and sought a niche in the market. However, all agreed that the search for a viable market niche should not overshadow the importance of maintaining their institution's core identity. Third, each institution's program development progress drew upon faculty knowledge and skills (organizational core competencies) as well as the faculty's ability and willingness to collaborate across departmental boundaries. Reliance on organizational core competencies, however, was also associated with administrative decisions to implement the new programs using primarily existing resources. Study participants noted that neither new faculty lines nor sufficient support for marketing and recruitment had been provided.

The study findings suggest that consideration of mission and institutional identity can serve to place boundaries on business schools' pursuit of enrollment markets. A second implication is that the introduction of a new master's program can serve as a catalyst for organizational learning and change within a business school.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation work is dedicated to my dear friend, Cathy, who has been a constant source of support and encouragement during the challenges of graduate school and life. I am truly thankful for having you in my life and part of my doctoral journey. I will never forget our dining room table conversations and all the wisdom you shared. Your unconditional care and unwavering support is the heart of this dissertation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background to the Study**

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) has been a part of the educational landscape for more than one hundred years. This graduate degree emerged during the early years of the 20th century to address the need for skilled managers in the growing industrial and corporate sectors. First established by Harvard University in 1908, MBA programs prepare students to enter management and leadership positions within business settings. The MBA is, by definition, a generalist program, which exposes students to a variety of disciplines including areas as dissimilar as finance and organizational studies (Daniel, 1998; DeNovellis, 2021; Kowarski, 2021).

MBA programs have played important roles in attracting revenues and prestige for business schools. Historically, MBA programs have provided steady revenue streams for their institutions (Morgan, 2013; Moulises, 2018). Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007) offer that university administrators often view graduate business schools as “cash cows” and seek to extract maximum financial benefit from these programs. Currently, the cost of an MBA degree at higher-ranked institutions is over \$200,000 and many students receive no financial aid (Moulises, 2018). Marcus (2021) suggests that multiple private institutions are relying on the funds they take in from their graduate business programs to stabilize their budgets. Additionally, rankings of MBA programs have served to enhance institutional prestige (Dearden, Grewal, & Lilien, 2019).

Hazelkorn (2015) argues that rankings allow institutions and their stakeholders to seek world-class excellence, and college and university leaders often pursue higher rankings (Pusser & Marginson, 2013) with an expectation that higher rankings will generate more applications.

MBA programs have historically driven enrollment growth for business schools in the United States, but in recent years, the popularity of these programs has begun to wane with decreases in both applications and enrollments. Applications to MBA programs in the United States have been decreasing for some time, with the 2017-2018 academic year marking the fourth straight year of decline (Mark, 2019). The Graduate Management Admissions Council (GMAC) reported that total MBA application volume in the United States declined from 150,749 in 2017 to 140,864 in 2018, a decrease of 6.6% (Jaschik, 2018). A longer-term view shows a culmination of years of slow but steady decline: when comparing the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) survey responses in 2013–14 and 2017–18, 53 percent of U.S. business schools reported a decline in applications to MBA programs (AACSB, 2019). Enrollment in MBA programs in the United States has also declined substantially. In 2008, 250,000 students were enrolled in MBA programs (Dakduk et al., 2016). In 2020, total MBA enrollment in the US had decreased to 156,000 (Byrne, 2022).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has made MBA application and enrollment volume even more difficult to predict. In 2019, the trend toward fewer applications continued, but in 2020, MBA applications at many top-tier institutions rebounded as the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent shutdown measures to contain it led to a world-wide economic downturn (Felsenthal, 2020). Typically, recessions and economic slowdowns bring an application rebound as career opportunities diminish (Byrne, 2019). However, smaller and less prestigious business schools did not experience the same type of rebound (Stewart, 2020). In



fact, some lower- and middle-tier business schools have seen their full-time MBA programs decline so significantly that they have been forced to cease operations (Ethier, 2020).

While the MBA has declined in popularity, specialized master's programs, such as those that focus on specific disciplines such as accounting, finance, information systems, management science and marketing, have become an increasingly significant segment of graduate business education. GMAC (2019) reported that more than 20% of students considering enrolling in a graduate business program are not considering MBA programs and are, instead, focusing only on applying to specialized master's programs. The 2020 GMAC survey revealed that nearly 80% of specialized master's programs reported growth in applications (GMAC, 2020). According to AACSB International, enrollments in specialized master's programs in the United States nearly doubled between 2006 and 2016 from 110,000 to almost 200,000 (Murray, 2018; Robinson, 2018). AACSB's 2021 Business School Data Guide reported a 19 percent increase in enrollment in specialized master's programs to more than 240,000 students during the 2020-2021 academic year (AACSB, 2021a). By 2020, in the United States, enrollment in specialized master's programs (240,000) had far outpaced enrollment in MBA programs (156,000).

The shift toward specialized master's degrees had been gaining momentum even prior to the coronavirus outbreak. Between 2012 and 2014, over half of the top 25 business schools in the United States added one or more specialized master's programs (Byrne, 2014). Furthermore, a 2018-2019 AACSB survey of 806 business schools found that 70 percent offered a specialized master's degree in accounting, while 50 percent offered a specialized master's degree in finance. Additionally, 17 percent of the schools surveyed had added a master's degree in business analytics, a relatively new field of study. Employment opportunities for graduates of specialized master's degree programs have also shown growth. A 2017 GMAC Corporate Recruiters Survey

revealed that globally 59% of the firms surveyed intended to hire graduates from specialized master's programs, an increase of 10 percent in the five years since the 2012 survey (GMAC, 2017).

A specialized master's program provides the theoretical groundwork needed to gain an understanding of a specific area of business. Of importance, specialized master's degrees typically cost less and take only about one year to complete, rather than the two-year sequence typical for an MBA. A 2019 GMAC study reveals that cost and time are among the biggest reservations candidates have when considering whether to pursue graduate business education. Candidates desire formats that are more flexible, shorter program durations, and quicker returns (DeNovellis, 2019). Specialized master's programs have gained popularity among a generation of students who are, increasingly, not willing to give up two years of work and salary to earn an MBA. Moreover, for specialized master's programs, a specified period of previous work experience is usually not a prerequisite. Less than two years of work experience is often acceptable, and many programs accept students immediately after completion of their undergraduate degree (Cook, 2022; Kowarski, 2022).

While these specialized degrees are offered in some traditional business fields, including accounting, finance, and operations, new areas of study have also emerged, including entrepreneurship and data analytics (Byrne, 2019; Murray, 2018). In contrast to the broad base of disciplines studied in a traditional MBA program, specialized master's programs are targeted for specific career tracks and may, therefore, be useful for students who want to hone their skills in a particular discipline such as finance or data analytics. In the generalist MBA program, the "A" in MBA is for administration, signifying the intent to educate practicing managers in a management context (Mintzberg, 2004). While the generalized curricular approach common in many MBA

programs is sufficient to prepare a student for a range of business-related situations, the specialized master's qualification serves to provide the candidate with the academic and theoretical knowledge to pursue a specific area of study. For prospective students, the advantage of pursuing a specialized master's degree is obtaining precise knowledge that is more in-depth than that provided in a generalist course such as an MBA.

Some evidence suggests that business schools have developed specialized master's programs as a response to changes in the market for graduate business education (Byrne, 2019; DeNovellis, 2019; McKenzie, 2020; Stockman, 2018). Now that enrollment in many MBA programs is declining, specialized master's programs are emerging in response to both the changing preferences of students and the current and future needs of potential employers. Institutional leaders may also believe that the development of specialized master's programs can both stabilize enrollments and maintain prestige. These program development strategies in business schools reflect a phenomenon that Ehrenburg (2000) identified in relation to establishing new master's programs in professional fields:

The attraction of expanding professional master's programs is that master's degree students typically receive much less financial assistance from university funds than do students enrolled in Ph.D. programs, and also, receive less financial aid, on average, than do the university's undergraduates. Hence, these programs have the potential to generate revenues that can help support the core undergraduate and doctoral programs at the institution. (p. 184)

When business schools add new master's degree programs, they may be attempting to respond to market trends, including student and employer expectations. However, business

school leaders could be rapidly adding programs simply to replace the revenues lost as MBA programs shrink. If program development decisions are driven primarily by revenue considerations, then business school leaders might create new programs without considering connections to institutional missions and core competencies available at their institution.

Institutional missions are formal statements of organizational purpose and direction that reflect the history and culture of a college or university (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Core competencies reflect the unique bundle of skills and technologies that an organization uses to achieve distinctive performance in one or more areas (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Academic programs that fail to align with institutional missions and core competencies are unlikely to attract the internal support and expertise needed to achieve a high level of effectiveness, thus resulting in potential failure to attract the students and revenues projected.

Experts argue that there is still a growing market for specialized master's degrees if they are designed and implemented carefully. Careful program development would include connections to institutional missions and core competencies, including faculty expertise. As McKenzie (2020) notes, the development of new master's degrees may be more successful if the programs are clearly connected to the institution's mission and existing faculty expertise:

For many schools, the best solution will be to develop small master's degrees around the differentiating expertise of the faculty. These master's programs should be thought of as strategic investments by their institutions, as they establish areas of expertise and specialization. The goal of these programs should be financial sustainability. It is also a mistake for schools to develop master's degrees simply to chase a market. Demand can

shift. A better strategy is for a school to play to their strengths and to create a master's that aligns with an institution's mission and values (p. 2).

Research on organizational change in higher education suggests that new academic programs can be more successful when they attempt to remain true to the values, culture, and historic aims of their institution (Eckel, Hill & Green, 1998). Kezar (2001) professes that higher education institutions should remain focused on their missions and resist any change that might endanger their institution's values. Furthermore, Kezar and Eckel (2002b) suggest that institutional culture plays an important role in the change process and that the distinct nature of campus cultures cannot be overlooked in trying to understand how change processes unfold and which strategies institutional leaders should emphasize. In addition, change strategies seem to be more successful when they are culturally coherent and aligned with the institutional culture. Tierney and Lanford (2018) state that "the challenge is to communicate to insiders and outsiders what an institution values and how those values distinguish one institution from other colleges and universities" (p. 7). However, in contrast to mission consistency, some institutions implicitly or explicitly move away from their missions when they add new academic programs.

Scholars have used multiple terms to characterize how higher education institutions sometimes move away from their missions during organizational change. Clark (1956) states that institutions engage in mission drift (also known as mission creep) when enrollments are declining. Morphew (2002) describes mission creep as changing the status or rank order of an institution. Tight (2018) defines mission drift as the tendency for lower status higher education institutions to aspire to higher status. For example, institutions that aspire to become research universities often add graduate programs and increasingly focus on research. In this case, the

concern arises that the original teaching focus of these institutions is diminished (Henderson, 2009). Milkovich (2016) defines the similar concept of mission fragmentation as the tendency of institutions to distribute resources among many competing demands that are not prioritized or aligned with mission objectives. Mission fragmentation can result in limited resources being thinly spread among a disparate array of unaligned goals.

Mission drift and mission fragmentation may be unintended consequences of efforts to enhance both revenues and prestige. Institutional prestige is an inherent part of the culture of higher education in the United States. Prestige in higher education is evidenced in classifications, rankings, and categorizations, which reflect the ever-changing landscape of higher education (McCormick & Zhao, 2005). An integral part of institutional prestige includes having graduate programs (Bowen & Rudenstine, 2014; Gardner, 2010). Institutional efforts to enhance prestige have been described as “striving” behaviors, which O’Meara (2007) defines as the efforts of colleges and universities to reposition themselves as more prestigious and often more research-focused institutions. Institutional striving can be defined broadly as “the institutional pursuit of prestige within the academic hierarchy” (O’Meara, 2007, p. 122). Bess and Dee (2008) offer that higher education institutions adopt striving behaviors in an attempt to gain a market advantage by emulating institutions that are more successful.

Previous scholarship has suggested that changes in colleges and universities’ organizational behavior, including the pursuit of prestige, often have been motivated by a desire (or possibly need) to generate enrollment-related revenue. Financial dependence on tuition has a long history in higher education. Veysey (1965) and Collins (1979) both argued that the modern American university emerged when struggling colleges adopted both curricular and marketing reforms in an effort to increase enrollments. Public higher education institutions have pursued

greater tuition revenue as the relative share of public (state government) funding has declined (Fowles, 2014; Mitchell, Leachman, & Saenz, 2019; Webber, 2017). For private institutions, while a small number of prestigious institutions generate substantial research, donation, and endowment revenues, most private institutions rely predominantly on tuition revenue (Desrochers & Wellman, 2011). As reliance on tuition revenue grows, the need to maintain enrollment numbers increasingly determines organizational decision-making. Kraatz, Ventresca, and Deng (2010) suggest that by introducing an ever-increasing diversified portfolio of degree programs, the goal of serving a distinct mission may be replaced by a goal of maximizing tuition revenues. When enrollment maintenance becomes an institution's primary concern, a decline in distinctive organizational mission may result as the institution attempts to become all things to all people (Birnbaum, 2002; Morphey, 2009).

In addition to accommodating enrollment and revenue pressures alongside fidelity to institutional mission, another important factor affecting academic program development relates to the roles and interactions of faculty and administrators. To determine institutional direction, allocate resources, and make strategic decisions that impact the institution's academic programs, administrators and faculty can work cooperatively (Del Favero & Bray, 2005). The faculty's institutional obligation is toward the development of academic programs that are both theoretically sound and academically rigorous. Unlike faculty, administrators are typically not involved in the core teaching and learning work of the institution, but they make possible the institutional autonomy, resources, and structure necessary for the conduct of academic work (Downey, 2000). Kezar (2014) suggests that while administrators value consistency and efficacy, faculty value freedom and flexibility. Nevertheless, research suggests that in order to implement successful programmatic change, the academic program development process must include both

subcultures: faculty and administrators (Givens, 2018; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Oliver & Hyun, 2011; Pukkila et al., 2007).

Faculty play an extremely important role when the introduction of new academic programs is being considered. New programs are more likely to succeed when the program content is aligned with faculty expertise at the institution (Dee & Heineman, 2016). Faculty can provide intellectual leadership for academic programs. Additionally, their disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical expertise can represent the core competencies of a higher education organization. Core competencies can include professional activities that integrate various forms of scholarship, enabling faculty members to create new knowledge through research, interpret knowledge across disciplines, examine teaching models to achieve optimal learning, and work to solve problems within the profession and across society (Milner, Gusic, & Thorndyke, 2011). Bess and Dee (2008) argue that “Core competencies define what the organization does well, perhaps what it does better than any other institution” (p. 729). If strategic initiatives are closely aligned with the institution’s core competencies, then the potential for success may be greatly increased. New academic initiatives are more likely to succeed over time when they can fully leverage existing organizational assets and capabilities. The hope is that a well thought out and carefully designed new program will meet the institution’s academic standards, attract students, meet workforce and societal needs, generate revenues, and fit within the institutional mission and culture (Morriss-Olson, 2020).

Given the decline in MBA applications and the growing interest in specialized master’s programs, many business schools are considering adding new degree programs to their portfolios (Marcus, 2019; McKenzie, 2020; Skopec, 2020). The creation of new master’s programs is a frequent tactic in institutional efforts to generate more revenue (Blagg, 2018; Marcus, 2019). The



development of new academic programs, however, represents a significant challenge for institutional leaders. A balance must be achieved between adding new programs in a timely manner, but also carefully determining if these programs are both academically appropriate and financially viable. Some graduate school officials are apprehensive about maintaining their institutions' financial viability and relevance in a rapidly changing economy (Burke, 2019). They are concerned that some of these programs (degrees in areas such as business analytics, entrepreneurship, and science and technology management) are being added to business schools' portfolios too hastily and without proper strategic planning. Administrators worry about the expenditures required for curriculum design, upgrades to facilities and technology, and the hiring of new faculty needed to launch new programs (Kennedy, 2001; Morriss-Olson, 2016b). Faculty may similarly express concern that the added responsibilities involved in designing and implementing a new program may lead to burn out and insufficient time to complete their other responsibilities (McMutrie, 2020). Students may be concerned about whether these new programs will be viable and will provide skills that are marketable.

### **Problem Statement**

Many business schools are faced with the challenge of declining enrollments in their MBA programs with a resultant revenue loss for their operations (Eduvantis, 2020). Stagnation or decline in MBA enrollments has generated pressures on business schools to attract greater enrollments through the development of new programs. As traditional full-time MBA programs have declined in prominence, specialized year-long master's programs have become more common.

Specialized master's programs could promote enrollment and revenue growth for business schools. However, when many competing institutions are employing similar strategies,

the desired outcome of increased enrollment may be challenging to achieve (Krupnick, 2020; Marcus, 2019; Morriss-Olson, 2016b). Even in a high-growth area such as data analytics, the growing number of business schools choosing to add programs threatens to dilute the market with more and more institutions competing to attract students from the same applicant pool. The 2019 GMAC report on application trends indicates that while applications to data analytics programs grew at most schools, that growth is slowing as more competitors enter the market (GMAC, 2019).

Business schools add new academic programs to their portfolios for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, business schools may be seeking to respond to market trends and student expectations. On the other hand, business schools may be adding programs simply to increase enrollment and tuition revenue without consideration of connection to the institution's mission and core competencies, including faculty expertise. The result may be the creation of academic programs that are not clearly aligned with the mission or capacities of the institution. New programs that are inconsistent with institutional mission and not aligned with available expertise and competencies could lead to mission fragmentation, where resources are thinly spread across relatively disconnected (or siloed) programs. The new programs may struggle to achieve the quality needed, and thus, fail to attract both the students and revenues desired.

As business schools develop specialized master's programs, two interrelated problems may emerge. First, if revenue generation is the primary motivation for academic program development, then new programs may not be aligned with institutional missions or faculty expertise. This lack of alignment increases the likelihood that the new program will not be institutionalized or sustained for the long term (Curry, 1992; Dee & Heineman, 2016). Specifically, without a connection to the institutional mission, the program might lack a distinct

or unique focus that could attract sufficient student enrollment. Without the clarity of purpose that connections to the mission can provide, it is difficult to prioritize strategic initiatives, allocate scarce resources efficiently and effectively, and demonstrate institutional value and impact. Educational programs should reflect the institutional mission in order to enjoy the full and informed support not just of the faculty but also of the board of trustees and the president, the primary stewards of the mission (Meacham & Gaff, 2006). Furthermore, without a connection to faculty expertise, the program would likely lack consistent intellectual leadership. Courses would likely be taught by adjunct faculty, and the curriculum might lack coherence as a result. Furthermore, if an institution develops a large number of programs that are disconnected from the mission and not supported by existing faculty expertise, then the institution will be susceptible to mission fragmentation.

The problem of lack of alignment between new program development and institutional missions and core competencies contributes to another problem on which this study focuses, specifically, the potential for mission fragmentation. As new academic programs are added, they often compete with existing programs for internal resources. When competing demands are not prioritized in terms of mission or strategy, then available resources may be spread thinly across a disparate array of programs (Milkovich, 2016). As a result, new programs do not receive the investment that they need to become successful. Furthermore, existing programs may experience budget reductions as resources are shifted to new initiatives. Alternatively, existing programs may engage in turf protection to hold onto the resources that they have customarily received. These internal battles for resources are far from the vision of a collaborative environment where new and existing programs can share resources and expertise.

To summarize, this study focuses on the practical problems that can arise when new academic programs are developed. A fixation with enrollment growth and revenue generation may lead to the creation of academic programs that are misaligned with institutional mission and faculty expertise (Marcus, 2018; Thomas, Lorange, & Sheth, 2013). Furthermore, the addition of new academic programs could generate internal conflict and a competition for resources that diminishes the capacity of both new and existing programs (Dickeson, 2010; Fannan & Saran, 2017). Misalignment with mission, lack of connection to faculty expertise, and fierce internal competition for resources can create an environment where new academic programs are unlikely to thrive. More research is needed, so that practitioners can learn how to develop more favorable conditions for academic program development. This study examines this research problem in the context of the development of specialized master's programs in business schools.

### **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

Higher education administrators have a complex set of factors to consider as they make decisions about which academic programs to develop (Dee & Heineman, 2016). If business school leaders make the decision to move away from enrollment dependency on the MBA toward a broader portfolio of specialized master's programs, then these leaders should also consider the implications of new program development for the total portfolio of master's programs at their institution. If decisions are driven primarily by a desire to generate more revenue, then academic program development has the potential to be misaligned with both the institution's mission and its core competencies, including the expertise of the institution's faculty. To date, research has not examined how and why business school leaders (both administrators and faculty) choose to add new specialized master's programs to their existing portfolios of graduate programs.

The purpose of this multi-site case study is to understand how business school leaders develop new specialized master's programs in relation to missions, markets, and organizational core competencies. Results garnered should lead to a greater understanding of the strategies and processes involved as institutions add new programs to their portfolio of degrees. Additionally, the findings may offer guidance to other institutions that are considering adding new master's degrees in business to their institution's graduate program portfolio.

This study focuses on how three business schools developed specialized master's programs. Using a multiple case study strategy, this study investigates the following research questions:

1. How did business school leaders at the three selected sites determine the need to develop new specialized master's programs within the context of their existing academic programs? Exploring this question enables the study to examine the extent to which leaders developed new programs that leveraged existing institutional strengths, or whether these leaders moved forward without clear priorities or strategies to manage competing demands from new and existing programs.
2. What role, if any, did institutional mission play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites? This question enables the study to determine whether the specialized master's programs extended or leveraged the mission in new ways, or whether institutional missions were overshadowed by desires for enrollment growth or revenue generation.
3. What role, if any, did markets play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites? This question allows the study to examine the role that enrollment growth or revenue generation played, as well as the institution's desire to

meet student expectations and the needs of potential employers through new program development.

4. To what extent, if any, did business school leaders draw upon organizational core competencies in the development of new specialized master's programs? This question enables the study to explore potential linkages between faculty expertise and new programs, as well as potential connections and synergies between existing academic programs and the new program.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual frameworks are key to conducting a transparent and trustworthy study and to guiding data collection and analysis. "A conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, constructs, or variables – and the presumed relationships among them" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 18).

Academic program development constitutes the phenomenon of interest for this study. Relatedly, the study seeks to understand the ways in which markets, missions, and organizational core competencies shape the development of new specialized master's programs in business schools. Figure 1 displays the conceptual framework designed to guide this qualitative research study. This study utilizes Melissa Morriss-Olson's (2016a, 2020) framework that offers five criteria to be considered when a higher education institution evaluates whether to move forward with the development of a new academic program.

Figure 1: Morriss-Olson's (2016a) Framework

Mission and Opportunity	Operational Feasibility	Market Niche	Internal Support	Failure Potential Versus Opportunity Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>With limited resources, it is critical to consider all opportunities in light of mission:</b></li> <li>• <i>What impact will this new program have on mission?</i></li> <li>• <i>Will this program limit or enhance our mission impact and in what way?</i></li> <li>• <i>What will happen if we do not do this?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Equally important are the questions that help us assess whether we have the operational capacity to undertake this new effort and do it well:</b></li> <li>• <i>What does success look like?</i></li> <li>• <i>What will it take to be successful?</i></li> <li>• <i>How long will it take to be successful?</i></li> <li>• <i>What existing institutional assets might we draw upon to launch this effort?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A third key set of criteria involves assessing whether we can develop a market niche in a particular area:</b></li> <li>• <i>What is the market context?</i></li> <li>• <i>Do we have the capability to carve out a niche?</i></li> <li>• <i>Does this niche make sense for us and is it attainable?</i></li> <li>• <i>Do we have a built-in market?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>In considering new program possibilities, I try to gauge the initial level of internal support as early in the process as possible. Key questions include:</b></li> <li>• <i>Do we have a champion(s) for this program?</i></li> <li>• <i>What role might this champion play in the development, launch and maintenance of the program?</i></li> <li>• <i>What benefits and limitations are associated with this champion?</i></li> <li>• <i>Is anyone likely to resist this initiative and if so, for what reasons?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A fifth consideration involves assessing the potential for failure against the potential for success. Questions that help us assess both the probability and impact of failure include:</b></li> <li>• <i>What might go wrong?</i></li> <li>• <i>How likely is it that this will happen?</i></li> <li>• <i>If this happens, what is the impact?</i></li> <li>• <i>How much failure can we tolerate and for how long?</i></li> </ul>

Source: Developed based on material in Morriss-Olson (2016a, pp. 3-6)

Given the challenges facing higher education, Morriss-Olson (2020) suggests that traditional management approaches such as strategic planning, resource prioritization, and cost cutting measures are no longer adequate long-term solutions. “In this current context, successful institutions are dynamically outward looking and have developed a discipline around driving entrepreneurial growth in ways that leverage and further extend the mission” (p. 146). Morriss-Olson further posits that an entrepreneurial mindset is key. At the institutional level, developing and maintaining such a mindset is both an art and a science. Academic leaders can openly encourage faculty and other institutional stakeholders to discuss and propose ideas for new programs (the art), but also develop a rigorous process to identify, evaluate, and operationalize the feasibility of these program ideas (the science).

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between Morriss-Olson's (2016a) framework and the study's research questions. Each research question incorporates multiple academic program development criteria. The first criterion is mission and opportunity. Morriss-Olson (2016a) argues that it is imperative to consider whether the new program would limit or enhance the institution's stated mission. Second is operational feasibility, which relates directly to the question of whether new academic programs are aligned with the institution's core competencies. The institution must consider if it has the operational assets and capacity (including faculty) to develop and support the proposed program. Third is market niche, which gives consideration to the current market context and potential student demand for a new program. Fourth is internal support within the institution. Within an academic environment, it is crucial to consider how the proposed new program might fit within the cultural and political context of the institution. In this context, alignment with mission and involvement among faculty may be critical. Finally, failure potential versus opportunity assessment must be evaluated. The potential market demand for the program should be considered, as well as any internal or external factors that could lead to the program failing.



Figure 2: Relationship between Morriss-Olson's (2016a) Framework and the Study's Research Questions.

Research Questions		Morriss-Olson (2016a) Framework 5 Criteria				
		Mission and Opportunity	Operational Feasibility	Market Niche	Internal Support	Failure Potential vs Opportunity Assessment
1	How did business school leaders at the three selected sites determine the need to develop new specialized master's programs within the context of their existing academic programs?	X	X	X	X	X
2	What role, if any, did institutional mission play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites?	X				X
3	What role, if any, did markets play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites?		X	X		X
4	To what extent, if any, did business school leaders draw upon organizational core competencies in the development of new specialized master's programs?		X		X	

### Significance of the Study

This study may hold significant value for college and university administrators and other decision makers contemplating expanding their portfolio of master's degree programs. Many organizations engage constantly in change initiatives that seek to enhance effectiveness and ensure the organization's survival (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Hannan & Freeman, 1984). As administrators make decisions to expand their master's degree portfolio, they should also consider whether the proposed programs align with the institution's mission and core competencies, including faculty knowledge and expertise. This study will help higher education administrators gain an understanding of the academic program development process, including why and how decisions are made to modify the existing portfolio of graduate programs, the strategies and processes involved, and the ways in which vital assets of the institution – mission

and core competencies – were incorporated in the process. Readers of this study may benefit by acquiring a grounded knowledge of new academic program development, as well as gain practical knowledge as to the possibilities and limitations of such organizational change initiatives. Adding to the information available on how institutions respond to both societal and institutional demands for accountability and performance improvement is also of importance to all college and university administrators. While business schools adding master's degrees to their program portfolios will be the study's focus, the information gathered will likely be applicable in other academic domains.

This study will expand the literature currently available in several areas. Organizational change in higher education has been studied extensively (Bess & Dee, 2008, Birnbaum, 1988; Cameron, 1984; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009), but the rationale and decision making associated with developing specialized master's degrees in business schools has yet to be examined. Furthermore, while mission statements are commonplace in higher education, the literature is limited regarding how leaders use institutional missions to guide the development of new academic programs. Additionally, this study will expand the information available on academic program development. To develop new academic programs, colleges and universities can be both entrepreneurial and mission-centric (Morriss-Olson, 2016a; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massey, 2005a). A greater understanding of the strategies and processes involved may serve to guide institutional leaders considering the addition of new programs to their degree portfolios in response to changing market forces and growing demands for improved accountability and performance.

The current landscape of post-baccalaureate learning is complex. On one hand, demand for the master's degree has never been higher -- the share of the U.S. population with an

advanced degree has increased from 5 percent in 1980 to 13 percent more recently (Burke, 2019). Yet, while employers continue to demand master's-level credentials and the skills they endow, societal concerns surrounding debt and the worth of degrees have led some to question the value of a master's degree (Lorenzo, 2019). While it is difficult to quantify the value of an education, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) consistently shows that earning an advanced degree offers financial rewards in addition to knowledge gained (Torpey, 2018). Individuals who have attained master's degrees have both higher weekly salaries and lower rates of unemployment than individuals with high school diplomas or bachelor's degrees (Torpey, 2018). Historically, enrollment in master's degree programs has increased as educational credentials became institutionalized as the primary pathway to upward career and social mobility (Brown, 2001; Collins, 1979; Larson & Larson, 1979). There is general agreement that graduate degrees enhance skills and increase wages for recipients (Fain, 2020; Frenette, 2019; Grubb, 1993; Heywood, 1994; Hungerford & Solon, 1987; Torpey, 2018). Independent of the knowledge acquired by workers or the applicability of that knowledge to a given job, a graduate degree signals abilities (Spence, 1974) in which employers assume workers to be more competent when they have more education (Chiswick, 1973).

U.S. higher education has sustained its globally preeminent position in part because of graduate education (Cole, 2010; Menand, 2010; Stewart, 2010). The professional master's degree has become the main credentialing tool used by professions to recognize expertise and skill within a given field. With the bombardment of global competition in the higher education market (Florida, 2006; Friedman, 2005), the relevance of U.S. graduate education and its significance have been scrutinized (Cole, 2010; Hacker & Dreifus, 2010; Stewart, 2010). Westerbeck (2019) advises:

Each business school must develop its own understanding of the needs and expectations of its unique stakeholders and prospects; each school must deliver differentiated value to these audiences, based on its unique assets, value, and competencies. To do this, it must also commit to new levels of objective decision-making, based on the disciplined use of comprehensive data, to establish their brand positioning, products, delivery models, marketing, selling processes-in short, to more strategically and effectively direct everything they do. (p. 2)

Business schools currently face numerous challenges. These include new content in management education, new teaching methods, the development of new faculty, new student needs, academic research relevant to management practice, sustainability and social responsibility, greater stakeholder participation, globalization, technology, and finally, growing competition and the need to expand into new markets (Avolio, Benzaquen, & Pretell, 2019). These challenges were exacerbated with the arrival of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which caused a dramatic disruption of higher education around the world. The pandemic has resulted in even greater complexities for higher education leaders to address, given the expenditures that colleges and universities have made to ensure the health and safety of students and faculty, as well as to update the technology required to facilitate distance learning (Farrell, 2021). In March 2020, higher education consulting and digital marketing firm, Eduvantis, sent a survey to 452 business school deans in the United States about the effects of coronavirus on business education (Eduvantis, 2020). Nearly half of the deans who responded believed that the public health crisis caused by the coronavirus would accelerate the closure of business schools.

If business school leaders become fixated on quickly developing new academic programs to gain enrollment and generate revenue, then they may not clearly link these new programs to institutional missions or leverage existing faculty expertise to guide these new programs. This study on academic program development in business schools can provide insights into the connections among market responsiveness and mission centeredness. As Zemsky, Wegner, and Massey (2005a) argue, being responsive to market demands and being grounded in institutional missions are not mutually exclusive; in fact, a dual focus on markets and missions may be needed, if leaders are to create favorable environments for academic program development.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

In the academic world, multiple changes are occurring simultaneously: evolving technology, increasing globalization, rapidly changing markets, and growing importance of knowledge capital (Rothwell, Prescott, & Taylor, 2008). Students must prepare for a world of rapidly changing technology, increasing global interconnectedness, and new forms of employment (McGivney & Winthrop, 2016; Stewart, Wall, & Marciniak, 2016). As a result, higher education institutions often find themselves in a competitive marketplace, as they seek to increase both their visibility and reputation (Goldman & Salem, 2015). Many college and university leaders have re-examined organizational strategy to adapt to environmental changes, and strategic priorities have emerged in areas related to academic program development, improved pedagogy, enhanced technology, and distance education (Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004; Klobstien et al., 2019; Kotler & Murphy, 1981; Rowley, 1997; Taylor & Machado, 2006).

Eckel and Trower (2019) suggest that to effect change institutional leaders should focus on strategy so that they can operate more efficiently, make smarter choices among competing priorities, and set the course for a sustainable future. They posit that strategy can be the bridge between mission and organizational change, theorizing that institutions would be better served to start by articulating statements of strategy and then creating operational plans to deliver on those statements. They also state that strategy should be established and advanced as a collaborative

effort among all involved stakeholders. To effectively utilize a strategic approach to organizational change, higher education leaders can contemplate the following questions:

- What key objectives will best ensure that we fulfill our mission in the foreseeable future?
- Who are our key audiences and how are their needs and aspirations changing?
- How is the environment evolving and what does that mean for our competitive advantage?
- Who are our competitors -- both traditional and nontraditional -- and in what ways are they competing differently? How might we respond?
- What do we not do or consider not doing? What are the boundaries of our efforts? What criteria is used to demarcate what is inside and outside those boundaries?

(Eckel & Trower, 2019, p. 5)

If strategy is the bridge between mission and organizational change, then business school leaders will need to develop and use strategic priorities as they add to and modify the portfolio of graduate programs that they offer. Strategic priorities can reflect not only a desired future for an organization, but also be grounded in the mission, history, and core competencies that organizational members have developed over many years (Bess & Dee, 2008). In other words, if strategy is a bridge, then it spans from mission and history toward change and the future, without losing a connection to either side in which it is anchored. An adaptive higher education institution has the ability to pivot and change, but not at the expense of its core mission and values (Tierney, 2008).

This chapter seeks to inform an understanding of academic program development, including the creation of specialized master's programs within the graduate program portfolios of

business schools. First, an overview of the history of business education is presented. To understand contemporary trends in the development of master's degree programs in business, it is imperative to first gain an understanding of the historical context of business education. Second, the organizational context for change in higher education is examined. Even when change is required, the process is challenging. Theoretical perspectives on organizational change can identify important variables in the change process that can support or hinder the development of new academic programs. Colleges and universities are organizations with a unique context that shapes how decisions are made about academic program development. Third is a review of power dynamics and shared governance. Colleges and universities have multiple stakeholders that must be satisfied and multiple players who must reach agreement for any proposed change to be implemented. Fourth, the chapter provides an examination of mission and strategy in higher education. As college and university leaders create new academic programs, they may draw upon an understanding of the market in which they are operating, as well as knowledge about how they can compete within this market while maintaining their mission and academic standards. Fifth, a discussion of academic program development particularly framed within a business school setting and including the role of managing academic program portfolios concludes the chapter.

### **History of Business Education**

Trends in contemporary business education in the United States can be traced to their historical roots. For many years, the MBA was the preeminent graduate degree in business, but its dominance has diminished in the last decade (DeNovellis, 2019; Ethier, 2020). How and why business education developed and how it has changed through the years is delineated in this section of the chapter.



The MBA has been part of the educational landscape for more than one hundred years, developing just a couple of decades after Joseph Wharton established the first undergraduate collegiate business school in 1881, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Commerce (Heald, 1970). Wharton was inspired by German universities' use of the scientific method involving rigorous measurement, data collection, and analysis techniques (Mintzberg, 2004).

In 1900, Dartmouth University became the first American university to offer a master's degree in business. The program required an additional year of study beyond the bachelor's degree and was taught primarily by former business executives, thus leading to a functional curriculum (Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003). Just eight years later in 1908, Harvard University established the first MBA program (Cudd, King, & O'Hara, 1995).

Early in the development of business education, debate commenced as to the appropriate balance between the academic and the practical. This debate can be traced to the competing approaches of Wharton, which focused on business theory and scholarship, and Harvard, which favored a more experiential model (Mintzberg, 2004). This fine line between the world of academic learning and the world of business practice has been the subject of continuing debate and controversy.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, MBA programs' academic standards varied markedly (Mintzberg, 2004). While the top programs' curricula placed significant focus on scholarship utilizing a social-sciences orientation, in other less prestigious programs, a growing association between academics and industry in the 1920s and 1930s led to the development of a more vocational business education model (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Heald, 1970). By the 1940s, employers began to complain that the MBA curriculum had not kept pace with the business

world's changing needs (Mintzberg, 2004; Heald, 1970). After World War II, this criticism intensified (Cudd, King, & O'Hara, 1995). Mintzberg (2004) offers that while the world of business was rapidly changing, the knowledge available to students either through textbooks or cases was not. Mintzberg views vocationalism, that is, the teaching of job-specific skills, as having triumphed without a proper emphasis on scholarship in most graduate business degree programs.

In the context of business schools accommodating both academic and practical values, private foundations have been active contributors to reforms in business education. In 1949, the Mellon Foundation provided a six-million-dollar endowment to the Carnegie Institute of Technology (which would later become Carnegie Mellon University) to establish a new business school with a focus on underlying academic disciplines, as well as an emphasis on analytical skills (Mintzberg, 2004). In 1954, the effort to reform business education became more comprehensive when the Ford Foundation established a 35-million-dollar endowment to encourage business schools to establish a focus on research and analysis skills in their curricula (Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003).

In 1959, two reports offered substantial criticism of American graduate management education. Robert Aaron Gordon and James Edwin, two economists commissioned by the Ford Foundation, wrote the "Higher Education for Business" report, and Frank Pierson authored the Carnegie Foundation's "The Education of American Businessmen: A Study of University-College Programs in Business Administration." Both reports claimed that the movement toward specialized, increasingly vocational courses would need to give way to a more integrated approach that would take in all business operations and functions from a broad managerial viewpoint and emphasize both analytical rigor and problem-solving abilities (Gabor, 2008). The

reports also recommended more course work on the social context of business, including the evolving legal, political, social, economic, and intellectual environments. Finally, the studies recognized “that the scientific and theoretical foundations of business needed shoring up, a goal that would require increasing the percentage of faculty with Ph.D.’s, placing a stronger emphasis on research, and expanding the training of faculty and students in both behavioral sciences and quantitative methods” (Gabor, 2008, p. 2).

The response to these reports was immediate. Business schools raised both their admissions and teaching standards and placed a significant emphasis on academic research. The overall result was the construction of what is now known as the classic American MBA model: a first year of required core courses in the basics of management and a second year of electives to allow specialization (Daniel, 1998).

By the 1970s, there was a growing concern that too much emphasis was being placed on quantitative content with a resultant lack of focus on management and leadership skills. Spurred by a Carnegie Commission report (1973) recommending curricular changes, many institutions added courses in areas such as organizational behavior and team building, although the overall structure of their curricula did not change dramatically (Augier & Teece, 2005; Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003).

From the early 1990s, graduate business programs relished popularity and rising enrollments (Blum, 1991; Crainer & Dearlove, 1999; Evangelauf, 1990; Porter, 1997; Porter & McKibbin, 1988). In 1990, 78,255 master’s degrees in business were conferred in the United States. By 2000, this number had grown to 115,602, representing nearly a 48% increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Critics, nevertheless, offered a cautionary warning that the success enjoyed by business schools was causing business educators to develop

a self-satisfied and complacent attitude regarding their program offerings. One potential mechanism to ensure quality in academic programs is through accreditation. Brink and Smith (2012) note that accreditation “is one method of holding a program or institution accountable and demonstrating that the program/institution meets at least a minimum quality threshold” (p. 1).

AACSB International was founded in 1916 as the Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (ACSB). A central foundational tenet of AACSB International was to ensure the “improvement of collegiate education for business” (Flesher, 2007, p. 10) through the development of standards and the accreditation of business schools offering bachelor’s and graduate degrees. In 1919, the minimum accreditation standards for schools seeking membership were approved. By 1925, ACSB had changed its name to the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and developed new standards for admission to the association. By 2021, 901 institutions across 58 countries and territories had earned AACSB accreditation in business (AACSB, 2021c).

In 1991, AACSB developed a set of curriculum standards for master’s in business administration (MBA) programs (Herrington, 2010). Approximately every ten years, AACSB releases a new set of standards that must be met by colleges and universities as they seek to attain or retain accreditation. The organization has also regularly supported studies of business education.

In 1985, the AACSB commissioned a study on management education in response to the argument that the curriculum in business schools was not responding to, or effectively reflecting, industry and societal changes. Known as the Porter and McKibbin report, the study was completed over the course of three years and sought to investigate what changes business schools would need to make to maintain relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among the report’s conclusions

were a greater need for strategic planning in business education, focusing on both supply/demand patterns and societal expectations, as well as a continuing examination of the relevance of business school curricula focusing on factors such as the external environment and international dimensions of business (Porter & McKibbin, 1988).

Furthermore, beyond the technical dimensions of management, future business leaders are likely to benefit from the development of skill sets associated with emotional intelligence, as well as the ability to foster stability, foresight, connection, improvisation, and comfort with ambiguity. Datar et al. (2010) looked critically at both the nature and the mission of business schools. They identified new skills that business leaders need from their education: leadership, critical thinking, creativity, ethics, global perspective, and cultural awareness. These authors posit that if business is to rise to the complex challenges of the 21st century, business education will have to take a leap forward.

Market shifts and societal changes are bringing forth new expectations from students who are often looking beyond MBA programs and considering specialized master's programs. In Europe, the Master's in Management, or MiM, is a well-established business education program (Byrne, 2020). The MiM was one of the first examples of a specialized business master's degree that differed from the MBA. The CEMS Alliance (Community of European Management Schools) was established in December 1988 by four leading European schools (ESADE Barcelona, HEC Paris, Università Bocconi, and the University of Cologne) and designed the first truly European business education program through a single Master's in Management (MiM) degree. This pioneer program allowed students to travel between member schools and countries for their studies, with a goal of equipping them with the necessary skills to succeed in international business environments. CEMS now includes 29 institutions from nearly

as many countries and has more than sixty corporate partners (Symonds, 2014). In 2019, the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Masters in Management Rankings ranked 135 programs offering MiM degrees. Ninety-six of the colleges/universities are based in Europe, while 21 are located in the United States (Megraoui, 2021).

Eighty five percent of worldwide MiM degrees are offered in Europe (Pop, 2021). Originally offered as a Master's of Science degree in business, the MiM is designed to offer in-depth theory-based classes in one or more subject areas. In addition, many European business schools also include practical experiences, as well as regular seminars with business practitioners, thus contributing to an impression that MiM degrees are more valuable in an increasingly global market (Pop, 2021).

Historically in the United States, specialized master's programs have had a lower profile than in Europe and may not be as well understood among two important groups of stakeholders – students and industry. However, these programs in the United States are rapidly gaining visibility. Prospective students may prefer the more flexible formats, lower costs, shorter program durations, and quicker returns. Another factor is the changing hiring habits of potential employers. A greater emphasis on soft skill development and greater facility with big data analytics were mentioned in a 2018 Financial Times survey of skills employers are seeking (Nilsson, 2018). Reputation is another possible reason some business schools are shifting their focus. In a competitive market, small business schools have found it difficult to compete with larger and more well-known business schools. By finding a niche and shifting their focus away from the MBA to specialized master's degrees in a variety of areas, small business schools may hope to differentiate themselves and build their reputation (DeNovellis, 2019).

## **Organizational Context for Change in Higher Education**

For academic institutions to survive and thrive, they must change (Kezar, 2018).

Developing new academic programs, for example, is an important part of growing enrollments, maintaining relevancy in the curriculum, and differentiating the institution from its competitors. McRoy and Gibbs (2009), however, state that managing change in higher education institutions is a difficult task, generally undertaken at times of pressure on budgets and often with unclear objectives. They further suggest that the factors needed to promote change within higher education can be either external or internal and that considering the viewpoints of multiple shareholders is crucial in any change process. Many researchers believe that, overwhelmingly, organizational change is initiated as a response to environmental changes and pressures (Birnbaum, 1988; Cameron, 1984; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) suggest that scholars have focused on external drivers of change in a university setting, specifically on government policy changes, and on their structural impact. Hence, they posit that research in higher education has somewhat neglected the complex reality of the university as an organization possessing its own structures, cultures, and practices.

In order to encourage change within higher education, a number of features distinctive to higher education institutions must be well thought-out. These distinctive features include autonomy for both institutions and academic workers, as well as a shared governance system involving multiple power and authority structures. Overlooking these factors may result in mistakes in analysis and strategy (Dee & Heineman, 2016). Furthermore, using concepts foreign to the values of the academy will most likely fail to engage the very people who must bring about the change (Bess & Dee, 2008; Birnbaum, 1991).

It is particularly important to understand the unique context of an organization before attempting to begin any change process. An organization's context is its "operating environment" (Pojasek, 2013, p. 1). The organizational context can be defined as the structural, cultural, and power configurations that characterize a particular college or university, as well as the external environment in which that institution operates (Bess & Dee, 2008). To establish the context means to define both the external and the internal factors that the organization must consider in the change process. An organization's external context includes its outside stakeholders, its local operating environment, as well as any external factors that influence the selection of its objectives (goals and targets) or its ability to meet its goals. The organization's internal context includes its internal stakeholders, its approach to governance, as well as its capabilities and culture (Pojasek, 2013).

Understanding the organizational context matters because it determines the influence and priority of stakeholder roles in the change process. The organizational context reveals which external stakeholders are linked to the institution, which procedures are used to make decisions, which values and beliefs guide those decisions, and which groups and individuals will ultimately have the most influence on the decision outcomes (Shepherd & Rudd, 2014). Tierney (1988) states that:

Institutions certainly are influenced by powerful, external factors such as demographic, economic, and political conditions, yet they are also shaped by strong forces that emanate from within. This internal dynamic has its roots in the history of the organization and derives its force from the values, processes, and goals held by those most intimately involved in the organization's workings. An organization's culture is reflected in what is



done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level (p. 3).

The context for organizational change in higher education has been explored in several empirical studies. Kezar and Eckel (2002a) conducted a case study of six institutions over a four-year period in an effort to develop a transformational change framework. They found that five core strategies were present at all the institutions that made substantial progress towards change: 1) senior administrative support, 2) collaborative leadership, 3) robust design, 4) avenues for staff development, and 5) production of tangible results. Senior administrative support involved developing support structures, providing financial resources, creating incentive structures, and using external factors constructively. Regarding collaborative leadership, the findings showed that leadership teams, composed of individuals from across the institution, sought to create a collaborative environment with avenues for involvement through workshops, symposiums, and roundtables. Having a direction to move toward as well as a flexible plan were central elements. Furthermore, robust design involved several years of campus-wide dialog, refined by the leadership teams, and shared with the entire campus. Multiple opportunities were also provided for staff development to create an understanding of the processes necessary to bring about the desired changes. Finally, sharing of tangible results provided participants a sense of accomplishment. These core strategies were effective because they provided opportunities for key participants to create a new sense of direction and priorities for the institution, and also to gain a greater understanding of their roles in transforming the institution. These strategies also served to foster organizational sensemaking. Sensemaking allows people to craft, understand,

and accept new conceptualizations of the organization and then to act in ways consistent with those new interpretations (Kezar & Eckel, 2002a).

Institutional culture is also an important factor regarding organizational change in higher education. An organizational culture can engender a needed sense of connectedness among the varied constituents associated with a campus (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005). Kezar and Eckel (2002b) examined the effect of institutional culture on change strategies by assessing the degree to which change processes are enhanced by following culturally sensitive change strategies and/or thwarted by violating cultural norms. They found that change strategies were more successful when they were culturally coherent or aligned with the institution's culture. Conversely, institutions that violated their institutional culture during the change process often experienced difficulty with implementing change initiatives. They recommend that campuses conduct audits of their institutional cultures before attempting to engage in the change process.

In higher education institutions, organizational identity is another core component to consider when conducting a change activity. Organizational identity is defined as a set of statements that organizational members perceive to be "central, distinctive, and enduring" to their organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 265). Studies of institutional identity and mission have been conducted at both small, liberal arts institutions and larger universities. Cowan's (1993) examination of eleven small colleges facing significant financial difficulties exposed that in the years previous to their struggles, the colleges failed to recognize a strong institutional identity. According to Cowan (1993), at these eleven institutions, there was a pervasive feeling that "the college was whatever and for whomever each person determined" (p. 32). The serious problem for small colleges (and for institutions more broadly) is an absence of a clear sense of institutional identity and purpose to guide strategy formation and related decisions. After five of

the colleges were able to come back from the edge, one participant in Cowan's study commented: "There's a feeling now [that] we really are what we say we are" (p. 34).

Hartley (2003) identified three liberal arts colleges experiencing a crisis of purpose and used interviews and review of institutional documents to describe how groups of individuals at these institutions responded to crisis by seeking a more satisfying institutional life. At these three institutions, Hartley found that broad-based discussions among multiple stakeholders led to the articulation of a compelling educational vision and the enactment of new policies reflecting this vision. Reclaiming the institution's historical roots proved to be an effective way of reestablishing a distinctive identity. At each institution, the founding purposes were almost universally considered to be legitimate. Evoking history tied the change effort to something deeper and reinforced the sense that the institution was "special." Positive effects included increases in both enrollments and fund raising, as well as the emergence of a very different institutional ethos in which the previous despondency gave way to a sense of pride and accomplishment. Hartley concludes: "The central element of any strong organizational culture -- one that is resilient and efficient and that engenders commitment -- is a compelling sense of purpose" (p. 75).

Similarly, Carey (2014) completed a qualitative study of two small private colleges that faced significant financial difficulty and possible closure, but were able to regain financial stability. The research involved detailed interviews with multiple stakeholders. Entrepreneurial leadership was found to be a critical factor in fostering institutional transformation. Data analysis identified the importance of the president and the leadership team promoting the uniqueness of the institution, communicating the vision for the plan, and implementing the plan in a timely manner.

Brownell (2016) explored how faculty members perceived the actions of leaders who attempted to revitalize struggling private four-year institutions. Semi-structured interviews were completed with ten faculty members, each employed at a small to medium-sized institution facing financial challenges, to obtain data about how faculty stakeholders interacted within an organization attempting to move from documented decline to revitalization. Findings revealed dissonance between leader intentions and faculty stakeholder perceptions regarding turnaround actions and processes. Many faculty members felt that the change process had not been transparent and that communication from administration had been limited and incomplete. Additionally, some faculty members experienced stress and burnout, leading to limited institutional engagement. Brownell concluded that if institutional leaders do not pay proper attention to faculty perceptions of leadership actions during each stage of the turnaround process, then they risk implementing change strategies that result in disengaged employees and a decreased chance of the turnaround being successful.

Hartig (2020) studied the complex changes associated with merging two higher education institutions. This qualitative study focused on faculty involvement in the academic merger process. Twelve faculty members from twelve different institutions in the process of merging with another institution were interviewed. Conclusions included that transparency and communication helped to build trust and that faculty members who are provided with clear expectations and outcomes will be more engaged in the process. The merger of two institutions is an extraordinarily complex change process likely to fail without the support and participation of organizational members. Study findings suggest that presenting a clear plan as a roadmap for the merger and effectively communicating the path forward to faculty members contributes to the

success of the proposed merger. Acknowledging the discomfort involved and finding ways to celebrate successes as the project proceeds also assist in promoting a successful outcome.

Holley (2009) applied Kezar and Eckel's framework of transformative change in a case study of 21 research universities in the United States, all of which were making change efforts to meet the growing demand for interdisciplinary knowledge. This framework supports the idea that change occurs over time and brings significant shifts in the way an institution sees itself. Findings indicated that the implementation of interdisciplinary initiatives was accomplished not only through changes in how institutional work is organized and the physical space in which the work is carried out, but also through simultaneous shifts in the institutional culture related to interdisciplinary activities. These findings are consistent with Birnbaum (2000) who stated that change processes are likely to be successful only when they are carefully and critically studied by administrators and faculty and are assimilated slowly enough for the effects to change the culture of the institution.

Empirical research on organizational change in higher education reveals a range of complexities that Vlachopoulos (2021) describes as a paradox. It is a field in which new ideas, solutions, and practices are constantly developing within different academic fields. When research data contradict current beliefs or models, ideas are changed. On the other hand, professors and managers in higher education consider it difficult to change the practices and behaviors which may be necessary for the continued growth and success of the institution. Diamond (2006) also offers that colleges and universities exist in a culture of competition among institutions, programs, and faculty. As a result, cooperation may not only be difficult to achieve, but may not be rewarded. Moreover, campus tradition, which can be a barrier to change, is often not considered when change is proposed.

## Shared Governance and Power Dynamics

### Shared Governance

While the previous section in this chapter focused on the organizational context for change in higher education, this section examines a specific component of that context that directly shapes the development of new academic programs. Shared governance is a complex concept that requires a delicate balance between faculty and staff participation in planning and decision-making processes, on the one hand, and administrative accountability on the other (Olson, 2009). “For perhaps the last 75 years, shared governance has been an overriding principle that guides decision making in American universities” (Kezar, Lester, & Anderson, 2006, p. 121). The core notion of shared governance is that faculty members and administrators both have important roles to play in setting institutional policy.

Effective and responsive governance is vitally important during times of change in higher education. When shared governance is viewed as more than a set of boundaries and rules of engagement, it can create a system where the integral leaders (administration and faculty) move beyond the fragmentation of traditional governance. They move toward shared responsibility for identifying and pursuing an aligned set of sustainable strategic directions. If their efforts are aligned, then solutions may be more thoughtful, and implementation might be faster (Bahls, 2014). Shared governance can play a vital role as institutions choose to design and implement new academic programs (Jackson, 2020). Relating to curricular issues, Mortimer and Sathre (2007) assert that a “program of study is not just a faculty responsibility, but a responsibility of the institution as a whole” (p. 55). They argue that this partnership is necessary in order to avoid what they refer to as a “chain of events [in which] ...programs of study that often emerge and are not the result of systematic planning” (p. 57). Without proper planning, the program may lack

clear objectives, adequate resources, and internal support. Moreover, the program may not appropriately reflect the institution's mission and/or its academic standards.

A dual system of authority involving administrators and faculty has long characterized shared governance in U.S. higher education institutions. Corson (1960) was among the first to identify the administration of colleges and universities as presenting "a unique dualism in organizational structure" (p. 43). Corson saw the university as including two structures existing in parallel: the conventional administrative hierarchy and the structure through which faculty make decisions regarding those aspects of the institution over which they have jurisdiction. This dual system of authority was further complicated by the fact that neither system had consistent patterns of structure or delegation. The faculty governance structure on every campus was different, and each administration seemed to have been established "to meet specific situations in particular institutions or to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of individuals in various echelons" (p. 45).

These dual sources of authority, administrative and professional, frequently are in conflict about academic decisions (Birnbaum, 1988). Unlike many other organizations in which those at the top of the institutional hierarchy make all the key decisions, in colleges and universities, these responsibilities typically are shared between faculty and administration, each acting on their own source of organizational authority. Mintzberg (1993) explains that the administration's authority arises from the organization's hierarchy and structure, as well as from the legal rights of administrators to set direction, control budget, and develop institutional strategy. However, at the same time, the faculty has its own source of authority derived from their specialized training and expertise, which are essential to their fundamental role in delivering core organizational functions. These dual sources of authority can come into conflict

in campus decision making with each asserting its right to decide particular issues (Eckel & Kezar, 2006). Faculty governance refers to the system of formal governance for academic matters, which includes decisions about curriculum, as well as oversight for academic promotion, dismissal, and tenure practices (Eastman & Boyles, 2015). One goal of faculty governance has been to protect academic freedom for faculty from undue influence on how they conduct their research and execute their teaching practices (Eastman & Boyles, 2015). “Faculty governance practices have often led to a somewhat adversarial relationship between faculty and administrators, which repeatedly results in conflict between administrative interests—such as increasing enrollments—and faculty interests, such as advancing innovative teaching practices” (Drysdale, 2018, p. 2).

Trends in the governance of higher education institutions suggest that faculty authority is declining. Due to decreased public funding and increased private and grant-based funding, Eastman and Boyles (2015) argue that higher education institutions no longer function as public trusts. This change is likened to corporatization, with decision-making power and authority resting more in administrative roles as the number of tenure-track educators and researchers decreases. Eastman and Boyles (2015), however, contend that faculty governance is more important than ever to maintain freedom of inquiry and teaching because of the expansion of administrative roles.

Additional research has explored the role that faculty governance can play in institutional decision making. Eckel (2000), for example, examined shared governance and its ability to facilitate contentious institutional decisions at four research institutions. The specific decision studied was the discontinuation of academic programs at the four institutions. Eleven to 16 individuals were interviewed at each institution. Meeting minutes, institutional reports, and press



coverage were also examined. At all four institutions, shared governance facilitated the program discontinuation process in three ways: 1) by providing a platform for administration to explain the serious nature of the problem; 2) by providing a legitimate platform to bring varying interest groups together to accomplish a challenging task; and 3) by giving multiple constituencies a voice to share both their knowledge and their concerns. Eckel concludes that both administrators and faculty are responsible for the creation of effective shared governance and that faculty are, in fact, willing to participate in making difficult institutional decisions, including the closure of academic programs.

### **Power Dynamics**

According to Del Favero and Bray (2005), faculty and administrators have very different perspectives on the function and purpose of their organizations. Faculty are motivated to engage in academic program development because they seek to explore emerging trends within their disciplines; on the other hand, administrators are motivated to engage in academic program development because their efforts can both increase revenues and enhance institutional prestige (Clark, 1996). Del Favero and Bray (2005) also acknowledge that although tension between faculty and administrators is partially due to organizational culture at individual institutions, it is also due to the organizational structure of colleges and universities, which positions administrators and faculty as somewhat adversarial. While conflict can be helpful, it appears that colleges and universities, as a whole, have not been able to establish a consistent approach to managing conflict, especially when important decisions need to be made in a timely manner (Del Favero & Bray, 2005).

Curriculum changes are likely to generate conflict and resistance, especially from individuals who perceive that they may be negatively affected (Dirks, Cummings, & Pierce,

1996). Institutional leaders, such as academic deans, have to navigate these complexities (Hyun, 2009). Myers (2006) states, “No dean wants to instigate a turf war among faculty members and their guilds, but curricular re-visioning almost always leads to such a moment unless a rapprochement can be reached via a faculty’s shared vision and understanding of a common mission” (p. 35). Myers (2006) goes on to explain that the assessment of the learning goals associated with an institution’s curriculum can generate dialogue and critical reflection on major issues. This evaluation process, “moves any adjustment of a curriculum into a shared process instead of defining each course as only the effort of one faculty member” (Myers, 2006, p. 39).

The potential for conflict as well as collaboration was revealed in research by Oliver and Hyun (2011), who conducted a case study to review a radical curriculum reform process of undergraduate education at a theological education institution spanning four years and involving the entire university campus, including both faculty and administrators. Two research questions were explored: How did the curriculum review team experience the comprehensive curriculum review process? How did the faculty and administration collaborate during the comprehensive curriculum review process? The primary data for this study were generated from in-depth interviews with 10 curriculum review team members. The study yielded a number of findings. First, a shared guiding vision for the curriculum provided a strong foundation for the curriculum review process. Moreover, embracing curriculum as a shared responsibility among faculty and administration led to widespread participation in the change process. The curriculum team’s sense of community and connectedness served to strengthen the process. Some faculty, however, struggled to collaborate with administrators. While some faculty were ready to move forward with the new curriculum, others chose to focus on what they determined was wrong with the process. However, when asked about what motivated their continued involvement even in the

midst of great struggle, all of the curriculum team members identified their commitment to the institution as a primary motivator.

To engage faculty and administrators in the academic program development process is not an easy task. The process can be disrupted by an array of factors including philosophical differences, the questioning of current practices, individual and institutional fear, and acknowledged competing interests (Del Favero, 2003; Del Favero & Bray, 2005; Oliver & Hyun, 2011). Comprehensive and collaborative reform may require a “full examination of how academics conceive their role and how the curriculum itself is defined, analyzed, and changed” (Toombs & Tierney, 1991, p. 9). When faculty members want to introduce new courses or changes in core curriculum models, they typically proceed through a multi-step, often time-consuming, approval process. Other faculty members have to be won over, and academic relevance must be established. In addition, the case must be made that the course design meets the quality threshold of the program, the college, and accrediting bodies – all difficult hurdles to achieve.

Ultimately, the literature recommends collaborative processes for negotiating power dynamics in the context of academic change in higher education. Most of the literature discussing faculty-administrator collaboration in the context of curricular and/or programmatic change discusses the importance of bringing together the right mix of knowledge and skills so that collaborators have enough in common to provide a foundation for the project, but also have viewpoints that are different enough so that each can make a unique contribution to the project (Briggs, 2007). Collaborations between administrators and faculty, however, often struggle to become institutionalized because higher education institutions work within bureaucratic and hierarchical administrative structures. Departmental silos, bureaucratic and hierarchical

administrative units, collective bargaining agreements, and other rigid structures frequently act as barriers to cross-divisional work and partnerships (Kanter, 1994; Senge, 2006). In particular, these barriers may be a significant impediment to faculty-administrator collaboration.

Kezar (2005) indicates that faculty and administration have difficulty working together because of an ingrained system that encourages the formation of departmental silos. When faculty and administrators communicate only with others in their own departments/divisions, the establishment of departmentalized silos occurs, and fewer opportunities exist for the building of partnerships and the establishment of networks outside departments. Additionally, while faculty and other professionals on a campus may be familiar with each other's roles, they may not have a good understanding of the specific services and responsibilities of each professional, particularly regarding student learning. This limited understanding of roles is another factor that can result in the benefits of collaboration being overlooked (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

### **Mission and Strategy in Higher Education**

Given the previous discussion of the business school historical context and the analysis of literature on organizational change and shared governance, this section of the chapter moves to a more specific focus on mission and strategy in higher education. Institutional missions and strategic priorities can play an important role in the development of new academic programs. Conversely, mission drift or mission fragmentation may be an unfortunate outcome associated with developing new academic programs.

#### **Mission and Strategy**

Institutional missions often reflect the campus culture and can serve as a linkage between the institution and its internal and external constituencies. Frequently, institutions create mission statements that describe the purpose of the organization, its direction, and the ends to which it

aspires. Gardiner (1988) identifies five primary functions of institutional missions: 1) identification of overall purpose, 2) indication of strategic direction, 3) contextual setting to justify institutional goals, 4) indication of the programs and services offered, and 5) distinguishing of an institution from others. Furthermore, mission statements can indicate the values and philosophy of the institution and the core competencies that will help it achieve its mission (Sidhu, 2003). A mission statement, or statement of purpose of an institution, encapsulates that institution's very reason for existence and what it ultimately seeks to accomplish in the larger environment. Mission statements at colleges and universities can signal their competitive position within the educational market. Institutional missions can also serve a symbolic function by acting as the glue that holds members together under a common belief system. A clear mission statement serves to help members of the organization identify activities that correspond to the goals of the institution (Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

Centering the institutional mission as the basis for organizational change affords leaders a foundation on which to develop strategies based on the competencies needed to reach institutional goals. Morphew and Hartley (2006) write that:

An institution's mission has two potential benefits. First, it is instructional. A clear mission helps organizational members distinguish between activities that conform to institutional imperatives and those that do not. Second, a shared sense of purpose has the capacity to inspire and motivate those within an institution and to communicate its characteristics, values, and history to key external constituents (p. 457).

Meacham and Gaff (2006) state that educational programs should reflect the institutional mission and enjoy the full and informed support not just of the faculty but also of the board of

trustees and the president, the primary stewards of the mission. VanZanten (2011) suggests that smaller, private institutions often pay more attention to their mission statements in an effort to establish their “distinct identities, unique values, and distinguishing cultures” (p. 2). Attis (2021) argues, however, that determining academic program alignment with mission is very challenging. “At all institutions, some programs are more closely aligned with the overall mission than others but quantifying those differences can be challenging” (p. 3).

Early research on organizational mission focused on types and characteristics of missions and their utility, or lack thereof. Gross and Gramsbsch (1974) suggest that the problem is not in institutions’ inability to identify their goals. Rather, they often have too many goals (some of which may be competing), as well as a wide variety of stakeholders. Gardiner (1988) notes that mission statements vary dramatically in terms of both length and specificity. Lang and Lopers-Sweetman (1991) examined 32 mission statements and 12 strategic plans from colleges and universities. From these statements and plans, they distilled a taxonomy of mission statement content. While they acknowledge that mission statements vary widely, they suggest that mission statements can be divided into six categories: 1) historical-philosophical, 2) action plans, 3) interrogative, 4) expressions of capacity, 5) presidential expressions, and 6) anthologies of unit statements. Lang and Lopers-Sweetman (1991) found that the historical-philosophical was the most common, providing historical context for what the institution is and why it is that way. The action plan mission statement attempts to define what the organization is planning to do typically in reaction to external circumstances, while the interrogative statement views mission as an effort to answer an important institutional question through collaborative effort and often provides multiple options. Expressions of capacity frame mission around the institution’s resources, specifically enrollment and physical requirements, while presidential expression conveys the

institutional leader's point of view. Anthologies of unit statements are compilations of varying viewpoints from different constituencies within the institution. The utility and form of the institutional mission statement depends on both the circumstances that prompt it and the audiences that will receive it. Lang and Lopers-Sweetman (1991) emphasize that the process used to develop the mission statement may be as or more important than the statement itself.

Taylor and Morphey (2010) examined baccalaureate college mission statements to better understand how these organizations chose to represent themselves to potential students and other external constituent groups. Documents were drawn from two sources, the colleges' official web sites and an archive constructed and maintained by *U.S. News and World Report*. Taylor and Morphey determined that the sampled colleges submitted revised or different mission statements to *U.S. News and World Report* than those published officially on institutional websites apparently in an effort to aid student recruitment. They concluded that mission statements may not always serve the purpose of instilling confidence in the institution due to the differences between internal mission statements and the versions presented to different constituencies outside of the institution.

Little empirical research has been conducted as to how mission statements affect institutional decisions. Newsom and Hayes (1991) surveyed 114 colleges and universities in an attempt to determine whether mission statements were useful in strategic planning and determined that they were rarely used for this purpose. In fact, they found that many individuals within a given institution were unable to identify their institution's mission statement. In contrast, Nowlin (2009) surveyed the Executive Directors of California State University foundations to determine the extent to which they utilize institutional missions in decision making. He determined that decisions related to finance and investments were more influenced

by organizational mission than others. The study reported that 75% of the participants believed that organizational missions usually or always influenced their decision making.

Additional research has examined the extent to which institutional missions impact decisions and actions. Rowley, Hurtado, and Ponjuan (2002) surveyed 744 chief operating officers at four-year institutions and studied the extent to which institutions are fulfilling their missions, specifically the institutional commitment to diversity (both students and faculty) and found a significant disconnect between institutional rhetoric and performance. Thus, the language of institutional missions had not impacted behaviors and practices. Their findings suggest that to achieve an institutional commitment to diversity the institution would need a “set of interlocking commitments to diversity [that] must go beyond the rhetoric in mission statements” (p. 21). Similarly, Zenk (2014) studied how academic leaders at six public universities within a single state made decisions and the mechanisms by which they incorporated mission into their decision making. Zenk argued that having a clearly defined organizational mission can serve as an asset during challenging times and that institutions with clear missions are better able to deal with internal and external pressures. Zenk concluded that for a mission statement to be an important factor in decision making, it cannot be only a written statement, but rather “it must be a living document imbedded within the culture of the institution” (p. 158).

### **Mission Drift and Fragmentation**

Higher education researchers have examined the relationship between institutional missions and organizational change, including changes that lead to mission drift or mission fragmentation. O’Meara (2007) employed the concept of striving to describe how higher education institutions often attempt to enhance their prestige. Striving institutions tend to make changes in five operational areas with a goal of increasing their rankings. The five areas are: 1)



revising admission processes to be more selective, 2) recruiting and rewarding research-oriented faculty, 3) making curricular and programming changes, 4) reallocating resources to facilitate research activities and to build attractive amenities, and 5) developing a public-relations or branding campaign. Similarly, Henderson (2009) discussed mission creep at master's universities, arguing that such institutions often strive to be more like research universities which can ultimately harm the teaching focus that the master's university uniquely provides. Henderson further suggests that master's universities must accept a model where teaching and learning are foundational to the institution, rather than allowing mission creep towards the research institution model.

The body of literature on mission creep has tended to focus on mid-size public institutions, lower-tier research universities, and master's granting institutions with a particular focus on colleges becoming universities. Morpew (2002) studied the more than 120 public and private four-year colleges that had changed their names and became universities since 1990. His findings demonstrate that the institutions that changed were predominantly less selective institutions that enrolled greater numbers of graduate students than their peers. He suggested that colleges often become universities in order to obtain greater legitimacy. Similarly, Jaquette (2013) studied mission drift in baccalaureate colleges which chose to change their names and become universities. Jaquette applied panel methods to a 1972–2010 dataset of all private institutions defined as “liberal arts colleges” by the 1973 Carnegie Classification. Results show that colleges became universities in response to declining freshmen enrollments, prior adoption of curricula associated with the comprehensive university model, and when network contacts previously became universities. Organizational age and strong market position lowered the probability of becoming a university. Jaquette argues that changes in postsecondary

organizational behavior are typically motivated by the desire to generate enrollment-related revenue and concludes that colleges that previously served only undergraduates become universities to grow and diversify their enrollments by adding graduate programs so that the institution's stability will no longer be dependent on the traditional base of full-time, undergraduate students.

A major problem with mission drift is that it reduces institutional diversity across the entire system of higher education. Morpew (2009) states that institutional diversity, or the existence of many kinds of colleges and universities, has long been recognized as a positive and a unique attribute of the higher education system in the United States. Institutional diversity provides postsecondary options for students seeking programs from career training to advanced research degrees. Without sufficient institutional diversity, students may be unable to find a program, degree, and setting that matches their educational abilities and goals (Harris, 2013). Morpew studied changes in institutional diversity between 1972 and 2002 and concluded that by 2002 the U.S. higher education system had become less diverse. While there was some growth in for-profit institutions, the number of smaller, non-profit (private) institutions declined, particularly those with lower tuition and fees.

Researchers have also explored how this pursuit of prestige, or institutional striving, has impacted faculty members. Given that institutions with striving aspirations may have significant resource constraints (O'Meara, 2007), striving behaviors may be seen as a way to garner more prestige through increased enrollment (i.e., tuition revenues) and by hiring more faculty with an emphasis on research (i.e., external funding). At the same time, the expectations placed on the faculty in these striving environments may be unrealistic if the infrastructure is not put in place to support such a mission change (Gardner, 2013). O'Meara and Bloomgarden (2011) utilized

data from 29 interviews at one self-identified striving liberal arts college to examine how faculty members experience institutional striving. O'Meara and Bloomgarden focused on faculty perceptions of the origins of striving, as well as its influence on institutional identity and their own work lives. All faculty interviewed for the study believed that their institution was in the middle of significant change and that the change had been ongoing for some time. This change was described as an institutional desire to acquire greater prestige and resources associated with more elite institutions. Interviews indicated that the majority of faculty believed that their institution was experiencing an identity crisis and a crisis of purpose, leading to feelings of fragmentation as faculty members struggled to fulfill the roles of teaching, service, and research. Moreover, the striving behavior led many faculty members to lose pride in their institution when comparisons were made to higher-ranked institutions.

Similarly, Gardner (2010) examined faculty and graduate student perceptions of how one institution's quest for prestige influenced their opinions of the institution. Gardner interviewed 38 faculty members and 60 doctoral students at a small, mid-ranked research university and found a pervasive faculty perception that the institution was not doing enough to support their teaching and research efforts. The faculty members interviewed were fully aware of the push for institutional prestige, but they critiqued the institution for not providing adequate funding and infrastructure. Some also expressed misgivings about the quality of the students being admitted. Relatedly, doctoral students overwhelmingly felt that institutional and departmental prestige-building efforts were detrimental. Many were concerned that faculty members were so involved with their own research activities that their availability to students was limited. Also mentioned by doctoral students as concerns were the high level of faculty turnover and a feeling of a lack of fit with the department's priorities.

Additional research on the effects of institutional striving shows that faculty may experience new sets of work expectations without the provision of necessary support to carry them out successfully. Gonzales, Martinez, and Ordu (2014) utilized an electronic survey sent to all the tenured and tenure-track faculty members at a striving U.S. university to ascertain their work life and experiences. Faculty reported that they felt pressured due to new and often competing expectations without necessary support. They felt challenged to balance their professional and personal responsibilities. They struggled to find enough time to complete all their roles and felt they had to reapportion their time to favor research and grant writing at the expense of teaching, advising, and public service. Additionally, they felt a sense of surveillance, that they were being monitored often with measures that they did not fully understand and that their contributions were not fully understood nor rewarded.

As noted in the literature, mission drift and striving may be responses to financial concerns. Financial constraints can affect an institution's ability to fully realize and maximize its mission. Over time, colleges and universities cannot spend more money than they take in without merging or going out of existence (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massey, 2005a). Ever-increasing costs, dependence on tuition revenue that directly affects operating expenditures, and other economic factors impact an institution's ability to either thrive or merely survive. Educational leaders in business schools are compelled to make decisions about the long-term health of their institutions. These decisions, however, may not always be consistent with their institutional missions.

### **Academic Program Development**

Previous sections in this chapter have examined the business education historical context and provided an analysis of organizational change with a specific focus on shared governance, institutional mission, and strategy. This final section of the chapter reviews empirical and

conceptual literature on academic program development. The genesis of a new academic program is a complex process; program design and curriculum development are both critical aspects of this process. The development of a new academic program also requires significant changes in resource allocations, staffing arrangements, and curriculum structures (Green, 2020; MacDonald, 2015; Morriss-Olson, 2020).

Furthermore, multiple stakeholders expect to be included in the academic program development process. As one stakeholder group, potential students indicate their curricular preferences including program delivery modes, as well as new subfields that align with their desired professional outcomes (Dee & Heineman, 2016). Potential employers constitute another stakeholder group who seek to influence academic program development, although some scholars have questioned whether the employers exert too much influence. Molesworth, Scullion, and Nixon (2011) suggest that the effort to satisfy employers promotes an environment in which higher education is not being utilized as an opportunity to pursue knowledge for its own sake and further hypothesize that once teaching becomes subordinate to an external agenda its integrity is threatened. The likelihood is that the pressure to accommodate and compromise will prevail.

In addition to considering the expectations of external stakeholders, academic program developers can examine competing programs at other institutions (Bok, 2009). Program developers can attempt to determine if they can position their program as both vital and distinct from the competition (Dee & Heineman, 2016). Relatedly, Michael Porter's (1980) competitive strategy framework suggests that college and university leaders can consider a range of factors that shape the competitive environment. These factors include the strategies and actions of competitors, projected demand for the academic programs they provide, their desire for legitimacy, and the viability of entrepreneurial strategies in defining their mission and purpose

(Porter, 1980). Developing new academic programs can be a powerful means through which higher education institutions evolve, meet the changing needs of students, the workplace, and society, as well as differentiate themselves from others and thereby stay relevant (Schoolcraft & Sax, 2016).

In the business school context, Routhieaux (2015) completed a case study about the development of “an innovative, integrative, modular-based MBA program” (p. 122). The goal was to develop a program that could be clearly differentiated from existing programs at competitor business schools using an integrated curriculum design and unique delivery methods. The program rapidly reached enrollment goals; however, the format and delivery presented conflicts with numerous institutional policies, procedures, and administrative processes and required levels of faculty engagement and collaboration uncommon in higher education. Nevertheless, after operating for several years and considering feedback from both students and faculty to make a number of adjustments, including simplifying some curricular units and eliminating mandatory weekend meetings, the program was considered a success.

Additional research on academic program development also reveals the importance of collaboration and shared leadership. Lawson (2020) conducted a case study of the development of a new, undergraduate academic program at a large, research university. The specific field of study was within the College of Arts and Sciences but was not further identified. The primary research question was how members of the program development team understood and accomplished their work. Data were collected via observations of team meetings during a 16-month period, as well as individual interviews with team members. Findings suggest that the curriculum team benefitted from positive leadership and camaraderie, but they lacked needed institutional support for developing new academic programs. Moreover, socially weighted status

characteristics (i.e., faculty rank and professional roles) shaped patterns of interaction and influence within the team. Non-faculty committee members felt that their contributions were neither fully understood nor appropriately valued. Senior faculty members and administrators participated more frequently and more assertively and sometimes appeared to devalue the contributions of more junior faculty members. Furthermore, Lawson concluded that managing uncertainty was the leading factor propelling the committee's activity. The committee's gaps in knowledge, as well as the compressed timeline to launch the program, often caused the members to work and make decisions in a rather haphazard manner.

Three recent studies utilized aspects of the Morriss-Olson (2016a, 2020) model of academic program development. Mejias-Fuertes (2020) used the model in a community college setting to study how an entrepreneurial mindset could contribute to the development of new funding streams to address gaps caused by budget cuts. Interviews were conducted with a panel of scholar-participants (individuals with both academic and practical knowledge of entrepreneurship who have experience working with community colleges and who have held senior-level leadership positions). Study participants emphasized the importance of first assessing an institution's readiness for innovation and change. If the institution appears ready to innovate, then new plans can be proposed to incorporate additional funding strategies such as strategic partnerships and the creation of new business ventures.

Additionally, Weissbrodt, Winkler, and Wells (2020) applied Morriss-Olson's (2016a) framework in efforts to develop a new curriculum for an environmental water resource recovery program for schools of engineering. The authors adopted Morriss-Olson's suggestion that any new program should be developed based on existing institutional strengths, thereby increasing the possibility of a successful outcome. They also espoused Morriss-Olson's contention that once

the new program is developed, the institution must find ways to “sustain and implement the idea” (p. 60).

Cassidy (2021) completed a mixed methods case study of the establishment of a business incubator as part of the strategic planning process at a community college. He argued that soaring costs and rising debt as well as a rapidly changing world have eroded confidence in the value of college degrees. He suggested that in order to demonstrate value and spur innovation, colleges must become more entrepreneurial particularly in their efforts to attract non-traditional students (Morriss-Olson, 2020). Cassidy concluded that the provision of business incubation and acceleration models to local small businesses as a part of an institution’s strategic planning not only fostered business growth, but also demonstrated value to community stakeholders.

Multiple stakeholders, varying organizational contexts, and financial constraints all contribute to the challenges involved in academic program development. Dee and Heineman (2016) offered a conceptual model for navigating the process of proposing new or modifying existing academic programs. The model defines how the organizational context—that is, the structural, cultural, and power distributions in a higher education institution— interacts with the decision context, or the type and scope of the decision and the stakeholders it includes or impacts. The conceptual model articulates how both the organizational context and the decision context influence the decision-making process. Dee and Heineman (2016) suggest that without knowledge of both the organizational context and the decision context, academic program developers may not be successful in moving forward with the proposed program. Although the model does not describe every situation, it provides an overview of the factors that affect the adoption and advancement of new academic programs or the expansion of existing programs. Specifically, the contextual variables in the model determine the relative importance of internal



and external data in the decision-making process and also serve to determine whether data are likely to be analyzed objectively or subjectively. These dimensions (internal/external and objective/subjective) yield four decision models: rational, entrepreneurial, political, and exploratory.

The rational model (internal focus/objective data) suggests a linear process involving data collection and analysis. To illustrate the rational model, Dee and Heineman (2016) provide a case study of a community college and its selection of a new learning management system (LMS) for its online courses. The committee formed to examine the issue had broad representation from the campus community and identified six potential LMS options. After reviewing information from vendors and other institutions, the LMS options were narrowed to three. Each of the three finalists was piloted in two online courses, and both faculty and students provided feedback. This rational planning process led to a decision to choose an LMS based on objectively assessed internal data from feedback on the pilot courses.

The entrepreneurial model (external focus/objective data) was illustrated by a case of another community college's decision to develop an online program in a health care profession. The existing on-campus program drew large enrollment but given the college's limited resources to expand on-campus facilities, an online alternative was proposed as a way to expand. Faculty and administrators were uncertain how best to develop this program. A faculty member (teaching in the on-campus program) researched similar programs in other states, identifying only one community college level program. An external focus was applied to collect data about comparable programs at other institutions with objective data analysis providing program suggestions to be adopted in the new online program.

In the exploratory model (external focus/subjective data), organizational members are engaged in subjective analyses of external data. For this model, Dee and Heineman (2016) offer a case study of a community college that had participated in a statewide online learning consortium and established an informal relationship with one of the state's universities. When the time came for the community college to choose a host for its online course delivery, this community college chose to utilize their state university partner without researching or examining other options. Without gathering any new data, institutional decision makers made a subjective judgement that their prior experience with the state university was a sufficient basis upon which to make a decision.

The political model (internal focus/subjective data) realizes that numerous individuals and groups are involved in organizational decision making, and that these individuals and groups may hold conflicting values and interests. A political model example in Dee and Heineman's (2016) study involved a community college where biology department faculty members were concerned that an online biology course was not providing an adequate laboratory experience. Despite being provided data of student success in the online course, the biology faculty members remained unconvinced and took the issue to the faculty senate, which voted that online science courses had to go through a curriculum approval process that included departmental review. The decision reflected political criteria (the power of the biology department), as well as the rejection of objective data on student success.

Overall, the Dee and Heineman (2016) study shows that academic program development, including the creation of new academic programs, can be influenced by internal interests, as well as external sources of information. The change process can also be shaped by the types of data that are deemed important in the context of a particular academic program.

## **Program Portfolios**

The development of a new academic program does not occur in isolation; new programs are created within the institution's overall portfolio of existing academic offerings. Rather than examine and assess a single academic program at a time, academic leaders can analyze the institution's entire portfolio of programs in an effort to evaluate institutional performance and align resource allocation with mission objectives. Portfolio management refers to the selection and prioritization of an organization's programs and projects (Dickeson, 2010). Relevant to this study, portfolio management practices can be used in the process of developing a new academic program. As business schools determine the need to develop specialized master's programs, leaders can consider how these new programs fit within the existing portfolio and if they serve the institution's strategic objectives.

Academic portfolio management emphasizes an ongoing process of continual rebalancing of resources in relation to strategic priorities. Organizational resources (funding, physical assets, and human time and effort) are reallocated in alignment with emerging strategic objectives. As a result, a high-priority program may be augmented with additional resources, while a lower priority program may see its resources reduced or eliminated. A change in market conditions, student preferences, or environmental context may suggest a change in the portfolio mix to recalibrate the resource allocation, the risk-reward balance, and the strategic emphasis, or to pursue new opportunities (Milkovich, 2016).

Practitioners can use a range of models to manage their academic program portfolios. Kotler and Fox (1985) designed the Academic Portfolio Model to assist in the strategic analysis of a university's academic programs. This model focuses on outcomes to guide strategic decisions and resource allocations and also offers insight into the application and importance of

portfolio modeling in the academic setting. Kotler and Fox (1985) identify three dimensions for the assessment of academic program portfolios: (1) the centrality of the program to the university's mission, (2) the quality of the program, and (3) the viability of the market.

Similarly, Wells and Wells (2011) developed the Academic Program Portfolio Model (APPM), adopted from the General Electric McKinsey Product Portfolio Model widely used in business, as a product portfolio strategic analysis tool customized for universities. The APPM offers the opportunity to assess the strategic direction of specific academic programs relative to each other and to the institution using two dimensions: program marketplace attractiveness and program and institutional capabilities, which connects to the idea of organizational core competencies.

Portfolio management focuses on program selection and resource allocation to achieve strategic objectives and is considered a potential means of improving institutional performance. Program prioritization (Dickeson, 1999, 2010) is one application or technique of portfolio management, focusing on the prioritization of academic and administrative programs. Dickeson (1999) defines academic program prioritization as a process in which an academic institution assesses and prioritizes its programs for the purpose of more strategically allocating its funding and resources. In Dickeson's model, institutional constituents collaborate in developing a set of criteria to evaluate all academic and administrative programs. They then make decisions to augment, decrease, or eliminate resource allocations for individual programs in alignment with strategic objectives. Dickeson (2010) advocates the use of program prioritization on a continual basis; however, most institutions have chosen to use the process only once or only sporadically, often in response to a financial or other institutional crisis. Dickeson (2014) also suggests that

when faculty are fully engaged and committed to the prioritization process, there will be greater ownership (and therefore more successful implementation) of the decisions reached.

Milkovich (2013) investigated academic program prioritization efforts based on Dickeson's (2010) model at institutions of higher education that varied by size and type, both public and private. Results indicated that large, public, land-grant and doctoral/research institutions are more likely to initiate organizational portfolio management and that the result of organizational portfolio management is "a tighter alignment of institutional resources with strategic objectives and defined mission" (p. 30). That large, public, research and land-grant institutions more often initiate strategies to improve efficiency and effectiveness is not surprising as demands for improved institutional performance tend to focus on taxpayer-funded institutions often spurred by legislative budget cuts (Dickeson, 2010).

Higher education administrators may turn to program prioritization in efforts to recover from the effects of mission fragmentation. Milkovich (2016) suggests that mission fragmentation exists where resources are overextended across too many programs and further posits that mission fragmentation may be followed by varying degrees of program prioritization, where institutions attempt to realign and refocus their resources to achieve a more articulated mission. Milkovich concludes that given that the intended outcome of academic portfolio management is a tighter alignment of strategic objectives and defined mission, it is likely that institutions fragmenting their resources across multiple competing demands may also be more likely to reach a point where they realize that realigning their resources through portfolio management is necessary.

## **Literature Review Summary**

To gain a better understanding of why and how business schools are developing specialized master's programs, multiple research areas have been reviewed. First, this chapter examined the history of business education with a discussion of the growth and decline of the MBA degree, as well as recent increasing interest in specialized master's degrees. Second, the chapter delineated the organizational context for change in higher education. Research reveals the internal and external forces that motivate change, the planning processes involved in effecting change, and the barriers and challenges that can stand in the way of meaningful change. Third, the discussion of shared governance explored the roles and relationships of administration and faculty, particularly in the context of decision making for academic programs. The fourth section, mission and strategy, looked at the roles of mission statements, as well as the associated concepts of institutional striving and mission creep. Last was a discussion of research on and frameworks for academic program development, including practices associated with portfolio management and program prioritization.

CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

**Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodology that was employed in this study to gain an understanding of how business school leaders develop new specialized master's programs and how markets, missions, and organizational core competencies shape this development. First, the chapter discusses the overarching research perspective. Second, the chapter explains the decision to use case study methods. The criteria for selecting sites are then described. Next, the chapter describes the methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the procedures that were used to ensure trustworthiness and reliability. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of my role as the researcher.

**Overview of the Study**

This study sought to explore how business schools at three institutions developed specialized master's programs to expand their portfolios of academic programs. On the one hand, business schools may seek to respond to market trends and address student expectations through the creation of new academic programs. On the other hand, business schools may add programs simply to increase enrollments or generate revenue without consideration of the connection to institutional mission and core competencies, including faculty expertise. The creation of a program that is not aligned with the mission or capacities of the institution may be highly problematic (Milkovich, 2016). Without clear connections to institutional missions and core

competencies, new programs may struggle to achieve the quality needed, and thus fail to attract both the students and revenues desired (Eduvantis, 2020; Ehrenburg, 2000). Attempts to add new programs that do not reflect the institutional mission or the institution's core competencies may also result in damage to the institution's external reputation (Massy, 2016; Morriss-Olson, 2020; Zemsky, Wegner & Massy, 2005b)

In recent years, business education has faced multiple challenges and emerging opportunities. Among these are resource constraints, business accreditation requirements, globalization, energy and sustainability initiatives, rapidly evolving technology, and demographic shifts in student populations and workforces. Previous strategies and responses to challenges and opportunities, both academic and financial, may no longer be viable (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Davis, 2013; Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Miles, 2019). Minor modifications to curriculum and service delivery, traditional financial management approaches such as budget cuts and resource prioritization, and the redirection or redevelopment of recruitment tactics may not adequately address institutional needs. Furthermore, the overall reputation, quality, and financial viability of a business school are determined in large part by the particular mix (portfolio) of academic programs offered. Therefore, when institutions consider adding new programs to their current portfolios, they may need to evaluate the impact on both the existing academic portfolio and the broader institution.

### **Research Questions**

As noted in chapter one, this study examined four interrelated research questions about the development of specialized master's programs in business schools.



1. How did business school leaders at the three selected sites determine the need to develop new specialized master's programs within the context of their existing academic programs?
2. What role, if any, did institutional mission play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites?
3. What role, if any, did markets play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites?
4. To what extent, if any, did business school leaders draw upon organizational core competencies in the development of new specialized master's programs?

### **Rationale for the Research Design**

This study used a qualitative research design. Qualitative research designs are adopted when the phenomenon is not well understood and the purpose of the study is exploratory (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Stake, 1995). While some research has been conducted exploring programmatic expansion at larger universities as they seek to optimize performance and meet strategic objectives (Dickeson 2010; Green, 2020; Lawson, 2020; Milkovich, 2013), how and why smaller, private colleges and universities choose to expand their portfolio of master's level business programs has not been examined in previous published research. Therefore, this study is exploratory in nature.

Qualitative research provides the best alignment for the objectives of this study. Stake (1995) offers that a qualitative approach is appropriate for examining open-ended research questions that seek both expected and unexpected connections among variables. Merriam (2009) identifies four key characteristics that describe qualitative research and are relevant to this study: 1) the focus of the study is on process, understanding, and meaning; 2) the researcher is the

primary instrument of data collection and analysis; 3) the research process is inductive; and 4) the research product or final report is intended to be richly descriptive. In describing qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) write, “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3).

A qualitative approach is useful when a holistic understanding of an organizational process is needed. In this study, the research examined the process of academic program development. The qualitative approach allows for exploration of both context and the differing perspectives of stakeholders involved (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). Additionally, qualitative research is ideal for exploring a phenomenon that involves multiple variables that cannot be controlled and that must be studied within their natural setting (Creswell, 2003; Lee & Lee, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Relatedly, Gillham (2000) suggests that qualitative research can be used to “get under the skin” of an organization to understand how people interpret an experience and construct reality (p. 11).

### **Case Study Method**

Case study is used when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Baskarada, 2014; Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Yazan, 2015). Yin (2003) defines the case study approach as, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Stake (1995) concurs, noting that a goal of this method is to “appreciate the uniqueness and complexity” of the case, including, “its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts” (p. 16). Marshall and Rossman (2011) define a case study as research “focusing on society and culture in a group, a program, or an organization” (p. 93).

Yin (2003) describes three conditions that assist the researcher in deciding which research methodology is most appropriate: 1) the nature of the driving questions, 2) the amount of control the researcher can exercise in the research environment, and 3) the historical lens of the research (i.e., does the research focus on historical or current events). He clarifies his description by also summarizing the conditions for case study as: 1) the research seeks to answer “how” and “why” questions, 2) the researcher has no control over behavioral events, and 3) the research focuses on contemporary issues.

Based on Yin’s (2003) conditions, this study used case study methods to develop an understanding of how and why business school leaders develop specialized master’s programs. The case study method surfaced insider descriptions and interpretations regarding the ways in which business school decision makers discussed and determined the need for new programmatic offerings, as well as how they assessed their institutional viability. Furthermore, the selection of three institutions as sites for this case study research maximized what could be learned within the limited time period available (Tellis, 1997). Case studies are considered particularly appropriate for higher education research because of the great diversity -- such as size, age, mission, and control -- of colleges and universities in the United States (Kyburz-Graber, 2004). By using a case study approach, this research delved into information obtained through interviews and institutional documents and sought to determine the key parameters involved throughout the various stages of the decision-making process. Moreover, the research yielded the opportunity to examine both consistencies and contradictions as a decision was reached to add a specialized master’s degree program to the institution’s existing portfolio of graduate programs in business schools.

The use of multiple cases was important in the design of this study. Yin (2003) posits that multiple-site case studies are particularly suitable to explore “contrasting situations” (p. 54). Multiple-case study design is often considered to be more robust, avoiding the vulnerability of single case studies and providing greater analytic benefit and possibilities. Results discovered in more than one case can be more powerful than those from a single case, and due to the fact that context matters in case studies, the possibility for transferability of findings to other settings can increase with the identification of multiple cases (Yin, 2009).

Stake (1995) explains that researchers use the case study approach because this research design can highlight the “uniqueness and commonality” of each case (p. 1). Examining multiple cases allows the investigator to maximize what can be learned about a given process, issue, or concern. Each case presents a unique narrative, but case commonalities also foster the maximization of knowledge gained. Multiple cases also enable comparisons that can clarify whether an emergent finding is idiosyncratic to a single case or is consistently replicated across several case studies (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).

The study utilized both within-case and cross-case analysis. The qualitative multi-case study design enabled the researcher to examine the participants, the processes, and the decisions that led to the development of a new specialized master’s program at each of the three participating institutions. In this study, I conducted interviews with administrators (deans, associate deans), as well as faculty members (including faculty program directors) who played a significant role in the decision-making process. I also compiled notes and obtained copies of documents further illuminating the procedures used and the processes that unfolded at each institution.

## **Sampling**

Patten (2003) describes the identification of cases as specific, complex units with known boundaries. Qualitative sampling seeks information richness (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) and, therefore, the selection of cases is purposeful, not random (Perry, 1998). Sampling is “purposeful” whereby “information rich cases are those which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

Purposeful sampling (also known as purposive sampling) is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015, Patton, 2002). Patton (1990) calls this type of sampling “purposive” in that the researcher intentionally has selected a particular sample based upon various traits or characteristics. Although there are several different purposeful sampling strategies, criterion sampling appears to be most common. This method involves developing a framework of the variables that might influence a case’s contribution to the study and is based on the researcher’s practical knowledge of the research area, the available literature, and evidence from the study itself (Palinkas et al., 2015). The process involves identifying and selecting cases (organizations) where individuals are likely to be especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest. Bernard (2017), Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), and Spradley (1979) all note the importance of the potential participants’ availability and willingness to participate, as well as their ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an expressive and reflective manner. Purposive, criterion sampling was utilized in this study.

## **Site Selection**

The three business schools selected for this case study were chosen using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: 1) institutions accredited by AACSB and located in

Massachusetts; 2) private, non-profit institutions that offer master's degrees in business; 3) institutions that are small to mid-size; 4) business schools ranking below the top tier of graduate business programs as ranked by Bloomberg and *US News and World Report* (not among top 100 in Bloomberg and unranked in *US News*); and 5) business schools having developed one or more specialized master's programs within the previous five years.

Regarding the first criterion, AACSB accreditation is the largest and most widely recognized business accreditation in the world. Accreditation is a voluntary, nongovernmental process that includes a rigorous external review of a school's mission, faculty qualifications, curricula, and ability to provide the highest-quality programs (AACSB, 2019). The process of earning AACSB accreditation requires a long-term commitment by the business school to develop, implement, and maintain a high level of quality education. Business schools that have earned AACSB accreditation demonstrate an ongoing commitment to excellence in teaching, research, curriculum development, and learner success. Curriculum and program development are two criteria assessed in the accreditation process. Additionally, accreditation considers both an institution's mission statement and its efforts to fulfill that mission (AACSB, 2021b).

The AACSB has heavily integrated strategic thinking into the accreditation process, presently requiring all accredited business schools to develop a mission statement and granting accreditation only when a business school demonstrates the fulfillment of that mission. "Thus, almost all accredited business schools have generated mission statements and embarked on the strategic-management processes initiated by those statements" (Orwig & Finney, 2007, p. 262). Therefore, AACSB accreditation would suggest that mission statements are relevant in processes associated with academic program development.

Each AACSB-accredited business school considered for inclusion in the study is located in Massachusetts. Limiting eligibility to schools in Massachusetts enhanced feasibility, given geographic proximity to the researcher. Furthermore, Massachusetts is home to a dense network of business schools including some that are part of larger universities and others that are stand-alone institutions. Several very highly ranked business schools are situated in Massachusetts (Fortune, 2021) as are numerous other business schools that may be less well known but are also well regarded. According to the AACSB (2021b), 20 public and private business schools currently offer degrees in Massachusetts.

A second criterion considered in site selection was whether the institution was public or private and whether the institution was non-profit or for profit. Most private colleges and universities are highly tuition-dependent and are particularly affected by any decline in enrollment (Bills, 2020). Private colleges and universities rely on a combination of student tuition fees, alumni contributions, and endowments to fund their academic programs. In this context, private institutions are often highly sensitive to markets. As Cohn (2019) reports:

Moody's Investor Services estimates 1 in 5 small private colleges are facing "fundamental stress" due to declining revenues, rising expenses and little pricing power when it comes to tuition. Analysts offer that 15 small, private colleges closed in 2019 — the largest number in recent memory, and three times the rate just 10 years ago. These closures are concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest, where the demographic pressures — including an aging population — are the highest (p. 1).

Private colleges can be either for-profit or nonprofit. Typically, nonprofit colleges boast better reputations than for-profit schools. For-profit institutions distribute their profits among the

institution's owners, investors, and shareholders while nonprofit colleges typically reinvest their profits back into the institution (Zinn, 2023). At a for-profit institution, revenue generation plays a dominant role in decisions about academic program development. Therefore, these institutions would not be relevant in the current study, which examined how a broader range of factors (missions, markets, core competencies) affected academic program development. Fifteen AACSB-accredited institutions in Massachusetts are both private and non-profit.

A third criterion considered was the size of the institution. Generally, private colleges and universities tend to be smaller than their public counterparts. According to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, the average size of private colleges in the United States is 1,920 students (Bentley University Newsroom, 2021). In contrast, according to *U.S. News and World Report*, the average size of public universities is 43,186 students (Wood, 2021). According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, a small college or university has a total enrollment of fewer than 3000 students while enrollment at a medium-sized institution is between 3000 and 10,000 students (American Council on Education, 2023). Small to medium-sized institutions may be more susceptible to shifts in markets than larger institutions, which can more easily absorb fluctuations in enrollment. Thus, for small to medium-sized institutions, markets may play an important role in the development of new academic programs. Eleven AACSB-accredited private, non-profit institutions in Massachusetts are small to mid-sized.

Fourth, the institutions chosen were ranked below those designated as ranking in the top tier of American business schools. Four of the eleven private, non-profit, small to mid-sized institutions located in Massachusetts are ranked among the top 100 business schools in the Bloomberg rankings and/or ranked in the *US News* ratings of business schools (Bloomberg,



2021; *US News and World Report*, 2021). While graduate business school rankings typically focus on MBA programs, the rankings provide a sense of the institutions' relative prestige level. Significant differences in student selectivity, including both GMAT scores and acceptance rates, are apparent when comparing ranked and unranked institutions. Additionally, institutions with higher rankings often receive more donations and grants, as well as larger numbers of applications (Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011). Private, highly ranked institutions also have significantly higher endowments (Wolbrum, 2016). Institutions with lower endowments are more dependent on achieving enrollment expectations and expected tuition income. Because these non-ranked institutions rely greatly on tuition revenue, they are likely seeking additional ways to attract prospective students. In order to remain viable, they may develop new programs in their efforts to attract additional students and remain competitive with other comparable business schools. In fact, given their similarities, these institutions are often likely seeking students from the same applicant pool. The seven remaining institutions are not ranked in the Bloomberg top 100 and are unranked by *US News and World Report Best Business Schools* (2021-2022).

For the fifth and final criterion, each selected business school had developed one or more specialized master's programs within the previous five years. The new specialized master's program was offered in a new subject area for the business school's graduate programming with both curricular and graduation requirements established. A five-year time frame was selected to ensure that the program had recently launched, had admitted more than one class, and had graduated at least one class. The five-year period also increased the likelihood that many of the individuals involved in the programmatic planning and implementation were still employed on campus. To confirm the start date of new specialized master's programs, press releases from the institution were reviewed. Business schools commonly use press releases to publicize the

availability of new academic programs. Additional sources, including information available on institutional websites and conversations with personal contacts at the institutions, validated that six of the seven potential research sites had introduced a specialized master’s program within the previous five years.

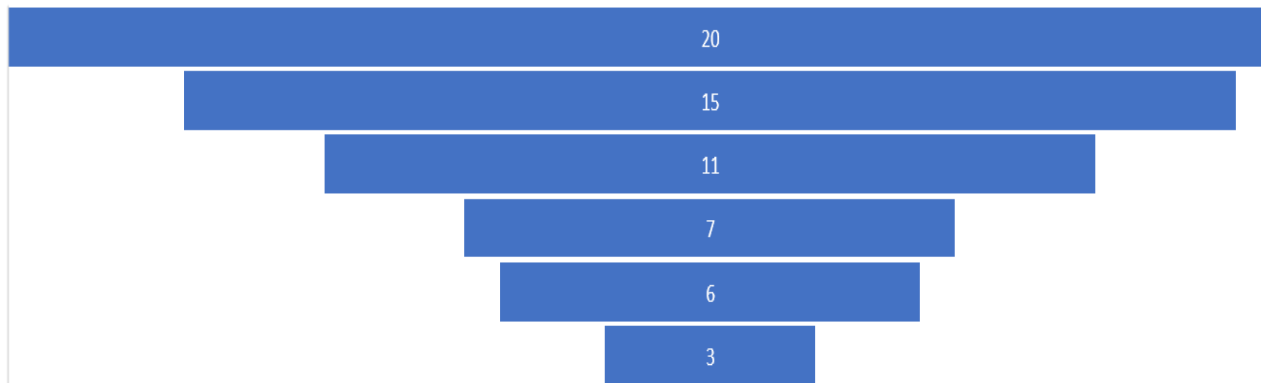
Table 1 shows the narrowing of the field of institutions eligible to participate as the site selection criteria were applied.

*Table 1: Site Selection Criteria*

Criterion 1: AACSB accredited business school in Massachusetts	20
Criterion 2: AACSB accredited business school in Massachusetts, Private, non-profit institution	15
Criterion 3: AACSB accredited business school in Massachusetts, Private, non-profit institution, Small to medium-size	11
Criterion 4: AACSB accredited business school in Massachusetts, Private, non-profit institution, Small to medium-size, Unranked in business school ratings	7
Criterion 5: AACSB accredited business school in Massachusetts, Private, non-profit institution, Small to medium-size, Unranked in business school ratings, Developed new specialized master’s program in previous five years	6
Participating Institutions	3

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of how the application of the site selection criteria narrowed the number of business schools eligible to participate in the study.

Figure 3: Graph of Site Selection Criteria



For the purpose of this study, the following definition was used for “specialized master’s program”:

- A specialized master’s program focuses on a specific area of business and provides deep and precise knowledge about that subject. Examples include accounting, data analytics, finance, human resources, logistics, management, and marketing.

Based on a thorough review of available evidence, six institutions met all five of the site selection criteria. When contacted, three of the six business schools that met the selection criteria agreed to participate in the study.

In qualitative research, selection of case study sites should be purposeful, using criteria such as accessibility and the likelihood that a particular site will allow the research questions to be explored productively (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Some constraints on the context were needed in order to operationalize the study from both a theoretical and methodological standpoint. Constraints were placed on both the state in which the institutions operate, as well as the type of institution studied. Looking at colleges and universities within a single state allows for examination of commonalities and differences, as well as the relationship of the institutions to

one another within the same geographic area. The focus on one institutional type, private non-profit, small to mid-sized institutions with graduate business programs, provided another focus to frame the study.

### **Participant Selection**

To study how institutional leaders made the decision to develop a new specialized master's program, a purposeful sampling procedure was employed. Key informant interviews were the primary method of data collection in this study. Interviews are a productive way to gather significant amounts of information across cases, particularly when they target the people most knowledgeable about the topic. Institutional leaders who played a primary role in the decision to expand the institution's academic program portfolio with new specialized master's degrees were contacted to determine their willingness to participate in the study.

Specifically, study participants included business school deans, as they are typically key decision makers regarding issues related to creating new academic programs. Academic deans serve as critical change agents as they are relied upon to encourage their institutions to evolve in ways that are fitting for their unique challenges. Effective academic deans work to strengthen their respective academic programs while collaborating with other deans to apply best practice innovations (Williams-June, 2014). Mercer (1997) states that academic deans often possess a large amount of authority, providing them the opportunity to steer their college and its programs. Coll et al. (2019) suggest that deans "play a critical role, perhaps the most critical role, in advancing the academic mission of the college/school they serve" (p. 12). In addition, associate deans and other administrators who participated in the program development process were also included in participant recruitment for this study.

Given that faculty are key stakeholders in academic decision making and given the necessity of collaboration between administrators and faculty to successfully develop a new master's degree program, the faculty director of each of the specialized master's programs was interviewed, as well as additional faculty members who had participated in the development of the program at the participating institutions. Each institution chosen had created only one new specialized master's program within the previous five years. At each institution, the business school dean and the new program's faculty director were the initial contacts. Depending upon the institution's structure and its decision-making procedures, additional individuals (faculty members, associate or assistant deans) were interviewed. Four interviews were conducted at each participating business school.

The researcher sent email letters to potential participants, providing them with the purpose of the study (Appendix B), an overview of the research process, assurance that the participants' confidentiality would be honored, as well as the approximate length of the interview (45-60 minutes). Once the researcher confirmed an individual's willingness to participate, the researcher requested some background/demographic information, including validation of name and title of the participant, role, position, and length of time in current position. Individuals who agreed to participate were requested to share any relevant documents which might serve to clarify how the institution determined the need to expand their degree portfolio via new specialized master's degree offerings. The researcher was most interested in interviewing individuals who were able to add insight and provide details about the ways in which the "team" determined the need for portfolio expansion via the addition of a new specialized master's degree. In addition, the researcher made inquiries about the institution's total portfolio of graduate programs to gain additional understanding about the number and types of programs

currently being offered as well as how the new program might fit within the existing portfolio.

Table 2 presents a list of the roles of the participants interviewed at each of the three participating institutions.

*Table 2: Listing of the Study Participants' Roles at Each Institution.*

<b>Site</b>	<b>Participant's Role(s)</b>
Aspengrove	Dean Program Director/Faculty Faculty Administrator (non-faculty)
Birchmeadow	Dean Program Director/Faculty Faculty Administrator (non-faculty)
Whiteoak	Dean Program Director/Faculty Associate Dean/Faculty Assistant Dean (non-faculty)

### **Data Collection**

Case study research relies on multiple data sources to provide detailed descriptions of selected cases (Cresswell, 2013). For this research study, data collection incorporated interviews with the participants listed in Table 2 and analysis of the documents listed in Table 3. This approach helped to triangulate and verify the information gathered.

*Table 3: Documents Examined at the Three Participating Institutions*

Sites	Documents
Aspengrove Birchmeadow Whiteoak	AACSB institutional profiles  Institutional websites <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mission statements</li> <li>• Program descriptions of the new specialized master’s programs</li> <li>• Curriculum overviews of the new specialized master’s programs</li> <li>• Faculty and administrator bios</li> <li>• Consolidated financial statements, 2020 – 2022</li> </ul> Institutional press releases including those announcing the new specialized master’s programs  Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2017 – 2022 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional Enrollment Data</li> <li>• Degree Conferrals</li> </ul>

Data for this case study were collected in 2022 and 2023 through interviews with identified decision makers (Table 2), as well as documents collected from multiple sources (Table 3). Merriam (1998) suggests that interviews are a preferred data collection method when studying phenomena that have happened in the past, that cannot be recreated, and when studying how participants interpret situations. Interviews also allow respondents to discuss issues which they believe are important, within the scope of the topic, while also allowing the interviewer to guide the discussion in order to gain additional depth or insight (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2009). Additionally, the interview process enables the pursuit of unexpected issues that arise during the conversation (Creswell, 2003; Lee & Lee, 1999). Stake (1995) argues that

interviews are the primary data collection method to capture the multiple perceptions of reality held by the individuals involved in a case.

For the purpose of this study, document analysis was used to understand the context of the decisions made surrounding the creation of the specialized master's program, as well as pertinent elements of institutional history. AACSB institutional profiles provided background information about the three participating institutions. The mission statement of each institution was read. Additionally, documents providing information about the new master's program (requirements, program of study, curriculum, course delivery model) were gathered and examined. Each study participant's biography was viewed on the institution's website. Consolidated financial statements were reviewed briefly to ascertain the financial standing of each institution. All institutional press releases relevant to the new master's program were studied. IPEDS data (specifically enrollment figures and degree conferrals) were examined to confirm data provided by the study participants.

### **Pilot Study**

Before the case study interviews were conducted, the interview protocol was piloted at the researcher's current institution – a small, private, non-profit institution in Massachusetts offering specialized business master's degree programs. Participants for this pilot study were chosen based upon their familiarity with specialized master's programs developed within the past five years. The pilot interviews were not recorded and were not intended for data collection, but instead as an aid to assist the research process by helping fine-tune and validate the interview questionnaire.

A dean and an academic program administrator were interviewed. No significant changes were made to the interview protocol; however, the importance of encouraging each participant to



relate their perception of the “story” of the program development process became evident. Each participant played a different role and provided a unique perspective about the program development process. Listening to multiple perspectives enabled the researcher to gain a more nuanced and thorough understanding of the process. The dean suggested a few minor edits to clarify some of the questions being asked. His suggestions were adopted.

### **Interview Guide Approach**

The interview guide served as an important tool to make certain that the researcher maintained sufficient structure and remained focused on collecting the data that participants considered most important, while still remaining relevant to the overall study. Additionally, the guide enabled the researcher to focus on hearing and thinking about the critical observations offered during the interview and reminded the researcher of the key markers to be captured, such as setting, people, actions, and conversations (Mack, 2005). According to Kvale (1996), the recognition and application of the knowledge gained from the interpersonal experience is what matters in a research interview.

A semi-structured interview process was utilized. Burgess (1984) describes a semi-structured interview as a conversation with a purpose. The semi-structured interview process affords the researcher the flexibility and the openness necessary for the participants to present and highlight their experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences in order to illuminate the complexity of the phenomena being investigated (Burgess, 1984). Cohen and Crabtree (2006) note that during semi-structured interviews, the researcher should follow the interview guide, but also be able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when deemed appropriate.

## **Documents and Artifacts**

Organizational documents have been a staple in qualitative research for many years (Bowen, 2009). Merriam (1998) describes documents as “ready-made source(s) of data” (p. 112). Documents are often used in combination with other qualitative methods as a means of triangulation, which refers to “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin, 1978, p. 291). Document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to bring about meaning, gain understanding, and cultivate empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For each case, the researcher examined the campus website as well as publicly available documents about the recently developed specialized master’s program. Publicly available institutional data on the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), including demographic information and retention and completion rates, were also used in writing institutional profiles.

According to Yin (2009), the most important use of document review in case studies is to “corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 103). Document analysis was conducted at each site and used to delve further into information obtained during interviews, as well as to clarify and substantiate claims made by key institutional actors. Documents for review included those primarily obtained on each institution’s website. Special attention was paid to any documents that referenced specialized master’s program development, institutional mission, guiding principles, and academic standards.

## **Reflective Journal**

A reflective journal in qualitative research is a written record that the researcher keeps throughout the research process. It includes details of what the researcher did, thought, and felt while obtaining and analyzing the data. A reflective journal is an account of the researcher’s

work in progress, but more essentially an opportunity for reflection on the learning experience (Bassot, 2020).

I maintained field notes and a reflective journal throughout the data collection process. I wrote in the journal immediately after each interview in order to capture key ideas. The journal guided me in developing a sense of emerging themes by allowing me to record my immediate thoughts, reactions, and interpretation about interviews and collected documents.

### **Data Management**

Face-to-face interviewing (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Gill et. al., 2008; Opendakker, 2006) and in-person interviews are the traditional forms of generating data in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013). However, meeting participants in person may not be feasible as the COVID-19 pandemic made conducting in-person research a potential health risk for interviewers and participants. Therefore, this study utilized Zoom conferencing and/or WebEx conferencing as an alternative means for conducting qualitative interviewing when/if in-person interviews were not feasible (see Appendix A). Interviews were recorded on a digital platform (Zoom or WebEx) and then uploaded to the researcher's computer. Interviews were then transcribed. All data were stored on a password protected computer.

### **Methods of Analysis**

Multiple-case studies have “two stages of analysis – the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). The within-case analysis offers a description designed to provide a “portrait” of each case, while the cross-case analysis provides analytical themes, which are the “core element” of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013, pp. 247-248).

The three cases were analyzed separately first, with a view toward creating a descriptive profile of each business school and the ways in which markets, missions, and organizational core

competencies shaped the development of the new specialized master’s program. Creswell’s (2003) data analysis and interpretation process was employed in this study to organize and prepare the data for analysis. First, the data were reviewed, transcribed, and organized for the process of coding, which entails “aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information” (Creswell, 2012, p. 184). Next, the researcher read the transcripts multiple times. The researcher looked for themes, particularly those relevant to the study’s research questions including institutional missions, markets, and core competencies, but also made note of any additional themes that emerged. Then, the researcher reread the transcripts and organized the data first into codes and then into categories. Table 4 shows the study’s application of Creswell’s data analysis steps.

*Table 4: Application of Creswell’s Three-Step Approach to Data Analysis*

<b>Creswell’s steps</b>	<b>Application of Creswell’s steps</b>
1. Organization of the data to prepare for analysis	Direct quotations were taken from each verbatim transcription and placed into charts according to the research questions.
2. Reading for a sense of the general information	The transcriptions were read and reread to gain information and search for themes.
3. Finding themes in the narratives	Tables were built to demonstrate themes relating to both the research questions and the conceptual framework.

The information obtained from the interviews was organized in tables. Data in each table were then color-coded within each category to allow for compiling information in the cross-case analysis. The general information described in step two was organized into a story format according to the themes discovered. A story format assisted in organization and facilitated a sequential presentation of the program development process at each institution. After the coding

phase, code words were reorganized into categories or themes (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Themes are “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). These themes as well as their sub-themes were then abstracted to allow for data interpretation.

Yin (1994) proposes four stages in the completion of a case study: 1) design the case study protocol; 2) conduct the case study; 3) analyze the case study evidence; and 4) develop conclusions, recommendations, and implications based on the evidence. The study completed each of the four stages. Yin (2003) further explains the analytic process, “Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study” (p. 109). Table 5 summarizes the application of Yin’s case study analysis principles to this study.

*Table 5: Application of Yin’s Principles of Case Study Analysis*

<b>Yin’s principles</b>	<b>Application of Yin’s principles</b>
1. Demonstrate that the analysis is derived from relevant evidence	Stories reflected the lived experiences of those telling them, making the evidence relevant.
2. Included varied but thorough interpretations, even if they rival one another	All interpretations were included in the analysis, including both congruent and dissonant viewpoints.
3. Address all critical elements in the case study	Given the wealth of information in each case study, all information was not used. All relevant information, however, was extracted.
4. Make use of the knowledge base and prior experience of the researcher	Self as the researcher and 20 years of work in business higher education provided both experience and a knowledge base.

In addition, after the researcher completed the within-case analysis for each of the three case study sites, cross-case analysis was employed to improve the potential for transferability

and to provide a dynamic interpretation of the data (Yin, 2003). Upon completion of the cross-case analysis, the researcher interpreted the emergent themes, provided insights as to the meaning of the data analyzed, and reported a narrative of the study’s findings.

Forrester (2013) suggests a three-step process to effectively analyze qualitative data.

Table 6 presents the study’s application of this process.

*Table 6: Application of Forrester’s Qualitative Data Analysis Process.*

<b>Forrester’s Three-Step Process</b>	<b>Application of Forrester’s Three-Step Process</b>
1. First, create a list of key themes as the data are examined and then tally each response that falls under/within each theme.	To better understand what participants were saying, the researcher created a list of key themes as the data were read; then tallied the responses by theme in an effort to make sense of the information.
2. Second, remain focused and logical. The researcher cannot become distracted by off-topic comments.	In order to build an organized, sequential institutional narrative, the researcher used color coding to mark relevant comments provided by participants, but also made side notes of other comments that were part of the participants’ stories but were not considered key to the research conducted.
3. Third, make the story come to life suggesting that the researcher break insights into short, understandable chunks and incorporate quotations from participants.	Given that each participant’s comments provided meaningful data, the researcher interwove participants’ quotes with her insights into meaningful “chunks.” The writing of each institutional narrative followed this process.

Fischer (2005) defines document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic. Just like any other analytical method, qualitative research document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to produce meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the following documents were gathered by the researcher for each participating institution:

- AACSB institutional profiles
- Institutional websites
  - Mission statements
  - Program descriptions of the new specialized master's programs
  - Curriculum overviews of the new specialized master's programs
  - Faculty and administrator bios
  - Consolidated financial statements, 2020 – 2022
- Institutional press releases including those announcing the new specialized master's programs
- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2017-2022
  - Institutional enrollment data
  - Degree conferrals

These documents were utilized to gain information about the institution and the new program, as well as to triangulate with information provided by the participants interviewed at each institution. Using different methods to collect information confirmed findings across data sets, thereby minimizing the possibilities for biases to emerge.

For qualitative researchers, maintaining respondent confidentiality while presenting rich, detailed accounts can be challenging. Informed consent was secured prior to the beginning of the interview. The consent form provided to the participants attempted to communicate a clear understanding of the study, their role in the process, and the role and responsibilities of the

researcher. Confidentiality of the study participants and their employing institutions was maintained in the study by the use of assigned pseudonyms.

### **Trustworthiness and Reliability**

Trustworthiness of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). In each study, researchers should establish the protocols and procedures necessary for a study to be considered worthy of consideration by readers (Amankwaa, 2016). Unlike quantitative researchers, who apply statistical methods for establishing validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Noble and Smith (2015) offer that although the tests and measures used to establish the validity and reliability of quantitative research cannot be applied to qualitative research, in the broadest context these terms are applicable in qualitative research, with validity referring to the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision with which the findings accurately reflect the data, while reliability describes consistency within the employed analytical procedures.

Creswell and Poth (2013) consider “validation” in qualitative research an effort to assess the accuracy of the results, as best described by the researcher and the participants. Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) further suggest that every study has biases, making it imperative for the researcher to maintain a self-critical attitude while searching for alternative solutions. They analyzed writings about validation in 13 studies and found a number of key validation criteria.

The four primary criteria were:

1. Credibility (Are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants’ meaning?)
2. Authenticity (Are different voices heard?)



3. Criticality (Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of the research?)
4. Integrity (Are the investigators self-critical?) (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001, p. 534)

Furthermore, Yin (1994) offers three validation principles to be followed while conducting a case study: 1) use multiple sources of evidence, 2) create a case study data base, and 3) maintain a chain of evidence to link data from the research questions to the conclusions. The following procedures were undertaken to ensure that Creswell and Poth's (2013) and Yin's (1994) validation principles were applied during completion of this study. Reading and rereading of the interview transcripts encouraged credibility, while interviews with subjects who fulfilled different roles at each institution encouraged authenticity. The investigator attempted to reflect upon the data gathered both thoughtfully and critically, thereby encouraging integrity.

Triangulation refers to the combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, observers, or perspectives in a single study. The use of triangulation is an attempt to obtain a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon that may also add rigor and breadth to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Jick, 1979). Patton (2002) cautions that it is a common misconception that the goal of triangulation is to achieve consistency between data sources or approaches. In fact, these inconsistencies probably are due to the relative advantages of the different approaches. In Patton's view, these inconsistencies should not be seen as a weakening of the evidence, but rather as an opportunity to discover a deeper meaning in the data. The collection of relevant documents from each institution combined with the interviewing of multiple participants at each site promoted triangulation in this research study.

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the stability of data collection procedures. It can be enhanced by detailed field notes, by using recording devices, and by transcribing the

digital files. Tellis (1997) offers that one key means to ensure reliability is the development of a case study protocol. Yin (1994) asserts that the development of the rules and procedures contained in the interview protocol serves to enhance the reliability of case study research. The current study attempted to achieve reliability in several ways. Before any interviews were conducted, a case study protocol was established. Throughout the study, interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, detailed field notes were compiled.

Qualitative research studies require reflection on the part of the researcher, both before and during the research process, as a way of providing context and understanding for readers. When being reflexive, researchers should not try to simply ignore or avoid their own biases, which is likely impossible. Rather, reflexivity requires researchers to reflect upon and clearly articulate their position and subjectivities so that readers can better understand the filters through which questions were asked, data were gathered and analyzed, and findings were reported (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Prior to the completion of each interview, the interview protocol was reviewed and the questions to be asked were highlighted to focus on each participant's specific role at the institution and in the program development process. The researcher attempted to separate the interview process from her position and years of experience in business education and listen to each participant's responses with an open mind.

### **Limitations**

Efforts were made to increase the trustworthiness of this study, but a number of limitations still need to be considered. The researcher did not directly observe meetings conducted at the three institutions about the program development process. One possible limitation is the dependence on the interview participants to recall and share information and the personal bias possibly associated with the method of qualitative case study. Notably, the study

focused on the memories and interpretations of a specific, selective group of high-level administrators and faculty, who due to their positions within the institutions, could be more practiced and reserved in their conversations, as well as more positive in their representation of faculty-administration processes and working relationships on their campus. Additionally, interviews were conducted at only three of the six institutions that met the study's qualification criteria and the number of interviews completed at each institution was limited. Another possible limitation is that the institutional documents publicly available likely reflect positive messages that top-level leaders wanted conveyed about the new program.

### **Role as the Researcher**

Merriam (1998) says that in qualitative research, "The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (p. 42). In conducting qualitative research, the researcher becomes the "instrument" as opposed to using a "research tool" in the form of a survey typically used in quantitative research (Merriam, 2002). Try as researchers may to remove themselves from the research process, it is not possible to separate from the inquiry. In the current study, it was exactly my professional experience and work history that framed the asking of these research questions.

My passion for business education drove my desire to understand how business schools determine if there is a need to expand their degree portfolios with specialized master's programs. My higher education career includes over 20 years in graduate business education, specifically as a non-faculty administrator. Currently, I serve as an Associate Dean administering business education at a small, private, non-profit college in Massachusetts (not included as a site in this study).

In 2018, I listened to a presentation conducted by AACSB during which global business school leaders and educators were interviewed and asked to discuss how business schools should adapt to accommodate student demand as well as society's need for an ever-changing workforce. During the interview session, Dr. Anne L. Balazs, Dean of the College of Business and Innovation at the University of Toledo said, "Colleges of business have to be leaders. They have to be out in front of change. People are looking to us to recognize that change, to identify that change, and to build programs to meet that change and those challenges." Her words resonated with me, and I continued to reflect upon them as I planned and pursued this research project.

In my career, I have developed a deep understanding of the graduate management education landscape. Throughout my administrative career, I have successfully developed and managed curricula for numerous academic programs and strategically influenced student and faculty engagement through collaboration, policy development, and institutional assessments.

Over the years, it has been my observation that the goal of completing a graduate degree in business, whether it is an MBA or a more specialized master's program, should be to provide graduates with the competencies needed to help them be both better managers and leaders. In addition, a master's degree in business should serve to make graduates more marketable to potential employers and serve to boost their success in the workforce. "Social, technological, and geopolitical changes have caused business schools to change how they do everything – from delivering curriculum to conceptualizing business as a discipline" (DeNovellis, 2018, p. 1). In order to remain relevant and adapt to an ever-changing world, business schools must develop new programs that will meet the needs of their students, their students' future employers, and society as a whole. How they accomplish these needed changes, while also maintaining their commitment to their institution's mission and academic standards and expertise was the focus of

this study. In order for business schools to continue to thrive, they must adapt. This study explored one possible means of adapting to an evolving academic environment, as well as a rapidly changing external environment: the development of new specialized master's degree programs.

## CHAPTER 4

### INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVES

#### **Introduction**

This study sought to explore how business schools at three institutions developed specialized business master's programs to expand their portfolios of academic offerings. The study used a qualitative research design to investigate the topic. Qualitative research methods are valuable in providing in-depth descriptions of complex phenomena and illuminating the experience and interpretation of events by participants with differing stakes and roles. Interviews were conducted with four individuals at each institution. Each interviewee was considered a key informant who had participated in the development and implementation of the new specialized master's program.

The following criteria were established for sites to be considered for potential inclusion in the study: 1) accreditation by AACSB and located in Massachusetts; 2) private, non-profit institutions that offer master's degrees in business; 3) small- to medium-size enrollment; 4) ranking below the top tier of graduate business programs as ranked by Bloomberg and *US News and World Report* (not among top 100 in Bloomberg and unranked in *US News*); and 5) development of one or more specialized master's programs within the previous five years. Six business schools were found to meet the five criteria established. Purposive sampling was then utilized to select three business schools for inclusion in the case study.

An overall narrative of each institution is provided in this chapter. Confidentiality is maintained by using pseudonyms for the names of the selected institutions: Aspengrove, Birchmeadow, and Whiteoak. For each case, this chapter provides a section that presents an overview of the specialized master's program developed, as well as a discussion of how this program relates to the institutional mission and core competencies. Also examined is the role that markets played in the development of the new program. Additionally, the change processes that were used in expanding each institution's portfolio of academic business programs are examined.

The case study is based on twelve interviews (four at each participating institution) conducted with business school administrators and faculty involved in the launch of the new specialized master's programs. Interviews were conducted between November 2022 and July 2023. Additionally, multiple documents were reviewed at each of the three institutions. Documents included institutional press releases, as well as information about the new programs available on the institutional websites. The interviews conducted and the review of institutional documents provided a comprehensive view of each institution's program development process.

### **Aspengrove**

Aspengrove is a co-educational, small college located in a suburban setting. Business degrees are offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In fall 2021, the college's total enrollment was reported as approximately 2,500 students (2,400 undergraduates and 60 graduate students). Historically, Aspengrove has focused on undergraduate education. The business school dean explained that about ten years ago institutional leaders, including the president and provost, decided to develop more graduate programs based on their belief that more graduate programs would enhance institutional prestige. The dean further explained that Aspengrove is

currently attempting to expand its portfolio of graduate programs with a potential long-range goal of achieving university status.

While Aspengrove's president and provost both promoted an interest in the institution achieving university status, the interviewees (dean, faculty director, and faculty member) did not necessarily share this strategic goal. They did not explicitly critique the strategy, but they also did not openly express support. Study participants acknowledged that while achieving university status could serve to enhance institutional reputation and prestige, they did not want the institution to lose its identity as a close-knit college with small classes and strong bonds between students and faculty. A long-time faculty member offered the following thoughts:

I know that certainly in faculty conversations there are people who get very exercised about it [the goal of moving to university status], but it often ends by them saying, "fine, fine, let them talk. If they mention it again, maybe I'll pay attention, but for now I'm just going to work with my students."

At the undergraduate level, Aspengrove's business school offers majors in management, accounting, marketing, economics, international business, healthcare administration, and finance. The focus of this case study is the development of a new business master's program in data analytics.

Aspengrove's mission focuses on providing a high-quality education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels with an emphasis on exchange of ideas, critical thinking, and free inquiry. Aspengrove aspires to educate the whole person so that graduates think and act courageously while seeking to contribute to the creation of a more compassionate society. The business school builds upon this base, stating its desire to encourage students to develop



leadership potential based on the college's liberal arts foundation and emphasis on creative thinking.

The business school dean offered support for the institution's mission. "I have never reinterpreted our mission. I think our mission is spot on." She further explained the institution's desire to produce well-rounded, highly educated graduates who can hit the ground running when they are hired by a firm. The program faculty director reiterated the institution's desire to know and remain "who they are" which requires small class sizes with an emphasis on experiential, skills-based learning. A senior faculty member also emphasized the cordial relationships developed between faculty and students and also among staff members: "Aspengrove was in many ways, for many years, kind of run like a family business."

Aspengrove's school of business also provides a vision statement emphasizing an experiential learning environment and ability to graduate professionals who can contribute and lead with purpose in a rapidly changing global business environment. In its vision statement, Aspengrove reiterates a goal of providing a high-quality education incorporating educational best practices and building upon both the foundation and tradition of a liberal arts education.

While the business school is not highly ranked, Aspengrove's undergraduate liberal arts programming has been consistently ranked highly. Aspengrove's promotional materials focus on experiential learning in small student-centered classes, as well as its 11:1 student/faculty ratio. Study participants mentioned that the president and the provost wanted to carry these perceived strengths into the development of any new graduate programs.

Aspengrove had multiple reasons to expand its graduate business programming. First, the business school dean explained that given that the institution's student body was primarily regional, the president and provost believed that a lack of graduate programming hindered the

institution's ability to gain regional market share against other AACSB-accredited institutions. The institution wished to be more attractive to students seeking graduate degrees and better able to compete with nearby institutions that offered multiple graduate programs. Second, the dean explained that the provost had shared with colleagues his belief that attaining university status could serve to enhance its institutional reputation. Third, Aspengrove's master's degree in accounting was no longer being offered. Developed in the 1990s, this business degree program operated successfully for many years. However, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) requested each state licensing board to adopt a requirement of completion of 150 credit hours (rather than a master's degree) before a student was allowed to sit for the CPA certification exam. Over the course of more than two decades, all fifty states adopted this proposal. Given that students were no longer required to earn a master's degree to sit for the CPA exam, market demand decreased. Therefore, Aspengrove discontinued the accounting master's program, while maintaining its accounting undergraduate major.

In 2016, an interdisciplinary master's program in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) was added. This integrated program offered some business courses, but it was focused on serving students who seek a more comprehensive curriculum rather than a specific business program. The program had a creative focus, beginning with an Introduction to Creativity course and culminating with the granting of a Master's of Arts degree. The IMC master's program was Aspengrove's only active graduate program until the Master's in Data Analytics program was introduced – the specialized master's program on which this study focuses.

In 2017, the institution's provost established an institution-wide initiative requesting that all academic departments explore potential graduate programs. The faculty program director of data analytics recalled:

The then-provost had some initiatives that he really wanted us to begin exploring, some graduate programs. We all knew about what was going to happen with the demographic cliff back then and how were we going to differentiate, and we'd always talked about graduate degrees. There were some times when we were talking about other programs [*not business analytics*] and we just didn't really have the talent at the time or the resources really, actually, faculty resources. We just didn't have any. So, the kind of feeling out there at the time was like, let's create some interdisciplinary programs that are really either between multiple departments or offered to students from a variety of backgrounds. We wanted to be as broad as possible. The programs were to be completely in person or hybrid, nothing online because we hadn't really at all -- other than summer undergraduate courses -- done anything in the online space.

The business school dean had to take up the mantle of exploring potential new graduate programs. The dean stated that the institution has always valued its “external partnerships.” In order to better understand the business world’s needs, the Aspengrove dean reached out to alumni working in a multitude of fields including marketing, health care, retail, and technology. All these individuals had been hired by their current employers to work in data analysis. They were invited to campus for a joint meeting with faculty and administration to ascertain the need for graduate programming in data analytics. Aspengrove’s dean shared:

So, companies have so much data, and what do we do with the data, and how do we analyze data, and how do we figure out strategy and business operations based on the data we have? Like I said, it could be anything from a healthcare organization to our marketing organization, to retail, to tech, whatever. So, this group of, we had... I'm trying

to think how many were there at this meeting. There had to have been at least 12 people from outside alums. Some couple non alums and then faculty... Around the table to figure out, okay, what does data analytics look like at these companies? What type of education do people need to go into this field? And what courses do we need to offer?

As a result of this meeting, the dean turned to one of the participants, an adjunct professor who had previously worked in data analytics in industry, to oversee the development of a new master's degree in data analytics. In 2017, upon completion of his doctorate, this professor became a tenure-track faculty member and subsequently was appointed to serve as the faculty director of the new program being developed. The dean stated:

I asked him if he would spearhead the whole process in this program and help me figure out how we should do it, what type of program we should offer, what courses are really important? Because I wanted it to be the type of program that was more practical where these are the actual skills you're going to use.

An eight-member working task force was created consisting of faculty from the business, computer science, and math departments to look at the creation of a program. The group first considered whether the program's focus should be data analytics or data science. The group decided that the focus should be data analytics, the more "business" side of data. The program director and a faculty colleague then spent time developing a list of proposed courses, while also completing an analysis of existing programs at competitor institutions. The program director provided further insight into the process:

So, we all got together. My then-colleague, who is now retired, him and I worked really hard on the first proposal of a list of courses, and we did some industry analysis. What

are other schools around us looking like? The goal from the very beginning was that it had to be a really applied program.

The faculty program director developed two drafts of what the program might look like and returned to the focus group composed of alumni and faculty. He further explained, “They gave a lot of feedback. They were also on board with skills, skills, skills. We need skills.” The program development process relied heavily on input and feedback from alumni and other working professionals who repeatedly emphasized the need that the learning program stress skill development. The faculty program director indicated, “We definitely wanted the program to be very applied. It’s not that we’re not going to teach theory at all. It’s that we want them to get as much practical experience as possible because we wanted to market something that employers were interested in paying for.”

The faculty program director also explained that prior to launching the new program top-level administration, including the business school dean, wanted to establish a corporate partnership to enable students to use and learn from the partner company’s data sets, software, and data analytics platforms. The process to obtain the company partner proved rather challenging. An agreement was reached with one of the world’s largest information technology companies. Aspengrove’s program director established a relationship with several company representatives, had the company representatives come to campus, and even did some training on one of their analytics platforms. After some time, however, the director explained, “They literally fell off the face of the planet. They stopped responding to emails. It was very bizarre.”

Following multiple unsuccessful attempts to reach his contacts, the director spoke to a colleague at another institution who informed him that other institutions were experiencing

similar difficulties with this information technology company. When the program director finally reached a spokesperson for the company, he was informed that the information technology company had decided to discontinue its college and university partnering program.

The program director then began to search for another partnership. This effort proved more successful as he was able to establish a relationship with one of the most widely used software analytics companies. He felt more comfortable knowing that this company already had an extensive higher education presence. When he reached out to the company, he explained, “We’re putting together this master’s program. We want it to be really applied.” The corporate partner offered to provide aid in both market research and curriculum design.

Additionally, the partner proposed that students completing their Aspengrove master’s degree, also be given the opportunity to earn an academic specialization, as defined by the corporate partner. The corporate partner outlined that academic specializations are available at this company in three tiers. Aspengrove developed its degree program so that students could earn a tier three specialization (the company’s most advanced level). This specialization requires the integration of software analytics technology into at least twelve credit hours of required courses. This software is used to analyze data in multiple industries including government, medicine, banking, and education. Training aims to equip graduates with data-analysis skills and business knowledge to enhance their business decision-making abilities. Although the application process was arduous, Aspengrove received tier three certification from the corporate partner. Therefore, upon completion of their master’s degrees, students also receive a tier three academic specialization from this company.

In addition, graduates are eligible to sit for a series of examinations administered by the corporate partner. By passing these exams, the student is eligible to earn one or more

professional certifications. These examinations are not mandatory, do not provide academic credit, and are not counted toward the academic requirements necessary to earn a master's degree. However, given that the examinations demonstrate competence in a widely used data analysis platform, the expectation is that a graduate's knowledge of this software will make the individual more competitive when seeking employment in the data analytics marketplace. The faculty program director explained, "And we've had people get two. Some people get none; some people get one. So, you earn all these credentials along with your master's and this is really what makes us different."

The program director provided the following overview of the program's message to students and prospective students:

There is no question that data is ubiquitous, and the exponential eruption of data is something that organizations cannot ignore. They must analyze data in order to innovate and grow. What does this mean for you? It means that employers need a workforce that is well-versed in the techniques of data analysis.

After more than three years of planning and preparation, Aspengrove launched its new Master's in Professional Studies in Data Analytics in the fall of 2020. Thirteen students matriculated in the inaugural class. The 2022-2023 cohort, however, included only nine students. To explain the lack of enrollment growth, the program director stated that the new program was not provided budgetary support for either marketing or student recruitment. His belief is that this lack of support, in combination with the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has suppressed enrollment. He suggested, however, that, to date, the president has not expressed concern about the low enrollment figures:

And our president has very ... I don't know a nice way to say this other than he has a pretty low bar. He was very happy to see that we got nine students this year. He was like, "That's great." He's like, "I was actually pleased. I didn't think you were going to get anyone since you didn't have any resources." It's nice to hear the president say that because that's helpful in this sort of continued development stage.

Prior to the program launch, an initial requirement for applicants was two years of work experience after completion of a bachelor's degree. However, this requirement was never implemented. As the program director explained, no external resources were granted by Aspengrove in the launch year to assist with recruiting and admissions, so a determination was made that at least for the first few years the program should admit interested applicants with or without post-graduate work experience. Two applicants, who were accepted to the initial class upon completion of their undergraduate degrees at Aspengrove, were outstanding master's level students so the decision was made to eliminate the work requirement. The success of these fifth-year students in the first cohort convinced the program director that a "mixed" group of students, including students who had just completed their undergraduate degrees as well as students who had experience working in the business world, could be successful. The program director also commented, "It's actually fantastic, the way the professionals work with the younger students – almost an accidental mentoring type of relationship." The current cohort is evenly distributed. Half have been working in the professional world, while the other half are fifth-year students. Given that work experience is no longer an entry prerequisite, Aspengrove is currently discussing changing the degree's designation from a Master's in Professional Studies to a Master's in Science degree. According to the program director, Aspengrove's top-level leaders



also believe that a Master's in Science degree might be easier to market to prospective students.

In summary, the program director said:

Now, it's open to anybody, which, it is yet another reason why we are going to switch to a master of science, because it's not just aimed at professionals anymore, because it has worked so well. In fact, our current cohort is half and half, I'd say. Half have been in the professional world and half are brand, brand new!

The program structure follows an executive (low-residency) cohort model allowing students to earn a master's degree in one year while continuing to work a full-time job. The program spans three semesters (fall, spring, and summer). Each semester starts with an extended three-day residency, with three courses per semester, and combines online with in-person instruction that brings students together on campus one weekend each month. Currently, all students are required to begin the program in the fall semester. The program director commented on the value of the cohort model and the risk that could occur by permitting multiple admissions entry points in an effort to satisfy market competitiveness:

Right now, we do one intake a year. So, there's only a fall entry point because it's a cohort, and they go through the courses in a progression, three, three, and three. Multiple entry points disrupt that cohort integrity. I feel like in our business, people always want you to take them, but there's a risk when you do that. It just changes the model.

On-campus classes meet monthly, Friday evenings and all-day Saturdays. Less than half of the academic instruction for the program is delivered online. The program director believes that the low residency format is an extremely positive aspect of the program: "It's a low residency format. We decided that's exactly what Aspengrove is all about, the high touch. We

spend a day together or a day and a half together.” The students have meals together allowing time to network and to establish bonds with both faculty and fellow students, one of the goals of a cohort model.

The program’s website stated that the goal/outcome of the program is to graduate students who have learned “to master the cutting-edge platforms at the heart of data analytics.” The degree attempts to focus on the skills that today’s employers desire and is also highly applied, incorporating “both hands-on research and client engagements to give students firsthand experience practicing what they learn.”

The new program also benefited from the opening of new campus infrastructure. In 2019, Aspengrove debuted a new business school building to fulfill its goal of upgrading institutional resources. The new facility included both state-of-the-art classrooms and cutting-edge technology. Inside the new building, graduate students have access to a Bloomberg classroom (allowing live access to pricing of equity shares, stocks, and currency), a capital markets room, a simulated board room, and a think tank/makerspace. These features simulate experiences that students can expect in the workforce and align with Aspengrove’s vision of giving students access to experiential education.

Nevertheless, when the new master’s degree in data analytics was introduced, the need to utilize existing resources was paramount. The dean expressed that while she wanted the program to be distinctive from those offered by competitors, she also wanted the program to utilize existing resources so that it could become self-sufficient and not lose money. She addressed this issue directly:

What was going to be distinct -- not only distinctive for us, but what was going to be a program where we had resources, because we felt that, how can we do this but not lose money on the programs that we start?

Since the launch of the program, only one additional non-tenured faculty position has been added. Initially, no additional support staff were added. Only resources already available within the business school were utilized to conduct both marketing and recruitment. The program director was charged with all recruiting efforts. In the first year of the program, Aspengrove's internal marketing unit regularly attended and videoed the live weekend classes in order to develop content for the institutional website. The program director shared, "They did a big, big marketing blitz for our program. And so, that's why our site is so good."

The program's first year coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic. In fall 2020, Aspengrove's faculty members were given the option of teaching on campus or remotely. Faculty members teaching in the data analytics master's program decided that their preference was to teach on campus if the students agreed. An email was sent to the students requesting their input. Universally the students requested that the hybrid model be continued. While some faculty members and students contracted COVID, the program's on-campus component had to be cancelled only one weekend in the spring of 2021.

While its cohorts have remained small since the program's inception, the president has offered support -- by allowing the program to continue, but without a commitment of resources in terms of faculty hires. At this time, the program is not fully financially self-supporting. The planning committee had projected enrollment of fifteen students per annual cohort for the first several years, with a longer-range goal of admitting 20 to 25 students each year. An enrollment

of fifteen students per year would allow the program to break even financially, but this threshold had not yet been reached at the time of this study. Aspengrove leaders were investigating ways to increase the program's enrollment. During the 2022-23 academic year, the business school provided some additional resources for both recruiting and marketing with a goal of attracting additional students.

The addition of online delivery has been considered, but feedback from students is that they value the in-person weekend instruction. After holding discussions with students in the current cohort, the faculty program director explained:

I asked the students in the cohort this year, I was like, "if the program were online, would you have done it?" And most of them said, "No." They said, "This is the reason why I picked this program is to be ..." And a lot of them feel that, because it's an accelerated program.

The director went on to share that students often say, "If it weren't for the touchpoints that we have on campus every few weeks, I think I would fall behind." He stated his belief that the in-person programming keeps the students accountable to both Aspengrove and themselves.

The program director also explained that Aspengrove has always focused on in-person instruction and remains ambivalent about shifting to or adding a fully online alternative. Given the current hybrid model, students need to live within the region. Online programming would allow attendance by students living in more distant states or in other countries. Nevertheless, as the faculty program director explained, "I think they're (the administration) very, very nervous about it [online programs], because it's traditionally not been who we are."

Another concern is whether an online program might not truly increase enrollment, but rather just divert some students who, otherwise, would have attended the hybrid program. A further concern is cost. The students in the hybrid program bring their own laptops and the needed software is installed at no cost to the students. Aspengrove pays its corporate partner only for a site license that allows both undergraduate and graduate students to utilize the software. Were students to attend online, software distribution would be much more challenging. Enrolled students would need to bring their computers to the campus to have the necessary software installed. Additionally, a system allowing remote access to each of the software platforms being used would have to be developed or procured. The faculty program director offered, "I'm certainly not against online. I think there's a lot of potential. The problem is that we have to differentiate ourselves [from other similar programs]." The program director expressed an additional concern that the hybrid data analytics program is not easily duplicated online. If an online program were to be considered, then he believes that maintenance of the strengths and quality of the current program should be a priority.

The faculty program director also offered that he has had inquiries from international students interested in attending the program, but because of visa requirements they currently cannot be accommodated. If the current program were to add additional residencies (on-campus courses) so that students completed more of their coursework on campus, then visas could be granted allowing international students to attend. The program director said, "I haven't yet sat down with a couple of our folks to be certain, but I think if we were to add a couple more residencies throughout the year, we'll be eligible to grant visas."

A possible longer-range solution to attracting additional students is to provide concentrations within the current program. Interest in both healthcare analytics and retail

analytics is growing; however, in order to provide multiple tracks, more faculty would need to be hired.

Study participants mentioned that Aspengrove is also considering adding other master's programs in business including an MBA. Again, the introduction of additional programs would require both staffing increases and expansion of institutional resources. Aspengrove is attempting to examine carefully the costs associated with the implementation of any new programs, as well as any potential effects on the institution's reputation. The interview data suggest that Aspengrove remains committed to maintaining its institutional strengths, rooted in small, in-person classes and experiential learning and does not want to deviate from its firmly established institutional identity in order to add new programs. As the faculty program director stated, "We want to not be the jack of all trades, master of none. We want to be the master of something."

### **Birchmeadow**

Birchmeadow is a co-educational, medium-sized university located in an urban setting. In 2022, Birchmeadow had an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 5,000 students and a graduate school enrollment of approximately 1,400 students. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, Birchmeadow offers degrees in the arts and sciences, engineering, and business and is particularly well known for its engineering programs.

Birchmeadow offers four undergraduate majors in business (business, industrial engineering, management engineering, and management information systems). The institution offers a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) online and master of science (MS) degrees in business analytics, information technology, innovation, and operations and supply chain analytics. All four MS degrees are offered both on campus and online. The master's degree in business analytics, introduced in 2020, is the focus of this case study.

Birchmeadow's stated mission is to develop students' ability to utilize entrepreneurial thinking and technology expertise to solve challenging problems that arise at the intersection of technology and business. The stated goal of the business school is to develop technically minded students into adaptive leaders who are able to use business acumen and technology to innovate, thereby creating sustainable and globally responsible solutions. The business school dean suggests a further tenet is the recognition of business as an "engine for social good and a mechanism to make a difference in the world. Our world requires strategic thinkers and leaders who are innovative in ways that yield societal impact while also engaging diverse constituencies."

A senior professor expressed a strong belief that Birchmeadow is a school that is very mission driven and that there is "a lot of consensus around what that mission is." As a faculty member for many decades, she stated, "We use different words now, but this fundamental focus on an intersection of business and technology has stayed throughout and I think it's a natural fit." She explained further that while different disciplines may embrace technology in varying ways, faculty members and administrators at Birchmeadow both look at new opportunities in terms of that intersection and, in her opinion, would not adopt a program that did not advance the institution's mission.

Beginning in 2017, Birchmeadow experienced enrollment declines in both its MBA and MS programs, particularly among international students. The business school dean shared that "Our MS in IT was getting 30 [international] students every year, year after year. With visa law changes that came out of Washington in 2017, we went from 30 to 0." He also stated his belief that a student profile shift was impacting enrollment market share: "Students are changing what

they want: they want more focus, they want more convenience, and they don't necessarily want to leave the workplace." The dean shared his five-year vision for the business school:

I want Birchmeadow to be the business school of choice for top STEM-oriented students who want to solve complex human problems. We should be globally renowned for our research and for our programs that are all at the intersection of technology and business. If we are the top one – or in the top handful of schools – that people look for that type of education, I will be very pleased.

The dean suggested that in order to achieve this vision, "we need to be better known." He further explained:

If you get 20 miles outside of our city, our recognition goes down substantially. Even inside of our city, I am surprised by the number of people who don't know there is a business school at Birchmeadow. If we are able to enhance that recognition, we will be able to bring in more students in our graduate and undergraduate programs. Ultimately, I would like to see more of the institution's students in science and engineering take more business courses during their time here.

As the dean reflected on why he considered expanding Birchmeadow's portfolio of programs given current market conditions, he said, "Birchmeadow has great potential which it has not achieved." He provided several explanations for his commitment to expanding graduate education.

First, the dean spoke about the business school market landscape, comparing Birchmeadow to a very successful business school nearby:



The (X) school has done wonderfully, "Why are we having difficulty? What can we do?" And I quickly realized that... So let me back up. I have always said that figure out where your strengths are and what your audience is, and then build from that. And it also helps to think if there's a demand for what you could produce.

Second, he reflected on the current state of and reliance on the MBA in Birchmeadow's graduate business portfolio and said, "Look, we're having trouble with the MBA." He provided the following explanation:

I discovered that the person my predecessor had hired to run things for the MBA, including recruitment, thought that we needed to cast our net broadly and appeal to everyone. And I looked at them and said, "Look, what we're doing is, by doing that, we're appealing to no one."

The dean expressed that he wanted Birchmeadow to be authentic to its long-standing mission and identity. Considering the current state of the MBA, he elaborated:

Where do our students go to work? They go to work for these 15 tech companies. Where do most of our students come from, actually? Well, they come from the tech companies. Why don't we say, we are a STEM MBA? And honestly, if you want a general MBA, this isn't the place for you. If you're thinking about becoming a banker, this probably isn't the place for you.

My interim predecessor as dean and the guy who was running things [in the MBA program] both said, "Oh, that'll be a disaster. We're going to tell people we don't want them?" But then I said, "Yeah, but we're going to tell other people, we want them."

The dean shared that he was “not ready to give up on the MBA yet, but I am not making big investments in it either.” He further expounded:

We took a look at where we are, what we are, and what we want to be. And the school has some real strengths in information technology, operations management, and industrial engineering, and in entrepreneurship and in innovation. We have to build upon those strengths. We have to reaffirm that we are the business school of a STEM-based institution. We will embrace that; we will make sure all programs recognize that; and that will guide what we do.

Given Birchmeadow’s relatively small graduate school, a faculty member suggested that there are no large academic silos, so different departments are very used to working together and are comfortable sharing resources. She provided the following example:

We don’t have a business intelligence course focused in just marketing areas or in just operations, so it’s across the board. I think that broader perspective can teach the fundamentals. So, we definitely take advantage of sort of this idea of sharing across programs.

The senior faculty member reiterated the dean’s belief that Birchmeadow has always had a focus on technology at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Given this long-standing interest, professors from several academic disciplines believed that data analytics was an area of potential growth. Instructors from multiple departments in the business school suggested that their students really needed additional data analytics skills. The senior faculty member elaborated:

I think we saw this role of data analytics in sort of lots of different areas, so not just operations, not just IT; marketing was another big one, and looking at some analytics there. I think that sort of shared idea that analytics cross disciplines in creating a structure that would really allow people to focus on the analytics as opposed to the discipline sort of drove the degree I would say.

Faculty members engaged with both the board of trustees and alumni stakeholders as they further investigated the feasibility of developing a master's program in data analytics. Faculty also discussed how existing MS programs at Birchmeadow might be restructured in order to provide students with the additional analytic skills that they desired and that faculty thought necessary.

Birchmeadow's business school has standing committees, some focused on undergraduate programming and others on graduate programming. The business school dean said, "We need to look at where we have strengths. Frankly, the strongest parts of that school are information technology (IT) and industrial engineering (IE)." In the 2017-18 academic year, one of the graduate committees was in the process of examining existing MS degree programs as well as possible options for growth. The business school dean shared that he, "encouraged the faculty to think about those areas where we have strengths, unique capabilities, and interest in producing a program. Then let's see if there's a market."

A business school full professor stepped forward and proposed the establishment of a master's degree in data analytics. The standing committee then completed a full review of the proposal. The senior faculty member explained the review process:

You're going to get feedback from the various constituencies about what needs to be part of the core, what doesn't need to be part of the core. And I do think there was a lot of give and take, but not really any struggle I would say, just some serious discussion around it. And I mean, I think it helps having this structure in place that ensures that... So we didn't have to create the structure of how you introduce a program; we have the structure.

Once the business school approved the proposal, it went to an institution-wide committee for further review and subsequently to a vote by Birchmeadow's entire faculty. A faculty member stated, "That process can be burdensome, but it does ensure that it gets a lot of fresh air, I would say."

The business school dean's preferred program development and marketing strategy is rooted in learning by doing. He explained his thought process:

To do a market research study, will cost \$50,000, but for \$20,000, I can put it on for a year. And, see whether it works or not ... its's often more economical just to try... I never worry too much about starting something and assuming that we could... If it didn't work, we would stop doing it. There is the issue that institutions are much better at starting programs than ending programs. The other thing I would say that you need to look at is, do I have the faculty who can. There are lots of things that would be really interesting, but you just don't have the faculty.

The senior faculty member concurred with the dean, "Resources are always an issue." Prior to gaining approval for a new graduate program, a competitive analysis is completed along with a projection of student enrollment. She added, "You're looking at... Are there new

resources? What do those new resources look like? How are they tied to student [enrollment] growth? I mean, that is definitely a conversation that happens.”

The business school dean suggested that he was not too worried about providing the resources necessary for a new business program:

If it's not a huge investment for business program creation, we typically don't have large amounts of equipment we have to buy. If I were going to develop a new program of scanning electron microscopy, then yes, I might have to make a big investment, or maybe in nuclear fusion. Not at the business school. You're like, "We just need a couple analytics courses. I think we'll be okay." If it is inexpensive and easy to do, let's just do it.

The program director stated the Birchmeadow administration consistently aspires to “get the faculty the help that they need.” One tangible way that the business school aided professors scheduled to teach in the new MS business analytics program was by establishing a system that provided one or two graduate student assistants to support each member of the teaching faculty. The faculty director further shared that whenever the teaching faculty ask for support her department chair reminds her, “whatever you need, just ask faculty if they need two or three assistants. Let's get these students.”

In fall 2020, Birchmeadow expanded its portfolio of graduate business programs by adding a Master’s in Business Analytics, the program examined in this study. This program focused on meeting the need across industries for employees who demonstrate expertise in handling large volumes of data and generating impactful business insights from those data. Birchmeadow’s Master’s in Business Analytics program required the completion of 33 credits, eleven three-credit courses. Students were able to attend either full-time or part-time. On-campus

courses were offered in the evening. Students could choose to combine on-campus and online instruction. The fully online option had already proven attractive to some international students, as well as to some domestic students desiring to continue full-time employment.

The Master's in Business Analytics program placed a focus on project-based education, which attempts to integrate the theory and practice of management. The program is STEM-designated given Birchmeadow's belief that there is an urgent need for engineers, scientists, and coders who also have well-developed management skills and business acumen. STEM-designated programs are academic programs that fall under at least one of the approved categories designated by the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS). These categories are recognized by the government because of their focus on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) topics. A goal of STEM-designated programs is hands-on, problem-based learning, a recommendation that reflects Birchmeadow's project-based learning philosophy. A professor offered that STEM-certification historically has served to attract international students. However, given that the new master's in data analytics debuted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in its first year, most of the students enrolled were fifth year students who had completed their undergraduate degrees at Birchmeadow, but chose to remain on campus to pursue a master's degree. In the past two years, the range of students has broadened to include more international students.

The Master's in Business Analytics commences with three introductory core courses. Thereafter, students may pursue two of four possible specialties: 1) advanced business analytic methods; 2) marketing analytics; 3) operations analytics; and 4) financial analytics with a goal of broadening the range of students' skills. According to a senior faculty member, "The program will expose students to different ways to use data, such as creating dashboards, computing key

metrics for running a business, and developing models to optimize business and supply chain operations.” Birchmeadow’s Master’s in Business Analytics program promotes students’ development of analytical skills to make strategic business decisions while also building leadership and communication skills. Students also have an opportunity to serve as an intern and to network with leading companies.

One of the central priorities of Birchmeadow’s educational philosophy is the application of academic skills and knowledge to real-world problems. The master’s program culminates with a two-course capstone experience centered on an interdisciplinary team project completed for a company. The first course of the sequence focuses on teamwork for innovation to prepare students to work together to complete a real-world project. Birchmeadow’s business school faculty believe that its capstone experience in the new master’s program is distinctive because it requires students to work with and rely on each other to facilitate completion of a project, a skill considered critical in the workplace. A faculty member explained, “The real world is complex and creates many challenges for people who are trying to make sense of data. The capstone experience gives students practice in analyzing data together and taking action with it.”

Regarding enrollment, the program administrator offered the following about the new master’s program: “This is a program where we thought it [enrollment] was going to explode and it hasn’t.” Birchmeadow was seeking a minimum yearly enrollment of 45 students (over two intakes), but in its first three years, the program’s enrollment has ranged from the high teens to the low twenties.

Initially the program used a third-party vendor to provide marketing and admissions support. The program administrator commented:

We used them for our MBA and BA to market that and take over the admissions connection role and recruiting. And it just didn't work out. They weren't delivering what they promised. So, we phased them out after a year, maybe a year and a half. We do have a centralized marketing communications group.

The program administrator also shared the following information specific to the new Master of Business Analytics program:

We're trying to scale our program, and we don't know what we're going to do. We're partnering with, we're starting using agencies for international recruiting, [a practice that previously] really was frowned upon at Birchmeadow. But we're making a case to use them, especially in [an Asian nation]. So, they're promising us 75 students in the fall.... Whoa, okay great. But we're going to need more faculty to teach more sections, that sort of thing. So, who knows? I'm hoping we get maybe 30 in the fall and then 40 in the spring.

In November 2022, the administration and faculty of Birchmeadow's business school, along with some trustees of the institution, published a strategic planning document that commits to "business competencies as an enabler to all Birchmeadow learners." This document expressed their belief that business competencies are important for all students regardless of major and that these competencies will provide an advantage as they seek employment after graduation. This initiative aligns with the business school's goal of continued expansion. The business school administration stated its desire to work with other graduate departments to establish a process for master's and PhD students in other disciplines (engineering, sciences, etc.) to enroll in appropriate business electives. Additionally, study participants explained that Birchmeadow



remains committed to seeking opportunities to offer master's degrees that are an amalgam of engineering and business such as the recently approved master's degree in engineering management to be launched in 2023.

### **Whiteoak**

Whiteoak is a co-educational, medium-sized university located in an urban setting. Business degrees are offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In fall 2022, undergraduate enrollment was approximately 4,000 students and graduate enrollment was approximately 1,000 students. The institution offers undergraduate business degrees in accounting, business analytics, business economics, entrepreneurship, finance, global business, management, and marketing. Whiteoak also offers multiple master's degrees in business including an MBA program. Students can earn master's degrees in accounting, business analytics, finance, healthcare administration, management and organizational leadership, marketing, and public administration. Whiteoak also offers multiple dual degrees, certificates, and fast-track opportunities. Most degree programs are offered on campus. Four of the master's degree programs (and one certificate) are also available fully online. The focus of this case study is the recently introduced (2019) master's degree in marketing.

Whiteoak states that its mission is to utilize the power of education, inclusion, and engagement to change lives and positively impact communities. Additionally, the institution's vision statement indicates that it seeks to encourage transformative experiences which create citizens of the world who are able to advance knowledge, promote positive change, and foster societal improvement. The business school promotes its focus on experiential learning as a pathway bridging the classroom and the real world and highlights its urban location as providing numerous opportunities for students to access projects and internships with a variety of

prestigious businesses and organizations in multiple clusters including biotech, financial services, government, and healthcare.

Whiteoak decided to increase its business program offerings at both the undergraduate and graduate levels around 2016. The dean at that time (who left the position in 2020) spearheaded the effort to increase the number of undergraduate business majors as well as the number of business master's degrees offered. The assistant dean explained that due to declining interest and enrollments in the MBA program, the dean wished to expand the business school's portfolio into new markets. At that time, Whiteoak already offered specialized master's degrees in some traditional business areas (accounting, finance) and in two somewhat atypical areas (healthcare administration, public administration). According to the assistant dean, the dean asked department chairs to search for "areas of interest based on what they were seeing as potential market opportunities, or missed opportunities that maybe we hadn't been acting on." The associate dean expressed that business school leadership believed that specialized master's degrees were increasing in popularity, so the addition of more specialized master's degrees was a logical way to add to the business school's portfolio, stating "at the time, the expansion, which was done pre-COVID, was all on the line of that's where the growth is, so let's grow."

The assistant dean explained the genesis of the planning process for new academic programs. A committee of faculty members was established within an academic department interested in developing a master's degree program. That committee met to discuss possible program initiatives. At the initial meetings, faculty brainstormed and debated the proper focus for the potential program. Next, that committee met with the office of graduate admissions. An associate dean provided coaching and mentoring as the committee formulated and completed its

departmental proposal. The assistant dean explained that the proposal examined multiple factors including competition, demand, employment opportunities, enrollment targets, pricing, and “what differentiated our program potentially from other programs that might already be in the marketplace.” She further offered that the planning process originated on the academic side and stated that “many of our master’s degrees are extensions of successful majors that we have at an undergraduate level.”

A professor of practice offered that for a number of years market analysis reports had suggested that business schools seeking to expand their master’s degree portfolios should explore the development of specialized master’s degrees, specifically in areas of institutional expertise. She provided the following explanation: “And we have some excellent expertise in management, we have some excellent expertise in marketing, so those were the easy add-ons to really explore expansion in those two areas.”

The planning process prior to the introduction of any new business master’s degree was both lengthy and comprehensive. According to the assistant dean:

And some of our [new] program initiatives were being researched quite thoroughly and for an extended period of time before they actually came to fruition, so they were on the bucket list, I think for our former dean for quite a period of time under his leadership to really round out the portfolio.

The associate dean agreed that the process is typically time consuming. She shared, “And higher ed faculty do not move fast. Our entire governance process – it takes a year plus to change things.”

Even after the former dean gave initial approval for the marketing department to continue development of a new marketing master's degree program, a number of issues continued to be debated. The key decision to be made was whether the program's focus should be general marketing or a more specific subset of marketing. The program director recalled numerous discussions between the dean and a faculty team consisting of marketing department senior and junior professors about the appropriate focus for the program:

So, I was involved in the team that actually crafted our first program drafts. But we [originally] wanted a master's [focused specifically on] marketing insights or something like that, but marketing related. And our dean at that time said, "Let's make it general marketing." So, that was how it played out. But then we had a concentration specifically in market research and insights. And then we had two other concentrations, which we later revamped. But it was basically, don't have that narrow branding of it, let's say. So, it was a back-and-forth kind of thing, but it worked out. I think it was better to have that.

After the proposal for the Master's in Marketing program was accepted by the business school, the program successfully advanced through each of the university's program development stages, including a positive vote by the faculty senate. The new program was introduced in the fall of 2019. The program delivery model offered most classes on campus and a limited number offered online.

According to the program director, the new marketing master's program seeks to teach students "how to approach complex marketing problems, analyze information, and develop high-quality strategic and tactical solutions." The new program offered a track in general marketing and featured three concentrations that enable students to customize their experience. When the

program debuted, the concentrations offered were global marketing, market research and customer insights, and product management. The three available concentrations have since been modified to marketing analytics and insights, digital marketing, and customer experience.

The new marketing master's program was designed to give students the knowledge, skills, and tools to make strategic decisions in a rapidly evolving marketplace. According to the program's website, the curriculum strives "to combine foundational marketing principles with emerging industry trends." Graduates are expected to develop the ability to sustain meaningful customer relationships, introduce and build new markets and brands, and create successful public and/or private enterprises. An experiential degree requirement could be fulfilled through either an internship or optional travel seminars, allowing students to acquire additional experience in real-world settings.

Full-time students could complete the program in as little as nine months, while part-time students could graduate in 21 months. Both the full-time and part-time programs required on-campus coursework. Students were required to complete between eleven and thirteen courses totaling between 31 and 37 credits. Along with the core and advanced marketing courses, students were required to complete nine elective credits. Furthermore, the MSM program had a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) designation from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Whiteoak has met or exceeded its MSM program enrollment goal of 30 students each year since the program's inception. Whiteoak's application pool for the MSM program has grown in two ways: 1) current undergraduates applying for a fifth year and 2) external applicants from both the domestic and international markets. Given its STEM-certification from the U.S. government, more than half the students attending were international. Students could begin the

program in either the fall or spring semester. Once admitted, students could choose to attend full-time or part-time.

Whiteoak's program director believes that two features differentiate its marketing master's program from programs offered by competitor institutions. First, the program integrates qualitative and quantitative research methods into the curriculum. Qualitative methods yield significant insights about customer behavior. Along with standard marketing techniques (in-depth interviewing and focus groups), students learn and practice newer techniques such as videography for observation studies. In the quantitative sphere, students learn the tenets of survey research, experimental design, data analysis, and digital marketing analytics. Whiteoak's marketing department believes that many marketing master's degree programs do not give enough attention to quantitative marketing skills and that future employers will value the program's focus on this area. The program director further addressed the need to consider both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of marketing, "So there's data, yes. There's creativity always involved in marketing, but if it's not backed by data, nothing gets legitimacy."

A second notable feature of the new MSM degree program is its emphasis on experiential learning in both coursework and in live client opportunities with local and global businesses. All students have the opportunity to engage with outside organizations to complete marketing projects. The program director stated that given its urban location numerous companies and organizations (both for-profit and nonprofit) provide students with a breadth of experiential learning opportunities. The business school dean concurs, "We need to reach out to find great partners so that we can create meaningful and rich learning opportunities for students."

Whiteoak's website and marketing materials suggest that students who attend the MSM program will learn from professors who are both leaders in industry and accomplished scholars.

Students will experience a dynamic curriculum focused on fundamental topics including market research, market analytics, and product management. While they will study relevant academic frameworks, they will also discuss practical approaches in marketing. As part of their program, students will have the opportunity to work on real-world consulting projects at companies seeking solutions to strategic marketing challenges. Each student's program will culminate with a capstone experience, completion of either a consulting project or a master's thesis. Whiteoak's dean and marketing faculty members expressed their hope that each student will graduate having developed an extensive professional network of both alumni and local business leaders. A senior teaching professor elaborated:

The role of marketing in business growth has amplified in recent years, especially with the historic shifts brought on by the pandemic. The MSM is designed and continuously evaluated to reflect these shifts and prepare our students with a customer-centric perspective that strengthens their data dexterity, creativity, and agility. We do so by providing many real-life opportunities such as client projects and internships with prestigious businesses and organizations.

The associate dean shared that Whiteoak is consistently engaged with outside advisory boards in an effort to gauge their needs:

At a graduate level, almost all the graduate programs have an advisory board that we work with, because you have to have the industry expertise. As part of my role, I'm also going out and talking to more people in industry and really trying to get a sense for what it is that they need. Trying to really bring us closer to the [nearby] community and really understand what it is they're looking for. We're also looking internally, trying to figure

out how we articulate what it is we're doing so that students can then articulate what they are capable of doing in the marketplace. I think we're trying to listen a lot more and then be able to message according to what the market need is. So, from a faculty governance perspective, everything we do is very collaborative.

Whiteoak recently developed an important resource for the new marketing master's program. In fall 2022, a human behavior lab was opened to help faculty and graduate students understand how customers make decisions. An institutional press release describes that the on-campus space features a leading biosensor research platform which "will provide graduate students with unique opportunities to study and analyze consumer experiences using tools and technologies that are becoming increasingly important to business success." This multi-modal technology measures eye metrics, facial expressions, and electrodermal activity in order to provide more objective insights into a person's responses to advertising.

While study participants conveyed a great deal of optimism about the goals of the program and expressed enthusiasm about meeting enrollment targets, the institution had provided an uneven response in terms of resources. The faculty resource pool was not expanded when the new program was introduced. The assistant dean stated that it has been somewhat challenging to provide appropriate staffing given the burgeoning market demand for the new program. The program director suggested that without the provision of additional resources the program's growth should be controlled, "...if the university, let's say, wants to, 'Oh, your program is good. Let's do it in an online version, too.' I'd be like, 'No, because we don't have the resources.'" She expressed her belief that programmatic growth cannot come at the expense of a decline in tenure-track faculty teaching in the program. She also shared, "there is some mentality of the adjunct



professor. Which again, there are, of course, very valuable adjunct professors that we have at the university too, especially one in our department. We value her a lot. But it's very difficult to find an adjunct professor that is also part of our [institutional] identity.” She added:

Because they [adjunct faculty] are usually not part of your institutional identity. And a grad program is just one year or one and a half years, two years, let's say the most. You don't want [students] to not associate their experience with your faculty, without your faculty being exposed to those people. Then it's not our program. I mean that's again, one of my value props is, there should be a connection to faculty. Not, I mean there are again, very valuable adjunct professors, great experiences, but [an adjunct] does not know anything much about Whiteoak.

The program director expressed her desire to limit the size of teaching sections to maintain teaching effectiveness, as well as to promote meaningful interactions between faculty and students. Program growth, however, has led to an increase in section size in some courses. While from a graduate education standpoint, she would advocate for an ideal class size of 20 to 30, the growing student intake has necessitated classes of up to 40 to 42 students. She further explained that all decisions are made on “a course-by-course basis” so that for some courses, the increase in enrollment has resulted in the offering of two sections.

The program director reflected on the growth of the program since its inception, as well as its early success. Regarding the creation of the MSM, she shared that when the program was in its developmental stages, the faculty involved (including multiple senior faculty members) wanted to create a program that differentiated itself from existing programs and also placed

significant emphasis on the quantitative aspects of marketing. She recalled that from the MSM program faculty team's perspective:

The interesting thing is, so we were very excited about these things [leveraging] current market needs and trends. But the interesting thing is, the two professors who actually, so I was the third one along with the other two who initiated the program. They are senior professors. So that was good, and I would say not so common having senior professors be so forward thinking. So, this program was spearheaded by the senior faculty and then because we were all junior faculty at the time, we were like, "Oh, this is great, right?"

In fall 2020, the business school welcomed a new dean. This change in institutional leadership translated into a change in priorities. The new dean arrived with multiple goals. Her immediate priorities were: 1) to explore a reconfiguration of the business school portfolio with particular attention paid to programs that are consistently under enrolled, 2) to align tuition across full-time and part-time graduate programs, and 3) to rearticulate the institution's brand/identity by reclaiming their mission.

The dean was concerned because she had inherited a program portfolio that she believes is currently oversized. In discussing the current portfolio, she shared:

How can we be more efficient? How can we just simplify our portfolio so that everyone can talk about what we offer? Right now, nobody can... So, one time I asked my assistant dean to give me a list of degree programs. Then, it took her a week to give me the feedback, because with all the combinations, duals, there are actually so many options.

The dean expressed that she is fully aware, that any attempt to eliminate a program will likely prove challenging with concerns raised by both faculty members and admissions staff. The dean added that Whiteoak's current need to downsize its portfolio is certainly not unique, but "a major challenge in higher education" at large.

Given that the new MSM program has met or exceeded enrollment expectations in each of its first four years, the program appears to have secured its place in Whiteoak's portfolio. In fact, the assistant dean stated that while some programs have "softening" enrollments, the MSM currently is one of the "fastest growing" and "strongest" programs in the business school's portfolio.

Along with evaluating the current portfolio of business programs, the dean has placed a renewed focus on emphasizing institutional mission. The assistant dean shared her insight as to how the leadership transition has clarified Whiteoak's mission as foundational to the business school's program portfolio. She said:

Under our former dean, there were assumptions about our programs being tied to our mission, but it wasn't clearly articulated that they were tied to our mission. And that's the significant difference I see with the new dean's leadership is, she has articulated our market value and how our programs are tied to our mission and our vision as a business school, but also as a university. And so, she's helped everybody better understand that connection based on our brand identity, which I think had been a little cloudy in how it was communicated externally.

The program director shared that the young MSM program, in its fourth year at the time of this study, was continuing to evolve in response to feedback from both current students and

alumni. Curriculum changes have been implemented as well as minor modifications to the concentrations offered. The program director explained that in a changing marketplace a company needs to align its business with its customers, not its product. She stated that such an alignment requires both data analytic skills and insight, stating, “Any of our graduates, they have to be dexterous with data.” Whiteoak’s marketing department faculty believe that by providing its students with expertise in data analysis skills, it is distinguishing its program from those of its competitors.

### **Summary**

Each of the three institutions in this study had added a new specialized master’s program in their business school. Leaders at Aspengrove, best known for undergraduate education, wanted to expand into graduate business education by adding a data analytics master’s program with a hope of enhancing institutional prestige. Birchmeadow, in response to declining MBA enrollments and a reduction in international applications, added a business analytics master’s program which it believed focused on its strength at the junction of business and technology. Whitmeadow, hoping to add to its already well-developed portfolio of programs, developed a new master’s program in marketing, which built upon one of its most successful undergraduate majors. Data suggest that institutional mission and institutional identity were considered in the development of each program. All three institutions relied heavily on existing institutional resources to implement these new master’s programs. Study participants at all three institutions also hoped that their new programs could find a market niche in an already crowded marketplace.

## CHAPTER 5

### WITHIN-CASE AND CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides within-case and cross-case analyses to address the four research questions that were posed for this study. The first research question asked how business school leaders at the three selected sites determined the need to develop new specialized master's programs within the context of their existing academic programs. The second question sought to understand the role of mission in the decision to expand academic program offerings through the development of the new specialized master's program. The third question explored the role of markets in the development of the new specialized master's program. For this question, markets were considered in relation to institutional desires to keep pace with competitors, generate revenue, and meet student expectations. The fourth question examined the role of organizational core competencies, including faculty expertise and existing academic programs and resources, in the creation of these new programs.

This chapter first provides the within-case analyses for the three business schools selected for this study: Aspengrove, Birchmeadow, and Whiteoak (pseudonyms). The following discussion addresses each institution's efforts to develop a new specialized master's program in business and provides information shared by the study participants relevant to the four research questions. The interview questions were open-ended, which allowed study participants the opportunity to explain their experiences with and perceptions of the process of creating a new

specialized master's program. The study participants at each institution had different roles, allowing for the expression of multiple viewpoints on the program development process. Each within-case analysis explains the program development process at one institution, while also identifying the key decisions made, difficulties encountered, and questions remaining.

Following the three within-case analyses, the chapter shifts focus to the cross-case analysis.

### **Within-Case Analysis: Aspengrove**

#### **Program Development**

Aspengrove's previous forays into graduate education had been limited and sporadic. In 2010, Aspengrove discontinued its one previous entry into business graduate education (a master's degree in accountancy) due to declining enrollment. In 2015, Aspengrove's academic leaders decided to reintroduce master's degrees to what had been solely undergraduate offerings at the institution. In 2016, a multi-disciplinary master's degree in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) was introduced with graduates earning a Master of Arts (MA) degree. This study focuses on the development of Aspengrove's second master's program in business – a Master's of Professional Studies in Data Analytics, launched in fall 2020.

Study participants mentioned two reasons to explain why the institution wanted to continue to expand into graduate education. First, given that the institution's student body was primarily regional, top-level leaders believed that a lack of graduate programming was hampering the institution's ability to gain regional market share and compete against other nearby institutions that had graduate programs. Second, according to study participants, institutional leaders (specifically the president and the provost) hypothesized that the introduction of master's programs could facilitate their long-term goal of attaining university

status, thereby strengthening the institution's reputation in terms of both regional and national rankings and attractiveness to a broader range of potential students.

In response to the top-level strategic emphasis on graduate program development, a faculty committee consisting of members from the business, computer science, and math departments investigated multiple business graduate program options, but rejected most due to lack of resources. After consultation with alumni, the decision was made to develop a specialized master's program focusing on data analytics. Throughout the program development process, business school leaders emphasized that the curriculum should focus on the practical needs of employers. After three years of discussion and preparation, the new program, a Master's of Professional Studies in Data Analytics, admitted its first students in fall 2020. This new specialized master's program joined the existing IMC master's degree program in Aspengrove's graduate degree portfolio.

### **Mission**

In spite of Aspengrove's historic focus on undergraduate education, study participants did not perceive a conflict or tension between adding graduate programs and maintaining Aspengrove's mission. The dean of Aspengrove's business school and the faculty director of the new specialized master's program stated the importance of aligning the data analytics program with Aspengrove's mission of educating the whole person given its liberal arts tradition. In discussing the importance of the mission, study participants also mentioned Aspengrove's institutional identity, which included a tradition of applied, practical learning, as well as small class sizes. Study participants saw the new master's program in data analytics as consistent with these criteria. Given the limited number of students enrolled, class size was small, and learning opportunities were described as "hands on." Thus, the strategic initiative to add a new business

graduate program was not viewed as inconsistent or problematic in terms of Aspengrove's mission and institutional identity. While study participants mentioned the possibility that Aspengrove could further expand graduate programming in the future, they emphasized the belief that the institution's longstanding identity as an undergraduate institution should not be abandoned.

Despite the fact that top-level administrators at Aspengrove viewed graduate program development as an important step toward attaining university status, study participants did not mention any efforts to update or rethink the mission in relation to the development of new graduate programs. The absence of critical reflection regarding institutional mission, however, could become a problem for Aspengrove, as well as for this new specialized master's program. Throughout its history, Aspengrove has emphasized undergraduate education. While the introduction of one small graduate program would not substantially diminish that undergraduate focus, top-level administrators had suggested a long-term goal of introducing additional graduate programming in order to enhance institutional prestige and move toward university status. As noted in the literature, pursuing prestige, through the addition of master's programs, raises the question of potential mission drift (Henderson, 2009; O'Meara, 2007). Given the resources needed to maintain small class sizes, as well as the investments necessary to add graduate programs, Aspengrove's aspiration to enter the graduate market might be an unrealistic pathway toward greater prestige. The significant demand on institutional resources required for the development of graduate programs, as well as the sheer magnitude of the undertaking, suggest the need for more critical reflection on institutional mission and academic program development priorities.



## **Markets**

During the program development process, business school leaders at Aspengrove considered market needs as they were identifying the focus for the new graduate program. In examining markets, Aspengrove utilized an advisory group composed of business school alumni to identify an area of study that would satisfy both student interests and employer needs. Leaders at Aspengrove listened to this alumni group, whose members emphasized the need for the program to be both practical and applied.

The design of the program also reflected how leaders framed the market for the new program. Specifically, Aspengrove selected a “hybrid, low residency” format with a single intake of students each fall. Given the requirement that students attend classes on campus one weekend per month, the student body was mostly regional (that is, reasonable driving distance to the campus). Aspengrove’s suburban campus, undoubtedly a strength in the recruitment of undergraduate students, could be a weakness in recruiting graduate students who live and/or work at a significant distance. The low residency model, involving fewer trips to campus, was an attempt to address this potential weakness.

While institutional leaders were attentive to market issues in the development of the new program (applied, low residency), they did not allocate resources to support engagement with those markets. When the program began in fall 2020, no additional resources were provided for either recruiting or marketing. This lack of support placed added stress on the program director, who took on additional duties including recruitment of students and preparation of marketing materials for the institutional website. The limited amount of marketing resources may have contributed to enrollment challenges for this new program. At the time of the study, enrollment figures for this new program in data analytics had not met expectations. The COVID-19

epidemic was undoubtedly one factor, but according to the program director, the lack of recruitment and marketing resources likely contributed to the limited enrollment. Additional recruiting and marketing support provided during the data analytics program's third year (2022-2023) was designed to increase enrollment and also lessen the burden previously placed on the program director.

Leaders at Aspengrove remained focused on a regional market for this new graduate program, rather than trying to expand into new geographic markets for the institution. Aspengrove, for example, did not place a focus on recruitment of international students. As the program is currently constituted, it cannot meet the needs of international students. The granting of visas for international students is not permitted due to the program's limited number of residencies (on-campus courses). If Aspengrove decided to pursue international students, then it would have to change its program delivery model and offer additional residencies each semester.

While expansion into graduate education was viewed as a strategic priority by Aspengrove's leaders, they pursued this initiative without consideration of internationalization. In the United States, however, graduate education is extensively interwoven with internationalization. In fall 2022, nearly one in four incoming business graduate students in the United States was a student visa holder (Fischer, 2022). As travel restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic were lifted, international graduate student enrollment in the United States across all areas of study grew by 95 percent in one year to 950,000 students, while the number of Americans enrolling in graduate programs fell by 4 percent (Fischer, 2022). Aspengrove may not be able to overlook these statistics given its desire to increase enrollment in its data analytics graduate program.

Within the regional domestic market, other potential concerns for Aspengrove relate to its low-residency model and the lack of opportunities for collaboration and networking across graduate programs. First, regarding the low-residency model, the current data analytics program requires in-person attendance once monthly. While the program director emphasized that current students feel that this scheduling allows them to stay focused and connect with each other, the faculty, and the campus, this program feature could discourage applications from working professionals who live a significant distance from campus. Institutional leaders viewed the low-residency model as consistent with Aspengrove's mission and identity associated with campus-based instruction. This adherence to mission, however, may come with some restrictions regarding the markets that new graduate programs can serve. Second, the lack of a critical mass of other graduate programs on campus could limit the attractiveness of the new master's program. Potential students who wish to develop an extensive network of graduate student peers might not find the Aspengrove program appealing.

### **Core Competencies**

While some existing academic resources were leveraged in the development of this new specialized master's program, Aspengrove's core competencies were limited in relation to developing graduate programs. Study participants mentioned two important resources that were leveraged to support the new data analytics program. First, given that the program meets on campus once monthly on Friday evenings and Saturdays, this scheduling allows the students full use of the business school building and its technological resources, which otherwise would not be utilized on Friday evenings and Saturdays. Second, institutional leaders also leveraged an existing relationship with a corporate partner. The partnering firm provided Aspengrove with

data analytics resources and expertise not available on many other campuses, as well as the opportunity for students to earn professional certifications at the firm.

Organizational core competencies, however, refer to an organization's set of skills and expertise in some domain of activity, rather than physical assets such as a building, or social capital assets such as a partnership with industry (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). For higher education institutions, core competencies in the academic domain of teaching and learning are critically important for institutional success (Bess & Dee, 2008). Given the lack of other graduate programs at Aspengrove, core competencies to support the new master's program were limited. Furthermore, institutional leaders were not investing the resources needed to develop these competencies. Specifically, there was a dissonance between the verbal support for the new master's program offered by the dean and the limited tangible financial support offered to the program. At the time of the study, the program director was teaching several of the courses, assisted by a rotation of part-time adjunct faculty. Full-time faculty in other departments at Aspengrove were not teaching in the new program. As the only full-time faculty member teaching in the program, the program director's dedication to the data analytics program was evident. However, if the program director were to leave the institution, then the program, as currently constituted, might not be sustainable.

Since the data analytics program had not reached a level of financially sustainable enrollments, it remains to be seen how long the institution will support the program. Another question is whether Aspengrove should consider adding additional master's degree programs given the limited success (to date) of the master's program in data analytics. Additional graduate programs would likely place a further strain on institutional resources.

As previously noted, study participants indicated that Aspengrove's president and provost had articulated a goal for Aspengrove to achieve university status. Colleges typically seek university status in order to increase enrollment revenues (Jaquette, 2018), enhance prestige (O'Meara, 2007), and/or obtain greater legitimacy (Morphew, 2002). The process of a college becoming a university typically requires the introduction or expansion of graduate programming. When an institution's historical focus has been the delivery of undergraduate education, the addition of graduate programming is likely to affect the allocation of existing resources, as well as increase internal competition for new resources (Gardner, 2010, 2013; Henderson, 2009; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013). Currently, Aspengrove's greatest core competency appears to be its undergraduate faculty who have contributed for decades to the institution's reputation. If the institution decided to place a greater emphasis on graduate education, would a focus on research supplant the current focus on teaching? A senior faculty member interviewed for this study stated his concern that as faculty retire, they are being replaced by new faculty who have more extensive research credentials, but limited teaching experience – a hiring pattern that could signal an eventual shift from an undergraduate emphasis toward a research and graduate education focus.

Aspengrove's business school dean explained that both the president and provost had shared their belief that the introduction of graduate programming would enhance institutional prestige and help Aspengrove become more competitive. Study participants mentioned that many of the institutions with which Aspengrove competes (peer institutions) offer graduate degrees. According to the dean, Aspengrove's long-range goal of achieving university status would require the granting of at least 200 graduate degrees per year. Reaching this goal would place Aspengrove within the Carnegie Classification for "M2: Master's Colleges and Universities -

Medium programs.” This placement in the Carnegie Classification would align the institution with its local competitors. Study participants described the introduction of the data analytics master’s program as one step toward achievement of this long-range goal.

Table 7 shows the number of graduate degrees granted at Aspengrove as reported by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). As the data show, with the addition of the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) master’s program in 2016, and the launch of the new data analytics master’s program in 2020, Aspengrove was beginning to award larger numbers of graduate degrees, but still remained far from the goal of awarding 200 per year.

*Table 7: Aspengrove Graduate Degree Conferrals: IPEDS 2017-2022*

Aspengrove	Graduate Completions
2017-18	0
2018 -19	0
2019-20	13
2020-21	15
2021-22	31

### **Aspengrove Synthesis**

Study participants at Aspengrove all shared how deeply they cared for the institution. Both the business school dean and the program director explained that the president and the provost supported expansion into graduate education. However, top-level administrators were not concerned that the development of a new graduate program and the pursuit of university status could impact the mission and identity of the institution. On the other hand, a senior faculty member interviewed for this study harbored questions about this potential shift in institutional

direction. Also, the program director expressed some concern about the institution's long-term commitment to the master's degree in data analytics, given the lack of resources provided for marketing and recruitment, as well as the limited faculty resources that were available.

Furthermore, no other full-time faculty were teaching in the program – a potential indicator that core competencies for supporting the new program were limited.

One possible pathway for Aspengrove to consider moving cautiously into the graduate market would be the implementation of a 4+1/accelerated program. Such a program would allow students to enroll in undergraduate classes for their first three years and then enroll in some graduate courses during their fourth year, allowing completion of both their undergraduate and master's degrees in five years. An accelerated five-year degree initiative (4+1) program could enable Aspengrove students to enter the job market with both an advanced degree and additional skills (Gobel, 2022; Holmes & Sorenson, 2022). Such a program could serve as a recruiting tool, allowing Aspengrove to expand into graduate education through its already well-established undergraduate pipeline.

### **Within-Case Analysis: Birchmeadow**

#### **Program Development**

Master's program development at Birchmeadow occurred in the context of declining enrollments in other graduate programs in business. Beginning in 2017, the MBA and MS programs, including the master's degree programs in information technology and operations, experienced falling enrollment due in great measure to a significant decline in the number of international students attending. The business school dean believed that shifting expectations of domestic students also contributed to this enrollment decline. Among the possible changes mentioned were a desire for greater flexibility in program delivery and an increased focus on

experiential learning. Table 8 documents Birchmeadow’s enrollment declines in its MBA program. Enrollment numbers reflect Birchmeadow’s yearly official census data.

*Table 8: Birchmeadow’s Enrollment Data for its MBA Program*

Year	Birchmeadow MBA Student Enrollment
2018	130
2019	119
2020	95
2021	96
2022	96

The business school dean at Birchmeadow noted that declining MBA enrollments were creating a loss in net tuition revenue. Net tuition revenue is the amount of tuition dollars an institution collects after subtracting institutional financial aid. Nietzel (2023) states that net tuition revenue remains the largest source of revenue for private four-year colleges. An institutional decline in enrollment, therefore, results in a loss of revenue. Given declining graduate enrollments and resultant revenue losses, top-level administrators at Birchmeadow were interested in introducing new specialized master’s degrees so that the institution could regain its enrollment market share.

While enrollment decline and revenue loss created the impetus for conversations about new program development, the genesis of the specialized MS in business analytics (MSBA) program was driven by both students and faculty. According to faculty members interviewed for



this study, students indicated their interest in learning more about analytics in informal conversations with faculty members and in comments on course review forms. Given the business world's growing reliance on data interpretation, business school faculty members from multiple departments also suggested a need for additional coursework in analytics. The program was considered a natural "fit" for Birchmeadow, given its longstanding focus on engineering and technology, both of which are data-intensive fields.

The new MSBA degree premiered in fall 2020 and was STEM-certified. STEM certification indicates a programmatic focus on science, technology, engineering, and/or math (STEM), categories approved by the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS). STEM certification is a governmental effort seeking to promote study in fields which will support the United States economy as well as enhance innovation. Moreover, these programs are attractive to international students. Upon completion of their degrees, students with STEM-designated degrees can remain in the United States for up to 36 months to work in their field of study (DHS, 2022).

The new MSBA program was offered through multiple formats. Students could attend full-time or part-time and could choose to attend in person or online or a combination of the two. This multi-format approach required institutional investment in instructional technology and faculty support, as well as sufficient enrollment to offer courses in both on campus and online venues.

## **Mission**

While the business school dean noted that the enrollment decline had created an impetus to develop new programs, the new business analytics program was developed with a clear connection to the institution's mission. One faculty member stated that Birchmeadow's mission

has always placed a fundamental focus on technology and that any new degree program would have to be aligned with that belief. Data from other interviews, as well as institutional documents, shows that the new program focused on technology within the context of business, thus demonstrating a clear representation of institutional mission. Study participants also noted that Birchmeadow promotes a mission of providing an education that balances theory with practice. The new MSBA fulfilled that tenet of Birchmeadow's mission as the program concludes with a two-course capstone experience centered on an interdisciplinary team project completed for a company.

Regarding alignment with mission, the business school dean expressed a concern that previous administrations at Birchmeadow had too often attempted to market their academic programs as being "all things to all people." Specifically, the dean noted that most programs at Birchmeadow have a clear connection to the institution's mission and focus on technology, but under a previous dean, recruitment and marketing efforts began to deemphasize the unique features of Birchmeadow's programs. Instead, marketing materials offered generic messages that could appeal to anyone. The assumption behind using a generic marketing message was that it could attract larger numbers of applicants and enrollments, but that assumption was not supported by data at Birchmeadow. One example was the MBA program, which had struggled to attract students for a number of years. The dean believed that the program's recruitment and marketing efforts (under a previous dean) had been too generic given that the program was not likely to attract students with interests in other business fields such as marketing and financial services. Instead, he suggested that Birchmeadow's marketing efforts need to return to its historic mission and identity, which focused on technology. The dean advocated that any new program should place more emphasis on Birchmeadow's demonstrated strengths, including its

expertise in technology and its institutional focus on designing graduate programs that could qualify for STEM certification – and that related marketing materials should emphasize those features. The new business analytics program appears rooted in these documented strengths and conforms with both the institution’s mission and its identity.

## **Market**

At Birchmeadow, the market analysis for the new business analytics program was inspired by internal conversations between students and faculty members. Given students’ requests to faculty members in multiple departments that they wished to learn more about business analytics, Birchmeadow’s business school dean, faculty, and support staff believed that a market for the new degree likely already existed. Prior to the new program’s launch, the business school planning committee engaged in informal market analysis by examining the program designs and curricula at competitor institutions. Members of this committee also discussed the proposed program with the board of trustees and alumni stakeholders.

Regarding the issue of marketing and recruitment, the dean was concerned that Birchmeadow’s business school historically had been overshadowed by the more prominent engineering school. As a result, the business school was not well known, not only nationally and internationally, but also regionally. According to the dean, limited recognition affected the recruitment of students. The dean believed that an institutional effort to advertise the business school, its programs (including the new specialized master’s program), and its technological expertise would assist with this issue. However, during the time frame in which this study was conducted, the dean’s suggested advertising initiative had not yet been undertaken by top-level administrators.

At the time of this study, the specialized master's program in business analytics had been in operation for three years, but the program had not yet come close to meeting enrollment expectations. An administrative professional staff member explained that projected enrollment for the program was approximately 45 students per year, but actual enrollment has hovered between 15 and 30 students. For the first year and a half of the program, recruiting and marketing support were outsourced to a third-party contractor. When enrollment expectations were not met, Birchmeadow's top-level leaders discontinued affiliation with this outside contractor.

Study participants at Birchmeadow hoped that STEM certification would encourage attendance by international students who had majored in engineering or science as undergraduates; however, this expectation had not materialized. Therefore, the business school was exploring the possibility of outsourcing the recruitment of international students to other vendors. While a third-party contractor may have the capacity to process inquiries and applications at a much faster rate than an in-house team, outsourcing admissions processing is not without its challenges. Birchmeadow's business school faculty members have expressed their desire to attract a diverse group of students. However, the program administrator reported that current marketing and recruitment efforts have yielded potential students in only one segment of the international market (South Asia). A class dominated by students from one specific area is not globally diverse. Some students arriving at Birchmeadow and becoming aware of the lack of diversity might be disappointed that they will not be exposed to multiple cultural and educational viewpoints. In this way, the recruitment of students from only one geographic area might help meet enrollment goals but could compromise other educational goals for the program.

## **Core Competencies**

While the dean expressed his belief that Birchmeadow's business school needed to grow and should build from its strengths, the dean also openly stated his belief that no significant expenditures would be required to launch the new graduate program in business analytics. To date, no additional full-time faculty have been hired to teach specifically in the business analytics program. Instead, graduate teaching assistants have been made available to faculty (both tenure-track and non-tenure-track) who are teaching in the business analytics program. While teaching assistants can provide some support for a faculty member, the professor must fulfill the additional duty of providing training and supervision for the assistant. The use of teaching assistants appears to be a cost-saving measure in an effort to mitigate the need for additional faculty hiring.

While no new faculty resources had been allocated for the program, Birchmeadow continued to benefit from the ability and willingness of faculty members to transcend departmental boundaries and teach in multiple programs. This degree of collaboration across departmental and program boundaries appears to be a core competency at Birchmeadow. A faculty member explained that Birchmeadow's departmental lines are fluid and that professors traditionally and willingly cross departmental lines to teach needed courses. Leaders at Birchmeadow leveraged this asset in the development of the new specialized master's program. Relying on faculty in other departments and programs to teach in the new business analytics graduate program, however, might not be a sustainable approach. The faculty director of the program expressed her concern that resources are always an issue whenever a new program is introduced. The director noted that if the only institutional expenditure for the new master's

program in business analytics is the funding of teaching assistants, then it seems doubtful that the program will be sustainable for the long term.

Birchmeadow's website states that the new master's program in business analytics provides students with a solid foundation of business knowledge, as well as the ability to solve complex problems through the use of technology. The program attempts to build upon the institution's historical strengths in science and engineering while also adhering to the institution's stated desire to integrate business and technology. The STEM-certified program begins with three core analytics courses after which students may choose to pursue two of four available specialties, all focused on different analytics applications. Faculty teaching in the program have a wide variety of backgrounds including operations, engineering, and information technology. Students have access to technology classrooms and laboratories to learn multiple ways to use data, including creating dashboards, computing key metrics, and developing models to optimize supply chain operations. Consistent with the business school's mission of integrating theory and practice, a project-based learning model was being utilized, including completion of a capstone project which represents a substantive evaluation and application of the program's coursework.

### **Birchmeadow Synthesis**

As Birchmeadow works to establish a consistent external pipeline of students for the business analytics program, further utilization of an internal pipeline can also be considered. Given the institutional focus on aligning engineering and business, study participants expressed an interest in having engineering graduate students take a "few business classes" as electives. This interest reflects one component of the business school's strategic plan. According to an institutional press release, one of the business school's priorities is to find ways to encourage

students in other disciplines to enroll in business courses. During preparation of the strategic plan, an internal survey of graduate engineering students was completed. These students expressed an interest in enrolling in business courses in areas such as project management, business analytics, and entrepreneurship. To signal the importance of aligning the two disciplines, the institution could consider modifying the engineering school's curriculum requirements to include enrollment in one or more business classes. Implementation of this requirement would increase the number of students in graduate analytics courses in the business school. In addition, a larger enrollment of students from the engineering school could increase the business school's visibility. Current students, as well as the public at large, may gain greater awareness of the business school and its varied academic offerings. Growing recognition could potentially also lead to an increase in business school applications.

Birchmeadow currently offers an unusual program delivery model. A faculty member, teaching a business analytics course within a given time block, simultaneously provides instruction to both in-person and online students. The institution, in fact, considers this class to comprise two sections: one for the in-person group and the other for the online group. The program director expressed concern that this "dual" instructional model could have negative effects on both the faculty member and the student experience. Professors can feel overwhelmed as they attempt to cater to two audiences simultaneously and worry that the learning experiences of their online students are diminished. Online students sometimes feel that they struggle to gain their professor's attention when other students are participating in person (Crook & Crook, 2020). Rapanta et al. (2020) suggest that dual instruction (simultaneously online and in person) can decrease both students' attention levels and the fluency of classroom interactions. Expecting a faculty member to toggle between in-classroom, hands-on learning and online instruction

seems extraordinarily challenging; however, study participants did not describe any new professional development or training opportunities for the faculty members teaching in this program.

### **Within-Case Analysis: Whiteoak**

#### **Program Development**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and under a previous dean at Whiteoak, the business school sought to expand its already substantial portfolio of specialized master's degree offerings. The motivation to expand Whiteoak's range of specialized master's programs was a decline in MBA enrollment and a belief that a growing interest in specialized master's degrees existed. To accomplish this pivot from the MBA to specialized master's programs, business school leaders considered existing areas of expertise among the faculty. Specifically, institutional leaders believed that the marketing discipline offered an opportunity for growth, and they chose marketing as an area for expansion. This choice was based on two factors: 1) the strength of the undergraduate marketing program and 2) the belief that an unaddressed niche existed in the market for a graduate program that emphasizes the quantitative/analytic aspects of marketing.

After discussions between the dean and the marketing department chair, a decision was made to investigate the introduction of a specialized master's program in marketing. A committee of marketing department faculty worked with the office of graduate admissions under the supervision of the senior associate dean in the business school to craft a proposal. The new master's in science in marketing (MSM) was introduced in fall 2019 and offered the option of a degree in general marketing, as well as three specializations: 1) global marketing, 2) market research and customer insights, and 3) product management. Study participants at Whiteoak



emphasized that both its course offerings and its specialization choices differentiated the new program from those of competitors.

Whiteoak's faculty program director suggested that its emphasis on quantitative marketing methods was a key differentiator of the new marketing master's program. In 2022, a new marketing laboratory opened on the campus, demonstrating Whiteoak's continuing allegiance to its STEM certification and provision of experiential learning opportunities. This new resource assists faculty and students to conduct a variety of quantitative research experiments utilizing biosensor techniques. Expertise in these new techniques can also serve to assist students when they seek employment upon completion of the MSM program.

### **Mission**

Whiteoak's mission places a focus on experiential and immersive learning opportunities in its urban location with a goal of preparing students to compete in a global economy. Additionally, the business school's mission attempts to integrate theory with practice. All study participants at Whiteoak noted that there had been a renewed commitment to the mission since the arrival of a new dean in 2020. They explained that mission is now considered more systematically in the development of new academic programs in the business school. Study participants also mentioned the new dean's promotion of institutional mission, vision, and identity with efforts currently underway to articulate and incorporate all of these at a programmatic level. The business school dean requested that each academic program investigate the learning opportunities that are being provided and how well they reflect the institutional mission. Every undergraduate and graduate course within the business school was being examined (as well as Whiteoak's certificate programs). According to an assistant dean, this

process has proven to be both challenging and time consuming. Progress had been made, but in some departments the efforts were still ongoing at the time of this study.

Whiteoak's business school reflects the institutional mission by emphasizing a focus on experiential learning to form a bridge between the classroom and the workplace. Additionally, business school leaders believe that its urban location provides a wealth of opportunities for its students to engage in experiential learning opportunities in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. The faculty director of the new master's program in marketing explained that a major focus of the new program was integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods. Also of importance was the program's STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) certification authorized by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The quantitative and research aspects of the new master's in marketing program sought to prepare students to engage in the evolving global economy and also reflect its STEM designation.

### **Market**

Study participants at Whiteoak believed that a master's program with a specific focus on the quantitative and analytic aspects of marketing could serve an unaddressed niche in the marketplace. The new program at Whiteoak appears to have filled this niche in the market, as it has met or exceeded its enrollment goal of 30 students each year since the program's inception. Leaders at Whiteoak took active steps to cultivate an internal market at the institution. Specifically, the assistant dean explained that Whiteoak has a number of champions within different academic units who work closely with the undergraduate population in an effort to make them aware of the institution's master's degree programs, as well as the value of graduate education. This internal marketing has encouraged a number of undergraduates to stay for a fifth year to earn a master's degree. The program's DHS STEM designation has also encouraged

significant enrollment of international students. According to the faculty program director, these two groups (fifth years and international students) have comprised the majority of students in each enrollment cycle.

To date, each year's MSM intake has exceeded the targeted figure of 30 students. However, enrolling too many students can be as concerning as too few, potentially placing a strain on existing institutional resources. Acceptance of additional students without the provision of more course sections could dilute the faculty-student classroom experience. The program director, for example, indicated concern about class size (more than 40 students) in some sections. Although she said that the program can accommodate some over-enrolled sections, she indicated that at some point too many students in one section is not a good experience for the faculty or students and more sections would need to be factored into the program staffing model and budget.

### **Core Competencies**

The master's of science degree in marketing (MSM) was built upon Whiteoak's well regarded marketing faculty and its already successful undergraduate marketing program. The undergraduate program offered two analytics-based marketing courses. Whiteoak's marketing department faculty believed that this focus on analytics was a strength of its undergraduate program and could, therefore, serve as a cornerstone for the new master's program. The program sought to emphasize the quantitative aspects of marketing by providing multiple course offerings in both marketing analytics and research methods.

Given the success of its undergraduate programming, Whiteoak's marketing department faculty were highly regarded. However, the faculty resource pool was not expanded when the new program was introduced. The assistant dean stated that it has been somewhat challenging to

provide appropriate staffing given the burgeoning market demand for the new program. The program director stated her belief that small class size (20 to 30 students) promotes effective learning opportunities. Therefore, the program director argued that hiring or the reassignment of additional faculty should be considered before any additional new graduate programs are created. In other words, the program director argued that Whiteoak should fulfill its commitment to this new graduate program in marketing, before Whiteoak starts any additional new graduate programs. Furthermore, if the program grows too quickly, then the program director's stated goal of having most courses taught by full-time faculty might have to be abandoned.

Too many students entering the program could also adversely affect the provision of appropriate internships and experiential learning opportunities. Currently, students benefit by working on real-world consulting projects for leading companies seeking solutions to their strategic marketing challenges. Moreover, Whiteoak offers experiential opportunities across multiple employment sectors. These diverse opportunities attract students and contribute to the institution's focus on integrating academic preparation with practical experience. An influx of additional students could make provision of appropriate placements challenging. Additionally, access to on-campus learning facilities such as the marketing laboratories (where students and faculty members work jointly to complete research projects) could be affected.

Whiteoak's business school (at both the undergraduate and graduate levels) is larger than either Aspengrove's or Birchmeadow's and offers a wide variety of majors. Each business school faculty member is assigned to an academic department and typically teaches only courses offered by that department. However, faculty from multiple departments work cooperatively on committees and other business school initiatives. The new business school dean has stated her intention to examine the full portfolio of master's programs with a goal of combining or

eliminating some that are underperforming. If programs are eliminated and faculty need to be reassigned, then it is important to ask if these reassigned faculty members have the expertise and enthusiasm needed to serve the new master's in marketing program. Alternatively, if some programs are discontinued, is there a possibility that funds will become available to hire additional full-time faculty with expertise in the marketing discipline?

### **Whiteoak Synthesis**

Whiteoak's new specialized master's program in marketing has evidenced initial success. Each year, the program has attracted more students than initially projected. The faculty director discussed hopes that the program will be able to expand and add additional sections if more faculty lines are provided.

The Whiteoak faculty director stated that she was not willing to sacrifice the in-person learning experience in order to offer hybrid programming. Instead, she suggested that an alternative online master's in marketing program could be created. However, provision of a fully online option would require the addition of new course sections, as well as adjustments to the pedagogy to meet the needs of online learners. At the time of this study, Whiteoak was comfortably meeting its enrollment goals for the on-campus program. However, given the ever-changing needs and requests of potential students, future provision of an online alternative could be contemplated. The resource implications of adding an online graduate program in marketing, however, would need to be considered.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

Cross-case analysis seeks to discover underlying themes and commonalities among the cases, as well as differences between them. While each case is unique, finding commonalities is a key factor for contributing to the transferability of the study findings. Results discovered in

more than one case are more likely to be transferable to other settings. Stake (2006) explained that for cross-case analysis, single cases are seen as belonging to a collection of cases that share common characteristics and conditions that are categorically related.

The cross-case analysis draws upon the conceptual framework for this study. Morriss-Olson (2016a, 2020) has written extensively on how to launch new graduate programs. She suggests consideration of the following five criteria before a decision is made to move forward with a new academic program: 1) mission and opportunity, 2) operational feasibility, 3) market niche, 4) internal support, and 5) risk-benefit assessment. This framework is aligned with the research questions for this study, which focus on the missions, markets, and core competencies of higher education institutions in relation to the development of specialized master's programs in business.

### **Mission and Opportunity**

First, Morriss-Olson (2016a) suggests that higher education leaders can consider mission and opportunity in relation to developing new academic programs. Alignment between institutional mission and academic program development could enhance the success of any new program developed. If a proposed new academic program is aligned with the mission of the institution, then the values and priorities of the institution are likely consistent with and supportive of the success of the new program. Morriss-Olson (2016a) also provides questions to assist leaders with addressing each component in the framework. For the mission and opportunity component of the framework, questions include the potential impact of a new program on mission and in what ways the new program may serve to enhance or limit the institution's mission. More specifically, leaders should consider carefully how the new program will advance the institution's mission, vision, and strategic priorities.

Study participants at all three institutions expressed strong belief in their institutional missions and stated that their new specialized master's programs conformed to that mission. This finding is not surprising. VanZanten (2011), for example, suggests that smaller, private institutions pay more attention to their mission statements than larger universities. The closer attention to mission might reflect the competitive markets in which private institutions operate, suggesting a need to use institutional missions to differentiate the college among its competitors. In the context of this study, we must also consider the possibility of a social desirability effect. Many practitioner-focused publications, including those of Morriss-Olson (2016a), suggest that leaders should consider mission in the development of new programs. More broadly, making strategic and financial decisions based on the institution's mission is viewed as "good" management in higher education. It seems unlikely that any higher education leader would admit that they ignored mission when they developed a new academic program. Therefore, this study moves beyond mere claims of alignment by study participants and instead examines the evidence about the role of mission in the development of these specialized master's programs.

Across the three cases, mission alignment issues were most complicated at Aspengrove. As explained by the business school dean, Aspengrove's top-level leaders (president and provost) had developed a strategic initiative to begin to add graduate programs and then eventually seek to be reclassified from a college to a university. Moving from college to university status would have significant implications for the mission of any higher education institution (Henderson, 2009; Jaquette, 2013). But leaders at Aspengrove insisted that the development of new graduate programs was consistent with and would not change their mission. Leaders clearly infused their new specialized master's program with pedagogical practices and learning outcomes that were consistent with Aspengrove's historic mission. But the interview

data and institutional documents suggest that these leaders had not considered how adding graduate programs and achieving university status would impact the institution's mission over the long-term. If mission reflects an institution's values and priorities, then it remains unclear how graduate program development fits within Aspengrove's mission. On the one hand, leaders described graduate program development as a central pillar in their strategic goal of gaining university status; but on the other hand, they said that their mission, rooted in an undergraduate liberal arts tradition, was not changing.

Leaders at Birchmeadow and Whiteoak appeared to have engaged in more reflection about mission in relation to graduate program development. The deans interviewed at both Birchmeadow and Whiteoak discussed their efforts to return to a more pronounced focus on institutional mission. For example, the dean at Whiteoak had asked all academic programs to assess the extent to which their learning opportunities were aligned with the institution's mission. Furthermore, the dean at Birchmeadow called for a return to mission-focused marketing and recruitment for its academic programs. The dean at Birchmeadow stated that the previous dean had allowed recruitment and marketing staff to issue generic appeals to attract a broader range of applicants in an effort to increase program enrollments and, thereby, net tuition revenue. But those generic recruitment and marketing efforts, in fact, did not reverse the enrollment decline at Birchmeadow. Instead, the current dean was seeking to ensure that marketing and recruitment messages were focusing on the mission-centered dimensions of academic programs. At Birchmeadow, the current dean believed that their recently developed master's programs accurately reflected the institutional mission, but that the previous administration had too broadly marketed the MBA program instead of focusing on recruiting students with a particular interest in technology. As the current dean explained:



I discovered that the previous dean had hired an administrative associate dean to run all things MBA, including marketing/recruitment. He thought that we needed to cast our net broadly and appeal to everyone. And I looked at him and said, “Look, what we’re doing is, by doing that, we’re appealing to no one.” Where do our students go to work? They go to work for these 15 tech companies. Where do most of our students come from, actually? Well, they come from the tech companies. Why don’t we say, we are a STEM MBA? And honestly, if you want a general MBA, this isn’t the place for you.

This case suggests that institutional mission can serve as a restraining force, limiting institutions from pursuing generic marketing efforts that simply seek to attract more students.

Similarly, at Whiteoak, the dean, associate dean, and assistant dean suggested that the previous dean did not always clarify how new program development was tied to the institution’s mission. According to the assistant dean, the former dean wished to “round out the portfolio” by expanding into new markets, believing that numerous areas of interest were “potential market opportunities.” But the connections between new programs and the institution’s mission were left rather unspecified. She elaborated:

Yeah, I think that under our former dean, there were assumptions about it [new program development] being tied to mission, but it wasn’t clearly articulated that it was tied to our mission. And that’s the significant difference I see with our current dean’s leadership; she has articulated our market value and how our programs are tied to our mission and our vision as a business school, but also as a university.

In addition to offering findings about the relationship between missions and markets, this study also identified important connections between missions and another key concept in this

study: core competencies. Institutions tend to develop core competencies in areas related to their mission. For example, Birchmeadow had developed core competencies in science and technology, which have historically been central to that institution's mission. Those core competencies served as important resources in the development of the business analytics master's program at Birchmeadow. New academic programs are likely to be more successful when they can draw upon the institution's existing core competencies (Dee & Heineman, 2016; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Morriss-Olson, 2020). Thus, aligning new programs with mission can better ensure that core competencies are available to support the new program during its early years of development. Birchmeadow developed a new master's degree program in business analytics that was connected to both the institution's technology mission and its core competencies, given its faculty's well-established technological expertise.

Another important finding regarding the role of institutional mission in the program development process was its connection to institutional identity. Study participants at each institution stated their belief that maintenance of mission and preserving institutional identity were major considerations throughout the development of the new programs. Along with stating their support for the mission, study participants at all three sites referenced that their institution needed to make a concerted effort to be true to "who we are." In other words, when study participants considered the relationship between new program development and institutional mission, they frequently referred to a desire to maintain their institutional identity. This goal appeared to involve applying the mission in meaningful ways across both program design and course delivery. For example, at Aspengrove, in-person learning opportunities were prized and online programming was limited; therefore, in designing the new program, an executive hybrid cohort model was adopted, allowing students to interact in-person with faculty and classmates

one weekend each month. This design reflected Aspengrove's mission to provide interactive learning opportunities and small class size, as well as the provision of opportunities for experiential, skills-based learning. At Birchmeadow, the dean repeatedly emphasized that the institution needed to build upon its strengths when developing a new program. According to the dean, any new graduate program in the business school should be STEM-certified and emphasize the institution's technological roots. Whiteoak's new dean also expressed her belief that each graduate program should reflect the institutional mission. She expressed concern that in its efforts to satisfy multiple markets, Whiteoak had frequently stretched its available resources and risked losing its identity. Similarly, the assistant dean at Whiteoak stated that under the former dean, while there had always been assumptions about new programming being tied to mission, the relationship had not always been communicated effectively. She offered further that under the current dean, the relationship between individual master's programs and the mission and vision had been articulated much more clearly.

### **Operational Feasibility**

Operational feasibility, Morriss-Olson's (2016a) second tenet, focuses on critical questions about the capacity of an institution to implement and sustain a new graduate program. Before initiating a program, academic leaders can ask whether consensus has been reached as to what success will look like and how long it may take to achieve success. Additionally, the availability of existing institutional assets to aid in the program's launch should be considered. When a new program draws upon the institution's existing core competencies, the likelihood of the program achieving operational feasibility increases (McKenzie, 2020; Morriss-Olson, 2020).

Regarding operational feasibility, each of the three institutional sites was in a unique circumstance when it began its investigation of possible program expansion. Aspengrove, having

discontinued a previous attempt at graduate business programming, was seeking to launch a single new graduate program. Birchmeadow, concerned about declining enrollments in the MBA and other programs, was attempting to adopt a new program that would be financially successful, but would also be responsive to requests by both faculty and students to provide more programming in business analytics. Whiteoak already had an extensive number of business master's degree programs operating with varying levels of success. Enrollment in some programs had always been small (single digits) and enrollment in other master's degree programs, including the MBA, had declined due to substantial decreases in the numbers of international students attending. As the dean at Whiteoak stated, "Enrollment went down significantly, it had been going down even before the pandemic, but the pandemic made it even worse." Nevertheless, institutional leaders at Whiteoak believed that the new master's in marketing could be successful by distinguishing itself from nearby competitors due to its focus on the application of quantitative as well as qualitative research methods.

Morriss-Olson (2020) suggests that prior to program development, an extensive feasibility study should be conducted. In this type of feasibility study, potential enrollment and revenue projections should be considered, and personnel and operating expenses should be carefully estimated. She also states the importance of an institution evaluating its existing resources, as well as considering the new program's ability to effectively access and utilize those resources.

Each institution conducted some informal research regarding the proposed master's program, but none reported conducting a formal feasibility study. The market research completed at these three sites appeared to focus on learning more about the programs offered by competitor institutions and assessing the needs of potential employers. For example, the Aspengrove

program director stated, “So, we originally had a focus group that we met with from a variety of industries. We came to them with a couple different drafts of what the degree might look like, and they gave us feedback.” At Whiteoak, the associate dean explained, “As part of my role, I’m also going out and talking to more people in industry and really trying to get a sense for what it is that they need.” None of the institutions used a formalized enrollment projection process to guide the development of their new specialized master’s programs. The possibility exists that the target enrollment figures that they established simply reflected the number of students needed to achieve financial sustainability.

Morriss-Olson (2020) argues that institutions must determine if they have the operational capacity to successfully launch a new program. The need for new resources should be determined, as well as whether existing resources can be efficiently accessed. Across the three sites, institutions allocated very limited financial support for the new graduate programs that were created. Each new program was required to utilize existing institutional resources as the new program was launched. Some of these resources supported the new program in meaningful ways. Aspengrove mentioned access to its new state-of-the-art business school building. Birchmeadow touted existing data analytics expertise available among faculty in its information technology and engineering departments. Whiteoak promoted the multiple business connections available in its urban setting that allowed students to work on real-world consulting projects and establish a network of contacts in the business world. In each of these examples, the institution leveraged existing resources to support the new program.

Simply relying on the leveraging of existing institutional resources may be insufficient to sustain a new academic program. Consideration should be given as to whether a new program can be developed successfully without either reallocation of resources from existing programs or

provision of an alternative revenue stream (such as grants or endowment funds) to support the new program (Green, 2020; MacDonald, 2015). Faculty and program directors interviewed at all three institutions expressed at least some concern about being asked to “make do” with existing resources. At Aspengrove, in addition to teaching multiple courses, the program director’s duties included marketing and recruitment of students and hiring of adjunct faculty. The faculty director at Birchmeadow suggested that resource acquisition was an ongoing issue, as well as her belief that “looking to the future, we’re going to be more resource constrained.” Whiteoak’s assistant dean expressed similar concerns, “We didn’t necessarily expand our faculty resource pool, so it was having to do more with the same number.” The program director agreed, “Yeah, you want to do a million things and then you run into resource issues.”

While tuition revenues typically provide most of the funding for academic programs (Nietzel, 2023; Rain, 2023), Morriss-Olson (2020) suggests that institutions should investigate other possible funding sources. Among these are grants, corporate funders as program partners, private donors, unrestricted endowment or budget surplus funds, and budget reallocation. None of the three new programs in this study were supported directly by grants or private donors. Neither Birchmeadow nor Whiteoak partnered with a corporation. Aspengrove utilized a corporate partner that provided all software necessary for the program, as well as assistance with curriculum design and market research. Nevertheless, the Aspengrove program was not well resourced, given that only one full-time faculty member – the director – taught in the program and performed nearly all administrative duties.

Morriss-Olson (2020) emphasizes that the introduction of a new academic program is not the final step in determining operational feasibility and states that regular and rigorous programmatic review is a precursor to success. “Having and adhering to a disciplined process for

ongoing review of all programs with clearly articulated performance targets is a good starting point” (Morriss-Olson, 2020, p. 283). Regular review allows needed modifications in program design and content to be made in a timely manner, thereby promoting the new program’s potential for success.

At Aspengrove and Birchmeadow, no study participant described or identified a plan to systematically review the newly added program. The program directors at both institutions stated that they frequently engaged in conversations with administrators about the new programs, but these exchanges seemed to be informal discussions without a specific agenda. Therefore, at these two institutions it would likely be difficult, if not impossible, to answer a key Morriss-Olson (2016a) feasibility question: “What will it take (for the program) to be successful?” (p. 4).

The specialized master’s program at Whiteoak, in its fourth year, has already undergone programmatic review. This review resulted in some curriculum changes, some alteration to course delivery, and the introduction of new concentrations within the master’s in marketing program. Whiteoak’s program director explained that the marketing department faculty had made a concerted effort to seek out and listen to feedback from current students, alumni, and outside stakeholders. This feedback led to changes in the concentrations offered, as well as to the provision of more varied electives. As explained by the program director, “Because again, the feedback from our own graduates, from our alumni, what we’ve seen is marketing itself is not what it used to be.” Whiteoak’s ongoing programmatic review differentiates it from the other two institutions.

### **Market Niche**

The third criterion of Morriss-Olson’s (2016a) framework is market niche. Morriss-Olson argues that one significant portion of a feasibility study for a new academic program should be

the investigation of market opportunities. Does a market niche exist for the proposed program, and if so, is it attainable for the institution? Morriss-Olson (2020) suggests further: “Assessing the potential market niche for a new program underscores the importance of fully understanding the market strengths, limitations, and potential gaps for your existing program portfolio” (p. 161). Given that the market context in business education is very dynamic, it is vitally important to understand the new program’s position as compared to competitors (Adame, 2023; Ma & Todorovic, 2011; Seltzer, 2022).

Study participants at all three institutions explained that they had completed an environmental scan of current market conditions before they moved forward with creating the new program. Aspengrove’s program director stated that he and a colleague devoted substantial effort to surveying existing programs at competitor institutions. Aspengrove’s corporate partner also assisted with additional market research in an effort to determine the needs of potential employers and to assist with the development of curricula that would align with those needs. At Birchmeadow, a standing graduate school committee studied existing programs at competitor institutions. As a faculty member stated, “I think there is definitely a market piece to this. How are we going to be relevant? How are we going to recapture the international market?” Similarly, at Whiteoak, the associate dean explained that the business school has standing advisory committees to engage with both alumni and potential employers. Each of these groups offered program design recommendations. At Whiteoak, faculty in the marketing department created a new program proposal committee, which investigated market conditions and studied the programs currently being offered by nearby institutions. The committee concluded that the new master’s in marketing could incorporate a number of programmatic features that would distinguish its program from those offered by competitors. Among the differentiators were its



focus on experiential learning, its STEM certification, and its ability to leverage multiple nearby business clusters (biotech, finance, healthcare, government).

As these new programs were launched, engagement with student markets was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 complicated recruiting for graduate programs. These complications contributed to some ad hoc changes in recruitment and admissions approaches at each of the three programs. Aspengrove's hybrid program was aimed toward students living in its geographic region. The initial plan was to require two or more years of work experience for admission to the program. However, to increase the size of the initial cohort, a decision was made to allow interested students completing their undergraduate degrees at Aspengrove to stay for a fifth year to pursue a master's degree. Similarly, at Birchmeadow, the inaugural class was predominantly fifth years, although the constitution of the next two years' classes had broadened to include more students with work experience. Additionally, the option to participate in the program entirely online allowed both domestic and international students to enroll without requiring a move to the area. At Whiteoak, on-campus study was required for its new master's program with some courses having online options. Students were recruited both nationally and internationally. Whiteoak's application numbers had been consistently exceeding targets since the program's inception. Both the dean and the assistant dean suggested that its STEM-certification differentiates its master's in marketing degree, thereby making the program particularly attractive to international students.

Top-level administrators and faculty at each institution believed that their program was unique and offered specific features that differentiated it from its competitors. Aspengrove trumpeted its emphasis on skill development, as well as its corporate partnership offering students the ability to earn a specialization and professional certifications in addition to their

master's degrees. Leaders at Aspengrove also advocated that their low-residency, cohort model was unique in the geographic area. Birchmeadow's online program overview emphasized the following program strengths: 1) STEM certification, 2) flexibility in choosing online or on campus program offerings, 3) four specialty areas from which to choose within the major, and 4) an interdisciplinary capstone project. Whiteoak promoted its focus on quantitative marketing skills, a skill set not emphasized at many competing programs, its experiential learning opportunities, and its STEM certification. Whiteoak's master's in marketing degree also offered an option for students to pursue concentrations fostering advanced analytical skill development.

Each of the three programs established a target enrollment before the new specialized master's program was introduced. At the time of the study, neither Aspengrove nor Birchmeadow had reached the figure targeted. No timeline regarding targeted enrollment expectations had been determined at either institution. Moreover, additional strategies that might be employed if enrollment goals were not met, had not been established at the time of this study. Whiteoak's circumstance, however, was different. Throughout its four years of operation, the master's in marketing program had consistently surpassed its targeted enrollment goal.

Establishing a niche within an already saturated marketplace is very challenging. Otto (2017) suggests that institutions need to examine three key variables: competition, employer demand, and prospective student interest. All three institutions completed informal competitive scans and concluded that their new program offered something meaningfully different from programs offered by competitors. All three attempted to build the new program upon a foundation of existing institutional strengths and core competencies. After consultation with both alumni and potential employers, each institution believed that its new program had the potential to meet the evolving needs of prospective employers. All three institutions posited that their

program had features that would interest potential students. At the time of this study, however, attracting the number of students targeted in the enrollment goals had been challenging at both Aspengrove and Birchmeadow, raising the question of whether the three market niche variables – competition, employer demand, and student interest – were investigated thoroughly enough or, alternatively, whether some additional variable might be impacting enrollment.

### **Internal Support**

Morriss-Olson's (2016a) fourth tenet is internal support. Significant questions posed for this tenet are whether the program being considered has a “champion” and, if so, the role of the champion in the development, launch, and maintenance of the program. Also to be considered is whether anyone within the institution is likely to resist the initiative.

Each program had a “champion” who stewarded the development and implementation of the new program. Aspengrove's program director was involved throughout the planning and implementation phases. He had come to Aspengrove as a full-time, term renewable faculty member after working in the business sector. Upon completion of his doctorate in 2017, he became a tenure-track faculty member. The dean then asked him to spearhead the development of the new master's program in data analytics. Similarly, Birchmeadow's business analytics program was proposed and shepherded by a well-respected senior faculty member who now fulfills the role of program director. At Whiteoak, for the new master's program in marketing, proposal development and program implementation were guided by an early-career faculty member, who, upon receiving tenure, was appointed faculty director of the program.

An important consideration is whether, in some cases, the program's champion was required to fulfill too many roles and given too many responsibilities. This potential concern was most evident at Aspengrove where the program director participated actively in the marketing of

the program, recruitment of students, and hiring of part-time adjunct faculty in addition to his significant teaching load. The active support and involvement of multiple stakeholders would seem preferable to having only one individual attempting to fulfill myriad responsibilities.

Morriss-Olson (2020) further posits that it is important to contemplate how the new program might fit within the political context of the institution. During the time frame of program adoption, all three institutions' administrators were actively promoting programmatic expansion and encouraging the development of new graduate degrees. Throughout the process, administrators offered verbal support for graduate program development. These administrators, along with the faculty program directors, were also seeking to establish linkages between new graduate programs and the existing undergraduate populations at their institutions. For example, an administrator at Aspengrove shared the opportunity to explain to undergraduates the value of staying for a fifth year to obtain their masters. "I think we'll have a lot of students now who want to do fifth years, which I think will be great for some future graduate programs." Similarly, the faculty program director at Birchmeadow indicated that their Master's in Business Analytics benefited their undergraduate engineering students as well. As the director explained:

I definitely saw a shift more this year. In advising undergraduates for industrial engineers, for example, they're getting an engineering degree within the department but then they have this opportunity to get a business degree in BS/MS format so that is very attractive to a lot of students.

Finally, Whiteoak's assistant dean explained that many of the institution's master's degrees were extensions of successful undergraduate majors. "We looked at the trends we were seeing

potentially with undergraduate education, looking at how that could translate into graduate education.”

Regarding the political context, the development of a new program has the potential to generate internal competition or conflict over resources. However, given the three institutions’ relatively small size, faculty members explained that academics were accustomed to working collaboratively with colleagues in other departments. They further offered that the sharing of resources was both necessary and expected. While legitimate questions were posed during each institution’s approval process, no study participant mentioned that any group of stakeholders resisted the initiative. According to study participants, faculty support at each institution was close to unanimous, as was informal support from outside stakeholders consulted (alumni and potential employers).

While internal political support for new program development was favorable at all three institutions, internal financial support for these new programs was limited. All three institutions utilized existing faculty with the addition of some adjunct professors and some teaching assistants. Leaders at each institution consistently commended the new program to both internal and external groups. However, limited financial support was provided to assist with staffing and other operational needs. Administrators can offer verbal support and encouragement, but at some point, financial support is likely also necessary. If financial backing remains limited, then the program’s ability to effectively educate its students could be compromised with a resultant negative impact on student and faculty satisfaction, as well as the institution’s reputation.

Small, private higher education institutions seemingly face a conundrum; specifically, if new academic programs are expected to attract sufficient tuition revenue, then it might first be necessary to make additional financial investments so that the program can become successful.

Put simply, institutions may need to spend money (investments in program resources) to make money (net tuition revenue). Statistics, however, indicate that many small, private institutions are facing extraordinary financial challenges (Auer, 2019; Hess, 2021). Developing a new academic program can be a reasonable option in efforts to grow enrollments, maintain relevancy in the curriculum, and differentiate the institution from its competitors. While in the longer term, an institution's expectation is that any new program will achieve financial self-sufficiency (Burke, 2019; Morriss-Olson, 2020), in order to achieve this goal, the newly developed program may require financial investments from the institution. Institutions facing financial challenges, however, may be reluctant to make outlays for new programs that have yet to be proven financially viable. While Whiteoak had met targeted enrollment goals and tuition revenue expectations, Aspengrove and Birchmeadow had not. It is reasonable to ask whether additional expenditures will be approved to support these two institutions' young programs and, if not, how long can the programs be sustainable?

### **Failure Potential vs. Opportunity Assessment**

The fifth and final tenet is failure potential versus opportunity assessment. Morriss-Olson (2016a) argues that program development participants must contemplate both the possibility of failure and the potential impacts of failure. Examination of the issue, however, should not emphasize only the negative. Thought should also be given to potential demand for the program, as well as any comprehensive opportunities that the new program might provide. At each institution, the course of study was well received, and program directors reported positive feedback from enrolled students. Aspengrove's program director offered an example: "The low residency format with meals together and a lot of networking time has been great. I have had my students say that it feels as though they have gained 15 brothers or sisters."

However, enrollment remained below projections at both Aspengrove and Birchmeadow, meaning that those two programs had not yet become financially self-supporting. Study participants at each institution also stated that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on applications and enrollments could not be calculated fully, but such impacts were likely significant. In the context of the decline of COVID-19, leaders at both institutions were hopeful that enrollment figures may grow. Given the waning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Aspengrove believes additional students will be willing to attend on-campus programming, while Birchmeadow points to a rebound in the international student market.

The deans at all three business schools professed continuing commitment to developing their young programs. Both Aspengrove and Birchmeadow were contemplating ways to increase enrollment. Aspengrove had introduced both marketing and recruiting support services for the program. According to the program director, “We hired somebody as a graduate recruiter from a small school, so she knows exactly the kind of environment that we have here.” Birchmeadow had contracted with outside vendors to market the business analytics program internationally. Birchmeadow’s administrator shared, “We’re trying to scale our program and we’re partnering with...we’re starting using agencies for international recruiting, they’re promising us 75 students in the fall.” Given that Whiteoak had met its enrollment objectives, its dilemma is whether it wants to expand recruitment for additional students, and, if so, how to accommodate them. The program director stated that her ideal enrollment would be 20 to 30 students per classroom section, but that in some classes, 42 students have been accommodated. Reaching an enrollment figure that makes a program self-sustaining may be an important goal, but institutions must carefully consider any compromises required to reach this goal. Searching for students in only

one geographic market or lowering academic standards would have negative effects, as would accepting more students than a program currently has the capacity to serve.

### **Summary of the Cross-case Analysis**

In summary, the three cases differed in the extent to which the program development process reflected Morriss-Olson's (2016a, 2020) criteria. Table 9 provides an assessment of how each criterion was evidenced at each of the three institutions. As Creswell (2012) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) explain, qualitative researchers frequently provide assessments of the extent to which data from a case reflect concepts in a framework. To offer these assessments, qualitative researchers often create descriptive categories that reflect the degree to which a concept was evident within a particular case. Specifically, researchers holistically consider the data from a case in relation to a concept in the framework, and then they place the case within a descriptive category that reflects how extensively the concept was evident in the case. Creswell (2012) notes that qualitative researchers should construct these descriptive categories based on clear indicators that are relevant to the cases being studied.

Table 9 relies on three descriptive categories, which refer to the extent to which a Morriss-Olson (2016a, 2020) criterion was evident in the case. Here, the "case" refers to the academic program development process:

- Extensive: the criterion was prominent in the program development process; specifically, "prominent" means that all study participants mentioned that this criterion was considered in the program development process and that the case data contained more than one specific example of its application in the program development process.



- Moderate: the criterion was present but not prominent in the program development process; specifically, “present” means that all study participants mentioned that this criterion was considered in the program development process, but the case data contained no specific examples, or only one example, of its application in the program development process.
- Limited: the criterion was not present in the program development process; specifically, the criterion was not mentioned by any study participant, and the case data did not contain any specific examples of the criterion’s application in the program development process.

The following examples illustrate how cases were assigned to these descriptive categories based on the extent to which the Morriss-Olson criteria were evident in the case. First, Birchmeadow’s program development process was categorized as *extensive* for the “mission and opportunity” criterion. This criterion suggests that it is imperative to consider whether the new program would limit or enhance the institution’s stated mission. In Birchmeadow’s case, each study participant promoted the inclusion of mission in the program development process. For example, the program director said, “I do feel like we are very mission-driven and have always been very mission-driven, and there’s a lot of consensus around what that missions is.” When describing how the new program was developed, each study participant mentioned that the institution’s technology-focused mission was frequently considered in decisions about program design and curriculum. Furthermore, an institutional press release announcing the new program referred to how the program is aligned with Birthmeadow’s mission at the junction of technology and business.

Second, the program development process at Whiteoak was categorized as *moderate* for the “operational feasibility” criterion. This criterion relates to whether the institution has the operational assets and capacity (including faculty) to implement the proposed program. All study participants mentioned that the program development process included an assessment of their capacity to carry out the new program. However, no study participant offered an example of how that assessment was carried out. Study participants instead referred to the capacity of the highly regarded marketing department faculty for teaching in the new master’s program. However, participants indicated that no new faculty lines had been added to support the new master’s program. Participants may have assumed that the new program could be implemented with existing faculty resources, but when the program was implemented, Whiteoak was challenged to manage enrollment growth and did not have adequate faculty capacity, as class sizes grew to more than 40, according to the program director. Thus, while informal conversations about operational feasibility occurred, Whiteoak did not engage in a formal process for assessing their capacity for implementing the new program.

Finally, the program development process at Aspengrove was categorized as *limited* for the “failure potential/opportunity assessment” criterion. This criterion suggests that the potential demand for the program should be considered, as well as any internal or external factors that could lead to the program failing. None of the study participants indicated that this type of assessment occurred at Aspengrove. When study participants described the program development process, they did not mention the consideration of any risks or factors that might challenge the program’s success. Given that Aspengrove still has not met enrollment goals, this criterion apparently has not received adequate attention. The current hybrid program delivery

precludes attendance by many domestic students, as well as all international students, thereby limiting growth potential. As articulated by an Aspengrove administrator:

I think one of the things that’s a hallmark of our undergraduate experience is in-person. And so, I think the original idea was to have graduate programs that mirror that. But I think we’re running into a market seemingly that isn’t necessarily looking for that. And so, I think we’re struggling with some of that.

*Table 9: Application of Morriss-Olson’s Criteria (2016a, 2020)*

Case	Mission and Opportunity	Operational Feasibility	Market Niche	Internal Support	Failure Potential / Opportunity
Aspengrove	Extensive	Limited	Extensive	Moderate	Limited
Birchmeadow	Extensive	Limited	Extensive	Moderate	Limited
Whiteoak	Extensive	Moderate	Extensive	Moderate	Moderate

The following paragraphs offer brief explanations regarding how each case was categorized in terms of Morriss-Olson’s (2016a, 2020) criteria. This discussion begins with a focus on the “mission and opportunity” criterion, and then moves into an examination of each of the remaining four criteria.

First, regarding “mission and opportunity,” at both Birchmeadow and Whiteoak, study participants indicated that institutional mission played an extensive and continuing role in the development of the new program. Study participants at both institutions acknowledged that under previous administrations, the linkage between mission and new program development had been more inferred rather than clearly applied. They noted that previously some programs had been marketed without a clear connection to the institution’s mission -- possibly the result of trying to attract additional students. But study participants at both institutions avowed that

mission had returned to the forefront of the decision-making process regarding the development of new academic programs.

Study participants at Aspengrove also offered several examples of how the new specialized master's program in data analytics was well aligned with the institutional mission. Both the dean and the program director, for example, stated that the mission had received full consideration in the development of the program. It is, however, more challenging to ascertain whether Aspengrove will be able to maintain its focus on mission should the institution decide to continue expansion of graduate programming. The institution's mission was developed when its focus was solely undergraduate education. If the institution chooses to introduce multiple graduate programs in an effort to achieve university status, then maintenance of the current mission could prove more challenging.

Second, all three cases were categorized as "extensive" for consideration of market niche. At all three institutions, developing a program that would be able to find a market niche was a paramount concern. Multiple study participants expressed the sentiment that the institution needed to remain true to its identity and build upon its documented strengths to facilitate the new program finding a market niche. Each institution gathered data about its regional competitors and attempted to highlight the features that would differentiate its new program. Study participants also mentioned institutional efforts to understand the employment outlook for graduates of the proposed program.

Third, as noted in Table 9 operational feasibility and failure potential/opportunity assessment were both categorized as "limited" at Aspengrove and Birchmeadow. When study participants at Aspengrove and Birchmeadow described their program development process, none of them mentioned conducting assessments of operational feasibility or failure potential.

Morriss-Olson (2020) acknowledges that it is impossible to capture all variables prior to program launch but suggests a disciplined approach prior to program launch allows consideration of as many “what ifs” as possible. The data suggest that study participants at both Aspengrove and Birchmeadow dedicated significant effort to program design and course delivery, but they appeared less successful in projecting enrollment, planning for alternative strategies if enrollment goals were not met, and defining success. Neither of these two master’s programs had achieved enrollment goals, nor reached financial self-sufficiency.

Whiteoak, which had reached its enrollment goal and had already made efforts to make modifications to the program in response to feedback from internal and external stakeholders, received a categorization of moderate for both criteria: operational feasibility and risk/opportunity assessment. When describing the program development process, participants at Whiteoak mentioned the need to assess feasibility, as well as anticipate factors that could limit the success of the program. However, they did not offer specific examples of how these assessments of feasibility and risk occurred. It seems that the process for considering feasibility and risk was more implicit, rather than guided through a structured process. Nevertheless, Whiteoak was also the only institution to initiate a formalized programmatic review process and had already utilized review comments from both faculty and students to make minor program modifications.

Finally, determining each institution’s level of internal support was somewhat challenging, given that the cases demonstrated high levels of internal political support, but low levels of internal financial support. At the time of this study, internal political support had been unwavering. Each institution’s dean offered continuing verbal support for the new program and promoted the program to the institution’s board and alumni. At each institution, a “champion”

guided the development and implementation of the program over the course of several years. In each case, the champion then filled the role of program director. Furthermore, in all three cases, faculty committees offered strong endorsements and votes of approval for the new programs.

On the other hand, financial support to assist with staffing, marketing, recruiting, and instructional and student support resources appeared quite limited at each of the three institutions studied. Minor expenditures were made, such as the hiring of graduate teaching assistants at Birchmeadow; however, the use of existing resources seemed to be the norm at each institution. Several faculty members expressed concern that acquiring necessary resources had been rather challenging and that they were often expected to “make do” with existing resources. Administration at each of the three institutions seemed to tacitly expect that the new program would find a way to move forward even in the face of limited financial resource provision. Given this dichotomy between high levels of internal political support and low levels of internal financial support, it might seem reasonable to divide the Morriss-Olson (2020) internal support criterion into two criteria: one examining the political support offered and the other examining the financial support given to the new program.

### **Summary**

Each institution introduced a new specialized master’s degree program in business. When examined through the lens of Morriss-Olson’s framework, Whiteoak appears to have been more consistent in applying the framework’s program development criteria. Specifically, the program development process at Whiteoak was categorized as moderate or extensive for each criterion. To date, Whiteoak’s new program has also been the most successful in attracting its targeted enrollment of students. On the other hand, while Aspengrove and Birchmeadow appeared to make substantial efforts to consider institutional mission and market conditions, they

appeared less successful in operationalizing program feasibility and assessing risk/success potential. The two programs' limited success, to date, may suggest that all of Morriss-Olson's criteria were not considered fully.

Overall, the Aspengrove and Birchmeadow cases demonstrate significant consideration of criteria related to program development, but less extensive consideration of criteria related to program implementation. Morriss-Olson (2020) emphasizes that those developing a new program should view implementation as a beginning, not an ending. Aspengrove and Birchmeadow may have effectively fostered program design, but they may have paid insufficient attention to issues that can arise during implementation.

Finally, the cases suggest that a more complex understanding of Morris-Olson's fourth tenet, internal support, may be needed. These three cases demonstrated clear differences between robust internal political support and limited internal financial support.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

#### **Introduction**

This study examined how business school leaders (administrators and faculty members) developed new specialized master's programs in relation to missions, markets, and organizational core competencies. The academic program development process was explored at three private institutions located within the state of Massachusetts. Interviews were conducted with deans, other administrators, and faculty members. Additionally, institutional documents were examined, as well as institutional data publicly available on IPEDS. Through cross-case analysis, the program development process was examined through the lens of Morriss-Olson's (2016a, 2020) academic entrepreneurship framework. Morriss-Olson proposes five criteria that should be considered when an institution of higher education evaluates whether to move forward with the development of a new academic program: 1) mission and opportunity, 2) operational feasibility, 3) market niche, 4) internal support, and 5) risk-benefit assessment. Four research questions guided the work of this study:

1. How did business school leaders at the three selected sites determine the need to develop new specialized master's programs within the context of their existing academic programs?
2. What role, if any, did institutional mission play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites?



3. What role, if any, did markets play in the development of specialized master's programs at the three selected sites?
4. To what extent, if any, did business school leaders draw upon organizational core competencies in the development of new specialized master's programs?

In this chapter, an overview of the study's findings is presented first, including a summary of the major conclusions drawn in relation to the four research questions posed. After summarizing the major conclusions, this chapter identifies three important implications from the study findings: 1) the intersection of mission, market dynamics, and institutional identity as a starting point for the development of a new academic program; 2) how a new master's program can function as an agent of change within a business school setting; and 3) a suggested adaptation of the Morriss-Olson (2016a, 2020) framework's fourth pillar: internal support. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practice and suggestions for future research.

## **Overview of Findings**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore how business school leaders develop new specialized master's programs in relation to missions, markets, and organizational core competencies. Academic institutions are often compelled to change in response to the changing needs and desires of multiple stakeholders. Morriss-Olson (2020) posits that institutional leaders must be strategic and savvy in leveraging their resources in ways that are responsive to these external pressures. Institutional leaders may need to find ways to operate efficiently and make difficult choices among competing demands (Eckel & Trower, 2019). Developing a new academic program is one response in this challenging environment.

Morriss-Olson (2016a, 2020) has written extensively about the launch of new academic programs and believes that the development of an entrepreneurial mindset is crucial in fostering the success of new programs. Morriss-Olson has suggested that an entrepreneurial mindset is comprised of skills that enable individuals to investigate and make the most of opportunities, while also learning from and overcoming setbacks. A lack of an entrepreneurial mindset, on the other hand, can contribute to individuals missing opportunities that can foster growth and development, thus keeping them tethered to unproductive patterns of both thought and action. According to Morriss-Olson (2016a), “nurturing such a mindset at the institutional level requires both art (intuition, active listening, and keen attention to opportunities) and science (rigorous discipline and process)” (p. 1). Among the questions that an institution considering program expansion should ask are: “How can we do this differently? What do we do really well that might be leveraged in new and unique ways?” (Morriss-Olson, 2016a, p. 1). Eckel and Trower (2019) agree, stating that an institution contemplating programmatic change must survey the competitive market and thoughtfully consider the ramifications of deciding to either act or not act. Bittle et. al. (2022) concur:

Higher education can and should launch new programs and tap new markets.

Experimentation should be encouraged. But those experiments, like any others conducted on campus, should be undertaken based on a high standard of prior evidence, rigorously conducted, and held to well-defined metrics of success.

### **Program Development**

The first research question focused on the academic program development process. At each of the three institutions, the impetus for developing a new master’s program was different,

although there were similarities. At the time of this study, MBA programs across the United States, especially those that were not in the top tier of ranked institutions, had been losing enrollment for several years (Jaschik, 2018; Mark, 2019; Stewart, 2020). Changes in visa requirements, as well as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in steep declines in international applications (Dennis, 2020; Silver, 2021). This trend was evident at both Birchmeadow and Whiteoak (Aspengrove did not offer an MBA). Study participants at both Birchmeadow and Whiteoak noted that their motivation for developing a new specialized master's program was shaped in part by declining enrollments in their MBA programs.

Aspengrove's circumstance was unique, in that it was attempting to add graduate programming at an institution that historically had focused on undergraduate education. In 2015, senior leaders (the president and provost) advocated for the addition of graduate programming in order to compete more successfully against other nearby institutions that offered graduate programs. According to study participants, these leaders also introduced a longer-range goal of attaining university status, which they believed would enhance the institution's reputation and ranking, as well as its student recruitment capabilities. Thus, institutional reputation and keeping pace with competitors were in the forefront of program development at Aspengrove.

Beyond the decline of the MBA, the changing interests and needs of potential students were crucial factors as institutions considered developing new master's degree programs. Study participants believed that many students wished to move away from the generalist tradition of an MBA and focus instead on a specific area of study that could lead to better employment opportunities. Discussions in the business school literature also suggest that students want flexible instructional models that allow more online learning opportunities, as well as a choice of full-time or part-time attendance (DeNovellis, 2019). Study participants reported that outside

stakeholders, including alumni and potential employers, were also requesting changes in master's curricula with a greater emphasis on skill development.

In addition to identifying the reasons for establishing these new master's programs, the study also examined the processes that the institutions used to review and approve proposals for these new programs. The results revealed that shared governance practices shaped the program approval process at all three institutions. The interviews demonstrated a reliance on shared governance at each institution. Faculty members were involved from the planning stages to the implementation stages. The proposed programs underwent a formalized review process that included scrutiny first by the business school (typically through committee and faculty meetings) and then by the broader institution. Interestingly, at two institutions (Aspengrove and Birchmeadow) the committee formulating the proposal for the new program included faculty from multiple departments. Likely due to the institutions' relatively small size, departmental silos (Kezar, 2005; Senge 2006) were not a major concern in the development of these new programs. Faculty from multiple departments appeared comfortable working together. The faculty interviewed for this study stated that throughout the program development process their opinions were considered and valued, in contrast to Lawson's study (2020) in which a number of faculty members who served on an undergraduate program development committee for almost two years expressed frustration about a lack of institutional support for their contributions. Institutional size may have been a factor, as Lawson's study was conducted at a large, research university.

While political support for the new programs appeared strong at all three institutions, provision of financial support was limited. Multiple participants suggested that they had been asked to "make do" with existing resources. At Aspengrove, the faculty director of the data

analytics program fulfilled a variety of roles including marketing, course development, and recruitment of both students and faculty in addition to his teaching responsibilities. At Birchmeadow, while teaching assistants were provided to faculty teaching in the new business analytics program, no additional faculty slots were funded. Also, the institution did not seem to have a solid sense of how best to recruit students for the program. Since the program's inception, student recruitment had been outsourced. Dissatisfaction with the initial vendor led to the hiring of a second vendor. However, according to study participants, this vendor is choosing to recruit from only one international market, seemingly a questionable strategy. At Whiteoak, the program director stated a strong preference for limiting class size and having courses taught by full-time marketing faculty. Yet, even though the program had reached (or surpassed) its targeted enrollment each year of its existence, no additional faculty lines had been added. Moreover, some classes were exceeding the number of students that the faculty director believes optimal.

Additionally, across all three cases, study participants believed that they were developing distinctive academic programs that would address unique needs in the business education market; however, not all dimensions of program development could be considered unique or distinctive. For example, all three of the new programs promoted a focus on experiential learning with a promise of bridging the academic and the practical. A reasonable question is whether experiential learning opportunities are “unique” or whether they are now an expected component of any business master's degree. In the recent past, business educators have been challenged to provide learning opportunities that prepare graduates to compete successfully in a dynamic, ever-changing business environment. This focus on the need to build demonstrable skills for graduates has led to a shift in the academic community. While experiential learning was once rather uncommon, it has moved from the periphery to the core of business education (Gordon, 2021;

Hodge, Proudford, & Holt, 2014; Lake, 2022; Perrin, 2014; Ripy, 2023). Experiential learning opportunities provided at the three institutions reflected institutional and business school mission statements. At each institution, one mission tenet was the need for academic programs to provide a bridge connecting the theoretical to the practical. Each institution in this study promoted its experiential learning opportunities as a core component of its new master's degree program. Additionally, the changing desires and needs of students and prospective employers, both of whom have requested a greater focus on skill development that easily transfers to the workplace (Hodge, Proudford & Holt, 2014; Wurdinger & Allison, 2017), could indicate that experiential learning may also serve as an institutional marketing strategy. But experiential learning may no longer be a unique feature that differentiates a business school's academic programs from those of its competitors.

### **Mission**

The second research question focused on the role of mission in the development of these new master's programs. Maintenance of institutional mission was a key factor at each of the three institutions studied. As Tierney (2008) argues, while it is important for an institution to make necessary changes, it should not do so at the expense of its mission. Consideration of mission appeared to extend beyond simply knowledge of the mission statement, which is typically somewhat broad and philosophical in nature, to the business school's more specific vision statement and/or strategic plan, as well as to each institution's identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) suggest that an institution's identity encapsulates that which is central, distinctive, and enduring about the institution. Almost every study participant highlighted the need to remain true to the institution's essence, while attempting to distinguish its new program from those of regional competitors. Zenk and Seashore Louis (2018) argue that while the role of

mission in organizations is not always straightforward, there is consensus that one of the roles that mission statements can fulfill is guiding metamorphosis. Metamorphosis is a clearly focused institutional change (such as the introduction of a new program) promoted through use of the mission statement.

Closely related to the concept of mission, previous studies have indicated that the development or maintenance of a clear and compelling institutional identity is an important factor when institutions make critical decisions (Cowan, 1993; Hartley, 2003). The current study reinforced these results, as study participants at each institution emphasized a desire to maintain the institution's core identity even as they introduced a new program. Jones and Nelson (2020) state that the vast majority of colleges and universities have a focused or centralized identity, shaped around their own specific missions, histories, values, geographies, and student bodies. When this study's informants emphasized that maintenance of institutional identity was critical, their beliefs reinforced findings of previous studies (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Cowan, 1993). Hartley (2003), for example, suggests that in order to provoke commitment to organizational change, an institution needs a compelling sense of purpose. At each of the three institutions studied, the new program appeared to reflect and project the institution's identity, incorporating its history, culture, and vision for the future.

In this study, Aspengrove developed a program that maintained many of the values evident in its undergraduate programming, including an emphasis on small class size and a regional student body. Birchmeadow's new program reinforced the institution's historical focus on technology. Whiteoak's program promoted its urban geographic location, enabling a variety of off-campus learning opportunities to promote its mission of providing a bridge between classroom experiences and the real world.

At all three institutions, study participants believed that linking a new program closely to mission and identity would result in a program that was significantly different from similar programs at other nearby institutions. In other words, they believed that their institution's mission and identity were unique or, in some way, distinctive; and, therefore, could provide a competitive advantage in attracting student enrollment.

## **Markets**

The third research question examined the role of markets in the development of these new master's programs. The narratives at each of the participating institutions confirm that traditional financial management approaches such as resource prioritization and/or cost cutting may no longer be sufficient long-term solutions for business schools to pursue as they seek financial stability. Business school leaders may need to examine market conditions and develop approaches for fostering sustainable growth in ways that reflect and further leverage their institutional mission (Meacham & Gaff, 2006; Middaugh, 2009; Morrill, 2010). Dee and Heineman (2016), for example, emphasize the need to position a new program as distinct from those of market competitors.

The participants in this study all spoke about complex and rather saturated enrollment markets. Additionally, they expressed the belief that in order to compete in these markets, they had to develop a program that was in demand, but also reflected their mission and identity. Deans at each participating institution suggested that they understood that they could not be all things to all people, and therefore made a deliberate choice to pursue markets that aligned with their missions. At both Birchmeadow and Whiteoak, the deans stated that previous administrations had sometimes strayed from their mission when they marketed new programs. For example, while recently-created programs were connected to Birchmeadow's technology-



focused mission, the related marketing materials were generic, perhaps in an effort to attract a large number of applicants. These deans stated that under their leadership, they wanted institutional mission to be central in the development and marketing of any new program. By developing a new specialized master's degree that represented its unique institutional mission and identity, each institution believed that the new program had the potential to be both distinctive in the market and attractive to potential students.

The three institutions varied in how they marketed their programs to prospective applicants. Aspengrove took a local geographic approach to marketing. Aspengrove's program in data analytics utilized a hybrid format featuring small class size. Minimal support for marketing and recruitment was provided initially. Given the requirement that students attend on-campus programming one weekend each month, marketing efforts focused on students living within the nearby geographic area. Birchmeadow's new master's degree program in business analytics was marketed by outside vendors, who focused on STEM-certified programs and engaged primarily with international students. To date, neither Aspengrove's nor Birchmeadow's program has enrolled the number of students projected. Conversely, study participants at Whiteoak believed that they had discovered an unaddressed market niche: a master's program in marketing with an analytical quantitative focus. Recruitment for this STEM-certified program included both domestic and international students. Whiteoak's marketing has proved successful. The new program has met or exceeded its target enrollment each year.

### **Core Competencies**

The fourth research question attempted to understand the role of organizational core competencies in the development of these new master's programs. At each of the three institutions studied, the use of existing core competencies was noteworthy. Aspengrove

developed its new master's degree using the same parameters that had proved successful in its undergraduate programming: regional student body, on campus classes, low student-faculty ratio, and hands-on learning experiences. Birchmeadow, building from its existing expertise in analytics and technology, developed a master's program taught by professors from multiple disciplines all approaching business from a technological background. The program also provided a variety of hands-on learning experiences. Whiteoak developed its new master's program in marketing based upon its well-established undergraduate marketing program and the expertise of its well-regarded marketing faculty with most classes taught on campus by full-time faculty. Its urban setting allowed for a variety of internships and other off-campus learning experiences.

Of interest, the programs at all three institutions received almost unanimous faculty support both within the business school and from the institution at large. The willingness of faculty members to work cooperatively across departmental and school boundaries might also be considered a core competency at these institutions. The insularity concerns expressed in the literature about academic silos (Bess & Dee, 2008; Kezar, 2005) did not appear to be an issue at any of the three institutions studied. Institutional size may have been a determining factor. All three institutions in this study were small to medium-sized, private institutions. At both Aspengrove and Birchmeadow, which have small business schools, faculty members regularly crossed departmental lines in their teaching assignments, as well as to work together on projects. While at Whiteoak, which has a somewhat larger business school, teaching assignments were departmental, but faculty members routinely engaged with colleagues teaching in other departments to complete a variety of non-teaching assignments. At each institution, an experienced and well-regarded faculty was a clear core competency. However, when the new

master's degree programs were introduced, provision of financial support to hire additional faculty was lacking.

Faculty participation was robust throughout the planning and implementation process. They served on committees to choose an area of study. They met regularly with both the administration and outside advisory groups. They prepared new course curricula. After program launch, some faculty were asked to shoulder additional duties including supervision of teaching assistants, instruction of on-campus and online students simultaneously, and marketing of the new master's degree program. Given these additional responsibilities, the effect on faculty workloads should be monitored carefully. Gonzales, Martinez, and Ordu (2014) suggest that faculty may become frustrated when they are given new sets of work expectations without the support necessary to carry them out successfully.

### **Summary**

Table 10 summarizes the major findings related to each of the four research questions. Study participants indicated that students' changing interests and needs were a significant factor both in choosing the curriculum area developed and in determining the instructional delivery model for the new program. Each institution attempted to reflect its institutional mission and also maintain its core identity in the new program. All three institutions wanted to build upon existing institutional strengths as they developed the program and sought a niche in the marketplace. However, they did not want the search for a viable market niche to overshadow the importance of maintaining their institution's core identity including its history, mission, and culture. Lastly, all three institutions drew upon their faculty's knowledge and skills – important organizational core competencies – for the development of the new program, and they also relied on their faculty's ability and willingness to collaborate across divisions/departments.

Table 10: Summary of Major Findings for Each Research Question

Research Questions	Major Findings
Program Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declining MBA enrollment</li> <li>• Changing interests and needs of potential students</li> <li>• Requests from employers for greater emphasis on specialized skill development</li> <li>• Effort to represent institutional strengths as new program was developed</li> <li>• Lack of process for establishing realistic enrollment goals</li> <li>• Substantial political support vs. lack of financial report</li> <li>• Absence of formal program review process (2/3 programs)</li> <li>• Desire to develop a program that achieves financial self sufficiency</li> </ul>
Role of Institutional Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection of mission in program development</li> <li>• Maintenance of institutional identity in program development</li> <li>• Need to monitor alignment between mission and program</li> </ul>
Role of Markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenges in finding a market niche</li> <li>• Efforts to differentiate new program from that of competitors</li> <li>• Market conditions can not supersede institutional identity</li> </ul>
Leveraging of Organizational Core Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty expertise</li> <li>• Faculty collaboration</li> <li>• Faculty workload</li> <li>• Sustainable service delivery model</li> </ul>

### Implications of Findings

Through an examination of the study findings, three implications emerged. These implications establish connections across the research questions. The first implication relates to the interrelationship of mission, market dynamics, and institutional identity, specifically as applied to the academic program development process. A second implication focuses on how the introduction of a new master’s program can serve as a catalyst for change within a business school setting. The third implication is a potential modification to the fourth tenet in Morriss-Olson’s (2016a, 2020) framework: internal support.

#### Implication 1: Mission, Markets, and Institutional Identity

As the study was completed and the Morriss-Olson (2016a, 2020) framework was applied, three themes consistently recurred. The first was the application of mission to day-to-day operations, including the planning and implementation of a new academic program. A second theme was the importance of understanding current market conditions. When considering

implementation of a new program, an institution needs to weigh carefully whether a market exists for the proposed program. Third was institutional identity. In avowing the desire to “stay true to who we are,” an institution may function more effectively when its various stakeholders share a collective understanding of the institution’s essence, including its goals and purposes.

The findings of this study suggest that being responsive to market demands and remaining grounded in institutional mission are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it may be imperative that a business school adhere to its mission during the program development process. Achieving the proper balance between missions and markets, however, is often challenging. Immerman (2014) states that higher education leaders must calibrate carefully how they respond to the external pressures of the marketplace while maintaining advocacy for the core values and mission of the institution. Young (2005) offers that choices that could achieve maximal impact for the mission likely differ from choices that offer the best financial rewards. According to Zenk (2014), “Institutional missions serve as a guide for decision making by clarifying competing goals and prioritizing among these goals” (p. 25), adding that a strong belief in institutional mission can serve to unite multiple stakeholders.

When this study began, the relationship between institutional mission and market dynamics in the development of an academic program in a business school setting was a major area of inquiry (Meacham & Gaff, 2006; Weisbrod, Ballou & Asch, 2008; Zemsky, Wegner & Massey, 2005a, 2005b). Zemsky, Wegner, and Massey (2005b) provide insight into the need to balance institutional mission with market dynamics.

Much is lost when higher education institutions are shaped almost exclusively by the desires of students pursuing educational credentials or business and government agencies

seeking research outcomes. When a college or university is wholly dominated by market interests, it sacrifices much of its capacity to serve its public purposes and sometimes even its fundamental mission (p. 1).

Attention to markets can serve to make institutions more responsive to student needs and expectations and drive institutions to evaluate carefully what they do well and how they do it. However, these efforts to pursue marketplace opportunities ideally should remain aligned with the institution's mission. As articulated by Zemsky, Wegner, and Massey (2005b), "The challenge for the academy is to make sure that market success remains the means, not the end" (p. 5).

Results of the current study indicate that missions and markets are not mutually exclusive and that it is, in fact, possible to be responsive to the demands of the marketplace while maintaining the values espoused in the institutional mission. Along with this expected focus on missions and markets, multiple study participants emphasized the centrality of a third variable: institutional identity. Study participants at each institution expressed a desire for their new master's programs to remain true to the institution's identity, which certainly includes its mission, but also incorporates other parameters including its vision, values, traditions, and history (Grzeszczuk, 2018; Hartley, 2003; Stensaker, 2015).

Institutional identity has been defined as a function of mission, vision, and values (who you are), strategy (what you do), and brand (how you are perceived) (Synthesis Partnership, 2019). Institutional identity often develops over time in a rather informal manner; however, it is important because it provides a sense of "who we are" – a sentiment often shared by multiple institutional stakeholders. Stensaker (2015) defines institutional identity as an approach to

connect the history and tradition of a university to the needs of its current stakeholders. Grzeszczuk (2018) adds that the core aspect differentiating colleges and universities from each other is the institution's unique identity, which has been molded through its mission, vision, values, and institutional history. Cowen and Winston (2019) state that a distinctive identity is essential for institutions to survive and that without distinctive features colleges will struggle in an increasingly competitive market. Stoever (2022) offers that institutional identity is of particular importance because it, "is not only how the institution intends stakeholders to characterize the institution, but also how stakeholders truly perceive and envision it" (p. 1).

Cowen and Winston (2019) suggest that, in order to survive, an institution of higher education must contemplate how the future will impact the institution. Often this reflection does not occur until there is a crisis (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009), but a successful institution will be more proactive in looking toward the future and attempting to clarify its ability to sustain its values in a world that is rapidly changing. A distinctive institutional identity can be a crucial factor. Without the development and promotion of differentiating features, educational institutions risk losing their ability to attract students and maintain market competitiveness and financial viability. When an institution does not fully understand "who it is," it may become very challenging to prioritize strategic initiatives, allocate scarce resources effectively, and demonstrate both institutional value and impact.

Additional research has shown that an institution can be more successful if it maintains a clear and consistent sense of mission and identity throughout any institutional change process (Carey, 2014; Cowan, 1993; Hartley, 2003). Developing a new academic program that aligns with institutional identity and also reflects the desires and needs of today's students is a

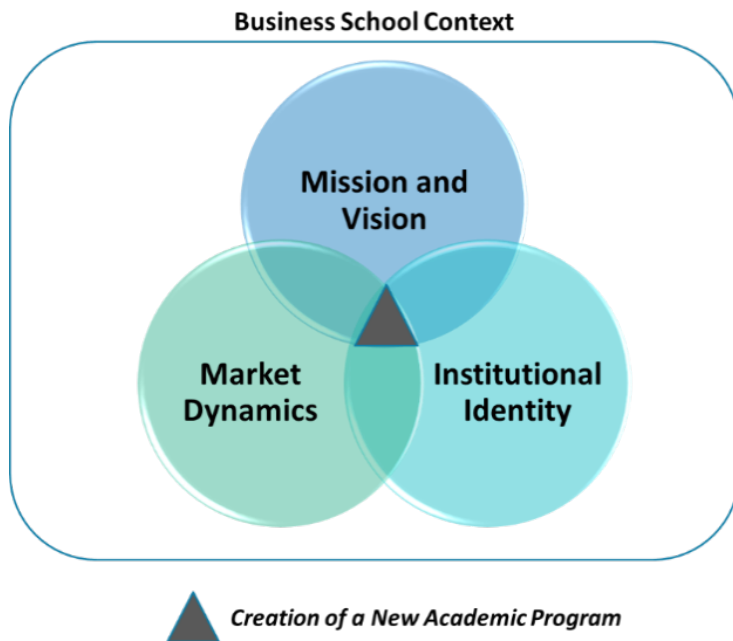
reasonable strategic goal for business schools to consider, as faculty and administrators contemplate the introduction of new specialized master's programs.

In this study, the deans at both Birchmeadow and Whiteoak referenced the need for their institutions to regain and maintain a clear sense of institutional mission and identity even as they recognized the need to introduce new academic programs. They acknowledged that previous leaders at their respective business schools had sometimes marketed new programs mostly as an opportunistic response to markets without detailed communication about institutional mission and identity. At Aspengrove, which was just beginning to enter the graduate school marketplace, the dean avowed the institution's desire to preserve the mission and identity it had established as an undergraduate institution. Whether this aspiration is realistic, if and when additional graduate programs are added, remains an unanswered question, especially in the context of strategic plans for Aspengrove to become a university.

The application of each of the three concepts (mission, markets, and institutional identity) within the context of graduate business education is important to consider. When a business school proceeds through the arduous process of academic program development, leaders can carefully consider mission, market dynamics, and institutional identity collectively. The convergence of the three would seem to be the logical starting point for academic program creation. Determining this area of intersection may be challenging, but its discovery could serve to both unite the stakeholders involved and facilitate the program development process as depicted by Figure 4.



*Figure 4: Starting Point for the Creation of a New Academic Program.*



In the process of developing a new specialized master’s program, business school leaders can begin by discussing the mission and identity of their institution. By focusing on both mission and identity, the discussion can move beyond the mere examination of text in a mission statement, and instead focus on the deeper meanings associated with institutional values, history, and purpose. An important step is linking this discussion to the identification of organizational core competencies that reflect the institution’s mission and identity. These core competencies would reflect the expertise and practices that uniquely contribute to the success of the institution. Any new academic program being developed should be clearly connected to these core competencies. Core competencies not only provide new programs with access to expertise and resources that can foster success, but they also can ensure that new programs reflect and become

interwoven with the mission and identity of the institution – all of which can enhance the likelihood that the new programs will be sustainable for the long-term.

If organizational identity reflects the unique and distinctive dimensions of a higher education institution, then academic programs that are clearly linked to institutional identity are likely to convey characteristics that differentiate them from similar programs at other institutions. In this way, linking new program development to institutional identity can enhance the likelihood that the new program will be viewed as unique or distinctive in the marketplace, thus enhancing the institution's ability to both differentiate its program from those offered by competitors and to attract student enrollments.

### **Implication 2: A New Program as an Agent of Change within Business Education**

Both external and internal forces continue to advocate for change in higher education (Datar et.al., 2010; Manning, 2017; Morriss-Olson, 2020; Westerbeck, 2019). Prospective students, employers, alumni, and accrediting agencies are requesting modifications in academic programming. Administrators, faculty, and staff are seeking better ways to promote student learning and more effectively accomplish their institution's mission. Yet, despite these desires for change, enacting change remains a formidable proposition (Bess & Dee, 2008; Kezar, 2018; Farrell, 2021). Stensaker (2015) suggests that the stability of higher education institutions works against the change process. Many proposed initiatives are not implemented, while others that are implemented fail to achieve their desired results due to lack of institutional support or resources (Dee & Heineman, 2016).

Facing an increasingly competitive landscape, business schools must adjust to evolving student demands. However, in these efforts, it remains critical that an institution not attempt to be "all things to all people." Change is inevitable, but it cannot be a single event. Rather it is a

process through which an institution develops a strategy to navigate challenges and find stability (Bess & Dee, 2008).

What to change and how to change are important decisions in the development of a new academic program. Several motivators for change have been documented. Many students are seeking demonstrable skills in specific subject areas such as data analytics prior to entering the workforce (Hodge, Proudford & Holt, 2014). Students are seeking flexibility in course delivery models (DeNovellis, 2019). While 42% of prospective students seeking master's degrees in business would prefer in-person instruction, technology-enabled teaching has seen a marked increase in popularity with 38% of prospective students stating that they would prefer to study for a wholly online or blended degree (Ethier, 2022).

The three programs in this study responded to these emerging trends in a variety of ways. Aspengrove's data analytics master's program adopted a model requiring on-campus attendance only one weekend each month, thereby allowing students to continue full-time employment. The program also enhanced instructional opportunities by partnering with a software analytics company. Birchmeadow's business analytics master's program offered an extremely flexible program delivery format. Students were allowed to attend on campus, online, or a combination of the two. The program offered most on-campus classes in the evening so that students could continue full-time employment. Faculty from multiple departments taught in the program. Furthermore, at Whiteoak, while the new master's degree was offered in the more traditional business area of marketing, the program differentiated itself from others by emphasizing the analytical and quantitative aspects of marketing. Additionally, each of the three programs promoted experiential learning opportunities. Aspengrove's corporate partnership allowed students to earn an academic specialization that provides an enhanced understanding of a

software technology platform used in multiple industries. Both Birchmeadow's and Whiteoak's programs featured real-world, capstone projects. Additionally, Whiteoak's new marketing laboratory promoted biosensor research, a recently developed technological advance.

Overall, the study findings suggest that the academic program development process can serve as a catalyst for organizational learning. Bess and Dee (2008) define organizational learning as the creation of knowledge by individuals and groups, which is then embedded in the systems, structures, and cultures of a higher education institution. As faculty and administrators engage in the design and implementation of a new specialized master's program, multiple organizational learning opportunities emerge, including how to better understand students' needs and employer expectations, how best to recognize new trends in business education, how to design relevant curricula, and how to revamp teaching styles and course delivery models. Faculty and administrators can apply what was learned to both existing programs and to the development of other new programs. Their experiences can encourage them to maintain a climate that encourages innovation and motivates the changes necessary to compete in a rapidly evolving business school environment. Morriss-Olson (2022) suggests that in order to effect change faculty and administrators must formalize an innovation strategy that makes clear the kind of transformation they are trying to achieve. They should remain focused on "asking the right questions and connecting the dots between their mission, their value proposition, and new opportunities" (p. 2).

### **Implication 3: Suggested Adaptation of the Morriss-Olson Framework**

As part of the cross-case analysis, this study examined how leaders at three institutions engaged in efforts related to each of the five pillars postulated by Morriss-Olson (2016a, 2020)

as they developed a new specialized master's program in business. Morriss-Olson's (2016a) fourth pillar, internal support, asks administrators to consider the following four questions:

- 1) Do we have a champion for this program?
- 2) What role might this champion play in the development, launch, and maintenance of the program?
- 3) What benefits and limitations are associated with this champion?
- 4) Is anyone likely to resist this initiative and if so, for what reasons? (p. 5)

Morriss-Olson's (2016a) internal support concept focuses primarily on whether the internal politics of an institution are supportive for the creation of a new program. In an academic environment, it is certainly important to understand how a new program fits within the political context of the institution. Morriss-Olson's framework, however, does not directly address the internal support needed to acquire financial resources for a new program. This distinction between internal political support and financial support is important to consider in relation to the findings of this study. The data suggest that ample political support from both administrators and faculty was present for all three programs. However, participants interviewed at each institution referenced a lack of funding for faculty hiring, as well as a lack of resources for marketing and recruitment for the new program. A potential, pragmatic modification of Morriss-Olson's framework would divide the fourth pillar (internal support) into two strands: one addressing the internal political context and the other examining the need for internal financial support mechanisms.

Modifying the internal support pillar of Morriss-Olson's (2016a) framework could encourage consideration of the institutional support necessary to address the new program's

political and financial needs. Figure 5 illustrates this suggested adaptation. Drawing attention to the financial needs of a new program could prompt the program design team to ask the institution’s internal stakeholders critical questions. Questions posed might include the following: What administrative infrastructure is planned or in place to support the proposed new program? How will the program be staffed? Are additional faculty lines needed? What physical space needs are required? What technological requirements (IT support, web development) must be addressed? Who will lead the program and how will the leader be compensated (course release, stipend)? This adaptation of the internal support concept could provide a more comprehensive accounting of the new program’s financial needs. An institutional plan to provide internal support to address these needs could then bolster the program’s development, as well as its sustainability.

*Figure 5: Adaptation of the Morriss-Olson (2016a) Framework: Internal Support.*



### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings, this study offers several recommendations for practice. These practical recommendations avoid simple recipes for developing new academic programs. Furthermore, these recommendations do not seek to generalize specific practices from any of the three cases in this study. The program development process is highly sensitive to context, and

what worked at one institution is not guaranteed to work at a different institution. Instead, these recommendations focus on broad concepts to consider, rather than specific sets of practices to implement. Specifically, this study offers three broad concepts that deans, department chairs, faculty members, and administrative staff can consider as they engage in the program development process:

- Embrace the art and science of the program development process.
- Pursue a well-defined market niche that is also aligned with institutional mission and identity.
- Assess the risks associated with decisions about expenditures for the new program.

### **Art and Science of Program Development**

In describing the art and science of academic program development, Morriss-Olson (2020) suggests that the development of an entrepreneurial mindset is key as institutions decide whether to add new programs to their existing offerings. At the heart of an entrepreneurial mindset is a willingness to take risks, but to consider carefully the chances that the risk being taken has the potential to succeed. A second important aspect of an entrepreneurial mindset is problem solving. An academic entrepreneur searches for new and innovative solutions. Faculty and other stakeholders should be encouraged to brainstorm and propose ideas for possible new programs (the art). However, before any proposal is accepted, a detailed process to evaluate and operationalize the feasibility of the proposed idea should be completed (the science).

As graduate business education continues to face declining enrollment, business school leaders are challenged to find innovative ways to differentiate their academic programs from competing institutions. When contemplating the development of a new program, consideration

should be given to how a proposed new program would fit within the institution's existing portfolio of programs. Any new degree program should make sense in the overall context of the institution and fit within the overarching portfolio. In a 2020 interview, Morriss-Olson offered the following explanation:

Individual programs do not exist in isolation within any campus context. Instead, each program exists within a complex web of inputs and outcomes; every resource decision that you make about an individual program has a bearing on the broader institution, its infrastructure, and its resource capacity, not to mention its reputation. In considering new programs to add to their existing mix, provosts and deans need to consider how the entire academic portfolio will be impacted and what this might mean for the institution as a whole; keeping in mind that the overall reputation, quality, and financial viability of the institution are determined in large part by the particular mix of programs that you offer (Academic Impressions, p. 2).

### **Pursuing Well-defined Market Niches**

Additionally, institutional leaders can attempt to measure if the program will serve a new market niche or segment (Barton, 2019). Institutions may need to comprehensively scan the existing market context. They can seek out the opinion of professionals working outside the institution via either existing contacts or establishment of ad-hoc committees. Morriss-Olson (2020) states, "Assessing the potential market niche for a new program underscores the importance of fully understanding the market strengths, limitations, and potential gaps for your existing program portfolio" (p. 161). Freeman and Bresciani (2021) suggest that historically, higher education has responded to marketplace pressures and opportunities by attempting to



expand and accommodate a broader market niche. They argue, “That strategy appears to be changing rather dramatically and quickly. The new model of institutional self-definition is to create and articulate a defined, narrowed, and consistent institutional scope with the intent of mastering that niche” (p. 236). An institution’s ability to demonstrate that it not only fits its niche, but also excels in it, can provide an opportunity to stabilize and potentially grow enrollment. Niche strategy is based on the reality that no institution can be all things to all people. A niche strategy places a specific focus on a particular segment of potential students. When well-executed, a niche strategy can help attract students whose goals are aligned with the mission of the institution, influence operations to match the new program to students’ needs, and reinforce a more sustainable position in the marketplace (Barton, 2019).

Finding a niche in an already crowded market can be challenging (DeNovellis, 2019), but doing so can offer an institution a pathway to future growth as market conditions evolve. A new program can seek either to identify a market that is not currently being served or enhance services for a previously defined market. Morriss-Olson (2020) also suggests that the introduction of a program should not be the final step in the program development process. It is critical that the institution review the market context on a regular basis. Given that the market context can be dynamic, understanding a program’s positioning relative to its main competitors is often vital. Casey-Rutland (2022), for example, states that regular and rigorous assessment of academic programs is important and allows institutions to ensure that they are supporting the programs effectively.

### **Assessing Risks in Relation to Expenditures**

Academic program development typically occurs within a context of limited resources, because essentially all institutions of higher education are, to at least some degree, financially

constrained. In a recent survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities of more than 700 higher education professionals, 74% stated that financial constraints were the most significant challenge facing their institution (Hess, 2021). Therefore, higher education institutions must carefully assess the needs of any new program being developed and ascertain what existing resources can be utilized, as well as what additional resources may be required. Morriss-Olson (2020) suggests that any institution considering a new program should develop a financial proforma prior to the program's adoption. The proforma should incorporate assumptions about enrollment, revenue, personnel, and operating expenses with a goal of estimating the program's revenue and expenditures.

Regarding expenditures, each institution took some risks by limiting their spending on the new program. Aspengrove, for example, requested that its faculty program director perform multiple roles: professor (teaching multiple courses), admissions recruiter, and program marketer. The institution took a risk by asking one person to fulfill multiple fundamental roles when launching the program; but, by doing so, they reduced institutional costs while the viability of the program was assessed. For Birchmeadow, rather than enhancing internal capacities for marketing and recruitment, they contracted with a third-party vendor, but study participants were concerned that relying on this vendor would result in a cohort of students who, while academically qualified, lack geo-diversity. This is a tradeoff that Birchmeadow may have considered necessary in order to increase enrollment and the program's self-sufficiency. Lastly, Whiteoak's challenge was based on the program having too many qualified applicants. The institution faced the temptation to grow the program too quickly by accepting more students than the program could comfortably serve given current staffing levels.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The current study focused on the development of specialized master's programs in business schools at small to mid-size, private institutions of higher education. Several possible directions for future research exist, including expanding the range of institutions considered and further identifying and refining the concepts that are relevant for understanding the academic program development process.

The three programs studied were young (three to four years in existence at the time of the study). It would be valuable to revisit these programs after a proscribed number of years to assess whether the programs have remained in the portfolio, whether they are thriving, whether they have grown, and what changes, if any, have been made to each program's curriculum and instructional delivery model. An additional question is whether any of the institutions has chosen to increase its financial support for the program.

This current study's research sample was limited to three institutions located in the same state. A further study could investigate program development at additional small to mid-size institutions in other states. Furthermore, since the organizational change process is likely to differ based on institutional size, future studies could examine how new programs are developed at business schools within large institutions.

The Morriss-Olson framework (2016a) demonstrated applicability to the program development process in the current study. Additional studies could determine whether Morriss-Olson's framework would demonstrate similar suitability in another setting. One option could be studying new graduate program development in different subject areas (for example, medicine, engineering, law). Studying the development of new academic programs at the undergraduate level could also be undertaken using the Morriss-Olson framework.

Also of possible interest would be an effort to utilize the Morriss-Olson framework to evaluate academic programs already in operation. Could academic leaders use the framework to assess an entire portfolio? Each of the pillars would appear to be applicable to the completion of such an evaluation. However, an institution could determine, based on its needs, whether to apply all of the pillars.

Morriss-Olson suggests the use of a feasibility checklist composed of ten elements when considering the development of a new academic program.

1. History and context of the program.
2. Relationship to institutional mission.
3. Program rationale and market niche.
4. Student demand and target market.
5. Program description and structure.
6. Staffing, structure, and other necessary resource requirements.
7. Instructional delivery and schedule.
8. Student recruitment, advising, and learning support.
9. Student and program evaluation and assessment.
10. Implementation timeline. (Morriss-Olson, 2020, pp. 175-6)

With the exception of number 10 (implementation timeline) all the others seem as relevant to the assessment of an existing academic program as they do the development of a new program. In fact, determination of some of the elements, such as staffing needs, instructional delivery model, and student evaluation of the program would be more easily determined when applied to a program already in operation. Additionally, this study's proposed modification to Morriss-Olson's fourth pillar (financial support) could be measured tangibly rather than through

estimation of projected expenditures. Application of the process to multiple programs within an institution's portfolio would allow two or more programs to be compared/contrasted. Such a system could provide useful metrics to an institution attempting to evaluate or reevaluate its current academic portfolio.

In the current study, participants at each institution expressed a desire to remain true to the institution's identity. Do other institutions of higher education also pay homage to institutional identity? If both mission and markets are considered when program expansion is being contemplated, is institutional identity an equal partner as appeared to be the case in the current study? In other words, future researchers can consider adding institutional identity, along with missions, markets, and core competencies, when developing frameworks for studying the academic program development process.

An additional recommendation would be examination of specialized master's degree program development at larger business schools where the process is likely more complex, given more rigid boundaries between academic departments and larger bureaucracies and governance committees to navigate. The Graduate Business Curriculum Roundtable (GBC) is a global association of business schools whose mission is to advance graduate business education through curricular and co-curricular innovation (Mabley, 2023). The GBC could commission a study to learn more about how business school leaders develop new specialized master's programs in relation to missions, markets, and organizational core competencies. The survey could be completed biannually. Committing to surveying its members every two years could provide deeper insights into business education's development of specialized master's programs. Each institution's impetus for developing a new program could be ascertained while also framing questions to look specifically at the factors explored in the current study -- for example,

institutional mission, identity, resources needed, and faculty collaboration. Such a study would allow the program development process utilized at larger institutions to be compared to the development process at smaller institutions. How much more complex is the process at larger institutions? Are mission and institutional identity still significant considerations? Is the examination of market context similar? Are institutional core competencies evaluated and incorporated in the design of the new programs?

Finally, application of both the Morriss-Olson framework and the feasibility checklist may assist in determining any risks inherent in the development of a new academic program. Once business schools have generated an idea for a new academic program, how do they sustain and implement that idea? Morriss-Olson recommends establishing a rigorous process and template for appraising the feasibility of new program ideas. Reflecting upon her many years of experience as a college administrator she explains, “This process has enabled us to remove some of the subjectivity that accompanies new academic program decision making, relying instead on a set of objective key elements and metrics that are applied equally to all new program possibilities” (Morriss-Olson, 2020, p. 194).

### **Conclusion**

Institutions of higher education currently face an unprecedented array of challenges including changing demographics, evolving societal expectations, and financial strains. Given the multiple issues facing higher education, institutions may need to adopt strategies to maintain relevance and to promote financial stability. The development of a new academic program is one strategy that can accommodate the needs of both students and the workplace. A new program can attract new audiences and allow the institution to differentiate itself from its competitors.

Participants at the three institutions in this study were hopeful that their newly designed specialized master's programs would achieve these goals.

The program development process can be a time for creativity and flexibility in pursuing new opportunities that can address the needs of emerging fields of study or the changing expectations for skills in the workplace. A reasonable question to pose, however, is whether this freedom could lead institutions to attempt to introduce new academic programs that are somewhat trendy and not as well thought out as they should be. At the three institutions included in this study, this concern was not warranted. Each institution introduced its new program in a well-respected field of business study. At all three institutions, the approval process was clearly delineated, somewhat laborious, and rather time consuming as the proposal moved from multiple meetings of the planning committee/task force to approval by the department/business school, and then the institution as a whole. In each case, the approval process continued for more than two years.

Each institution attempted to define some aspect of the new program that was novel, or at least not standard, in its efforts to differentiate its program from those of competitors. The institutions' efforts to distinguish their programs were different, but some commonalities were apparent. Some involved the service delivery model. Aspengrove utilized an executive, low residency cohort model. Birchmeadow allowed students to attend in person, on-line or both. Whiteoak permitted students to attend either part-time or full-time. Each institution appeared to be attempting to provide flexibility for potential students.

All three institutions also incorporated experiential learning opportunities, a relatively recent, but rapidly growing trend in business education. These opportunities included a business partnership, a capstone project completed for a company, laboratory experiments, and various

internship opportunities. These program components likely emerged from the institutions' mission and vision that elucidate the need for a focus on skill development and also suggest that students should learn by doing. Study participants possibly also believed that these learning opportunities could make their graduates more marketable.

Each institution attempted to develop a new program based on its faculty expertise and the willingness of faculty members to collaborate. An important question to pose is whether a new program can be developed without the provision of additional resources. While it is presumably wise to build from the existing institutional strengths, the expectation that additional resources will not be required for the new program to establish a foothold in the market and grow its enrollment and reputation would seem unrealistic. Through this research experience, my understanding of the ways in which business school leaders develop, introduce, and implement new specialized master's programs in relation to missions, markets, and organizational core competencies has broadened and deepened. I went into this study with my own biases having spent over 20 years employed by a small, private business college in Massachusetts. Over the years, my institution has faced challenges similar to those that this research study sought to understand. For a business school to remain relevant and viable, it periodically must develop new academic programs. However, for many years, I have observed some business schools seemingly flood the market with new programs. They have added a plethora of new master's degree programs apparently in an effort to respond to the requests of prospective students and/or future employers or, alternatively, in an attempt to develop additional revenue streams. Repeatedly, I have asked myself whether this approach was causing a dilution of business schools' institutional missions and questioned whether these business schools were creating too many programs that often appeared almost indistinguishable from those offered at other business schools. However,



throughout this study, I was reassured when all study participants expressed remarkable consideration of their institution's mission during the program development process. Each institution also appeared to consider carefully and try to build upon its core competencies.

The institutions that participated in this study attempted to develop programs that arose from their missions, but these programs were also deeply rooted in their institutional identities. Thus, while the programs developed might, at first glance, look similar to existing programs at competitor institutions, closer examination reveals subtle differences that clearly reflect each institution's mission and identity. Moreover, each of the new programs appeared grounded in its institution's documented strengths, including faculty expertise.

The competitive landscape for master's degrees in business, however, remains fierce. Determining a niche in a saturated marketplace has been and remains challenging. To encourage the possibility of a successful outcome, emphasis on institutional mission and identity appears crucial, as does promotion of the distinguishing features of the new business master's degree program.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date

Dear X,

I am a PhD candidate in Higher Education at University of Massachusetts Boston. As part of this degree, I am completing a dissertation that focuses on the development of specialized master's programs in business. The purpose of my multi-site case study is to gain insights from stakeholders within business education as to the processes they followed as they created and implemented new specialized master's programs.

My passion for business education drives my desire to understand how business institutions determine if there is a need to expand their degree portfolios with specialized master's programs. My higher education career includes 20 years in graduate business education, specifically as a non-faculty administrator. Currently I serve as an Associate Dean administering business education at a small, private college in Massachusetts.

It is my hope that the results garnered from this research can lead to a greater understanding of the processes involved as institutions choose to add new programs to their portfolio of degrees.

I am writing to inquire if you would be willing to speak with me about your business school's addition of X program in Y year. Your insight would contribute greatly to my research. I would like to speak with you via video conferencing software at your convenience for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Your voluntary participation in this research study will be completely confidential; neither your name nor your institution's name will be revealed.

I hope you are able to take the time to speak with me, as your experience as a X will contribute significantly to this research project. Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you are available for a webex/zoom interview, and if so, times that may work within your schedule.

Best regards,

Beth J. Bristol  
[Bethbristol1@gmail.com](mailto:Bethbristol1@gmail.com)  
781-883-1618

## APPENDIX B INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### **Title of Paper: Developing Specialized Master's Programs in Business Schools: The Convergence of Mission and Markets**

**Beth J Bristol**

**University of Massachusetts Boston**

**Bethbristol1@gmail.com**

**Interview: 45 – 60 minutes**

### **Preliminary Demographic Information (to be obtained prior to the interview)**

1. How long have you been affiliated with [name of institution]?
2. What is your current position at the [name of institution]?
3. How long have you served as [current role] at [name of institution]?

### **Interview Introduction:**

- Thank you for participating in this study. It is my hope that the results garnered from this research can lead to a greater understanding of the processes involved as institutions choose to add new programs to their portfolio of degrees.
- Here is a copy of the consent form. There are no direct benefits to you by participating in this study. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, meaning you can stop participating at any point in time.
- Please be assured that your personal information will be kept confidential and neither your institutional name and or city location be revealed as an institutional pseudonyms will be applied.
- By participating you are agreeing to be digitally recorded, the audio will be transcribed and summarized, and available for your review. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identification in this study and all data collected will remain stored in a password protected computer. The data will be used for research purposes only.
  - Would you like to choose your pseudonym?
- Over the next 45 – 60 minutes, I will ask you a series of questions about the development of specialized master's programs at your institution.
- Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

### **Interview Questions for both Faculty and Administrators:**

#### **Overall General Question**

1. Can you tell me the story of how your institution made the decision to add a new [name of program]?
  - a. Follow-up (as appropriate):
    - i. When did the efforts start to add this new program?
    - ii. What do you consider to be the two or three critical factors that prompted the decision to initiate this new program (e.g., change in leadership, strategic planning, financial concerns, market data)?

- iii. Who were the key stakeholders and/or decision makers in starting this new program?
- iv. Can you tell me about the process through which the program was developed? (follow-up questions as needed: a) how was the curriculum developed, b) how was the mode of instructional delivery determined, c) how was the marketing and recruitment plan developed
- v. Can you tell me about how the program was launched? What were the most important components of the start-up process for this new program?
- vi. What roles did faculty play in the development of this new program? What roles did administrators play in the development of this new program? How did these two stakeholder groups interact in the process?
- vii. What was your specific role in this process?

### **Mission Pillar 1**

- 2. Did the development of this new program relate to your institution's mission?
  - a. Follow-up (as appropriate):
    - i. If yes, was mission considered either implicitly or explicitly during the planning process?
    - ii. If not, why not?

### **Market Pillar 2**

- 3. Did the development of this new program relate to meeting student demand or moving into new market?
  - a. Follow-up (as appropriate):
    - i. When this program was first developed, did people expect this new program to gain market share for the institution? If yes, why?
    - ii. Did a built-in internal market exist already for this program?
    - iii. How, if at all, did you consider your institution's competition in the market prior to launch?
    - iv. Did your institution consider the needs of potential employers? If so, how?
    - v. Did your institution employ any specific marketing strategies? If yes, please describe.

### **Operational Feasibility Pillar 3**

- 4. When this program was first developed, did people envision connections between this program and the academic programs that were already operating at this institution?
  - a. Follow-up (as appropriate):
    - i. Can you describe the level of fit between the [name of program] and your institution's total portfolio of graduate programs?
    - ii. To what extent do you think the current program is sustainable for the long-term?
    - iii. What factors may contribute to or interfere with the new program's sustainability?

## **Closing**

5. Lastly, can you identify and/or share with me any relevant documents that could further illuminate today's discussion. Examples might include marketing materials, meeting minutes, press releases, emails, or reports. Additionally, are there other individuals that you think it would be helpful for me to speak with?

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