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Identity and Image: The Process of Cultivating Perceptions of Secondary Schools

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IDENTITY AND IMAGE:
THE PROCESS OF CULTIVATING PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS

By

Kathryn McWilliams

A DISSERTATION

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Kay Keiser and Dr. Jeanne Surface

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IDENTITY AND IMAGE:
THE PROCESS OF CULTIVATING PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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University of Nebraska, 2021

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Group associations are a fundamental aspect of the human condition, facilitating the most basic as well as more complex needs for survival. Tajfel's research outlines the impact that such associations have on how humans create identities for themselves. Providing pride or shame, organizations have a profound opportunity to shape its members' senses of self-efficacy. Organizations, therefore, need to be mindful of their group identity and image to positively influence the self-esteem of those members. Nowhere is this as important as secondary schools where students are not only at a formative age, but also are often assigned to their school based on geography and socio-economic status rather than preference. The purpose of this study was to uncover the ways urban high schools develop these organizational identities and images, either intentionally or unintentionally, in addition to the effect school identity and image has on its members' perceptions of their individual self-efficacies. Using Borman and Deal's Symbol Framework, this study

profiles four high schools. Three of the schools are housed in the same school district and have similar student populations in diversity and in socio-economic levels. The fourth school (from the same school district) closed in 1984 and provides a historic perspective of organizational identity-making. Using three types of data (interview, observations, and historical research), this qualitative study found that organization identity is formed through symbolic actions, such as storytelling; heroes and heroines; physical artifacts; and traditions and rituals. These symbolic forms clearly communicate the identity and image of the school by emphasizing its values and beliefs. Without mindful attention to these symbols, schools run the risk of creating an identity that not only derails the mission of their organization but hinders the self-efficacy of its members. Through the careful analysis of the data collected, this grounded theory study posits steps that education leaders can take to intentionally and affectively cultivate an organizational identity and image that truly reflects an organization that all members are proud to belong to.

Dedication

When I first met with Kay Keiser, she described the pursuit of a Doctorate as the desire to become an expert on one topic. This laudable goal seemed out of reach. Just a few short years later, though while I still wouldn't label myself an expert, my drive to become one has blossomed, just as Dr. Keiser predicted it would. The group of people who have traveled this road with me is so large, it would be a dissertation in itself to thank them all, but I would be remiss if I didn't recognize just a few of the many.

Thank you to my colleagues and friends at Bryan High who were not only a sounding board for me during this process, but also an inspiration to me daily with their commitment to students. Support came from all corners of Bryan, but Ms. Jennifer Cuddy and Ms. Katherine Van Ravenhorst have been rocks I have often leaned on during this. I would also like to thank Dr. Rony Ortega for seeing school identity as an imperative piece of our school improvement plan and being committed to Bryan's growth in this area. I feel so fortunate our paths have crossed, and I truly value his mentorship.

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Thank you also to the incredible UNO Educational Leadership community. My professors and peers in this program have been the most collaborative, innovative group that I have worked with in an academic setting. An integral part of this community is the committee that I have been so lucky to work with during this process. Their expertise has guided me along the way, and I feel truly honored to have been able to learn from them. I am especially thankful to my two chairs, Dr. Kay Keiser and Dr. Jeanne Surface. They both pushed my thinking and writing in a way that has enabled me to create something I am truly proud of while encouraging and inspiring me along the way.

When I speak of identity, I know that I am defined by my family. They are my heart and soul. My brother and sister's drive for excellence has always been a model that I have aspired to, and their families are a constant source of joy. Likewise, there are not enough words to thank my mother and father. My father's moral compass has guided me and his dedication to his profession taught me that one not only *could be*, but also *should be* passionate about their career. My mother has given me the faith in myself to do this work. She is the most self-less, giving person I know. She is everything I want to be, and her love makes me believe that I am capable of such a lofty goal.

Finally, I have to thank the inspiration for every single moment spent on this study: the students of Bryan. Please believe me: you are incredibly smart and talented

people, who have the capacity rule the world and make it a beautiful place. My daily driving force is to create an environment that helps you realize it.

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Chapter One

Introduction

It was an average Monday morning at a midwestern urban high school. Like any other group of teenagers, the students in this Advanced Placement Language and Composition class talked quietly and glanced at their cell phones trying to wake up and to harness the energy for another full day of academics. Because of the school's overpopulation, the class was being held in lecture hall with worn seats and tiny armrests serving as desks. The teacher stood in front of the eager class of thirty-two with a dusty, outdated chalkboard hanging behind her and announced that they would start preparing for the newly state-mandated ACT exam. With many of the students being the first in their families to attend an American high school, the class was generally familiar with the exam, but were anxious for details. One especially gregarious student raised his hand and asked what score he needed get into college. The teacher responded that it depended on what college or university the student would want to attend and started to give examples of entrance requirements. When she reached Harvard, the student piped up and said, "Miss, you don't need to tell us that one," as his peers nodded in agreement. "Nobody from this school ever goes to places like Harvard."

In his seminal 1943 paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation," Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy that outlined the levels of human needs. At the bottom of the pyramid, Maslow asserted that all humans have fundamental physiological needs for survival: food, water, sleep, etc). As the hierarchy evolves upward, safety, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization are addressed. Even at the base level of Maslow's

hierarchy, social interactions and associations increase the likelihood of a human surviving and thriving. These needs are the foundation of humans' desire to seek out common goals and create communities to achieve said goals.

Formal and informal organizations are not only formed to the basic needs at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy. Associations are central to the formation of one's sense of self, or their identity. When humans form a "we," they feel more powerful and confident. Membership in an organization with a strong identity, is part of what human beings search for as they "have deeply entrenched inclinations to delineate groups, to identify with and value members of their own group, and to adopt a cautious, if not antagonistic tone, to other comparable groups" (Gardner, 2008, p. 105). Individuals feel compelled to unite with others to assuage negative feelings of insecurity and a lack of safety, whether it be physically or emotionally. People seek membership and social acceptance "to confront the implications of division" (Burke, 1969 p. 22) that plague humans.

With group association, individual identity is influenced by the organization's collective identity and image. The distinct and enduring values and beliefs of the group, as well as how outsiders perceive it, are passed along to its members and become a means of "self-categorization." Academic institutions, such as high schools, have a tremendous opportunity to offer staff, students, and alumni the unity, identification, and pride that all humans desire. As structured organizations, high schools offer essential parts of community that many people crave, while etching its collective identity onto its individual members. While it can transpose pride and confidence to their students, staff, and alumni, however, a school's identity can also generate feelings of shame and lower the self-esteem of its members. But how are these identities and images born? Why do

some schools carry a positive identity and image while others have a negative image, even among its membership, that is perpetuated from year to year?

For the purposes of this study, as will be discussed in greater length in Chapter 2, identity will be defined as the enduring, distinct qualities that make an organization unique. Likewise, image will be defined as the members' perception of the outside opinion of their organization. Researchers often discuss identity and image through a symbolic lens as a means to assess organizational health. Hoy (1990) offers "three symbol systems [that] communicate the basic contents of an organization's culture [are] stories, icons, and rituals" (p. 160). Strong, historical narratives that tell how an organization came to be, complete with its heroes or heroines, that are celebrated with repeated traditions which reveals the values and philosophies that the members hold dear. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to discover the symbolic choices that intentionally and unintentionally bring about an identity and image for urban high schools.

This qualitative study, through a close examination of three current urban high schools and one historical urban high school, all within the same school district, seeks to discover the symbolic choices that have cultivated their identities and images. An organization's identity impacts its membership and can have great influence on students' sense of efficacy.

Role of the Researcher

As the teacher in the recalled Harvard story at the start of this chapter, I was disheartened to hear my accomplished student voice his self-doubt. As a researcher,

however, I was fascinated at how this perception had become so engrained in our students. Having taught in the same building for 18 years, I had heard similar comments many times before, but each time a student re-iterated the belief that they are confined by their association with this school, I became more convinced that we, as educators, were missing a vital component in school improvement plan.

With this research laid before you, I sought to understand the persistent identity crisis at my school. My search became intertwined with three other schools within the same district, all of which, I had preconceived notions of. Because of these biases, I have worked to remove myself from the research. I asked all my participants the same series of questions and recorded their responses verbatim. In my writing, I attempted to use the participants words to present the data in pure form rather than filtering it through my lens.

My lens exists, however, and it would be irresponsible to ignore its presence. I have been a member of this community for many years and certain perceptions led me to choose the subject schools and in many cases of my own school, who I interviewed. Throughout the process, however, I uncovered many ideas and opinions that countered my own and was introduced to individuals who had unique and insightful viewpoints that pushed my thinking and reframed my thinking on school identity and image. Through self-reflexive writing and conversations, I worked to take the role of a student and absorb the knowledge, wisdom, and experience of these experts to uncover the answers to my research questions.

Conceptual Framework

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal introduced a four-part framework to understand organizational culture and management. At its core, this theory examines the creation and communication of organizational identity through these four frames: the structural, the human-resource, the political, and the symbolic. Each quarter of the framework offers insight into the organization's mechanics, but this study will narrow its lens to the final frame in Bolman and Deal's work to examine the symbolic choices that were made (intentionally or unintentionally) to create and communicate each school's identity.

This fourth frame examines the power of symbols in developing member loyalty to an organization, business, or institution such as a school. Bolman and Deal (2006) outline five suppositions that inform their symbolic frame: 1) meaning is more important than reality; 2) individuals can interpret the same event or action differently; 3) in times of uncertainty "symbols arise to help people resolve confusion, find direction, and anchor hope and faith"; 4) the processes mean more "for what they express or signal than for their intents or outcomes"; and finally 5) with the aid of symbols, organizations are created by "cultural forms" (p. 242). These assumptions about symbolism underscore its member's emotional reaction, rather than logical or even linear reactions that are needed to build an organization's identity.

Bolman and Deal recognized symbolic patterns that emerged from organization: stories and myths; heroes and heroines; events, rituals, and ceremonies; and physical artifacts. These components set the stage for a narrative, or theatrical experience where emotion, loyalty, and faith trump logic and data. According to Bolman and Deal (2006),

“focusing on what we can measure rather than what we care about is a formula for disappointment and failure” (p. 279). Framing the organization symbolically, however, builds devotion and legitimizes the members’ experience regardless of its trials and tribulations. Stories of organizational triumphs and individual heroics, represented in rituals and physical artifacts convey the group’s values and beliefs while assuring members that a commitment to these tenets will bring about success.

School Profiles

The high schools in this study were carefully chosen for the similarities and differences that they exhibit among themselves. They are of varying ages and are at different stages in the identity building stage, yet the current schools all serve within the same district and are serve students with similar demographic qualities. That is to say, these schools serve a wildly heterogenous group of students that come from a variety of ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and experiences. These multicultural schools were chosen not because they are creating identities with uniform populations but rather because they are uniting students of all walks of life.

Thomas High School

The first school to be examined for historical context opened in 1912 in the metropolis of a growing urban city. When built, it consumed three city blocks and had five wings. It was equipped with the newest technology to serve students who were interested in vocational fields, including home economics labs, science labs, wood and metal shops, radio station, printing press and was the largest school west of Chicago. By

1940, this high school was home to 3684 students and 200 teachers. In 1960, however, desegregation and the practice of “redlining” caused much of the city’s population to move westward leaving Thomas High School with only 800 students. Despite renovation efforts and a brief enrollment resurgence, the school was permanently closed in 1984 with less than 700 students.

Clark High School

Clark High School sits not far from the former home of Thomas High School, only a little over a mile away. Clark High School’s building, once a statehouse, was acquired in 1869 by its midwestern territory when statehood was achieved in 1867. The state capital was moved westward to a more central town and building nicknamed “Old Capital Hill” was vacated. In 1872, the doors opened to students and throughout the next century and a half, the building saw many renovations and additions (Menard, 2009). Currently, it is home to a diverse population of 2799 high school students. The student body is twenty-eight percent Latino, twenty-seven percent Africa-American, and thirty-six percent white. Ten percent of this school’s population are designated English Language Learners and fifty percent qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. On the state accountability exam, the ACT, an average of forty-three percent of this school’s junior level students were considered “proficient” by the state standard (Nebraska Department of Education Data Profiles, 2021).

Smith High School

Smith High School was opened in the early 1900s before the small town it resided in was annexed by the larger surrounding city. With over 2788 students attending this

high school, it is one of the largest schools in the city. This school's population is eighty-one percent Latino, five percent African American, and nine percent white. Sixteen percent of this school's population are English Language Learners and eighty-two percent qualify for the Free and Reduced lunch program. Twenty-five percent of its students scored proficiently on the ACT in 2018 (Nebraska Department of Education Data Profiles, 2021).

Butler High School

School D, the final school to be examined, was opened in 1964 to accommodate the overpopulation of Smith High School. It is a slightly smaller school in size and population currently serving just under two thousand students. It too has a majority of Latino students, sitting at sixty-seven percent of the student population identifying as such. The rest of the school's population is made up of eleven percent African American students and fourteen percent white students. The English Language Learner program at this school serves approximately thirteen percent of its population and seventy-nine percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches. On the 2018 ACT test, fifteen percent of the students were deemed proficient by the state (Nebraska Department of Education Data Profiles, 2021).

Significance of Study

Organization identity and image has largely been underrepresented in the academic pursuit of school improvement. Instead, school culture, and its effect on student and staff achievement, has been the focus of many studies, books, and leadership

seminars, and the research resoundingly confirms its profound impact on its members. School culture, however, is not created in isolation. As the research will reveal in Chapter Two, an organization's identity and image are intimately intertwined with its culture, and a strong culture cannot exist without attention to the organization's distinct and enduring qualities that have been shaped by its values and beliefs. While there is research on organizational identity in the business sphere, little has been studied about this concept in secondary schools.

Association with a group has the potential to assuage feelings of shame and elevate feelings of pride in individuals, especially those who are vulnerable. High schools are especially powerful communities because they are influential at a key developmental time in adolescent lives. These students are deeply immersed in the creation of their own identities and are in need of a sense of belonging. As a means to belong, students (and staff members) who attend high schools will conform or take on the traits, or identity, of these institutions. Therefore, high schools have the opportunity to provide students with an essential sense of pride by simple association. Unfortunately, not all high schools' organizational identities and images are positive. Just as pride can be instilled in a student through simple identification with an organization, so can shame.

In many communities, students do not choose which high school they attend. Their membership is often determined by geography, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. As this study will reveal, without choice, these students' sense of self-efficacy can either benefit or fall victim to the school's identity and image. By examining their organizational identity and images and making intentional choices, schools potentially could give every student, regardless of background or socio-economic status, an even

layer of intentional pride by creating strong organizational identities. While this study does not attempt to draw a correlation between school identity and student achievement, it does seek to create a theory of urban high schools' identity and image development of and how it can be formative to students' own identities.

Central Research Phenomenon

How is a school's identity and image intentionally developed?

Sub Questions

- How does a school's cultural identity impact a student's identity?
- How/Can a school's cultural identity be intentionally transformed?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

There are many elements that must be understood to answer the questions that drive this study. No one framework or theory can create a complete explanation of school identity and image and its impact on its members. Rather, one must approach the topic from a number of angles. To fully understand school identity, it is necessary to first step out of the classroom and into organizational studies. While not applied to high schools, specifically, this area of study can illuminate the importance of identity and image, its impact on its members, and how it can be cultivated.

Organizational Identity and Image

Organizational identity and image are intertwined concepts that influence each other, but it is important to make a distinction between the two. The research on the topic is vast and varied, but most scholars agree that organization's identity is based on three tenets. Whetten and Godfrey (1998) explain these key ideas as what members "believe to be central to the organization; what makes the organization distinctive from other organizations; and what is perceived by members to be an enduring or continuing feature linking the present organization with the past" (p. 17). The organization's central belief is its set of core ideals that are essential and non-negotiable. Despite any changes the organization encounters, these ideals must remain solid to maintain its identity. The distinctive element of an organization depends on its relation to other similar organizations. It emphasizes how an organization is different and special. Identity seekers

are always “creating and invoking classification schemes and locating themselves within them” (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 276). This can occur through competition, in/out groupings, or simple comparisons. An organization’s steadfast nature should not be translated as stagnant or unchanging; rather, it is the understanding of what has remained consistent with the passage of time and which ideals will be mourned by its members if it is loss.

Within the framework of organizational theory, the definition of an organization’s image and culture must be differentiated from organizational identity; however, the three tenets are influenced by each other. Gioia and Thomas (1996) explain that image is a close relative of identity and can be defined as how the members of an organization perceive outsiders’ views of their organization. It is not necessarily how outsiders see the organization, but rather how the insiders think outsiders conceptualize the organization’s identity. Culture is a set of assumptions within an organization that influence behaviors. Deal and Kennedy (2000) define culture not as “who we are,” but rather “how we get things done.”

Hatch and Schultz (2002) in their Organizational Identity Dynamics Model posit how organization identity, image, and culture are dependent upon each other. “Members express their understandings of their organizational culture through organizational identity, which in turn, affects the perception of others outside the organization about the organization. The outsiders’ perception, or organizational image, in turn, affects the organizational identity, which again is reflected in the central elements of the organizational culture” (Lin, 2004, p. 804). This relationship affects an organization’s ability to shift its culture. The culture depends so heavily on how the organization is

perceived by its membership, true change must start with a shift, first, in its identity, and then an image will subsequently be altered, for the positive or negative.

Social Identity Theory

To gain a broad view of the importance of organization identity, one need must look beyond the health of the organization and also examine impact it has on the members. Extensive research, spanning decades and academic disciplines, has been conducted on the influence that group association has on the individual. A core concept that ties the vast research together is “identification,” which is defined as “the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization” (Dutton & Dukerich, 1994, p. 239). The foundation of identification is built on the notion that one’s identity cannot be defined in isolation from others. Burke (1969) asserts that all individuals are made up of “substance,” and when one finds another who shares their substance, “consubstantiation” is formed (p. 20). In combining substance with another, individuals become “substantially one” with another while remaining unique. People search for such identification “to confront the implications of division” (Burke, 1969, p. 22). Individuals desire connectedness to combat isolation, and this desire for human connection provides the function of communication, according to Burke. “Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for [an organization] to proclaim their unity” (Burke, 1969, p. 22).

Individuals’ conceptions of themselves are built on the groups that they are a part and the shared ideals that they believe (Burke, 1969). Therefore, an individual’s identity

is established with the groups the person associates with, which can be based on any numbers of traits (i.e. ethnicity, profession, political ideology, age group, etc.) even when these groups and identities seem to be at conflict with each other. Identification with an organization is powerful in that it influences the way an individual thinks about himself or herself. “Our corporate identities serve to enhance the self, granting us status, even prestige. One identifies himself with some corporate unit (church, guild, company, lodge, party, team, college, city, nation, etc.) and by profuse praise of this unit, he praises himself” (Cheney, 1983, p. 146). An organization’s identity or image contributes to feelings of efficacy by its members, if identification is established. The successes, the failures, the praise and criticism of an organization are the successes, failures, praise, and criticism of its dedicated membership. Therefore, an organization must be mindful and deliberate about the identity and image that it creates. When identification is established, identity, and image, not only will the collective entity endure trials and tribulations, but the individual members will as well.

Social Identity Theory was shaped in its current form by Henry Tajfel (1978). Tajfel contends that individuals will instinctively “classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership” (Ashford & Mael, 1989, p. 20). In a three-stage process, a person will first categorize the people around them into groups. They will then embark on “Social Identification.” In this stage, the individual will begin to adopt the qualities of the classification group that they have been placed in. “The self-concept is comprised of personal characteristics and social identity encompassing salient group classifications” (Ashford & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Finally, in the process’s

third stage, comparisons are naturally made between “in-groups” and “out-groups,” or simply, “us versus them.”

An individual can exist in more than one “category” with their identity being shaped by the different associations they might have. In some cases, the association is not chosen, but rather thrust upon a person based on a variety of circumstances such as race, geography, or socio-economic status. Ashford & Mael (1989) found, in fact, “that to identify, an individual need not expend effort towards the group’s goal; rather an individual need only to perceive himself a part of it” (p. 21). Regardless of the circumstance of how a person came to be part of a group or his or her commitment to its mission, an individual’s self-concept and self-esteem is dependent on the organization’s identity, according to Tajfel. In his original theory, Tajfel (1979) asserted that people choose to associate with a collective to enhance their self-concept, especially through the third phase of his theory: social comparison. By being part of an “in-group,” individuals are empowered to judge others more harshly while promoting their own status by tending to the cultural beliefs and values of their own group. Later researchers, however, found this only works if the “in-group” has a positive organizational identity and image (Ashford & Mael, 1989; Wagner, Lampen, & Syllwasschy, 1980).

Social identity theory contends “that identification is maintained in situations of great loss or suffering, missed potential benefits, task failure, and even expected failure” (Ashford and Mael, 1989, pg. 21). A strong, healthy organizational identity and image empowers the individual while a negative one shames the individual. “Social identification is seen as personally experiencing the successes and failures of a group” (Ashford & Mael, 1989, pg. 21). The self-esteem of an individual is so intertwined with

their associations that it rises and falls, regardless of how a person came to be associated with it, and could affect their efficacy and performance. “Shame is a painful, disruptive emotion that often arises when individuals recognize their own negative attitudes or unwanted behaviors, especially when these are observed by others” (Cook, Wildschut, & Thomas, 2017, p. 3). When an organization does not have a healthy identity and image, these strong feelings of shame and inferiority become self-fulfilling prophecies, not only for the collective but also its individual members. An organization with a robust identity, however, even when confronted with minor failures, can withstand setbacks and allow its members to maintain those feelings of pride. If members believe they are members of an excellent organization that is superior to others, they will strive to perform to those levels of success.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

To achieve identification and the creation of a collective identity, organizations intentionally (or unintentionally) rely upon symbols. Identification is effectively established when symbols exploit group commonalities on a subconscious level. Symbols have been examined from many scholastic lens (linguistics, literature, or the pure psychology) but for the purpose of this study, they will be defined from an organizational identity perspective. Symbols will be defined from Ernest Bormann’s Symbolic Theory Convergence Theory. Bormann (1982) describes a symbol as an “image, logo, narrative, anecdote, or dramatization that derives a shared meaning, motives and emotions (p. 50). A symbol is a tangible object that, through a collective group consciousness, takes on intangible, or abstract, meaning.

Burke (1969) argues that individuals respond to symbols because they are so embedded into everyday life and give concrete terms for abstract ideas while “providing us with a terminology of thoughts, actions, emotions, attitudes, for codifying a pattern of experience” (p. 154). To this end, the identity of an organization can be established symbolically to make sense of its shared values and beliefs. Intangible principles are made tangible through the “stories or rituals, including myths and legends, as well as, actual events. They emphasize positively or negatively valued traits of the organization” (Firestone & Wilson, 1987, p. 21). Meaning is derived from these symbolic actions and through it, the membership is informed, influenced, and incorporated with the organization’s identity.

From this concept, Ernest Bormann’s (1982) symbolic convergence theory was born. Bormann argues that “the holding of fantasies in common transforms collections of individuals into cohesive groups” (p. 50). Bormann defines “fantasies” as “the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need.” It is, in essence, a “shared experience between people” (Borcher, 2006, p. 163). Symbols provide individuals a means to express their shared emotions, motives, and meaning. “Symbolic convergence creates, maintains, and allows people to achieve empathic communion as well as meeting of the minds” (Bormann, 1982, p. 102). While some organizations are not created out of shared beliefs, but rather out of circumstance, a school is rarely a natural collection of likeminded individuals who share a common ideology. Rather staff members and students are brought together generally by geography, socio-economic status, or familial obligations. With disparate experiences and circumstances, individuals do not organically create a collective, but by developing a

shared understanding of symbols and the abstract concepts behind them, groups are created.

Bormann (1982) suggests “once a group has reached group consciousness, they no longer think in terms of “I” or “me” but in terms of “us” and we”. From this “group consciousness,” where mutual ideals, goals, and motivations are established, organizational identity is born. The members share “clarity about who they are, what they are all about, and what they are trying to achieve” (Collins & Porras, 1994, p. 121). These shared experiences, or fantasies, are then spread through what Bormann refers as “chaining out” or “fantasy sharing.” As symbols become more widely accepted, so does the organization’s identity. This chain can be spread amongst current members or passed down through generations in the organization. Induction into these organizations entails the learning and adoption of the shared meaning of its symbols. New members must learn the language of the organization. “To become an organized cohesive group, the participants must begin to communicate with another to create a new shared consciousness” (Bormann, 1982, p. 91). When new members internalize the symbols, and thus the ideals behind them, their identity is tied, to some degree, to the identity of the organization that they are a part of.

Bolman and Deal’s Symbolic Framework

Closely aligned with Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory, Bolman and Deal’s Symbolic Framework offers allegorical and metaphoric forms that are integral in the creation and communication of an organization’s identity. These forms (stories and myths; heroes and heroines; physical artifacts; and traditions and rituals) illuminate the

unquantifiable importance of members' emotional devotion and loyalty to the success of an organizations.

Stories and Myths

A rhetorical theory grounded in the Dramatism tradition, symbolic convergence theory contends that cohesion is created through the stories that are passed down within an organization and that symbols act as a common language to perpetuate that history. Symbolic meaning is born of cues established in the history of an organization. Words, phrases, slogans, images, and narratives are developed to represent the experiences that have shaped an organization's identity. "Narrative is a mode of reasoning—indeed, a primary way we cognitively process social information. Narrative is also emotionally charged, since stories are ways of knowing and remembering personal meaning and make up our understandings of reality" (Dailey & Browning, 2014, p. 30).

Stories are an essential part of the human experience, and they provide a way for an organization to not only relate its origin and history but also the values and beliefs that form its identity. Through extraordinary stories of heroic exploits or perseverance, the organization unites the past with the present, even if the narratives are exaggerated or only half-truths. "Narratives that are based on true events, but they frequently combine fact and fiction" (Hoy, 1990, p. 357). The stories may not be historical recordings of what actually happened, but rather shared perceptions of an experience. Novelist Tim O'Brien (1990) wrote that "'Fiction is the lie that helps us understand the truth.'" Stories are meant to convey the feelings of an event rather than the facts. Within the emotion these stories

convey (pride, elation, disappointment, or shame), an organization can perpetuate its values and beliefs.

Many times, these organizational stories take on mythical traits. Myths “explain, express, legitimize, and maintain solidarity and cohesion” while communicating “unconscious wishes and conflicts, mediat[ing] contradictions and offering a narrative anchoring the present in the past” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 242). Myths most often serve as origin stories that illuminate the core values and beliefs on which an organization was built. Organizations pass them down from generation to generation to explain how, and more importantly, why things are done in a certain way. “Mythic narratives reveal the early crystallization of the experiences of communities. In other words, it does not only give meaning to the actions of individuals always and everywhere, but also, and mainly, to groups” (Solas Morales, 2013, p. 33). These myths, legends, and stories define organizations based on its perceived experiences and values.

The power of stories is in the persistence of it as a symbol. As stories are repeated, their symbolism “chains out” as Bormann described, and regardless of their truthfulness, new members learn the values of an organization through them. “Shared narratives socialize members into their collective identity and enable them to understand their shared experiences and emotions, and understandings of various situations” (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019 p. 14). These repeated narratives preserve the values of an organization and inform a path for the future. As Daily and Browning (2014) suggest, “in addition to binding an organization to its past, repeated narratives also create a fixed course for a company’s future” (p. 33). Deal (1985) argues that the key to sustaining

these stories of an organization's past often falls into the hands of its "priests and priestesses" (p. 615). These storytellers, often of esteemed status, pass along the history of an organization in laudatory form. While some of these stories are humorous and others are triumphs, they are consistently celebrations of the way things have been done in the past and how things should be done in the future. This "informal network of priests or priestess, gossips, storytellers, and other cultural players keep the culture alive and intact and acts as a barrier to change" (Deal, 1985, p. 615) The stories told and passed down among the generations feature symbolic cues that elicit a collective emotional experience for the members. Heroes, physical artifacts, and ceremonies star in these histories and Bormann suggest that these symbols are ties that bind past, present, and future members to the core values and identity of an organization.

Heroes and Heroines

Inevitably, at the heart of these stories, myths, and legends are heroes and heroines that further exemplify the identity of an organization. These individuals are human symbols "whose thoughts, deeds, and personal qualities represent core company values" (Deal, 1985, p. 606) and are offered up as role models for current members of the organization. As such, the heroes and heroines can come from any tier of the organizational scaffolding. They could be a founding father (or mother), a leader, or an average individual whose success demonstrates the power of the organization. These figures, regardless of their status, must be "living logos, human icons, whose words, and deeds exemplify and reinforce core values" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 245). Just as in literature, organizational heroes and heroines tend to fit into archetypes, or symbolic

characters that reoccur in storytelling. Each serves a different purpose in these celebrations of an organization. They can range from “a pantheon of heroes and heroines representing the status quo (sacred cow or hunker-down types) to innovation (compass and outlaw types)” (Deal, 1985, p. 606). Each of these types, while disparate, offer examples of the values and beliefs of an organization and how the past can be connected to the future while maintaining the organization’s identity. Zhaoxun (2005) found that organizational heroes and heroine are known to virtually every member, usually through the spread of myths and are held up as an example of “here’s what you have to do succeed around here” (p. 268). The stories that are told about these individuals are emblematic of what the organization’s measure of itself is.

Physical Artifacts

Artifacts and physical iconography are also used to extol these values and beliefs to its members, as well as its outside observers. “When entering an organization, the first things ones can see, hear, or ‘feel’ are its artifact. They represent the visible aspects of organizational culture and provide clues about the less tangible levels of organizational culture” (Schein, 1987, p. 385). These concrete entities offer outlets for the emotional reactions that members might have for their organization. Physical artifacts can present themselves in a variety of ways. Some organizations utilize a dress code or uniform that reflects their identity while others rely on furnishings and signage to create a sense of who they are. The building itself and the location of the building can also serve as significant if it is emphasized in the organization. The display of historical mementos can

also be chosen to represent the identity of a group. Even a logo or brand provides insight into an organization's inner workings and the enduring qualities that make it unique.

While the physical artifacts can encompass a great number of things, they are useless unless the members have a common understanding of their meaning and an emotional reaction to their presence. According to Weiss & Cropanzano's (1996) events in an organization elicit spontaneous emotional responses in members that add up to more general attitudes and emotions towards the organization. Therefore, the artifacts must be grounded in the history of the institution, regardless of how recent the event was. Once again, institutional storytelling is the key to members understanding and reacting to the physical symbols that represent organization's values and beliefs. A lack of artifacts, or the discarding of established artifacts, creates an equally powerful message to members and non-members. It causes confusion and ambiguity about the purpose of their communal work together. Physical artifacts, intentionally or unintentionally, can quickly reveal the essence of an organization's identity.

Events, Rituals, and Ceremonies

Theorists have also posited that organizations symbolically establish their identities through the consistent procedures and events that are conducted throughout the years. From the mundane, daily processes that members take for granted to the grandiose, annual occasions, these events provide members with common experiences that articulate what is celebrated in the organization. Organizational events can take many different shapes. Rituals are the repeated actions that are ingrained in the fabric of the organization that provides members and outsiders, alike, with insight into "how things are done."

Rituals “usually [have] a stateable purpose, but one that invariably alludes to more than it says and has many meanings at once” (Moore & Meyerhoff, 1977, p. 5). These repeated actions provide structure to an organization while connecting past members to current members. Steadfast rituals offer a communal phenomenon that articulates that the organization is larger than its present membership. Rather, it has history and traditions that endure through time. “The power of ritual power become palpable if one experiences the emptiness of losing it (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 251). The loss of rituals, no matter how small, are mourned by long time or former members and can have a disconnecting effect from the organization. In a large organization that has had many diverse members, such as a high school, a ritual is a common language that transcends time and diversity. Deal (1985) contends “rituals permit members of very different subcultures to communicate effective with one another” (pg. 607).

On a grander scale, ceremonies can also be used to dramatize and reinforce an organization’s core values and beliefs while establishing its identity. According to Bolman and Deal (2006), “ceremonies serve four major roles: they socialize, stabilize, reassure, and convey messages” (p. 256) to internal and external constituencies. Ceremonies can be used to honor members, victories, and innovations, and in such, the core values the organization espouses. The symbolic action of ceremony defines what is important to an organization, or what is worth celebrating. They “dramatize and reinforce core values and beliefs” (Deal, 1985, p. 617) while elevating the achievements and identity of the organization, as a whole. Ceremonies can also be used to initiate new members into the organization and “deepen the faith” of its existing members. Whether the initiation is formal or informal, the repeated tradition of integrating new members into

a culture not only imparts the expectations and values on them but also renews the faith and commitment of its elder members. Ceremonies are dramatizations of the values and beliefs held at the core of an organization. The individuals, priests and priestess, who serve as a conduit for organizational stories, should be “prominent features at ceremonies” in that they offer anecdotal evidence of the consistency of the ceremonies that symbolize the identity of an organization (Deal, 1985, p. 618).

Often these symbolic gestures (storytelling, heroes and heroines, physical artifacts, and rituals and ceremonies) are created and performed without the express purpose of cultivating an organizational identity. Rather, they are seen as traditions that exemplify the way things have been (and always should) be done. Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory, with Bolman and Deal’s symbolic leadership framework, underscore the importance of these subconscious decisions made throughout the history of an organization. Often, the persistence of these symbols throughout time expressed more about an organization than the intentional messages created by the leaders. “Meaning is not given to us; we create it” (Bolman & Deal, 2006, pg. 236) and this organic creation of symbols is a more sincere reflection of an organization’s identity.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to uncover the deliberate and non-deliberate symbolic choices that are instrumental in developing and changing a positive or negative identity and image for urban high schools. It also sought to develop a stronger understanding of how a school's identity impacts its memberships' identity.

Approach and Data Collection Methods

To discover the answers to these questions, a grounded theory approach was employed. While much has been said in regard to organizational identity in corporate or business environments, a clear theoretical framework does not exist which truly explains the development of a high school's sense of identity and the influence it has on student's identity. Rather than try to fit these questions into a pre-existing model, it was important to let the data emerge naturally and then create a theory of its meaning. This method served as a natural and truthful exploration of this topic and the one that would yield most unbiased results.

Three types of qualitative data were collected to discover how a school's identity and image are developed. Qualitative data more effectively revealed the complexity of how schools can intentionally cultivate a positive identity that inspires students and staff alike. This was a story that demographics and test scores could not tell. It was rather one that needed to come from the experiences of the school's members and a detailing of the

rhetorical choices that have influenced their experiences. A qualitative study was able to illustrate the “how” of school identity and image.

One type of data that was examined was historical artifacts, including, newspaper articles, old yearbooks, and literature written about the four sample high schools. The goal was to understand the establishment of these identities and images and how they grew and evolved over time. Research was not confined to the aforementioned types of artifacts, however. “Place-based” research was conducted to unearth historical details regarding these schools’ evolving identities. Through research and first-hand observations, the physical attributes of these spaces and design decisions were assessed to develop a sense of the symbolic decisions that have been made to cultivate the schools’ identities. Not only were the schools’ physical environments examined from a dispassionate outsiders’ perspective, but staff members and former students were also asked to describe the buildings and their distinctive features. These observations were recorded in detailed field notes that served as essential documents for the coding process.

Individuals who are familiar and knowledgeable with the identity of each school, starting with the formal leaders of each building, were interviewed. Based on their recommendations and the individuals highlighted in the historical and place-based findings, the research proceeded outward to include community leaders, alumni, and other stakeholders who have stories to share about these urban high schools. In these interviews, individuals’ impressions of their school’s identity and image and the experiences that shaped their perceptions of the institutions were discussed. The scope of the interview included their views from before they attended, during their time there, and after they graduated their given school. From the onset, it was decided that the

interviews, like the historical artifacts, were not confined to a specified number or type of interviews. While questions were developed for these interviews, it was important that participants had the freedom to expand on and deviate from any questions, as it was their voices that must drive this study. The pre-prepared questions, however, focused on the stories and symbols that surround the high school and how they shape the school's identity and image

While exploring these three different data collection methods, one type was not given more importance or credence than another. Nor was this data be gathered in a chronological way. A “zigzag” approach to the research which Creswell (2007) defined as a “out to the field to gather information, into the office to analyze the data, back to the field to gather more information, into the office, and so forth” (p. 64) was utilized. The line from this study's fieldwork and interviews to open coding was not linear, because many opportunities to learn about this topic that hadn't been conceptualized at this study's infancy. Committed to creating a fully realized, rich theory, the scope of this study could not be limited to any preconceived notions of where the research would start or end. Rather the concepts of the identity and image were explored within the confines of these four high schools until the data had been saturated.

Data Preparation

Given the non-linear approach of this study, there was continual movement from the field to data preparation. As data was gathered through observations and interviews, transcripts and field notes were read on the high schools and the historical artifacts that were examined. Open coding was used to look for common themes and emerging major

categories. Through axial coding, the data was then be put back together in search of relationships among those themes. Creswell (2007) suggests looking for causal conditions, strategies, and contextual and intervening conditions, as well as consequences (p. 64) and creating a theory from them. Then returning to the three forms of data collected, relationships among the themes were highlighted. Using a “constant comparison” approach to data analysis, a continual process of examining the established codes side by side was used to find consistencies and differences that would eventually reveal a pattern.

As with any research, it is important to be aware of one’s preconceived notions and ideas. In this qualitative, grounded theory study, as the researcher and primary instrument, it was essential to be cognizant of any biases and personal opinions. As a teacher of seventeen years in the district that houses all of the schools that were examined, I engaged in “reflection and reflexivity” to be conscious of my positionality and influence throughout the research process. Not only were experiences and personal involvements recorded and bracketed, but data was also shared with participants and peers to safeguard against an overtly biased analysis.

Chapter 4

Findings

Thomas High School

In 1911, a midwestern town along the Missouri Rivers was quickly becoming a thriving city that served as a gateway to the expanding West. The city was fueled by the hard work and ingenuity of immigrants. The ethos of the city was no better exemplified than in a “dingy classroom in the basement of the Old Capitol Hill building” (“T--- High School: A Centennial History, 1954) that housed the city’s first high school, Clark High School. Here in this specific basement classroom, however, commercial education rather than collegiate education was the focus of the staff and students. While these vocational staff members and students were barely “tolerated rather than encouraged by Clark’s student body,” demand was so great for classes that taught technical skills for individuals who couldn’t afford or chose not to pursue college, that in 1911 “a single member of the School Board encouraged a new venture in public education, and the High School of Commerce was born in 1912” (“T--- High School: A Centennial History, 1954). Moving a few blocks from Clark High School to the top floor of a building that also housed a burlesque theater, the new school offered classes in accounting, typing, and bookkeeping to over 750 students.

By the time the school was moved to its new home in a much larger building in 1923, the newly named Thomas High School had more than 2700 students and offered a more comprehensive education beyond its vocational curriculum. It was the largest and most modern high school west of Chicago, and it offered innovative curriculum that

prepared its students for a number of vocations. The local newspaper (1924) declared at the time that this was “the most complete and well-planned technical high school in the United States.” Thomas High School was equipped with the latest technology and was a source of great pride for all who were members of this unique school. For decades, it remained one of the largest, most innovative high schools in the city and over the next fifty years, Thomas High School saw numerous professional athletes, esteemed politicians, war heroes, and acclaimed performers walk its illustrious hallways. At its peak enrollment in 1940, the massive school was home to approximately 3644 students, and by 1954, Thomas High School’s athletic department had claimed over 21 State Championships. Thomas High School, despite its vocational focused curriculum, exuded school pride and confidence that rivaled any college preparatory institution in the city.

Times were changing, however, and like many schools across the United States, Thomas High School was on the frontline of the social and political unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. Seated in the heart of a predominantly Black community, Thomas High School bore the brunt of a number of local policies that would drive its surrounding neighborhoods into poverty. In 1956, as a result of the Federal Highway Act, the state decided to build a stretch of highway through the Thomas High School community, cutting the area into two halves. Construction of the controversial highway began in 1960, destroying over 700 homes, as well as many businesses and churches. In addition to creating a smaller housing area, the highway, with a lack of exits into the heart of the once thriving area, diverted traffic away from the remaining businesses that fueled the community’s economy. White families left the area for more affluent suburbs, but Black families were limited in housing options because of the racist redlining practices of the

times. The neighborhoods surrounding Thomas High, once prosperous, deteriorated as tax revenue and city maintenance waned, and the once tight-knit Black community was fractured. As the community suffered these substantial impediments, the trajectory of Thomas High School shifted, and by 1968, its staff and students were fully embroiled in a battle not only to salvage its identity and image, but also the school itself.

A school primarily composed of Black students, Thomas High School became the victim of the racial tension that plagued the city. The protests that were happening across the country were met with great disdain and fear from this conservative city. A 1968 visit from segregationist presidential candidate, George Wallace, sparked protests and walk outs at many of the city's urban junior and senior highs. The act of civil disobedience exacerbated an already alarming trend of falling enrollment and climbing dropout rates at Thomas High. During the 1968-1969 school year, it was reported that over five hundred students dropped out of Thomas High, and only 19% of its graduating class went on to college. ("T--- High: A Self Study", 1979). Talk of closing its doors gained traction in city's primary newspaper, which then consistently painted a bleak portrayal of the school in the subsequent fifteen years. Meanwhile Thomas High School's leadership did little to protect the school's image. In a 1968 article describing the enrollment issues, the school's white principal was quoted saying, "you have to be really honest about the situation. Many of [students] won't be coming back because of racial tensions at the school such as last March following the Wallace incident. It stands to reason that the students wouldn't want to get caught up or involved in any situation" (Gember, 1968, pp 2-3).

A number of incidents, ranging from walk-out protest to fights at sporting events, became fodder for the local newspaper. In February of 1971, a fight broke out during a

basketball game against a high school from a nearby town. Painted as a one-sided attack by the newspaper, suspended Thomas High School students' pictures were printed repeated in days that followed the incident. Students, and even an injured referee refuted the narrative that the opposing team's students were mere victims while the Thomas students were the sole aggressors, but school officials remained steadfast in publicly disciplining the accused students. The incident spurred conversations of canceling the remainder of Thomas High School's basketball season. Student leaders asked for opportunities to meet with school officials to proactively squelch future incidents but to little avail. The principal told the newspaper that he would think about the situation but "right now, I doubt what good the basketball program does, is worth the trouble we have" ("T--- Basketball Future Still up in the Air," 1971).

The years to follow gave no relief to Thomas High's battered image. A lunchroom disturbance at Thomas High in late December of 1971 prompted the cancellation of school for the days leading up to the school's winter break. In 1972, ninety-five percent of the school's students walked out of school when two outspoken Black educators' contracts were not renewed. Protests over police brutality and racially charged fights at sporting events filled the pages of the newspaper during the early part of the 1970s. The newspaper framed these disturbances with harsh, inflammatory rhetoric, such as 'melee on the basketball court' and "occupation of the school's auditorium" giving the city a one-dimensional impression of Thomas High School.

These conflicts poured into the classroom driving racial tensions between staff and students to develop. In 1971, Thomas High's student population was 91.5% Black while only 14.6% of its faculty was Black ("T--- High: A Self Study", 1979). An outside

advisory board comprised of local community members “concluded that Thomas High students are in physical and mental danger and that the administration has been frightened by insensitive racist faculty members into taking unnecessary measures to alleviate this dreadful situation” (“Eight recommendations: T--- High Incident Prompts Talks.” 1971, pp. 15-16). Students distributed pamphlets listing who they deemed the ten most racist teachers. A newly appointed Black principal (the first in the city) set out to heal the racial divide that fractured the organization. “We had to get past the point of saying ‘I hate you because you are black, and you hate me because I am white.’ We had to realize we are all part of one school, not two sides opposing each other.” (Parsons, 1972, pp.1,6). Because its membership was so profoundly at odds with each other, there was no cohesive organizational identity that could combat Thomas’s negative image.

Beyond the disparity between the faculty’s identity and the students’ identity, the school made little effort to celebrate the Black culture of its students. At the height of its decline, the Black counselor whose contract had not been renewed, told the local newspaper that one of the greatest disconnects in the school was a lack of representation in the hallways. “Thomas’s cafeteria is decorated with old, antiquated murals of white people- no black people, nothing for the student to identify with, nothing to make them proud” (Bresette, 1972, p. 6B). The school leaders did little to cultivate symbols that held a shared meaning for all its members. Black athletes, who played professionally in the NFL, NBA, and MLB were not celebrated by the mostly white administration. Even local Black heroes who continued to contribute to the school through coaching and teaching, were not introduced as symbols of success. By the time the district decided to eliminate the adjoined junior high because it had become “ungovernable,” the leaders of Thomas

High School and its members not only lost cohesion but also devolved into an “us” versus “them” atmosphere.

During the 1973-1974 school year, as threats of shuttering its doors loomed heavier with enrollment dipping to a mere 503 students, efforts were made to rebrand the school by renovating the building and rejuvenating the curriculum with magnet status. The US Circuit Court of Appeals even issued an integration order in 1975 to facilitate an effort to attract white students, and the school adopted a self-paced learning program that allowed students to accrue credits faster. While the building experienced a temporary boom, its image hung heavy over Thomas High like a cloud. Potential students cited a lack of rigor as reasons for choosing neighboring high schools over Thomas. To further its decline, the school first lost its Class A athletic status, and then in 1976, all sports programs at Thomas High were cancelled. Upon learning the news, an alum and legendary professional basketball player commented, “I have always thought of [Thomas High] very fondly because the basketball I learned there. I think [the decision] is a shame.” (Parsons, 1974, p. 1) He went on to lament that when he visited the school in the 1970s, however, he found the school to be “atrocious.” The school that he had graduated from in 1955 no longer existed.

By 1982, Thomas High’s enrollment numbers were again waning, and after years of rumors and speculation over the fate of the high school, it was decided by school district to shut its doors. At 50% capacity, the building, they reasoned could be put to better use as a district administration office. A lawsuit alleging racial implications for the closing was filed against the district, but the judge found in favor of the district citing its efforts to boost enrollment numbers. The parents and community members who filed the suit

were unable to pursue an appeal because of a lack of funds and resources to sustain the legal process. When the Class of 1984 crossed the graduation stage, the school that had been born “in a dingy classroom in the basement of Clark High” and fought for seventy-two years to buck its underdog image was closed permanently. The decline of Thomas High School offers a cautionary tale on the importance of not only establishing a strong identity and image, but also vigilantly maintaining it.

Clark High School

Years before the Thomas High School was conceived in that small classroom, its birthplace had developed a dynamic history of its own. The story of Clark High School is one that reflects the growth and development of the city in which it resides. Public education was a roving entity in the city, moving to various buildings around the downtown area since it was institutionalized by the state in 1859. It was not until the 1867, when the territory became an official state, and its capital was moved west to a more centralized town, did the students of this growing city have a school building with any permanence. The former capitol building was secured for educational purposes, torn down, and rebuilt as a four-story school building that dedicated two of its fourteen classrooms to high school students. As the city grew, and the need for more schools was realized, the elementary students were moved out of the building on Old Capitol Hill and Clark High School was born.

The school was once again transformed at the turn of the century, when noted architect John Latenser was commissioned to reimagine the grand building. While students remained fully engrossed in their academics, the new building was built around

the existing one, starting with an east wing. By 1912, the four new wings encompassed the old building, which was turned into an open-air courtyard that is surrounded by the school's original walls (Menard, 2009). The school has seen numerous renovations and changes to their building, but the home of the city's oldest school is still foundational to the identity of Clark High. "The building is... kind of the pull. You know" the current principal explains. "It does kind of have this unifying effect on the people that, you know, have a Clark High kind of connection." With its French Renaissance grandeur and historical features, such as creaky wooden floors and "wooden academic doors," its building has come to symbolize the enduring, unwavering mark that Clark High has made on the city of Omaha. A retired principal explained the historical importance of the four original walls, left behind by Clark High's first building. "They tore down the original Clark High but what the courtyard replicates, and this is so beautiful, I love this, it replicates the foundation of the original high school. So when you walk into that courtyard, you're exactly in the same place that the kindergartener in 1872 walked into. So, we've never lost who we are. Even though we built a new building, our foundation in the original building is still there"

The love for Clark High's historical building was made apparent in 2015 when an addition to the east side of the building was proposed. Among the chief concerns of the alumni was that the outer appearance of the building would not maintain its original look. To project the original essence of the building, private alumni donors funded the purchase of limestone from the same vein of the quarry in Indiana that the original building was built from. Not only were the architects tasked with finding identical limestone, but they also employed state-of-the-art 3D printing to ensure that it was cut and designed in the

same fashion as the limestone from 1850 used in original building. As the Clark High School's Alumni Foundation director explained, "there was a lot of thought put into that. There was a price tag on that. We wanted to make sure that it was something they would be proud of." A core tenet to Clark High's identity is a shared common experience that begins with the inside those four beloved walls.

It is for this reason that Clark High School's history well-known by its membership and has been passed down through the ranks of leaders, teachers, and students. Alumni, spanning several decades, have written books and articles about the school's history, and its evolution from a small brick building on a hill to a thriving school of 2612 students is well-documented. The school has preserved the student records of each class since its origins and archived them in a vault in the school. But more importantly, history is all around the staff and students of Clark High in the stories that are passed down through generations, the individuals it chooses to honor, and the traditions that are repeated each year. The physical archives that are displayed represent the school's past and create an identity for the school that its members feel obligated to perpetuate, according to those interviewed. The retired principal describes "it's just that somehow we're doing, because of our history, because of what we've been given, because of what we know about our past that we make relevant to our present, and that what we're doing in our present is gonna be relevant to our future. We're able to get it all together." The longevity of Clark High is so mythologized that the assumption is that it will endure forever. Current students and staff are part of a celebrated past that perpetuates itself through symbolic action.

Carl Jung described myths as “a collective dream,” or rather stories that emphasize not only what an organization is, but also what it wants to be. Members of Clark High described the ethos of their school as “passionate,” “driven,” and “hard-working.” They were eager to explain that their success didn’t come from privilege and an abundance of resources, as some would assume. A former teacher describes her first day of class, “I was grabbing desks out of one class and putting them in another because we didn’t have enough desks. I was the one that had the deodorant and the toothpaste and the tampons sitting in my desk because our students never had enough.” Collective hard work and commitment to Clark High emboldens staff and students to push through such obstacles to achieve success.

This work ethic and an enduring loyalty to their school are found even in the myths that are told about Clark High, emphasizing those shared values by the stories told. There is the well-known legend of two ghosts that haunt the halls of Clark High. Stories of a janitor and a dean of students, both who came to untimely ends, are spread amongst the students, staff, and alum of this high school. Ghost stories are common for older builds, but where these stories differ is in the way these alleged apparitions conduct themselves in the halls of Clark High School. It is told that both the janitor ghost and the dean of students ghost don’t know that they are deceased and remain at Clark High, continuing their daily work for the students. Even in the afterlife, members of Clark High, according to myths, maintain a strong work ethic and sense of service to others. The retelling of this legend, throughout the years, reinforces the identity that Clark High has cultivated for itself.

In a similar vein, many incoming students are told by older peers and staff members that the former principals of Clark High are buried under the “Sacred C” icon that historically adorns the floor of the grand foyer of the school. The “C” is roped off from student traffic, but alumni of the 1960s and 1970s confirm that before it was stanchioned off, students and staff adhered to the unstated rule that nobody should step on this landmark. A former student and current teacher at Clark High described her first encounter with the Sacred C when as an eighth grader, she was touring the building with her mother, who too was an alum. “When I went on my first tour, I was like, ‘what is this about?’ And my mom said, ‘this is the Sacred C. You are not allowed step on it. You will get noticed in the wrong way if you step on it.’ I didn’t know what that meant, but I was like, ‘Oh God, hide me.’” The “C” is artifact made even more symbolic by the alleged (although false) burials underneath. Like the ghosts of the janitor and dean of students, this legend suggests that the past principals have chosen to remain in the hallways of their beloved Clark High. How these myths and legends started is unknown, but their origins are irrelevant. The fact that they have endured generations of classes points to the value placed on longevity, hard-work, and loyalty.

At the center of the stories told about Clark High are characters that serve as exemplars of its perceived identity. When asked to identify well known individuals in their organization, members of the Clark High community told of past, esteemed individuals that either contributed to the academic culture of the school or individuals who went on to find tremendous success after they graduated. Two former principals, whose combined tenure spans from 1944 to 1995, are lauded by teachers and administrators alike for maintaining the scholastic integrity of Clark as it evolved over

those fifty-one years. A Clark High English teacher was also a consistently mentioned name, as the author of a legendary stylebook that has dictated the school's writing curriculum since 1915.

Not only were these individuals mentioned repeatedly during interviews, their images, names, and memorabilia are displayed throughout the school, and their contributions are commonly shared in the classroom environment. A large wall atop a grand staircase, displays pictures of some of Clark High's most popular or prominent principals. The image of the larger-than-life principal who served from 1944 to 1968, while not in the center, certainly is one of the more sizable portraits on the wall. Likewise, right before his recent death, the legacy of the beloved principal, who had been a member (in various capacities) of the Clark High School community for many years, was solidified with the dedication of a walkway outside the building. These men are remembered as being tough leaders, who demanded quite a bit from the teaching staff and students, alike. One teacher, who was hired after both men had retired, recalled the impression that they had made on the staff that was then passed down to younger teachers. It was "sort of legendarily observed how, how high their expectations were for the staff in their professionalism and their academic standards," he stated.

Likewise, the members of Clark High's Alumni Hall of Fame are common names that are discussed and studied in classes. Their accomplishments are on display in a prominent hallway by the school's cafeteria marked with rows of plaques that don the recipient's picture, name, and biography. When asked, former students and staff alike not only mentioned famous athletes and award-winning performers that once walked Clark High hallways, they also bring up Nobel Laurates, politicians, business owners, and

philanthropists. The Clark High Hall of Fame committee, according to the current principal, makes a strong attempt to honor individuals who represent the student body although demographic shifts can inhibit the effort. “When [Clark] was a primarily Caucasian and African American, um, I would say it really reflects those two groups fairly well, and that was true up until 10 years ago when we started to get a stronger influx of Hispanic and Latino students. But long term, I think it [the Hall of Fame] will change to reflect that population.”.

The heroes/heroines of this school are often far-removed from the student’s daily lives, either geographically or chronologically. There is a good chance that the students of Clark High will never meet or interact with these individuals, but they are very intentionally made a part of the students’ academic experience as examples of what to aspire to. In some history classes, students are asked to study and report on a Clark High School Hall of Fame recipient. A 2021 graduate commented, “I think the point is you’re trying to energize students to want to be a part of it. So, they make a really big deal. And for me, it’s been like ‘I want to be up there someday.’” The current principal confirmed this sentiment. “It honors the past, celebrates the present, and fertilizes the future, so to speak, in terms of kids really believing that they can accomplish something. A lot of kids, that becomes their goal, and they go, ‘I want to get in the [Clark] Hall of Fame.’” By keeping these high achieving members very much present in the school, the leaders of this organization are offering a clear target for students and staff to aim for.

Besides recounting history through stories of its origin and the members who found success, Clark High School celebrates many traditions throughout the course of a school year, many of them dating back to the early 20th century. Recalled in every

interview conducted with members of the Clark High organization, and touted in recruitment materials, several beloved annual traditions of the school are celebrated, each revealing a part of the school's identity. The newest of these traditions, Purple Feather Day, was started in 1977 by the principal to honor students' academic success. The date of this event is kept a secret until the morning of when students who have earned a 3.5 cumulative G.P.A. or higher, receive an invitation containing a purple feather. The honored students then spend the day engaging in fun activities rather than attending class. A 2020 alum spoke of the importance of the day and the symbolic artifacts that come with it. She stated that she, like many of her peers, has kept all of the purple feathers from those celebrations. This is a sentiment that was reflected by the teachers and principals interviewed. They told stories of alumni coming back to visit, years later, with their purple feather in tow. This tradition once again reinforces the importance of a rigorous academic identity at Clark High. The students who consistently excel in the classroom are given privilege and esteem for that day.

Likewise, the Road Show, the annual talent show, for students, staff, and alumni dates back to 1913 and is a celebration of Clark High's community of talents. The director of Clark High Schools Alumni Foundation explained that the talent show ties the past students to the current students because "everyone knows what the [talent show] is. It doesn't matter again, if you're 50 or 70, or you're 18, you know what it is. And so, to us, that's an important thing to keep us... We don't wanna be a boutique school, we wanna stay true to our roots, of who we are." Along with organizations such as the O-Club, the legendary journalism department, and an honored JROTC, these traditions are not only important in what they represent, but also in their endurance through the years. By

repeatedly and intentionally prioritizing them, the organization articulates a desire to build continuity amongst their members from all generations.

Ceremonies and special events are not the only traditions that bind members of all ages together at Clark High. Certain procedures and expectations have endured long enough to have a tremendous impact on the identity of Clark High. The aforementioned Clark High Style Book has been taught with fidelity by all Clark High English teachers since its inception. Tales of these rigorous writing procedures are shared between all generations of Clark High students. The expectation of high-quality writing is so ingrained in the identity the school, that many former students return to the school, after a year of college, to laud the curriculum that as one alum phrased “made me such a better writer than anyone in all of my classes in college.” The current principal described the many times in his tenure that a student has told him ““You know, 'cause I hated it when they forced us to do it at [Clark]. But I've learned how to do it.” Students are not the only members of Clark to experience a tradition of high expectations. Staff members, too, are held to decades-long ideals of professionalism and hierarchy. A veteran teacher of 23 years described his start at the school as a brand-new educator.

When I started in '97, there were still lots and lots of teachers from the 60's and 70's and so many of them had worked for [the former principals]. And their attitude was basically, "Okay, listen new guy." They never would, they never would spell this out to you. In fact, the veteran staff would rarely talk to you. When I started there, there was this understanding. Like, "Listen, you do not rate in this school as a teacher until you've proven yourself over several years. And you had better adhere to these high standards that we have had since... and you

can imagine that when they started in the 60's or whenever, that, they would sort of have felt that from the teachers that had been there since the 30's and the 20's.

The members of Clark have carried on the tradition of high expectations and esteem for generations. Regardless of their outcomes on a standardize test or on an athletic court,” there is a pride that is fundamental to Clark Highs’ identity, and it is perpetuated through the sheer will of its members.

This pride is at the forefront of the decisions made when decorating the halls of Clark High, which the students and staff have dubbed “Champ High.” All around are artifacts that honor the history and success of Clark High and its students. As mentioned before, the courtyard is adorned with display cases honoring the past of Clark High, complete with historical artifacts that span the school’s long existence. There is a display of published Clark High authors in the courtyard for all students to see every day. In any direction that a student looks, they will find evidence of success at Clark High. The building’s hallways form a square pathway around the courtyard that frame the potential trajectory of a Clark High student. It starts when a student walks in the front doors. They are greeted with a roped off gigantic “C” on the floor. This “Sacred C” is the source of great pride to generations of Clark High alumni and as mentioned, is held quite reverently. Hanging over the “C” is a giant purple banner that states “Welcome Class of 2024! Where Great Expectations are Met!” As they travel the hallways of the school, they are greeted with hundreds of plaques and awards which students have won throughout the years. They range from journalism awards to “Students of the Month” plaques. The student will then approach the hallway that has giant posters that document in large letters the students who have earned an AP Scholar Award. This award is given

to individuals who have passed more than three Advanced Placement exams with a score of three or above. By design, these posters will then lead a student to the Clark High Hall of Fame. Hundreds of plaques adorn the wall with names, pictures, and short biographies of all the past recipients of the award. According to its retired principal, this was done to symbolically illustrate the path to success and to reinforce the notion that each student, by being at Clark High, is in the position to achieve greatness. Every artifact in the hallways of Clark High was curated to express the values of the organization to its members.

Another source of Clark High's pride is that it sits in the center of the city's metropolitan area. The principal and former principal, however, refute any notion that it is an "urban" school, preferring to call it a "downtown" school. This is an important distinction in Clark High's identity, according to its leaders, and one that is often communicated to students. According to a former staff member, this message is even shared on the morning announcements, "every morning, our principal says, 'We are so proud to be downtown. We are proud to be thriving while other downtown high schools in the country are failing.'" The retired principal pointed out that the location paired with its comprehensive academic rigor makes it unique. "In essence what you end up with is this very unique outlier of a downtown high school that not only works but excels. It's diverse, it's rigorous... its exotic." With open enrollment, but no residential areas in proximity to the school, Clark High draws a diverse population that reflects the entire city. The current principal explained that the emphasis of its downtown location was partially by design and partially by simply noticing the school's unique circumstances. "It emerged when we realized that after the migration to the suburbs, most high schools that remain in downtown areas across the country are specialty high

schools. Very few comprehensive high schools exist, let alone those that have a positive culture and are in demand from even those kids who had moved to the suburbs.” In the 2019-2020 school year, approximately half of the students that attended Clark High lived outside of its home attendance area, or district boundaries, and the leaders at Clark High called on this fact to promote not only their diversity but also their uniqueness. They cultivated the term “Downtown High” to symbolically represent an elite image of a school succeeding in ways that other urban schools have faltered.

Since its beginnings on Old Capitol Hill in 1867, Clark High has cultivated an identity of pride, high expectations, and loyalty. The members of this organization talk of its “rich and strong academic tradition” and the “historical” way that it is a “foundational element of the entire city.” All those who were interviewed shared their membership as a mark of honor and privilege and held a strong belief that if any outsider was going to disparage Clark High, it was simply because the school seemed to be too good to be true; a “Disneyland of public schools.” Because of this loyalty and devotion to their alma mater, alumni for generations have fought to preserve the identity and traditions of Clark High.

Smith High School

Twenty years after Clark High took residence in the old capital building in the downtown of this midwestern city, a community was emerging to the south with such speed and spirit that it was nicknamed “The Magic City.” This village, Smithville, incorporated in 1886, was built from a desire to bring the meat packing industry to region. Its wide-open spaces provided the perfect location to build what has now come to

be known as an “industrial suburb” which offered “expansive tracts of open land with room for future growth and easy access for the railroad transportation network” (Bell, Butterfield & Savage, 1894, p. 630). One year after its incorporation, Smithville opened its first meat packing houses in 1887 and the community exploded with a population that grew from hundreds to tens of thousands in just five years (Carter). The people moving into Smithville, looking for opportunity and stability, shared one characteristic- their diversity. Since its inception, “The Magic City” was built and has been inhabited by the ever-evolving immigrant populations that define American history. “By 1880 nearly one-third of this city’s population was foreign-born, and over half claimed to be of foreign ancestry.” Irish, German, Polish and Czech men and women converged on this area to work in the meat packing plants, build businesses, and create homes. According to the 1907 Dillingham Commission, 87% of Smithville’s meatpacking workforce was a first- or second-generation immigrant (“Latino Population Growth in the O-----/C----- B----- Metropolitan Area”) and from this thriving community and its hard-working ethos, Smith High School was born.

Just as quickly as Smithville was established, a school was immediately deemed necessary. In 1887, construction began on a “two story brick structure built on a “high clay bank” (“Corner stone of S----- O-----'s fine new high school laid with due ceremony,” 1904), and in 1889, the high school opened its doors to all the school aged children of the community. At the time, the second floor was dedicated to secondary studies and had five students. Teacher Eva F. O’Sullivan wrote of the original school, “The old high school was composed of a wonderful student body- eager to cooperate, willing to work, loyalty personified, possessed their share of cussedness. They

established traditions and standards that took deep root” (The Tooter: Opening Celebration, 1905). One such tradition started in 1892 with the school’s first graduating class. According to accounts from members of that inaugural class, the juniors of the school were tasked with entertaining the graduates after the commencement ceremony, a tradition honoring the school’s culture of comradery that lasted until 1925.

As the Smithville’s population continued to grow exponentially, the need for a bigger school became obvious. By 1903, the local board of education was crafting plans to build a larger, more “modern” school a few blocks away. John Latenser, architect of Clark High School, was once again tapped to design an institute that would anticipate the growing needs of this developing community, and in 1905, its students moved to an enormous five-story building of red brick, with a red tile roof and white trim. At the laying of its cornerstone in May of 1904, famed state politician and orator spoke, and the local newspaper reported that “the crowd which listened to [the speaker] numbered close to 5,000 and it was a great day for the school children of [Smithville]. It was, indeed, a great day for [Smithville] for the building of the new high school in the city marks the beginning of an era of unprecedented progress along educational lines in the Magic City” (“Cornerstone of S---- O----'s Fine New High School Laid with Due Ceremony,” 1904).

The beloved area, once a small village and now a thriving area of commerce, was annexed ten years later, and school was given its present name, Smith High School. Even as they were incorporated into the larger city, Smithville and its beloved high school, have retained its identity as a tight-knit community. Despite its many evolutions, the area kept the immigrant spirit from which it was built. At the turn of the century, Smithville was powered by European immigrants who came to the state for opportunities and a

better life. Today, the area is home to a thriving Latino community that seeks similar goals. Despite the shifting demographic, the ethos of the community has remained the same and can be seen in the Smith High's traditions and heroes.

Smith High School's identity is rooted in its history and geography. Both have shaped its working-class mentality and grit. According to the J.E. Carter, author of "The Birth of the Stockyards" (2010) "[Smithville] has long been known as a place of muscle and sweat," so it should be no surprise that its successful athletic program is a tradition that has been honored and celebrated throughout the years. When asked what they believe Smith High School is known for, most who were interviewed immediately responded "sports." Even with the shift in cultural attributes, the students of Smith High have turned their eyes to different sports that were popular in the early days of the school, but the "[Smith High] pride" remains unchanged. According to the Alumni Association president, gymnastics was very popular at Smith High in the 1960s and 1970s, and their wrestling team won nineteen State Championships between 1931 and 1967. But as the school's demographics changed through the years, so have the students' interests. Soccer and basketball now are favorite activities that bring out many fans. "I think they have total pride in their school. I'm amazed when I go to the soccer games and stuff like that, those kids, they're just like we were at football games. Just full of pride and happiness in Smith and the pride of their teams," the alumni president stated.

Not all beloved traditions have endured through the years, however. From the early part of Smith High's history into the 1980s, parades were regularly held on the main street of the community. An alum and current staff member described the experience. "There were floats. Cars and trucks would pull them, and the kids would decorate the

back of the truck, and they would throw candy, and it was the pep rally before the game. They did it every Friday.” She explained that the tradition fell by the wayside around 1988, and even Smith High’s traditional homecoming parade down the main street stopped as it become more complicated when more businesses moved into the neighborhood. The alumni association president recently discussed bringing back the parade with school officials, but the logistics were too great. “It’s just a different environment down there, I mean, they’d have to get permits and everything for shutting down [Main] Street.” The staff also have attempted to bring back pep rallies in recent years, which required a lesson in school spirit for the current students, according to the alumni staff member. “We literally had to teach the kids how to act. Like it was the teachers doing the yelling and cheering and hooting and hollering and dancing, because the kids just sat there and stared at us because they had never experienced a pep rally.”

With Smith High’s identity so strongly intertwined with its athletic department, it is no surprise that the school commonly holds up its successful athletes as the heroes to be emulated. When asked about famous or well-respected individuals who attended the school, the interviewees exclusively mentioned famous athletes who continued played their sport after high school, in a professional or semi-professional arena. All those interviewed mentioned a pro-football player who had the distinction of being the first African American quarterback in the NFL. This individual has returned to Smith High to talk with students at pep rallies, and a street by the school is named after him.

It is worth noting that with each of the names mentioned by the interviewees, their accomplishments were followed by a mention of how they have given back to Smith High or still contribute to its students’ success to this day. To be a hero or legend at

Smith High is to not only achieve great things but to also remain a part of the community and to give back to the community. The Smith High Hall of Fame was started in 1987 by the Smith High Alumni Association and each year it honors five alumni, one teacher, and one “community partner.” The application for the Hall of Fame describes the ideal candidate as an alumnus who has contributed to “the communities in which they live, to their professions, and to SHS.” An additional criterion is that the nominee must “support the SHS Alumni Association.” These honored individuals remain deeply involved in their Smith High heritage. This commitment perpetuates a Smith’s identity of a “tight-knit community,” according to the alumni association president.

In this high school, built on “muscle and sweat,” the stories that endure and are retold aren’t necessarily historic recounting of how the school came to be. They are rather rough and tumble legends of great sporting feats or shared good times and humorous pranks that students and staff members played on each other. The legendary “Gus the Ghost” exemplifies the playful comradery of Smith High School. Like the ghost of Clark High, Gus is said to be a former janitor who was accidentally killed by a falling barrel during a tornado drill in the “catacombs.” Unlike the ghosts of Clark High School, Gus spends his time in the performing arts wing of the building, pranking students who have missed their acting cues or forgot their lines in a play. This myth certainly reinforces the value that members of the school place on the strong sense of unity amongst its members and the good-natured antics that happens. Many Smith High alumni recalled tales of senior pranks on freshmen and teachers with unique ways of correcting student behavior. One alum accounted stories told from her father and uncles of a perennial wrestling coach. “When you would get in trouble at wrestling, your punishment was you had to

wrestle Coach [Hansen] and you did not want to do that because he was probably about a 250-pound man or more. He would pancake you. And the kid would be screaming and crying and wanting to get out from underneath Coach.” Such stories are common in Smith High’s book of legends. They are told with the good humor and fondness that exudes a familial ethos. Despite the demographic shift of the population, stories such as these endure and underscore the family spirit the has existed for generations at Smith High School.

The school’s “[Smith High] Pride” was given a boost with an addition to their building in 2010. The school had not hosted a home football game since 1946, but the addition of a new, state-of-the-art stadium provided a home to, not only the school’s football team, but also the successful Smith High soccer team. “You know, that new stadium has helped us tremendously to build some gumption around the fact that we have a beautiful stadium and a team. And our football team's not that good. But we support all the sports through that stadium, and so it's kind of neat,” alumni staff member reflected. The mere existence of the facility countered the stereotypes that many students felt they were subjected to. One recent alum stated “There’s like stigma around our area because I guess maybe people who don't regularly live here might think that, ‘Oh, we live in like... Like we see violence a lot or...’ Before when I went to Smith, I heard a lot of, “Oh, girls are pregnant,” or, “Don't go there, it's so bad.’ But once you start going there, you realize that there's so much more than what the rumors are saying.” Having a new stadium that people from all over state can visit allows the school to display their true colors and their school pride.

It is for this very same reason that the former principal took such care in maintaining a clean learning environment for his students. He reflected “When I first moved to this city and told people that I wanted teach at Smith High, a woman stopped, looked at me and said, ‘Well, I hope you have a bullet-proof vest because that's a terrible school,’ and she just painted this picture of kind of a wild west where kids were running around doing whatever they wanted.” While he felt he couldn’t counter every person’s false image of the school, he could certainly shape those who visited Smith High. The custodians and the office staff have the two most important jobs, because their jobs are going to create a vision in people's minds as to what Smith High School is, and so if somebody walks in and they find dust bunnies on the floor or fingerprints all over the windows, they are gonna think that our school is not cared for. And therefore, the people who inhabit it don't care about their education and don't care about educating kids.” By putting an emphasis on the physical appearance of the building, the members of this organization are not just communicating to the public, but also each other that this place matters to them and is worth taking care of.

The aesthetic of the school is all the more important for its identity and image because it is still in the heart of a thriving business community that sprouted up in 1886. Alumni and staff members say this location is part of its unique character. One alumni pointed out that Smith High’s connection with its surrounding businesses is deep because many of them are owned and run by family members of students, so the area is very much a reflection of who they are. She also mused that as much as the students and staff appreciate the businesses, the feelings tend to be mutual. “Without Smith High, [the area] would just feel kind of empty, because of the amount of people that go to this school...

We're always around those businesses and we're there because we love what they do and what they cook and what they offer." The area is steeped in the immigrant tradition that has been part of the community since its earliest days, and the high school's identity is intimately tied to its cultural identity. Smith High reported that in the 2019-2020 school year, 83.6% of their students identified as Hispanic, which mirrors the neighborhood population that surrounds the school (Nebraska Department of Education Data Profiles, 2021). As a Dual Language and Performing Arts Magnet, the school embraces those extended learning opportunities to reach out to the local businesses. The former principal described yearly field trips to the neighboring el Museo Latino (which sits in the exact location of the original Smith High building) and lessons in cultural arts that reflect the students' identity. "We have a guitar program, and a lot of our students come to us already knowing how to play the guitar because they learned it from their fathers or grandfathers. And then music is just a big part of their family." By leaning into the surrounding community and the culture of their students, the school has shifted with demographic changes of the area to build its identity based on its members, rather than expect its membership to conform to the organization. This ethos reflects the value that the school places on diversity.

The Smith High that exists today might not resemble the Smith High of the early 1900's or even of the 1960s, and those changes are not just demographic. Moving from a technical and trade school of the sixties and seventies to a school that specializes in the performing arts and dual language was not universally well-received by its alumni base. Smith High, however, has continually adapted with the times, and now provides a college focused curriculum to its over two thousand students. Despite these changes, the identity

of Smith High has remained deeply rooted in its geography and the community values that have endured for over a hundred years.

Butler High School

Butler High School, named for the same local Nebraska politician who spoke at Smith High's opening ceremony, was built in 1965 to combat the overcrowding in other area schools and to provide home to the students of the flourishing southwest community of the city. Originally built on the edge of a developing neighborhood, the school was designed to welcome all junior and senior high students of the area. The first year it was open, approximately six hundred seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth graders attended the school, with a staff of forty young teachers. By the time all six grades (7-12) were represented in the 1967-1968 school year, it was clear that the singular building would not meet the growing demands of the community for much longer. Almost immediately after the first senior class crossed the commencement stage in its small auditorium, plans were put in full swing to build a larger facility just down the hill, six blocks to the west. In 1972, Butler High 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students walked into the building that now holds over 200 staff members and nearly 1800 students.

Where many of the city's schools that were built at the turn of the century were ornate marvels of architecture, grandeur was not the focus of Butler High's design. As architectural styles shifted throughout the years, schools of the 1960s and 1970s were built with much more practicality in mind. The exterior of the building was designed as a "simple expression of the structure and the classroom modulations," according to the architectural notes left by the design firm. Inside, designed as a continuous large

rectangular loop, half of the building was built to serve as the academic wing of the school, while the other half was designated an “active learning zone... to serve both school *and* community” with an auditorium, gymnasium, industrial arts classrooms, and a cafeteria. The design of the building with the separation of these two types of learning foresaw the importance of community involvement that would develop at Butler. School officials envisioned a building where education would continue well into adulthood and the community would be welcome to gather year-round.

With these objectives in mind, Butler High was built to be adaptable and to nurture a sense of community among its members, and as such, the school was purposefully designed to be an empty canvas that could be manipulated based on the needs of its members. The architectural notes read “The difficulty of projecting a school program some fifty to seventy-five years hence is almost insurmountable; therefore, the committee has tried to keep their ideas as fluid and flexible as possible.” Both classrooms and teacher plan stations were conceived with the ability to shift from large group facilities to individualized spaces. According to a 1972 article in the Butler High newspaper, the primary architect, Golden Zenon stated, “there should be less teaching and more learning in the schools today” and therefore created a model that would enable teachers to meet with students individually and in small groups for more personalized education. This philosophy of education still is a defining characteristic of Butler today. Former students repeatedly discussed the influence of the interpersonal connections forged with their peers and teachers in the classroom. One recent alumnus explained the role that a caring staff had on her impression of the school. “It was the staff of Butler High who really help contribute to that safe and comfortable atmosphere, always being

there, even just for little stuff like, ‘I have a question on this homework, but I’m kind of scared to ask,’ or ‘I have an issue I’m going through at home, I don’t really know how to handle it,’ they’re always there for that. And I think that’s a large part of why the student and staff have such a good relationship there, because it’s just always safe.” An alum who is now an assistant principal at Butler High echoed that sentiment. “The thing that I think we do really is building relationships and being very connected to each other.”

The goal of comradery was not exclusive to the classrooms. The academic and activities wings are connected by a “commons” area that serves as “the focal point of the entire school and is the center of the action for both students and community get-togethers during unstructured times,” according to the architect’s notes. This commons area, like the rest of the building, is a large blank slate waiting to be filled with the members of the organization. Sitting right inside the original Butler High entrance, the space spans the width of the building and is two stories high. It is overlooked by a second-floor balcony on the “academic wing” and is punctuated with a “sunken carpeted conversation pit” on the west end. The architect’s notes describe the commons as a “part of the circulation spine,” but to the members of Butler High, it is the heart of the school.

Just as the design intended, the commons area of Butler has become a defining element of its identity and a symbol of what is important to the students and staff: community. It is the “hub of the building, the life blood of the building,” according to the assistant principal. Every member of this organization, past and present, who was interviewed for this study, mentioned that the commons area and the pit were the core of the building and the one element that would be fiercely defended if it was threatened with renovations. An alumnus from the 1980s said about the pit, “When I was a student here,

that's where we gathered, that's where you met your friends in the morning, that's where... We'd hang out in the pit. We slept in the pit, we talked in the pit. That's what we did. That's Butler High." In a similar vein, a 2018 graduate of Butler High explained, "The pit's the most original spot at Butler. If you don't know what the pit is at Butler, you don't really go to Butler." A veteran teacher mused "almost all good Butler High stories start in the commons area. You can get a feel for the day based off of what's going on in that nerve center." The commons, an epicenter that was designed for students and community members to meet and socialize, underscores the value this organization places on relationships and connections. A school that has battled overpopulation from its birth, Butler's commons area not only serves as a gathering place that is inhabited by hundreds of students at any given time, but also a symbolic representation of its identity. A recent alum described Butler as "a huge family, very multi-cultural, and just a lot of people in a kind of small space and just a pretty close, tight family." Generations of students and staff called Butler High their home, and the commons was the living room for this enormous family.

Like the rest of the building, however, the commons reflect its austerity and advancing age. Butler High was built to be shape-shifted based on the needs of the students and staff, but the blank slate concept has, inadvertently, contributed to an organizational identity crisis. An unintentional consequence was that the school never retained a strong identity beyond the nurturing relationships that were formed. One teacher explained it as "It's not like you can point to it and be like, 'Oh yeah, that's this style or that's this school.' It doesn't have unique characteristics. And so, I think the physical location, the building, the nondescript building, all of that reflects our struggles

with carving out a unique identity.”

The bland design is only exacerbated by years without a substantial update. While the plant itself has been well-maintained and upgraded through a series of bond issues, the interior décor is worn and dated. The assistant principal who graduated from Butler twenty-five years ago lamented the fact that much of the school has remained the same since her own days as a student. “It’s been a long source of frustration for me at the lack of renovations and updates, but it’s very telling of our character, that we just kind of make the best out of what we have. There is still some original carpet.” To some staff, this is evidence of Butler High’s grittiness. “We don’t get caught up in kind of flowery stuff; we are just kind of a gritty place that serves a purpose, and I don’t need it to look nice to be able to get done what I need to get done.” The humbleness of their surroundings (for the adults who love Butler and are versed in its positive attributes) is a reflection of the school’s resilience and grit. The students who are still forming impressions of their school experience, however, tend to look at it with less pride. One student lamented that some students could fall into a trap of low expectations when they see the conditions of the building “You walk in and you’re like, ‘Well, the lockers are still beat up, there’s still ink all over the desks, there’s not enough desks...’ There’s just a lot. And some kids will fall into that, just, ‘This is the expectation of me.’”

These students’ doubt about their own efficacy was affected not only by the outdated condition of facility but also, to a degree, the lack of meaningful physical artifacts that illustrate success in the school. A total absence of adornments throughout the hallways of Butler High could be blamed on its relatively short history, as the school, by comparison to its counterparts in this study, is fairly young. Age could not account for,

however, the incomplete hodgepodge of artifacts displayed in the commons and the hallways, that only spanned from the early 80s to the early 2000s. Photos of National Honor's Society groups lined one wall of the commons, but the last group documented was the graduating class of 1997. Valedictorians were pictured on another wall but stopped short at 2004. These honors were still being awarded, but there was no evidence of it on the walls of Butler High. One veteran teacher reflected, "It was like the school was paused in the mid-late 90s. The students were doing great things, achieving many things worth celebrating, but the school wasn't recognizing them in the same way that they had in the past." The absence of these artifacts speaks just as loudly to the students, staff, and visitors, as if the school was decorated with multitude of accolades. The empty spaces have become inaccurate symbols of inaction and decline through the years, and in a subtle but powerful way, tell members of the organizations that success is not a realistic pathway at Butler High. One teacher interviewed explained that in her classroom, it is a constant battle to counter these perceptions. "I get so sick and tired of hearing the kids go, uh, you know, 'Only losers graduate from Butler High. Nobody successful ever graduates from Butler High.'" By not illustrating the many accomplishments of its current members, this organization has unintendedly cultivated an image of failure.

When a new principal was appointed in 2019, he marveled at the bare walls and outdated décor of Butler High and knew he was in for a challenge. He described his first impressions of the school. "I was underwhelmed by the lack of pride that the school exuded. The walls were beige, empty, and nothing stood out. Had I not known what school I was at physically, there would have been no way for me to know I was at Butler High." Furthermore, the few portraits of success that did exist were no longer

representative of the current student populations. Whereas Butler High was once a school with a predominately white population, it is now home to a largely Hispanic and Latino population. The few artifacts that were displayed reflected the more homogeneous demographics of the seventies, eighties, and nineties. “What also stood out to me was that many of the pictures didn’t reflect the cultural heritage of the current student demographics. The school had not kept up with the ever-changing school demographics from a once white majority school to currently the largest student group being Hispanic,” Butler High’s new principal lamented. With a lack of identity markers and signs of success displayed around the school, it is no wonder that a veteran teacher described Butler as a “school with nothing really tied to it” and that the students felt that their school was looked down upon by visiting members of the community.

Whether a cause, or a victim, of this lack of historical artifacts, Butler High’s members reported that they do not feel attached to their school’s heritage or history. A relatively young school, without the longevity of the other schools in this study, it is logical that the history of Butler High would not be at the forefront of its identity, but some members felt that its absence takes a toll on present day operations. One teacher stated that it would be “hard to find a person who knew the history of Butler High.” Some interviewed felt certain that the school named the bear as their mascot because of there was a bear who was wandering loose in the area, when the school had been built. Others believed it was because a car dealership, down the street from the construction of the new school, had dancing bears on the lot as a promotional stunt. Many members even debate the year that the school opened. Some individuals insist that 1964 was Butler’s inaugural year, while others (correctly) place the opening in 1965. This ambiguity has been a

source of frustration to the members of Butler High for years. In fact, many staff members of Butler High expressed the concern that the history of their school had been deliberately erased several times, in the name of “school improvement.” One teacher stated, “we don’t have that history, we don’t have that beloved lore surrounding us, because we don’t do those things. We don’t keep going with things that are working.” While artifacts detailing the history of Butler High exist, they have not been displayed, or even in some cases, preserved. The school’s past simply has not been an influencing factor on present day life at Butler High.

While each organization is familiar with the often-conflicting recollections of its schools’ history and events, Butler’s mythology sometimes strays from the playful lore that shapes a school’s ethos into macabre urban legends that paint a darker side of the school. Former students and staff members, when asked about myths and legends, struggled to find stories that told the very typical stories of pranks and senior antics of former students, or even good-humored ghost stories. Instead, one common story that was reported by all Butler members who were interviewed was one that earned the school the ominous title “Suicide High” in the mid-1980s. After experiencing a cluster of three suicides in one week in February of 1986, the high school attracted national media attention. Much of the reporting focuses on the epidemic nature of teen suicide, but the school was marked by the tragedy in a long-lasting way. The myths that have endured thirty-five years later vary greatly in the retelling. Some alum reported that the suicides actually happened at school. Others insisted that one of the suicides occurred when a student jumped off the balcony into the commons area of the building. One alum believed that the number of suicides in that short span of time was close to ten students (rather

than three). No school is immune to such tragedies, but the persistence of this story, with such wild variations, has clearly left a deep scar on the identity of Butler High to its members. While those outside of the Butler community have little or no remembrance of the terrible events that took place in 1986, it is part of the school's lore and endures far greater than any positive story told about Butler High's history.

History is often conveyed to its current members through the performance of traditions and rituals performed throughout the years. Without traditions and rituals, the history of an organization is an abstract concept to its current members, with little or no influence on its daily operations. The veteran staff members of Butler who were interviewed struggled to find a lasting ceremony or ritual that has endured through the years. Short of the standard high school experiences of graduation, prom, and homecoming, Butler High staff and students felt little connection to its past members. With the exception of one tradition, the annual community trick or treat event, Boo Bash, the individuals interviewed were unable to find a strand that tied the decades of Butler History together. One teacher lamented the discontinuation of an annual service award that was given to an individual who had played an important role in the athletic department. He blamed the lack of continuity for the disruption in tradition keeping. "When new leaders, teachers, and coaches come into our school, like everyone feels like they have to come in and rewrite the story, instead of keeping what was going well, and then kind of adopting their own kind of spin on it." If the purpose of traditions and rituals is to communicate the values of an organization, it seems one thing is worse than not having any, and that is the repeated erasing of them. When new members, especially those in influential positions, discard valued traditions, it says to the older members that

what they cared about was not important or was even wrong. Not only does this cause tension and strife among its members, but also these mixed messages make it difficult for an organization to create a healthy, enduring identity.

Shifting membership cannot be solely blamed for the loss of all traditions, however. Evolving neighborhoods and student populations can make some traditions and rituals logistically difficult. Many of the traditions that were once so important to the individuals at Butler became impossible, as the community around them urbanized and “school choice” policies allowed students to travel outside of their neighborhoods and attend schools across town from their homes. While Butler High’s population has greatly increased with these initiatives, events such as homecoming parades that once took place in the neighborhood and streets surrounding the school became less practical because the residents weren’t connect to the school. Likewise, transportation and distance made participation outside the school day difficult. In describing the attendance of Friday football games during the 1970s and 1980s, one Butler alum recalled “you really didn’t have a choice. You went to every varsity game. We were always there. We had signs. We did homecoming parades, and you went around the neighborhood, honking, and the people at home would come out and wave. But you knew ‘em, ‘cause it was so and so’s mom or their grandma...” Traditions such as this have fallen victim to the geographical constraints of the current student body. Butler’s cheerleading coach explained “We have girls that live so far from the school, and it’d be like, ‘Well, I can’t come ‘cause I don’t have a ride.’”

Whereas Clark High and Smith High are both seated in urban areas, Butler High sits in a more suburban neighborhood, but all the same, the school’s identity is influenced

by its location. Even, as one of a handful of the district's schools that don't actually reside in within the city limits, the majority of Butler High's students live more within 1.5 miles away from the school and 65-70% enrollment is considered inside its home attendance area. This certainly isn't unusual for the district, but the community surrounding Butler High looks very different than the neighborhood many of its members come from. According to school records, only 8% of the current Butler student body live in the same zip code as the school, while over 38% live in the neighboring 68107 zip code. While they sit in close proximity to each other, these areas represent very different experiences. The residents of 68157, Butler's neighborhood residents are 85% white and have a median income that exceeds \$65,000. In contrast, the residents of 68107 are predominantly Hispanic or Latino and have a median income of \$40,000. The value of an average house in the Butler neighborhood is \$135,000, while the houses in 68107 have a median value of \$87,000 ("Quick Facts: Bellevue City, Nebraska"; "Quick Facts: Omaha City, Nebraska").

Furthermore, the residents of the neighborhoods surrounding Butler are older individuals without school-aged children. According to Butler High's principal "many of our immediate residents sent their kids to Butler High in the 1990s when our school was once a strong neighborhood school but mostly white. They continue to reside in their homes that are paid off." Therefore, younger families cannot move into the neighborhood, and many of the families that do live in the Butler area with school age students tend to send their children to parochial schools or neighboring school districts. Despite being considered a neighborhood school, Butler's students hail from thirty-seven of the forty-nine zip codes that span the entirety of the city. "There is a disconnect that

comes when you look at Butler High School, and you see the houses around Butler High, you just don't understand Butler High," according to a veteran teacher. He goes on to suggest that the effect is even more profound because many of the school aged students living in those neighborhoods have opted out of Butler to attend more suburban schools: "We're not really interacting with our community around our school because the community around the school has kind of forgotten about us or kinda left us behind many, many years ago." The recent alum reflected the same concern. "We were kind of farther; we weren't down south. And we weren't in the western part of town or the northern part, so we were kind of in a weird place. We were in kind of two different districts. We were just kind of the 'far away' school for me." With no unifying geographical element (such as a downtown area or on the main street of a historical district) that aspect of Butler's identity has left them untethered to any community and adrift.

Without a strong sense of remembrance of the positive elements of Butler High's history, whether through traditions, origin stories, myths, or legends, the heroes and heroines come in a different form at this high school. Butler's heroes and heroines are very disparate from the famous, esteemed alumni of Clark High and Smith High. That is not to say that those success stories do not exist at Butler High. An NFL star, a guitarist in a popular band, and a professional boxing champion, as well as a host of successful businesswomen and men, all graduated at Butler High. They are just not celebrated in the way that could influence its present membership. Attention has, until recently, not placed on these notable characters in Butler's history. According to one teacher, these notable characters in Butler's history, often become lost because there has not been an intentional

effort to honor these individuals. Referring to the NFL football player, he recalls “we retired his number when he died in 2013. We had a whole ceremony, we had a big jersey and everything, but we have no clue where that jersey is.” All too often, these narratives have been lost, and Butler students do not know much about these heroes or subsequently, the success that they can find beyond the high school walls.

All the same, Butler High’s identity can still be strongly articulated through the individuals it chooses to honor. In an organization that values relationships and connections, staff members and students alike described individuals with whom they had daily interactions with as the icons of Butler High. Ranging from teachers, to coaches, to security guards, the heroes of Butler High were the individuals who took care of the needs of the students and modeled hard work and integrity. The most well-known individual who was discussed by most interviewees was a veteran security guard. Known for his boisterous antics and great sense of humor, this security guard has been a larger-than-life presence at Butler High for fifteen years. Former students discussed how he was the one constant at Butler High and “that if you didn’t get gum from him, you didn’t really go to Butler High.” But his, and the other staff members mentioned, were not just lauded for their longevity, but rather their service to the students. One student spoke of the security guards with reverence by saying “They took care of us and you just have to know them if you went to Butler ‘cause they knew everybody... they was the people taking care of, that watched after us. So we got super close with them.” These were the individuals that saw that the students were cared for and nurtured. When asked why these heroes were such an enduring presence in Butler High’s culture, even after

they had retired, the assistant principal said, “whether it’s food, safety, education-based help, or whatever their specific needs are, those are the people that get it done.”

Likewise, the heroes and heroines of Butler modeled the importance of teamwork and comradery, two elements that are core elements of this organization, according to those who were interviewed. In describing beloved past athletic coaches, those interviewed didn’t describe their records of wins and losses but rather the example they set for the other members of the organization. The school’s assistant principal explained “they modeled what it was to just play nice. They supported each other, there was no territorial contest. Many of them were involved in various activities and athletic programs and they just had each other’s back and they showed up to each other’s events and encouraged the student body to do the same.” Those early coaches instilled a sense of unity in the Butler ethos which set an example of what success looked at in this organization. It was then the expectation of future members to build a strong community that honored teamwork. The enduring message of these exemplars of Butler High was “We’re gonna have some class and some respect and we’re gonna treat each other with respect,” according to a veteran teacher. The heroes and heroines of Butler High were not the ones that have won the most awards or acquired fame and fortune, but rather those who have gone above and beyond to create relationships and connections with students and staff members alike. At Butler High, heroes and heroines create a sense of family in this organization.

Many of Butler High’s members have expressed concern that the school doesn’t have a strong identity. Its lack of attention paid to its history through the celebration of traditions and famous heroes certainly confuses the legitimacy of the school’s identity.

While its members feel that they are constantly re-defining the school, that is not necessarily accurate. Butler High has core values that have built a strong foundational identity for the school, such as teamwork and relationships. All the same, however, its members still worry about the image that is being projected to its students and outside community. Many have articulated that while there are wonderful things happening at Butler, negative image inhibits both staff and students' feelings of efficacy. When asked how she reacted when someone would say bad things about her school, a recent alum described feeling "restricted." She goes on to explain, "when everybody around you, except for the people that are in your box, put you in this box and they label you like that, no one's gonna come look in the box because it's labeled as, 'Do not open this box.' So you and everybody who's in the box with you can be screaming, and you can know that we are so much more than what you just labeled us as, but it's not gonna matter because the box is still labeled, 'Do not open.' It's just when everybody's telling you that you are something, it's hard to break out of that and prove that you're not."

When the new principal came to Butler High last year, he was determined to unveil what many staff members and students called "the best kept secret in the city." Intentional work started in crafting a stronger image for Butler High. It was quickly realized that before one can shape their image, they must determine their identity. As Butler High dives into this process, Thomas High School, Clark High School, and Smith High School offer important lessons in how identity and image can be developed and used to the advantage of student and staff members. The next chapter outlines the key takeaways from these schools' experiences

Chapter Five

Discussion

Symbolic Implications

A school's identity and image are cultivated by the rhetorical symbols that its leaders, and subsequently its members, emphasize consistently (intentionally or unintentionally) within the organization and the community surrounding it. Symbols not only articulate identity and image but they also perpetuate them. Ernest Bormann's symbolic convergence theory emphasizes the transmission of symbols in an organizational setting to create group consciousness and to resolve confusion. Symbols are integral to communicating the organization's identity, not only to its members, but also to outsiders. Symbols serve as a common, emotionally based language that members have subconsciously agreed upon. Rhetorical in nature, symbols certainly have an impact upon the minds of individuals. As seen from the interviews conducted with the staff and students of these school, however, they also yield an intense power over like-minded groups or organizations. This power underscores the importance of the purposeful cultivation of symbols that represent the best of a school. When symbols are adopted by its membership by happenstance, the negative elements of an organization's identity could bubble to the surface, as it did with Thomas High School. Likewise, if this shared rhetorical language does not exist amongst the members of a school, the staff and students will likely never coalesce together as a community from which an identity can be born.

Bolman and Deal's symbolic framework outlines common organizational symbolic tropes that reveal a group's identity. The four schools studied offer an insightful look at how prevalent and powerful these rhetorical devices can be. At their core, symbols are inherently narrative in that they create stories that connect abstract ideas or qualities to concrete images or items. Organizations define their identity by articulating their shared values and beliefs through these symbolic narratives. At their core, the origins and subsequent histories of the four schools were a fertile ground of symbolic traditions, heroes, and artifacts that articulate these organizations' identities.

Histories, Stories and Myths

Enduring stories about these schools (true and mythological) prevailed, and the way they have been told, create a sense of the members' school experience as well as a common thread that all members (past, present, and future) are connected by. A school whose history is well documented in a positive light (either in reality or in mythology) and then articulated by its leaders and members, has an institutional touchstone or standard to match. It provides a legacy that the current members are anxious to live up to and be connected by. Even the whimsical myths and legends that are passed down from generation to generation, class to class, reveal clues to the schools' values and beliefs that are the foundation of their identity. The origin stories of Clark High and Smith High have been intrinsically linked to the birth their city's metropolis and its burgeoning, urban communities. Thomas High School's beginning, however, was recounted undesired members who were confined to in a "dingy room" in the basement of Clark High School.

Each of these origin stories extend beyond factual accounting. The way they have been told consistently by the formal and informal leaders of each school symbolizes the way the organization has been taught to feel about themselves. They are the symbolic foundation of the schools' identities and the fact that these stories are recounted by the membership makes these symbols all the more powerful. Just as detrimental to a school's identity is the absence of a commonly held historic narrative. When history is missing in an organization, such as it is with Butler High, the members are without a directing compass. These stories give legitimacy to an organization and without them, Butler has been left untethered to a solid foundation. Symbolical convergence theory posits symbols, such as historical anecdotes, resolve confusion about what defines the organization. Without this framework, from which many of organization's symbols are subsequently born, a strong identity cannot flourish. The history of an organization must be intentionally passed along to the membership, so that it will, as Bormann described, "chain out" and reach future generations.

Heroes and Heroines

As these histories and origin stories illustrated the fundamental tenets of these schools' identity, so has the characters that acted in them. The narratives are brought to life by individuals who have lived them giving meaning to the organization symbolically. In the same manner that histories are edited and refined to emphasize important qualities and values, heroes and heroines are pared down to the elements that exemplify the image that organizations (intentionally or unintentionally) project. An organization's identity is further solidified by its heroes and heroines.

The high schools examined in this study clearly reaffirmed this notion. Clark High has elevated individuals who have come to symbolize rigorous academic achievement, a tenet that its members ascribe to the organization. Academic leaders, such as its principals and teachers, are lauded as personifications of the high scholastic expectations that are valued at this traditional school. In sharp contrast, with Butler High's ethos of "community first," the individuals who are able to make strong connections with students emerge as the icons of this school. The heroes of the school aren't necessarily known for the intense academic rigor they offered students, but rather for the character that they projected and the way that they treated other members of the organization. These human symbols, who serve as wise, caring elders, exemplify Butler High's familial identity. It is important to note that the lauding of these archetypes does not mean that caring individuals don't exist at Clark High and that teachers with high academic expectations are absent at Butler High. Those qualities simply are not predominant in how the members celebrate their organization.

Predictably, different values such as these influence student attitudes and behaviors. According to Bolman and Deal (2006), an organization's heroes and heroines symbolically are "held up as an example of what you have to do to succeed around here." In the high school setting, these icons are held up not necessary just to show how to succeed, but rather what success looks like. This too is where the identities of schools are found. With a prominent wall of accomplished and renowned alumni at Clark High, success is traditional. Innate talent and academic acuity, honed by rigorous expectation, will result in esteemed professions and financial reward. Likewise, Smith High reveals their image and identity by who they choose to honor. A requirement of admittance into

their hall of fame involvement in the alumni association and giving back to Smith High” in a substantial way. Achievement, while still important, is secondary to a commitment to the community and organization.

Without a hall of fame, or an established system to honor the success stories of Butler High, the symbols of success are relegated to the individuals who have nurtured and supported the students. These heroes are successful at creating important relationships with their fellow members and demonstrating a level of integrity that all should strive to duplicate. What is missing, however, is a sense that a world beyond the halls of Butler High is available to all of its members. When the former student asserted that he did not need a higher score because Butler students do not go to ivy league schools, it was because he had not seen examples of this type of success. By not offering additional, wide-ranging symbols of success, Butler’s identity is confined to one of family and not achievement. Social identity theory contends that the members of an organization will adopt its identity, hence often Butler students’ vision of their individual potential is limited.

Not all hall of fames, however, successfully create heroes and heroines. Thomas High School was by no means short on success stories. Several athletes (of all ethnicities) from the 1940s and 1950s not only went on to perform on a professional level; they were also nationally renowned and accomplished. Similarly, a diverse group of artists, authors, and politicians that attended Thomas High saw tremendous success, but they were not included in the daily fabric of the school. Rather, Thomas High counselor told the local newspaper in 1971, the school was decorated with images of older white individuals with whom the current members had no connection to. The students did not see heroes and

heroines that actually represented themselves, their families, and their experiences. By choosing untimely heroes for their organization, the leaders further damaged an already eroded organizational identity of the school.

Traditions

Much in the same way that an institution's recalled history and shared heroes and heroines reveal clues into their identity, so do the traditions, rituals and ceremonies of a school. Bolman and Deal (2006) assert that the things that an organization chooses to celebrate, whether it be through rituals or ceremonies, "articulates what is important to the organization" (p. 250). Rituals offer structure and insight into "how things are done" in an institute. Ceremonies, a grander form of ritual, serves to reassure its members about what is important in an organization. Just as heroes are personifications of an organization's values, these traditions are symbols of what is celebrated and honored. The symbolic traditions of these four schools do not depart from the identity that the forementioned symbols establish. Smith High School's traditions are rooted in the close-knit community of Smithville. From early in its life to today, Smith High has consistently been an organization that rallies around the athletic achievements of its members. Despite shifts in the types of sports its students enjoy, the community as a whole shifted with the times to offer continued support. Clark High's traditions, one of many being its Purple Feather Day, meanwhile focuses on academic achievements. Butler High members, on the other hand, struggled to think of a tradition that has been consistent for any substantial time. Attempts at establishing new traditions often dissolve with the rotation of new staff members and leadership, which can have strong repercussions. When new

staff and students discard valued traditions, for any number of reasons, it sends a clear message to the established members that what they cared about was not important or was even wrong. These mixed messages make it difficult for an organization to create a healthy, enduring identity.

Building

The physical appearance, geography, and décor of a school's building also contribute to the identity and image that is held by its membership. In these physical artifacts, the students and staff have concrete symbolic representations of the values of their organization. Whether unintentionally or by design, the school building is seen as a symbol of what is important to its leaders and members. In a 2016 study of school buildings and student achievement, Lumpkin (2016) found that "school facility is an important element in the quest to improve student academic achievement" (p. 182). Therefore, it can be no surprise that the level of care and planning that goes into a learning environment can influence the efficacy of the students and staff. But it can also affect the way students see the organization and themselves.

The design and maintenance of the building is a symbolic representation of what is valued by the school even if it was not created with this intentional purpose in mind. The alumni and staff of Clark High are fiercely attached to their building even though it is not modern or new. Several teachers referred to small rooms and cramped offices while still expressing a deep love for the building and a commitment to preserving it. The building represents the institutional antiquity and tradition that is fundamental to Clark High's identity and image. A much newer school with larger rooms and modern layout,

however, the Butler High plant has gained no such attachment to it. Rather, the alumni and staff see the building a symbol of Butler High's lack of identity. Outdated artifacts and an absence of school pride in its décor falsely represents a stagnate school that has not progressed in the last twenty years. The only element that was mentioned in interviews was the communal pit where students could gather. While the history of a school is where the symbols originate, the physical buildings are blank canvases in which these symbols are communicated to its members and the community. In contrasting forms, students and staff members from both schools reported the influence that their physical environment had on how they felt about their school, from design to maintenance to historical and celebratory artifacts.

Geography also plays a role in the identity of each of the schools examined. While not always by design, the placement of these schools has been influential in the way that they are defined by their students and their staff. A school's location is often symbolic of larger social and economic powers at play. Often though, the way that it is rhetorically utilized (or often times, not utilized) by the school's leadership can create just as powerful messages as the narratives told about the school. Clark High markets itself as a "downtown" high school, making very clear that they aren't an urban school. For years, leaders have leveraged this nostalgic notion of downtown being the center of the city, which mythologizes the school's role in the birth of the city. In a very similar fashion, Smith High is defined by not only the present community that surrounds it, but also the historic neighborhood it sits in. Although demographics have changed several times in its history, Smith High is the beating heart of a beloved community with devoted residents, and its identity is forever intertwined with the identity of its cultured surroundings.

Butler High and Thomas High, on the other hand have struggled at the hands of their geography. Thomas was part of a struggling community that was torn apart by the racial tensions and desegregation of the 1960s. Families left the area in droves moving towards more affluent suburbs. With its dwindling population, the school not only lost students, but it also lost any chance of maintaining its once strong identity. Much like Thomas High, the area of Butler High does little to define the school. Many of the residents in the surrounding neighborhoods do not represent the student body of the school, culturally or socio-economically. The area does not contribute to Butler High's identity in the way that it used to, once again depriving the school of a binding connection to the larger community.

With each type of symbols outlined by Bolman and Deal, clear patterns emerge in how each of these school's identity and image are influenced by these representations. Clark High and Smith High have strong identities that are consistently communicated with clear symbolic representations. These schools have very different identities that articulate different organizational beliefs and values. Both, however, have leveraged their histories and buildings to establish heroes and heroines and traditions that clearly articulate what success looks like for its members. Clark High and Smith High use symbols to create a group consciousness and resolve any confusions, as Bormann's symbolic convergence theory suggests. Thomas High School's identity and image were also influenced by symbolic representations, but not ones that were thoughtfully cultivated by its leaders. From its conception, the leaders of Thomas High characterized their organization as an underdog that was constantly cast in other area high schools' shadows. This identity was not ever replaced, despite the school innovated programs and

extra-curricular/ athletic successes. With symbols that were either negative or outdated, Thomas High School was not able to withstand the tumultuous times and the barrage of negative press that they encountered in the 1960s. This sullied identity and image created an environment where members felt no pride for or connection to the school, thus leading them to easily withdraw their affiliation.

Meanwhile, Butler High School is approaching a proverbial fork in the road of its evolution. As a relatively young school, its staff and former students struggle to articulate its identity or the symbols that represent it. They do, however, express concern about their image. This perception of what others think about their school, and by proximity the members, will influence not only Butler High's identity but also their culture. This, as seen by Thomas High's cautionary tale, could have profound effects on the school's future. Butler High's youth, however, still offers an opportunity to build a strong identity by leveraging its strong sense of compassion and community. By engaging those attributes and consistently emphasizing its history with a wider variety of symbols of success, its leaders could cultivate a strong identity and thus provide an opportunity for its staff and students to experience a long successful future.

Conclusion

This study revealed that each of these schools, to some degree, has an identity and image that deepens over time. Albert and Whetten's (1985) three characteristics of organizational identity (clarity, distinctiveness, and durability) are all elements that were uncovered by the data collected in this study. If that identity, however, is not crafted, nurtured and propagated in an intentional way, a school could face a crisis. Every school

must have enduring and unique qualities that not only actively inform members of its values and beliefs, but also gives them a sense of who they are as members. Without an understanding of its identity and image, a school, as an organization, can fall victim to any strife that may come its way. Shifting from an unintentional identity to an intentional identity is best conducted proactively rather than as a reaction to a crisis (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p. 371). A school's identity and image are so intertwined with its organizational culture, one cannot flourish without the other. For these reasons, it is imperative that leaders understand their school's current identity and image, as well as how they can be intentionally shifted in a favorable direction that elevate members' pride in their school and subsequently, pride in themselves.

To shift its identity, a school must recognize that identity informs image and image informs identity. If members believe that outsiders are judging the organization favorably, not only is this perception created by a positive school identity, it will also, in turn, influence the identity of the organization. Moreover, image and identity are impacted by a school's culture, while also affecting it. If a school's identity is not reflected in the image members feel that outsiders see, the dissonance will create a schism that could have lasting effects on the organization's health (Hatch & Shultz, 2005; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Thomas High School, from its inception, was such a victim to its image that it couldn't sustain a positive identity when tested by difficult times. The culture of the building dissolved to match the community's image of it because it didn't have a positive foundational identity to ground it. Conversely, Clark High, less than a mile away from Thomas High, faced with similar societal turmoil in the 1960s and 1970s, was able to lean on its strong identity to maintain its image and culture. Similarly, the

inability of Butler High's membership to recognize and articulate its identity has impaired the school's ability to project a strong image to its surrounding community. In all three of these schools, it is clear how image and identity feed each other in a cyclical fashion. To create meaningful change to either identity or image, a school must tend to them concurrently. By comparing the answers to "Who do we think we are?" to "Who do they think we are?" a school can move to rectify the disparities and improve both its image and identity (Hatch & Shultz, 2005).

Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory demonstrates the sway that the identity/ image relationship can pose to not just to a school, but also its staff and students. Image is not necessarily a realistic snapshot of what the outside community thinks of an organization, but rather what the members perceive to be the opinions of others about their school. An organizational association, as dynamic as a school membership is powerful in shaping a student's impression of themselves and their efficacy. Tajfel's process of moving from "self-categorization" to "self-identification" is imposed on students who don't necessarily get to choose their association (ie the school they attend). According to Social Identity Theory and Organizational Identity Dynamics Model, when a school's image is poor, that image is adopted as the identity of the school and its members will begin to internalize the qualities of the organization. Clark High, Smith High, and Butler High alumni reported that they viewed their potential as innately tied to the identity and image of their schools. Enrollment waned profoundly at Thomas High because incoming students didn't want to be associated with its negative image. They didn't cite concerns over violence and disorder for choosing other schools. Rather they believed that colleges wouldn't feel that they were as prepared as other students from the area. To that accord, whether it's a

Clark High student who believed her fate aligned with the success stories hanging on the school walls, or a Butler student who felt trapped in box that nobody wanted to take the time open, even the most independent members are influenced by the perception of their high school. Neither an organization or its individual members can thrive when their communal identity and images are weak or negative. Attention must be paid to these abstract concepts because, while they do not come in the form of concrete school interventions, they can be just as critical to its success.

As leaders come to realize the importance of organization identity and image, they must take the necessary steps to align their identity and image to the mission of their school: discover, shape, and propagate. This first step of discovery is fundamental to the process. As previously mentioned, all schools have an identity and image, even if it is buried, undesirable, or a misrepresentation of the truth. Each school has shared beliefs and values that effect its culture. The organization must search deeply to understand how these beliefs are perceived by its staff and students. Schools, unlike other organizations, have members that didn't necessarily choose to join, but rather were assigned or placed based on geography and socio-economic status. This type of association will lend itself to a more authentic conversation about the identity of a school. Given the opportunity, the members of a school will offer a clearer, more honest vision of its current state. Formal leaders must lean on informal leaders, in the form of seasoned staff members and students, to not only provide inside member information, but also as influencers when new symbols are adopted in an effort to create a stronger identity and image. These "priests and priestesses," as well as the gossips that act as the unofficial messengers of an

organization, have great access to the ears and hearts of its members (Deal, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 2006).

Together these formal and informal building leaders need to parse through the values that are enduring and unique to the school and decide which need to be emphasized and which need to be transformed. It would be a fools' errand for a school to try to invent an entirely new identity for themselves. Instead, they should leverage the existing positive qualities of their organization to transform its less desirable qualities. Butler High should by no means shed the caring and nurturing values of their identity any more than Clark High should lower their academic expectations. This value of family and compassion will empower Butler High to strengthen their academic identity and image. To tear down a school's entire identity in an effort to recreate something that is foreign to its members will result in confusion and discord, which defies the very purpose of organizational identity. This misstep was clearly illustrated in Thomas High's attempt to reinvent itself in the 1970s and 1980s.

Once leaders have determined the fundamental qualities of their organization and established a desired identity to pursue, they must be intentional about the symbols that are used to communicate these institutional values. Some symbolic artifacts are already existing (or have existed at one point) and need to be resurrected or given more emphasis. Just as Clark High created the Purple Feather Day in the 1970s to celebrate its academic values, some new symbols need to be created to propagate the school's identity and image. Regardless of the origin, these symbols must be authentic and accepted by the membership. They cannot be imposed. Just as a school can't completely change who they are, unrepresentative symbols will be rejected.

Whether it be symbolic artifacts, stories, heroes, or traditions, they must reflect the organization's membership, if their meanings are to be accepted and emulated. An obvious example is Thomas High School displaying images of white "heroes" in a school that served a primarily Black population. Symbolic lapses, however, can be more subtle. For example, Butler High's discarding of traditions, in the name of school improvement or efficiency, were seen as insults to the positive aspects of its existing identity. While perhaps well-intentioned, this caused dissention and resentment among the members and confused them about the values of their school. Symbols should be built on the shoulders of existing successful symbols. The heroes, traditions, and artifacts must celebrate all that is good about the school and the potential that it has to be better (Hatch & Schulz, 2002; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). The symbols should be representative of the school's past, present, and future to provide guidance and inspiration to its members.

Once members of a school accept these symbolic representations of the school's aspirational identity, it is important to maintain them and share with new members. As leaders and members inevitably come and go through the years, it is important to pass along these symbols that reinforce the school's identity and image. This "chaining out" of symbols over time will strengthen the values and beliefs of the organization. This important task is the not job of one individual or small group of leaders (Bolman & Deal, 2006; Bormann, 1982). It is also the staff leaders and proud alumni who give meaning to the traditions, histories, heroes, and artifacts. They pass along the importance of the Sacred "C" in Clark High's entry way or the gathering every Friday night at a Smith High's stadium to support the school's athletes. Over times, these symbols become so deeply rooted in the identity of the school, their origins become a symbol, in of itself.

Considerations for Future Research

This study sought to understand the creation of identity and image in secondary schools and the impact that it has on the members of the school. Confined to three urban, public schools within the same community, this study opens the doors for further exploration of the topic by expanding the sample schools to include a variety of school types and locations. Furthermore, a quantitative approach could be combined with a qualitative approach employed in this study to create correlations between perceived school identity and image and its members' levels of achievement.

The exploration of school identity and image is a topic that is worthy of any leader who is developing a school improvement plan. Giving attention to these topics can only bolster the organization and strengthen the community it serves. By engaging stakeholders in the discovery and cultivation of a strong identity and working to create and perpetuate the symbols that clearly communicate that identity, leaders will not only transform the identity but also the school's image and culture. Subsequently, as this identity is brought to the forefront of the organization, not only will the image and culture shift, but also its members perceived self-efficacy. As any school leader can attest to, when self-efficacy is present, achievement is not far behind.

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