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**The X Factor: Generation X Leadership in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
American Community Colleges**

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**The X Factor: Generation X Leadership in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
American Community Colleges**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Kelly,  
and to my fantastic, energetic, and loving daughters, Natalie and Riley.

We all sacrificed time and energy so that I might better learn  
how to contribute to the world through improved leadership  
in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges.

You are the most supportive, loving family a person could hope  
to have, and I cherish every day we enjoy together.

Thank you for all you have done and the schedule you have  
endured to make this effort possible. You inspire me  
to want to make the world a better place and boost  
my energy and ambition to make it all happen.

I love you all so much- thank you for being my family.

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**The X Factor: Generation X Leadership in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
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A gap exists in the literature between generational studies and community college leadership studies. Concurrently, there is a wave of retirements occurring in American community colleges. The retirement phase is projected to continue, at least, throughout the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Thus, generational studies are becoming more and more pertinent to community college districts. Since the social age cohort commonly referred to as Generation X is at the appropriate age/experience/education level to fill many vacancies as elder peers retire, this study was focused on opening a dialogue about how Xers might like to lead or be led- and how those preferences are likely to fit with selected established and emerging leadership theories.

The goal of the research is to encourage conversation about successful integration of Xers into community college leadership roles. Therefore, the

qualitative study is best described as a window through which Xers might be viewed in the specific context of early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community college leadership. Generalization of the findings is left up to the reader to determine due to the structure, scope, and context of the study. However, clues did emerge that may be useful in understanding Generation X dynamics and possible implications of an Xer plurality in community colleges. A potential blueprint is offered for successful interaction with Xers combining knowledge from extensive Generation X literature review, a literary review of selected leadership theories, interviews with Xers identified as talented Generation X community college administrators, and the researcher's observations of Xers both within the study context and from a lifetime of experiences as an Xer.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction to the Study**

Eclectic (ek-lek`tik), *adj.* 1, selective; not following any one school of thought. 2, consisting of selections from various sources. (Webster, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1995).

### **BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

Amidst declining resources, demands for accountability and paradigmatic changes in education, a large percentage of experienced American community college administrators will be replaced by comparatively inexperienced educators. As this turnover occurs, Generation Xers (Xers), people born between approximately 1965 and 1979 (Torres-Gil, 1992), will likely grow to a plurality in both faculty and administration. Thus, it is logical for leaders to behave in a manner beneficial to Xers and considerate of other generations' needs. However, many Xers who have authored books and articles claim their generation's needs are largely misunderstood, and this lack of understanding often results in inappropriate leadership strategies.

Prior to the late 1990's, Xers were most often portrayed in literature and media by members of other generations. Several Generation X misconceptions arose as a result of such biased, external depictions (Minerd, 1999). Rather than the selfish, drifting slackers they were often described to be, Xers are often very resilient, ambitious and justifiably self-reliant (Brown, 1997; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Many Xers had to make major decisions at an early age

compared to previous generations (Holtz, 1995). Inclusiveness in decisions that affect them, then, is often paramount to Xers. Throughout childhood, many Xers were not only empowered in decisions, but were often the primary decision-maker in their own lives. Thus, rather than protest when dissatisfied with leadership, Xers often just go their own way as they have been conditioned to do. Literature review and comparison to selected leadership models and current trends indicate that time-specific, societal level Xer formative experiences facilitated the development of important themes prevalent among this maturing organizational interest group.

In this study, the social/age group commonly referred to as Generation X is defined; Generation Xer themes established through literature review are shared; and comparisons are made between Xer themes and selected leadership models. Some leadership approaches studied did appear to match Xer themes better than others, and a parallel was discovered with the Learning College concept popular in many early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges. Initial literature review findings were then compared to themes from interviews with a selected group of Xers identified by a supervising community college administrator as talented current and future American community college leaders. Interview data were compiled and analyzed with a qualitative approach and in a Constructivist/Interpretivist tradition to discover whether a group of top potential Xer community college leaders attempt to lead and/or like to be led in a manner

consistent with Xer themes apparent in the literature. Comparison is then presented to examine which selected leadership theories offer potential good fit for Xers. Finally, analysis is provided near the end of Chapter Five to consider Xer interaction with other generations at work.

It is not implied that every Xer will act, feel, or think consistently with all other group members or that all Xers will behave the same as community college leaders. Instead, apparent Xer themes described in literature were explored for meaning and potential application to community college leadership. Careful attention was given to avoiding stereotypes while discovering information about Xers as future community college leaders.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Since Xers are likely to numerically dominate American community college administration sometime in the early to mid 21<sup>st</sup> century, an accurate portrayal of Xer leadership needs and styles from an Xer paradigm is timely. Considerable current literature is available about community college leadership, about Generation X, and about generational differences. However, I have not found a study specifically linking community college leadership with the ramifications of an Xer plurality in community college administration, nor has there been a study examining Xer themes and possible relationship to how those themes might influence community college leadership or organizational climate.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How do Xers identified as top potential community college leaders describe their generation and Xer leadership needs in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges?
2. What leadership approaches work best with Xers in community colleges?
3. What is the correspondence between the leadership preferences of Xers and selected leadership theories?

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

The name “Generation X” was coined by Douglas Coupland as a book title; he used the name of Billy Idol’s 1970’s rock band, “Generation X” to assign a moniker to the generation following the Baby Boomers (Gozzi, 1995). Although no consensus exists on exact generational boundaries, Xers refers to the United States population cohort born between approximately 1965 and 1979 (Torres-Gil, 1992). Other authors such as Bradford and Raines (1992) proposed 1965 to 1975; and Strauss and Howe (1991) used 1961 to 1981. Researchers and the media have offered many other names including: Baby Busters, 13<sup>th</sup> Generation, New Lost Generation, Free Generation, and others. In addition to broad definition, Xers were also considered as an organizational stakeholder group. “An organization’s stakeholders are those groups within or outside the organization that have an interest in it [the organization].” (Robbins, 2000, p. 48).

Defining a socially constructed interest group may be considered problematic due to the many variables and inconsistencies that exist within any large, diverse group. However, studies and articles about American social/age groups known as generations abound. Although there is no standard generational characteristics measurement to define generations, members of any generational cohort share many common life experiences that help shape group members' worldview. "...a generation is... persons in the same age grouping ... experience social reality from the same perspective at crucial, formative times of their lives, thus providing them with an outlook particular to their generation." (Flory & Miller, 2000, p. 233-234). However inexact, generational studies do shed light on how an age cohort might develop generational themes.

Other generational cohorts referred to in this study include: Baby Boomers, defined as Americans born between 1946 and 1964; Millennials, those born between 1980 and 2000; the Silent Generation (or Traditionalists), born between the mid 1920's and mid 1940's; and the G. I. Generation born between 1900 and the mid 1920's.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methodology employed in this research endeavor was primarily qualitative research from a Constructivist/Interpretivist perspective combined with a historical review of the literature. This method was chosen because it

provided in-depth data about basic views and assumptions of Xers from their own perspective through interviews, direct observation and written documents (Patton, 1990). Extensive literature review of Generation X books, articles, and other studies was incorporated to provide comprehensive background information. Further literature review was focused on selected leadership approaches the researcher identified as relevant to the study. Selection of interviewees was purposive; twelve subjects from the state of Arizona, employed in American community colleges as administrators, were selected. They were identified by their college president, chancellor, or other supervising administrator as an Xer with strong leadership ability and/or potential. Prior to interviews, each interviewee was questioned to assure that a common definition of Xers was established and each interviewee identified himself or herself as an Xer. Although not statistically representative, subjects were selected to ensure male/female representation and an ethnically diverse group.

The method is appropriate for the research project, because the systematic, rigorous, and flexible data-gathering inquiry used was an evaluative effort to augment leadership effectiveness (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Future augmentations of leadership will be made possible through increased understanding of a group of Generation X leaders chosen from a population cohort interest group that is likely to maintain a plurality among American community college administration during much of the early to mid 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

During the next decade, many older Baby Boomers, along with most of the Silent Generation (also known as Traditionalists) will retire and be replaced in the workforce by Xers. Older Xers are concurrently coming of age with enough experience and training to advance into significant leadership positions. These Xers will join peers who already rode the high-tech train into high salary computer and technical careers. Therefore, understanding typical Xer views will help early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community college leaders relate to and positively work with an age cohort that, according to some researchers, is larger than the Baby Boom generation (Strauss and Howe, 1991).

This study will fill a gap that exists in the research literature between community college leadership and leadership for Generation X. It will provide data to increase American community college leaders' understanding of Generation X as the wave of faculty and administrative retirements coincides with holistic implementation of the Learning Paradigm and the professional maturation of Xers. It will also provide practical data about Generation X to encourage progress in productively leading and working with Xers.

## **ASSUMPTIONS**

Reader familiarity with current community college issues such as significant administrative turnover and the Learning College concept were



assumed. Thus, while these concepts were included in discussion, lengthy descriptions were not offered.

It was also assumed that Generation X is identifiable as a social/age group sharing many common experiences during formative years, enough so that typical Xer themes might be discovered. Additionally, it was assumed that the reader would acknowledge generational theme viability but avoid stereotyping Xers, and that the best way to understand a generational cohort is through group members' recent literature, experiences, and views.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Xers have begun to create literature describing their own generation in books, articles, and research papers, yet they are an eclectic generation often defying description. More diverse than previous American generations, the group is particularly difficult to describe comprehensively. The modern era in which Xers grew up included so much variety that individual Xers often developed varying worldviews amidst similar experiences. "The name Generation X seems anomalous but is oddly appropriate. "X" is, after all, the unknown quantity, and this generation has so far slyly eluded categorization... it seems that whatever one says about Generation X, one must immediately say just the opposite in the next breath." (Beaudoin, 1998, p. ix).

Further, generational themes cannot possibly include all age cohort members. Some Xers, particularly those near the cusp of the Baby Boomers or Millennials, identify more with the senior or junior group. Others simply do not identify with themes describing age-cohort peers. In either case, similar to ethnic identification or other socially and culturally determined groups, generational membership is partially self-defined and cannot be considered all-inclusive.

Extensive comparisons to other generational cohort norms were not included. Various persons from other generational groups might identify well with any of the Xer themes found in the literature. It is important to reiterate that this study was not intended to be all-inclusive or all-exclusive in any manner.

Likewise, leadership approaches incorporated in this study were not all-inclusive. Models for description and comparison to Xer themes were chosen purposefully; the approaches were selected primarily from educational literature related to American community colleges.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This research project, then, will provide a bridge between generational studies and leadership studies in the community college setting. As many American community college employees retire between 2000 and 2010, a large number of Generation Xers are likely to move into faculty, staff, and administrative positions. Thus, it is timely to open a dialogue about potential

implications of having a generational group other than Baby Boomers as the plurality social/age cohort interest group in community colleges.

Xer themes from both the literature review and interview data compared with selected leadership approaches affords an opportunity to begin theory development about which leadership approaches might best fit Generation Xers. For example, research results may raise questions regarding the popular Learning College paradigm and provide an examination of how Xers fit in the Learning College and other organizational cultures.

Although concrete generalizations would be inadvisable from this particular study, results should provide a window through which a group of Xers identified as leaders might be viewed. Community college administrators may use the research to better understand how Xers might view leadership, consider Xers as a viable organizational interest group, and better appreciate the diversity that exists between different social/age cohorts within community college faculty, staff, and administration.

Finally, since this initial research endeavor will demonstrate contextual meaning rather than provide concrete generalizations, groundwork will be laid for further research utilizing complementary quantitative data to augment initial, qualitative research. This project may initiate more questions than it provides answers. If this is the case, however, the research goal will be met; a new and important dialogue will open in community college leadership. Generational

cohorts will be viewed as viable organizational interest groups, and further study will be warranted to develop theories pertinent to successful leadership of Xers in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges.

## **Chapter Two: A Review of the Literature**

### **CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

Two bodies of literature were included in the study. The first includes selected leadership approaches from books, articles, and papers about leadership approaches and/or theories related to community college leadership and the Learning College paradigm. The second body of literature includes books, articles, and papers about Generation X, communicating with Xers, and Xers as an organizational interest group. Xer themes were then identified and compared to the selected leadership models.

### **SELECTED LEADERSHIP APPROACHES**

Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam (1990) reviewed four methods for understanding leadership: Trait Approach, Behavior Approach, Situational/Contingency Approach, and Power and Influence Approach. Each model is an attempt to understand and describe how leaders function effectively.

The Trait Approach included research to determine what natural traits separate effective leaders from others. However, the concept lost favor after use of the model yielded no concrete explanation of effective leadership traits. Instead, discovery of multiple variables led to further research on leadership behavior (Baker, Roueche & Gillett-Karam, 1990).

The Behavior Approach included thorough examination of leaders' behaviors in order to determine how effective leaders behaved differently than other leaders. Study of behaviors focused on both behaviors for task accomplishment and for relationship development (Baker, Roueche & Gillett-Karam, 1990). Robert Freed Bales' initial behavior measurement tool, the Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) categorized leadership behavior into making decisions for task leadership and the social function of keeping the group together. Many leadership behavior researchers concluded that leaders are effective with task management and social skills to varying degrees, but the most effective leaders are skilled in both areas.

Due to leadership/followership complexity and the inability of trait and behavior studies to fully explain leadership effectiveness dynamics, more complex leadership studies developed. The Situational/Contingency Approach includes a Path-Goal Theory (House & Mitchell, 1974; cited in Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam, 1990), that identifies four leadership behaviors and stresses the importance of contingency variables such as follower traits and external environmental factors. The identified leadership behaviors (directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented) will be used in later discussion as a model for comparison to Xer themes, as will Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam's similar descriptors (theorist, supporter, influencer, and achiever) used in the

Teaching As Leading Inventory (TALI); (Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam, 1990).

A fourth method to understand leadership developed- the Power and Influence Approach. Burns (1978, p. 12) stated, “Power is a *relationship* among persons.” He also described the importance of *purpose* within the power and influence of leadership. “I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations...*of both leaders and followers*...the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers’ values and motivations.” (Burns, 1978, p. 19). The power and influence model Burns described includes two primary leadership tactics, transactional leadership and transformational leadership.

Transactional leadership is a give and take process where positive rewards and negative consequences are given for actions and duties performed satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily by the follower. This approach fits under a power and influence paradigm, because the leader is in an inherent power position. The leader might achieve results by influencing the follower or directly exercising power through a negative consequence. However, according to Burns and other researchers, transactional process is only one form of power and influence.

Another power and influence leadership model is transformational leadership:

Transformational leadership is unique and has more distinguishable behaviors associated with its conceptualization. It builds on the human need for meaning, it creates institutional purpose, it involves vision and judgment, it involves values and the shaping of values in others, and it requires of the leader and the follower the ability to transcend their own limited views and perform beyond what is normally expected. Transformational leaders seek to arouse and satisfy higher needs in the follower, to engage the whole person of the follower (Baker, Roueche & Gillett-Karam, 1990, p. 38).

Transformational leadership, then, is a “both-and” scenario where leaders and followers connect, develop a joint mission, and then follow through to achieve goals that are set while maintaining a mutually inclusive relationship. Baker, Roueche & Gillett-Karam (1990, p. 39) continued, “A dynamic that involves continuous growth for both the follower and the leader is an essential feature of the model.” Thus, transformational leadership appears to be a model exemplified by the Learning College concept promoted by O’Banion, et al.

The learning-centered movement, as it relates to community colleges, proposes an overall student learning mission that is a paradigm shift away from the teacher-centered, instructional delivery mission embraced in the past. “The new paradigm says that community colleges are learning, not teaching, institutions. The mission is student learning. The most important people in the institution are the learners. Everyone else is there to facilitate and support student learning.” (Boggs, 1993, cited in O’Banion, 1997, p. 26). Learning Colleges create substantive change in learners; engage learners as partners; offer a variety



of learning options; promote collaborative learning; encourage learning facilitators to adapt to learner needs; and declare success only when learning improvement can be documented (O'Banion, 1997). Like Burns's transformational leadership model, the Learning College approach engages the learner (or follower) holistically as a partner and seeks to go beyond basic success to higher levels of motivation and goal attainment. "...the value of learning is not in its current popularity, but in its eternal ability to transform, inspire, and enlighten." (O'Banion & Milliron, 2001, p. 2).

Transformational leadership strategies employed in the Learning College approach are, at least, the current educational trend. At most, this paradigm centered on continual engagement with and adaptation to the learner, various situations, and environmental factors may replace educational traditions that developed over millennia. How these strategies might fit or conflict with Generation Xer themes is explored after a review of literature to discover Xer themes.

## **UNDERSTANDING GENERATION XERS**

Xers matured during unprecedented global and societal changes. "Today's young adults must make meaning in the midst of an intensifying personal and global complexity..." (Parks, 1986, p. xvii). Complexity and turmoil experienced during formative years had a lasting impact on the

generation. Throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, Xers watched many of society's time-honored institutions crumble (Liu, 1994; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). President Nixon resigned on television in disgrace, the vaunted United States military withdrew from Vietnam having neither achieved any discernable objective nor saved face, and the United States divorce rate skyrocketed (Holtz, 1995). Concurrently, Xers were bombarded with unrealistic advertisements, "For Generation Xers, the formal and political approach was too slick. Being raised on television, they saw countless ad campaigns that promised the world and delivered nothing... To a Generation Xer, feedback that's not straight talk is no more reliable than the ad for the Super Slice-O-Rama that was supposed to cut through wood but barely made it through a stick of butter." (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 260).

Beaudoin (1998, p. 46) succinctly captured the essence of Generation X: "We are a fashionable generation, constantly re-imagining each moment, assuming the future to be a chain of unending renegotiations of moments... slippage of context and historical amnesia are the fruits of a "culture of moments"; together, they shape our struggle to make meaning..." Throughout their formative years when Xers learned to make meaning, they experienced more family relocation than previous generations, economic downturn and extensive corporate downsizing, the ascendance of images over printed words due to technological advancement, and a more diverse, multicultural society (Flory &

Miller, 2000). These societal events helped create a unique formative experience for Xers, giving them a perspective markedly different than previous generations.

William Strauss and Neil Howe called Xers “The Thirteenth Generation” and theorized that a generational cycle exists in United States history. They traced generational groups back to the year 1584 and found a recurring pattern that similar-type generations follow in sequence: Idealists (like Baby Boomers), Reactives (like Xers who they call the 13<sup>th</sup> Generation), Civics (similar to the current, elder G. I. Generation- they also predict that Millennials following the Xers will be a Civic type), and Adaptives (most similar to the current Silent Generation, next-elders to Baby Boomers). They characterized Xers and similar Reactive generations as groups that typically distrust institutions and authority; are alienated by elder criticism; become skeptical and learn to rely on instinct and experience rather than principle; might do things (or seem to do things) just for the hell of it; and generally make their own way rather than follow established patterns. Strauss and Howe (1991) summarized their view of the Thirteenth Generation (Xers) born 1961-1981: “Hearing others declare everything too complex for yes-or-no answers, 13ers struggle to filter out noise, cut through rhetoric, and isolate the handful of practical truths that really matter.” (p. 322); “...America’s 1970’s era children went from a family culture of *My Three Sons* to one of *My Two Dads*...” (p. 329); (quoting Kenneth Keniston in 1977) “...The parent is usually a coordinator without voice or authority... moms and dads...

hardly ever have... the power to make others listen to them.” (p. 329); and “[Xers have]...grown up in an age of anti-institutional feeling... The president of MIT has likened the 13er civic attitude to that of the Lone Ranger: Do a good deed, leave a silver bullet, and move on.” (p. 333).

Such cavalier attitude might be partly attributed to the general decline in organization within individual families that many Xers experienced. Lack of a strong family structure left many Xers exposed to adult issues while they were still chronologically children. “[Xers]’ childhood experiences of poverty, latchkey independence, and divorced and “blended” families all hyper-accelerated the maturation process.” (Beaudoin, 1998, p. 8). A California sociologist noted, “They [Xers] are, in other words, a decade older than their parents were at the same stage in their lives. That they do it at all is perhaps a testament to their flexibility and resilience.” (Littwin, 1986, p. 17). This was, perhaps, the most positive statement Littwin made about Xers. She consistently characterized the generation as immature, drifting slackers primarily seeking freedom from responsibility.

Littwin’s opinion exemplifies generational differences. Since Xers behave differently than Baby Boomers, they are easily misunderstood by elders who expect continuing Boomer patterns. Unlike many Baby Boomers, who often protested loudly against societal inequities and governmental policies, Xers simply charted their own course- integrating various worldviews into their own

psyche and weaving together bits and pieces of various cultures, religions, and other perspectives. This independence allows Xers the freedom to dissolve old traditions when those traditions perpetuate injustices, demonstrate intolerance, or simply don't address contemporary needs. Xers are less interested in high ideals, big themes, and absolute truths- countering such concepts with a casual, "Yeah, whatever." (Liu, 1994, p. 182).

Similar misunderstandings arose around Xer religious views. Generation X has not embraced traditional, organized religious institutions like previous generations. "It is no mystery that the mainline denominational church has done a terrible job of holding on to these Gen X youth in the 1990's. There is an obvious clash of culture here- one more rigid and traditional, the other marked by innovation and progression." (Flory & Miller, 2000, p. 2).

Further delineating Xers from previous generations, succinct generational cohort comparisons were offered by Lancaster and Stillman in, When Generations Collide:

When Xers entered the workforce, most of us assumed they'd view the world of work the same way the Baby Boomers had and that our tried-and-true management methods would work just fine. That turned out to be painfully wrong. Generation Xers behaved differently from their predecessors, and the organizations that didn't take the time to get to know them are still paying the price in high turnover, low hiring rates, and poor morale (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 207).

Further contrasting generations, Lancaster and Stillman also stated:

While Traditionalists were characterized as being extremely *loyal* and Boomers *optimistic*, Xers have been marked by *skepticism*. They grew up seeing every major American institution called into question. From the presidency to the military to organized religion to corporate America, you name the institution and Xers can name the crime. Combine that with a U. S. divorce rate that *tripled* during the birth years of Generation X and you have a generation that distrusts the permanence of institutional and personal relationships. As a result, Xers tend to put more faith in themselves as individuals and less faith in the institutions that seem to have failed them time and again (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 25).

Therefore, Xers tend to have little faith in employer/employee contracts and agreements- relying instead on themselves rather than on the company to develop and sustain a career path. Where Boomers and Traditionalists were interested in job security, Xers want career security and seek to learn marketable skills rather than pay dues in order to move up slowly and securely; they abhor the concept of dues paying (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). This Xer trait often incites criticism from older generations that Xers have little capacity for loyalty. However, "...while Xers might not feel strong loyalty to an organization, they can be incredibly loyal to peers, managers, and co-workers." (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 249). Many Xers see themselves as highly and strategically independent rather than lacking loyalty.

Xers typically resent micromanagement and seemingly endless meetings. "...[Xers] struggle to understand why it's so important for someone to see them if

they are getting the work done satisfactorily. For Boomers, face time is a strategic tool, but Xers see it as a waste of time or... an attempt to kiss up to the boss for no reason.” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 114). Although Boomers often viewed this as lazy, many post-1995 authors noted that Xers simply have different work methods including two main work expectations: outputting creativity and getting the job done. Further differentiating Xers from Boomers, Flory & Miller (2000, p. 1) stated, “...this is Gen X. They may not be burning their bras or rallying in the streets, but they are leading a global information revolution, and they are doing it with style.”

The worldwide information revolution did not begin with Xers, but they grew up immersed in it. Fast paced changes and technology brought the world closer together, allowing unprecedented interaction between diverse peoples. Xers, then, interacted with a more diverse population and experienced a wide variety of ideas and people through music, television, movies, books, and the media than any previous generation. These events seem to have encouraged Xers’ acceptance of diverse worldviews. “Xers are a very tolerant group. They enjoy differences. Multiculturalism is in... while assimilation is out... the ethic of tolerance and acceptance is normative for many Xers.” (Flory & Miller, 2000, p. 7). Xers’ eclectic attitudes extend far beyond cultural issues. They enjoy diversity within organizational structure rather than rigid hierarchies. They seek to understand life through exploration and experience; they are open to multiple

worldviews, appreciating diverse people and ideas; they are comfortable with, expect, and even enjoy ambiguity; and they do not assume someone else is “right” just because that person or an institution says so. Xer skepticism was born of experience.

Since the generation grew up while society’s important institutions faltered, they became wary of trusting any institution as “right” or permanent (Minerd, 1999). Cohen (1993) agreed that Xers grew up with corrupt social institutions and headlines highlighting local and national scandals. “We grew up seeing too many businesses downsize or merge, and we learned that the last thing we could trust was the permanence of the workplace... by the time we hit the job market, the employer-employee contract was already out the window and Social Security was headed down the toilet.” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 5). Xers learned that if they did not take responsibility for their own needs, no one would (Lankard, 1995), and they learned to put trust in themselves before trust in others, particularly formal institutions.

Traditional hierarchies, then, face considerable Xer opposition. Suspicion of religious institutions, for example, is an extension of Xers’ general suspicion of societal institutions. “There are varying degrees of this irreverence among Xers, but essentially we tend to insert a large question mark after any religious idea, doctrine, or assumption that our elders have taken to be theologically certain...”



(Beaudoin, 1998, p. 179). Beaudoin also specifically linked Xer views of religion with a distaste for tradition:

*Tradition* is a word with which many Xers are uncomfortable, and for good reason. People with religious authority have abused tradition as a way of excluding dissent, solidifying “orthodoxy,” and protecting the “truth” from... counterattacks... When Xers complain about religious institutions, people often invoke religious tradition to dismiss their views and stifle further discussion (Beaudoin, 1998, p. 151).

“It’s still uncommon for younger generations to be seen as credible. Yet so often they are exactly the people executives and marketers are failing to listen to in their own workforce or among their own customer base.” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 43). Employers usually ignored Xer disenchantment with company hierarchies: “The attitude at traditional companies has been... the unspoken hope that Xers will somehow outgrow this antiestablishment stage and fall in line as they mature.” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 107). However, it does not appear that Xers will outgrow the typical attitude they have displayed toward institutions. It is not a matter of maturity but, rather, one of generational position compared to other cohorts and vast societal changes experienced collectively during formative years:

“We [Xers] then hit the 1980’s and suddenly these same latchkey kids who saw their parents spend more time at work than at home saw their parents get tossed out on the street by their company... Unlike their elders, skeptical Xers

have shied away from the idea that they are likely to remain with one employer throughout their careers. As a result, rewards geared toward permanence such as tenure and vesting tend to have less value for Xers.” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, pp. 84-85).

Instead, Xers are very independent, skeptical of societal institutions, and focused on stimulating, lifelong learning (Brown, 1997). Their skepticism runs deep, “More of us believe we will see a UFO than a social security check with our name on it.” (Seacrest, 1996), as does their independence, “He... felt that his perspective as a Generation Xer was valuable. He had no intention of doing things the way they had always been done.” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 248). They tend to have much less regard for positions, titles, and hierarchies. “...[Xers have] a strong belief that leadership can be found among ordinary people in the community regardless of their positions or levels of authority.” (Kouzes & Posner, 1999, p. 79). Experiences during their developmental years combined with irreverent independence leads Xers to make meaning within organizations on their own terms rather than through accepting traditional structures and paradigms or loudly protesting. Top-down administrative theories, such as those proposed by Fayol et al, encourage conformity that is contradictory to Xer themes.

Xers respond better to things they help create (Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, 1999). Since Xers did not create most large, contemporary institutions, they have become one of the most entrepreneurial groups in America, particularly

in high-tech industries. Xers also recognized the tremendous number of Baby Boomers just ahead of them on the corporate ladder (Holtz, 1995). They sought other ways to rise in their careers by being more geographically mobile and through independent ventures.

### **IDENTIFIED XER THEMES**

Considerable consensus appears in Generation X literature identifying several themes. While it would be unethical, even ridiculous to assume that all people who are called Xers or identify themselves as Xers are the same, themes do appear that reflect attitudes, beliefs, or views prevalent among many group members. Thus, to varying degrees (and acknowledging inevitable exceptions) Xers tend to exhibit the following themes:

- Flexible- Comfortable with ambiguity, Xers enjoy multitasking and variety in people, job duties, recreation, and life in general.
- Skeptical- Xers favor innovation over tradition, reject conformity, and are a tough sell with grand ideas or schemes that they have not helped develop. Xers are also skeptical of institutions, preferring to place their loyalty with people rather than organizations.
- Collaborative- Inclusiveness is paramount to Xers.

- Goal oriented- Xers are pragmatic and outcome focused rather than process focused.
- Technologically savvy- With notable exceptions due to lower socio-economic status and resulting lack of technological exposure, Xers are generally comfortable with technology.
- Intrepid and irreverent - Casual and self-sufficient, many Xers are independent enough to be daring.
- Mature/Immature- Many Xers grew up fast and independent, so they often perform beyond their chronological years. However, a dichotomy appears to exist, because many other Xers rejected the responsibility thrust upon them at an early age.

#### **XER THEMES COMPARED TO SELECTED LEADERSHIP MODELS**

Trait and behavior approaches to understanding Generation X leaders were, in a broad sense, incorporated throughout the Xer literature review. However, the goal was to learn *tendencies* rather than concretely identifiable traits and behaviors. Thus, the Xer themes described might be loosely considered as traits and behaviors. Ultimately though, similar to earlier trait or behavior research endeavors, Xer complexity and overall diversity of experience within the

generation did not allow inherent traits or specific behaviors to substantially explain complex leadership effectiveness dynamics.

The Situational/Contingency approach offers a more viable model for comparison to Xer themes. Similar explanations of leadership styles exist in House and Mitchell's Path-Goal Theory (directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership styles), and in Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam's Teaching as Leading model (theorist, supporter, influencer, and achiever).

Xer skepticism and independence make Directive leadership tactics less viable. The mature/immature dichotomy might also have bearing on directive approaches. Xers who embraced maturity and responsibility may handle directive leadership more effectively than those who rejected responsibility. Conversely, following a directive may be easier for someone who wants less responsibility, so it is unclear from literature review which sector of Generation X might better handle directive leadership. Additionally, Xer flexibility and love of variety make directive leadership less attractive; following orders does not leave much room for the variety one might experience with more self-direction. Ultimately, it appears that neither group of Xers would prefer directive style leadership.

Similarly, the Theorist style identified by Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam in the TALI would likely meet considerable Xer opposition. Skepticism and goal orientation, combined with Xer irreverence would create a sort of logjam

with theorist leaders. Xers' penchant for a pragmatic outcome focus leaves little time for the high ideals associated with theory. Literature also revealed that in addition to skeptical irreverence for high ideals and sweeping themes, Xers seek to differentiate from idealistic Baby Boomers. Leading Xers from a theoretical model would be an attempt to get Xers to act *more* like Baby Boomers rather than acknowledging their own generational identity.

The Supportive model identified in Path-Goal Theory and corresponding Supporter style used in the TALI present a somewhat better fit for many Xers. Though Xer skepticism and irreverence may be qualities that slow down the supportive process, other Xer themes match supportive behaviors. Collaborative and flexible, Xers would likely enjoy a supportive environment. Likewise, the intrepid style many Xers like to employ would complement a leader who enjoyed offering follower support, and less mature Xers may need considerable support for optimum achievement.

Participative leaders, however, are an even better fit for collaborative Xers. Since many Xers were responsible for decision making at an early age, inclusiveness in planning processes is critical to ensure Xer follow-through. Participation would also serve to negate Xer skepticism; it would be more difficult to criticize that which one helped create. Involvement in leadership planning and initiatives also reaches Xers at a deeper need level. Mature Xers who embraced decision-making and self-direction at an early age would thrive in

an environment that allows them to utilize their real-world savvy. Participative leadership also allows flexibility and variety; continual collaboration and growth; and may foster an outcome-oriented atmosphere. Thus, participative leadership models are a fantastic Xer fit.

The Influencer style described by Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam (1990), combining action orientation and others orientation, is also a great Xer fit. Generation X literature indicated that, though Xers do not respond well to directives, they might be influenced- particularly through inclusion in a participative process. Xers' goal orientation and fondness of collaboration are consistent with action orientation and others orientation. Similarly, Xers' proclivity for variety in people, multitasking ability, and comfort with ambiguity would allow an influential leader to stimulate creative Xers by exposing them to situations and ongoing training opportunities that would naturally lead to desired solutions.

Achievers (Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam, 1990) and analogous Achievement-oriented (Path Goal Theory) leaders might also meet with considerable success leading Xers. The intrepid, pragmatic, and goal oriented Xer attributes fit well with the action and task combination that achievement oriented leaders use. Xers' comfort with technology might also be utilized to focus on action and task completion efficiently. Conversely, a strong task orientation could present problems for flexibility-loving Xers.

Within the Situational/Contingency framework, then, an outstanding Xer leadership approach would likely be participative in nature. Xer themes would allow an influential model to work well, particularly if the influence is achieved through inclusiveness. Achievement oriented and supportive styles would, to a lesser degree, match Xer needs. On the contrary, directive and theoretical approaches used with Xers would probably have limited success.

The Power and Influence leadership model also presented a viable comparative structure. Both transactional and transformational leadership characteristics have some merit for leading Xers. Transformational leadership, however, far outshines transactional process as a better style for bringing out the best in Xers.

Transactional leadership has some value, but also has an overt problem when applied to Xer themes. The use of transactional give and take might be healthy for motivating Xers when the leader combines transactional strategy subtly in an attempt to influence. Conversely, Xers do not typically recognize hierarchical authority in the traditional sense. Xer skepticism and irreverence leave little room for “That’s the way it’s always been done...” explanations for top-down leadership strategies. Thus, exercising power directly as a negative consequence is likely to de-motivate Xers. Furthermore, continual overt use of power vested in a position or title is likely to facilitate development of an informal power structure operating within, and interfacing as necessary with, an



institutional hierarchy. The result would include at best passive resistance and, at worst, organizational chaos. A better leadership style matching Xer needs and themes is transformational leadership.

Xer need for inclusion matches the mutually inclusive connection transformational leaders establish with followers. Transformational leaders seek to engage followers holistically, and motivate (influence) them to transcend ordinary goals while achieving at a higher level. Thus, the model allows ample opportunity for outcome oriented Xers to: provide collaborative input; embrace creativity and innovation; use technological skills to increase efficiency and effectiveness; maintain continuing flexibility and variety; and frequently learn new skills.

Another reason transformational leadership appears to be a good Xer fit is that transformational leaders empower followers by developing a joint mission. “Interpersonal Mastery is the dynamic blending of personal power with synergy power to create value and contribution.” (Cashman, 1998, p. 107). Empowerment, a manifestation of the leader’s interpersonal mastery, is a natural technique that allows room for independence, diffuses skepticism, maintains flexibility, encourages use of mature Xers’ savvy, and promotes outcome orientation rather than a process focus. Additionally, “Flexibility is better [than using one leadership style], but few people can change their whole style, although they can change certain behaviors.” (Roueche & Baker, 1986, p. 40).

Transformational leaders continually learn and adapt with followers. “Because the emphasis of leadership and followership is on collective purpose and change, the factors that are stressed are those that unite and differentiate leaders and followers. Leaders may modify their leadership in recognition of followers’ preferences...” (Baker, Roueche & Gillett-Karam, 1990, p. 41). Xers are likely to appreciate adaptations, inclusion, and empowering transformational leadership. They may find congruence in the Learning College paradigm, a “... climate that encourages change. One way to create such a climate is to involve all college constituents in an assessment of current values, missions, programs, needs, processes, and structures.” (O’Banion, 1997, p. 230).

#### **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Xers are often and accurately described as eclectic. If they are viewed narrowly from any single point on the *Spectrum of Consciousness* (Wilbur, 1993), then misunderstanding and unrealized expectations are bound to occur. Instead, the group and their varied reality interpretations should be acknowledged as legitimate, albeit different from previous generations’ norms. Xers, similar to any generational cohort, represent a viable interest group. However, like other types of interest groups within organizations, Xers’ views are not always considered when developing or implementing theories.

“Pick up any of the large organization theory (OT) or organizational behaviour (OB) texts, turn to the index, and try to find any reference to race, ethnicity, class, or gender. Chances are you will find nothing.” (Mills & Simmons, 1999, p. 3). Even while noting important interest groups that merit consideration, Mills and Simmons neglected to mention generational cohorts. They continued on page 144-145 with a statement that made considerable sense although, again, they excluded generations from the list, “We need a theory of organizations that focuses on structure and personality, and on societal realities. This theory must incorporate issues of class, race, ethnicity, and gender [generational paradigmatic differences might be included here], be concerned with issues of micro and macro power structures...” Thus, Mills and Simmons proposed a sort of multicultural approach to organizations.

Generational understanding and acceptance is similar to multiculturalism. Each generation develops a unique culture within the larger macro-culture. While administrative theorists might attempt top-down structures and autocratic styles, Xer cultural indicators point to imminent difficulty during top-down implementation and autocratic day-to-day activities. “Although... control and unity of command have traditionally been uppermost in the minds of administrators considering reorganization, these are not always the only, or even the most useful, terms in which structures can be analyzed.” (Gortner, Mahler & Nicholson, 1997, p. 120).

Literature reviewed for this study revealed considerable consensus among generational researchers that Generation Xers view the workplace differently than previous generations. Consequently, a problem has been identified in applying many traditional organizational theories and leadership approaches to Generation X employees and supervisors. Xers will have considerable influence in American community colleges as they gradually replace Baby Boomers and become the largest generational group represented within the institutions. Self-Designing Bureaus, manifested in community colleges as the Learning College (learning-centered) paradigm are a potential, theoretical, Xer fit. These are:

...structures that are self-designing or that “learn” over time. The principle thesis is that organizational structures and technologies, or key operational parts of them, should evolve uniquely and impermanently in response to emerging knowledge of program development needs rather than in response to traditions or excessive needs for internal security and control. (Gortner, Mahler & Nicholson, 1997, p. 116).

If leaders choose not to embrace Xers with inclusion and continual learning, the Xers may just disregard top-down directives and generate their own informal structure that will interface with and operate successfully within the larger organizational framework.

Generation Xers typically accept impermanence, ambiguity, and ongoing learning as normal ways of life. These Xer views seem a natural fit in the educational paradigm shift to a learning-centered higher education mantra. The shift is a move from colleges that exist to provide instruction to institutions that

exist to produce learning; the Learning College also requires continual redesign to meet changing needs (O'Banion, 1997; Barr & Tagg, 1995). Kay McClenney (2001, p. 27) further explained the paradigm shift:

But the patterns of the past are unlikely to suffice as the pace of change accelerates, the challenges of leadership escalate, the faces of students and the nation become ever more diverse, and technology quite literally transforms the learning enterprise. It is important to preserve and support the very best of current "best practices" in leadership development; but it is also critical to promote "break the mold" thinking about new structures and approaches.

Xer themes that surfaced throughout the literature review indicate that Xers embrace change, diversity, and technology well and enjoy effective utilization of current best practices as well as innovative ideas. Thus, Xers appear to be a good fit for the Learning College concept. Xer maturation into leadership roles promoting the learning paradigm that embraces innovation and transition may also be timely. As Peter Drucker (1999, p. ix) stated, "...the major challenges of tomorrow... are not arising out of today. THEY ARE DIFFERENT. In most cases they are at odds and incompatible with what is accepted and successful today. We live in a period of PROFOUND TRANSITION." Profound transition is exactly what many Xers experienced individually and at a societal level throughout their formative years. Perhaps Xers' comfort with ambiguity and penchant for flexible innovation will serve them well as early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community college leaders.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

Chapter three includes a detailed description of the research methodology utilized in this study. An overview of why qualitative research was chosen is offered. Further discussion includes description of how the data was collected, analyzed, and reported. Participant recruitment strategies and procedures are shared, and interview protocols are outlined. Additionally, limitations specific to the research methodology are further delineated. A chapter summary concludes Chapter Three with a review of research goals and a description of how the methodology chosen meets those goals.

### **RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH METHODS**

Researchers beginning dissertation studies must not only choose a worthwhile topic but must also select an appropriate research methodology (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Characteristic qualitative research strengths include deep and detailed study of a particular research subject(s), openness to discover data, and derivation of meaning based upon overt data combined with more subtle nuances (Patton, 1990). Many researchers using qualitative methods do not intend or presume to be objective as is found in traditional quantitative research methods (Glesne, 1999). Instead, the qualitative researcher might choose to work from a Constructivist/Interpretivist approach and co-construct a

contextual truth or opinion as understood by the researcher and the subject(s). The “truth” is not a generalization. Rather, it is an agreement upon a contextual perception of reality as understood by the researcher and subject(s).

The method was appropriate, because broad knowledge was sought to make meaning of Generation X research and literary descriptions from an Xer perspective while comparing apparent Xer themes to selected leadership models and theories. Further, once those comparisons were made, additional qualitative research with the selected group of Generation X leaders working as community college administrators provided a specific, contextual application and a comparison model. Therefore, while literary references included both qualitative and quantitative data and provided a well-rounded information base, personal interviews and observations offered a comparison model and allowed contextual, practical meaning to surface. Thus, this study is a co-construction of reality based upon the researcher’s understanding of themes that emerged from compiling, analyzing, and comparing data from interviews, direct observations, and review of the literature.

#### **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

Three primary techniques are used to gather qualitative data: interviewing, participant observation, and collecting pertinent documents (Glesne, 1999). The researcher purposefully determines the extent to which each procedure is used (Patton, 1990), and makes no pretense of objectively extracting

himself from the research process. Instead, the qualitative researcher is quite immersed in this complex interaction and actually serves as the principal research instrument (Patton, 1990). Since, “Human behavior is complexly motivated.” (Wolcott, 2001, p. 76), immersion allows the qualitative researcher to interpret the complexity of any given research situation (Wolcott, 2001). Therefore, in order to determine the proper dissertation methodology, the researcher must acknowledge the intricacy of human interactions and decide if he or she is a willing participant in the research process. Once the research immersion decision has been affirmed, the researcher is free to finalize the topic, articulate the purpose of the study, develop specific research questions, and demarcate the specific approach she or he will use within the chosen methodology.

Multiple sources may be combined to increase validity of research findings (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Therefore, review of literature will be combined with direct observations and interviews to generate data, analyze the data, and report research results.

### **Interview Participant Recruitment**

Three community college districts were the primary agencies involved in this research project: Central Arizona College, the Pima County Community College District, and the Maricopa County Community College District. All three districts are located in Arizona. Interviews were generally conducted in a



professional office setting on campuses within the appropriate community college district.

Twelve participants (interviewees) were recruited by first approaching community college chancellors, presidents, and/or other key administrators and asking that he or she identify talented and/or potentially strong leaders within the organization's administrative team who are apparently members of Generation X and might be willing to participate in the study. Identified Xers were then contacted to explain the purpose of the study and determine three things:

1. Does that individual identify himself or herself as an Xer according to a mutually agreed upon definition including basic Xer themes in the literature identified and summarized by the researcher? Identified Xer themes from literature review are:

- Flexible- Comfortable with ambiguity, Xers enjoy multitasking and variety in people, job duties, recreation, and life in general.
- Skeptical- Xers favor innovation over tradition, reject conformity, and are a tough sell with grand ideas or schemes that they have not helped develop. Xers are also skeptical of institutions, preferring to place their loyalty with people rather than organizations.
- Collaborative- Inclusiveness is paramount to Xers.

- Goal oriented- Xers are pragmatic and outcome focused rather than process focused.
  - Technologically savvy- With notable exceptions due to lower socio-economic status and resulting lack of technological exposure, Xers are generally comfortable with technology.
  - Intrepid and irreverent - Casual and self-sufficient, many Xers are independent enough to be daring.
  - Mature/Immature- Many Xers grew up fast and independent, so they often perform beyond their chronological years. However, a dichotomy appears to exist, because many other Xers rejected the responsibility thrust upon them at an early age.
2. Is the potential participant willing to participate in the research as an interviewee?
  3. If the potential participant is willing to participate, when would it be possible to meet?

The interview consent form was then explained to those who expressed interested in participating.

Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions prior to consenting to the interview. The consent form was developed using The University of Texas at Austin template as a model. Research participants signed the form prior to the interview. A signed copy of the consent form was also provided to each participant for his or her personal records.

### **Interview Protocols**

Since the research method for the study was qualitative, participants were asked to complete a 2-3 hour personal interview and a follow-up 20 to 30 minute telephone call. The interviews were used to gather raw data (direct responses from interviewees) and subsequent telephone conversations were used to verify accuracy of any data interpretations made by the researcher. The interviews took place at a mutually agreed upon time and were generally conducted in a professional office setting- usually on a community college campus at the interviewee's place of employment.

Interview questions were open-ended and essentially asked the interviewee how she or he views Generation X; how the interviewee likes leaders to behave in the community college setting; and how the interviewee behaves as a leader in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges. Questions were structured to elicit two types of response:

1. One question is structured to determine how the interviewee describes his or her generation (Generation X) and how he or she feels/thinks Xers like to be led:

“From your perspective as a Generation Xer, please describe your generation and Xer leadership needs in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges.”

2. The second question was structured to determine what leadership strategies the interviewee believes work best to lead Xers when he or she is in a leadership role:

“What leadership approaches work best with Xers in community colleges?”

Participants were given the interview questions in writing prior to the interview and encouraged to provide an in-depth answer/dialogue on his or her views, beliefs, and/or opinions.

### **Participant Observation**

Interviewees were also observed immediately prior to, during, and just after the interview. Additionally, observations were made of others who interact with each interviewee in the workplace environment. The researcher compared observations to previous interactions with Xers in American community colleges.

Observation techniques were utilized primarily in an indirect fashion; that is, observations were used triangularly to verify or contradict data gathered through interviews and literature review rather than as a primary data-gathering tool.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING**

Other decisions face the qualitative researcher. First person and third person writing styles were described as acceptable in ample literary references about various qualitative research tactics, and the researcher must decide which is appropriate when writing research results. Additional decisions must be made about how to analyze data. Boeree (1998) described two distinct ways of handling and analyzing qualitative data. ‘Cool analysis’ is more technical and objective while ‘warm analysis’ uses empathy to connect the researcher and subject(s). The following qualitative dissertations contained clear information about how to identify, develop, and structure qualitative inquiry: “Before making methodological decisions, a researcher must first (a) develop a complete understanding of the study’s purpose, (b) determine the research questions to be addressed, and (c) determine the availability of research resources.” (Ely, 2000, p. 115). “Qualitative methods attempt to develop a body of knowledge unique to an individual subject or phenomenon. There is no search for generalizations or cause-effect relationships, but rather a search for meaning.” (Perez-Greene, 1993, p. 98).

Perez-Greene also referred to “elite” interviews as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), as those “performed with key participants of special status for the purpose of eliciting a particular subject for in-depth understanding.” (Perez-Greene, 1993, p. 105). Warm analysis, then, will be used with a select group of Generation X administrators to develop an in-depth understanding of how they view leadership in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges.

### **Validation Processes**

Another question that arose through research of qualitative methods was that of reliability. How do qualitative researchers determine that their research is reliable? Many qualitative studies “...used multiple sources to generate and confirm data.” (de los Santos, 1997). Yin (1994) used multiple steps and encouraged other researchers to conduct qualitative research as if someone is constantly watching you. Other qualitative research authorities noted that qualitative research is interpretive and multi-method (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln discussed reliability while still using the researcher as the primary research instrument, because the resulting report is a co-construction based upon immersion in and interpretation of the data. Since qualitative evaluation is as much art as science (Chronbach, 1982) and, “There are no rigid rules that can be provided for making data-collection and methods decisions in evaluation.” (Patton, 1990, p. 13), literature about research methodology was

broadly examined and recommendations for successful research were closely followed.

The methodology used for this study, then, included historical literature review with particular focus on four approaches to understanding leadership and on post-1995 Generation X literature. Multiple sources were compared to determine a contextual reality. I incorporated experience as an Xer with observations of other Xers to enhance the literature analysis and compare Xer themes to the leadership approaches and the Learning College concept. Initial summary identifying Xer themes in the literature were then compared to qualitative interview data themes to discover meaning and co-construct a contextual reality as perceived by the researcher and subjects. Thus, findings were assembled in a Constructivist/Interpretivist framework where the ontology includes an external reality, but primary importance was placed upon "...how individuals experience, perceive, understand, make meaning of the same "reality" in many different ways." (James Scheurich, personal communication, June 2001). Jinkins and Jinkins (1998, p. 193) echoed, "Reality, however, is not simply an objective box into which we fit ourselves. Reality, in some sense, is shaped by our perception." In order to ensure the reliability of an agreed-upon contextual reality, member checks were conducted with interviewees to validate interview data interpretations.

## **METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS**

The following methodological limitations are acknowledged within this study:

1. As both a Generation Xer and a community college employee with experience in various leadership roles, inherent biases were likely present in the primary research instrument- the researcher. This factor could have impacted how findings were generated, interpreted, and reported.
2. The group of interviewees consists of only twelve individuals living in one geographic area and, thus, is limited in the number of participants- all of whom may be affected by local and statewide issues not prevalent or impactful nationally.
3. Utilizing supervising administrators to nominate potential interviewees may increase the likelihood that people nominated would share and demonstrate leadership views similar to the administrators who nominated them rather than reflect Generation Xer views.
4. Audio taping and note taking during interviews may have distracted interviewees or otherwise influenced their behavior and/or responses.
5. Generation Xer observation was integrated from a lifelong process of interacting with Xers and viewing the generation from the inside out. While this may be viewed as a great strength of the study, it resulted in



less importance placed upon extensive observation of the interviewees- thus limiting the study to more reliance on interview data and literature review.

#### **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

A researcher's decision about conducting qualitative or quantitative research hinges upon three basic things: the researcher's preference for and compatibility with either approach; the research topic itself; and the research goal. Since I prefer inductive rather than deductive thinking, qualitative research is a natural fit. The proposed topic is compatible with either qualitative or quantitative methods. Qualitative research from a Constructivist/Interpretivist perspective is preferred, however, largely due to the research goal; the study was structured to gain knowledge unique to a specific group in a specific context. The research is a search for meaning rather than an attempt to generalize or determine a concrete cause-effect relationship.

Broad generalizations might be offered through a Positivist approach, and other research reports may be socially constructed opinions as found in Post-Modernist writings. However, co-constructed, contextual truths- those unique to a specific time, place, and circumstance- may legitimately be developed through quality research and reliability checks. In addition, these contextual truths are key to discovering the meaning about how a group of Xers perceive their own

generation, how they identify with themes ascribed to Generation X in the literature, and what clues they might offer about successfully leading Xers. The study was not structured to comprehensively generalize about Generation X. Rather, it was formed to provide a window into how some respected Xer leaders view leadership compared to Xer themes apparent in the literature and to stimulate dialogue about how to most successfully interact with and lead Xers.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first three chapters included an introduction to the study, a review of the literature, and a detailed description of the research methodology utilized to complete research. The fourth chapter includes study findings, beginning with an overview of the study. Since the dissertation is a qualitative study using a Constructivist/Interpretivist approach, understanding the research context is vital to comprehending the meaning developed collaboratively by the researcher and the study participants. Therefore, an in-depth description of the study context is offered to augment understanding of the findings. Study findings are then presented in four sections: overall Generation X themes identified by study participants; themes of Xer leadership needs generated by analyzing interview data; specific leadership approaches or strategies the interviewees agreed work well with Xers; and a description of other significant views expressed during interviews. Chapter Four is concluded with a brief chapter summary.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

Leaders at the three participating community college districts were contacted to solicit recommendations for potential interviewees who meet the study criteria of working in a community college administrative position, having ability or potential for being a good leader, and apparently having a birth year

between 1965 and 1979. One district chief executive officer asked for clarification of the definition used for administrator. Clarification was provided to all three districts so a common definition of administrator would be established; an administrator is a term defined in the study as an employee within the community college district that has supervisory responsibility. All participating districts provided contact information for potential study participants.

### **Participant Screening and Selection**

Potential interviewees were then contacted via telephone with care taken to have both male and female representation and as ethnically/culturally diverse group as possible. After a brief introduction describing the dissertation, each potential participant was asked if she or he had time to dialogue about the criteria for inclusion in the study. Upon acceptance of the offer to continue conversation, participant screening began with an affirmation of the person's birth year to ensure that the initial age criterion was met. All potential interviewees screened met the age requirement. Subsequent conversation included a description of Generation X themes common among literary references and identified previously in Chapter Two. Potential interviewees were then asked if he or she self-identified as an Xer based upon general congruence with the basic Xer themes from the literature.

Two potential interviewees were screened out- one based upon non-identification with the Xer description and one who did agree to participate but could not commit to an interview until late spring 2003. Possible risks for participation were then explained to those fitting the study criteria, as well as steps that would be taken to minimize risks. The research participation consent form was explained, and then the screening process was completed with a request for participation from those meeting all study criteria. After obtaining full contact information, a packet was sent to each participant that included the following: the interview questions; a memo providing further explanation and comprehensive contact information for the researcher; two copies of the research participation consent form; and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return of one signed consent form.

The consent forms were all signed by participants and returned, and all interviews were scheduled and completed between January 16 and February 7, 2003. Interviews were ninety minutes to three hours in length. Follow-up telephone calls lasting 15 to 30 minutes were made with participants during the data analysis and coding process to ensure interpretation accuracy and also to ask follow-up questions. Each participant was randomly assigned a number that was subsequently used for participant identification throughout data analysis and coding.

### **Qualitative Analysis: Coding the Data**

Data were then coded utilizing an Excel spreadsheet to begin sorting themes expressed by interviewees. Interviewee comments were categorized into numerous columns. Participant numbers were noted under each column indicating that the interviewee response was applicable under the column heading. An asterisk or, in some cases, multiple asterisks were added next to the participant number under column headings where the interviewee either strongly expressed congruence or stated congruence several times during the interview and/or follow-up telephone conversation.

Each topic that was delineated during data analysis and assigned to a column was put onto an individual piece of paper. Topics were then compared for similarities and arranged thematically. The same data analysis process was used for overall Generation X themes described by interviewees; themes about Xer leadership needs expressed by study participants; and specific leadership approaches and strategies recommended during the interviews. Other significant views expressed during the interviews (those described in depth but not expressed by enough interviewees to constitute a theme) were analyzed separately through extensive review of interview data and exploration for meaning and research application. Results of the analysis were then written in a description of the study context and research findings. Additionally, throughout data analysis and writing

chapters four and five, the researcher continued review of interview audiotapes while commuting two hours round trip to work each day for two months.

## **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

Twelve early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community college administrators working in a variety of administrative positions participated in the interviews. Interviewees were employed in one of three Arizona community college districts: Central Arizona College, Maricopa County Community College District, or Pima County Community College District. The interviewees had varying levels of administrative experience both within and outside of community colleges, as well as other work experience- also within and outside of the community college setting. Questions asked and conversation before, during, and after the interviews helped ensure male/female representation and a diverse group in terms of ethnicity or culture, socio-economic status during childhood and formative years, geographic background, religion, as well as representation from both rural and urban/suburban perspectives.

### **Characteristics of Interviewees**

The potential interviewee pool recommended by top administrators at the three participating community college districts included 64% female and 36% male administrators. Interviews conducted closely mirrored the potential

interviewee pool with 67% of the participants being female and 33% being male. Birth years of interviewees ranged from 1965-1972. Ethnic or cultural groups represented from self-identification by participants included: Anglo American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American. The socio-economic status of interviewees' families during childhood and formative years included approximately equal representation from lower class, lower middle class, middle class, and upper middle class. There were no participants who described their family of origin as very wealthy or upper class. Although study participants are now all living and working in Arizona, geographic diversity abounded. Various interviewees spent considerable time living in fourteen different states including Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, the West Coast, the Midwest, the East Coast, the Southeast, the Deep South, and several in the Southwest. Additionally, though all interviewees spent most of their childhood and formative years in the United States, two study participants were born outside the United States. One other interviewee spent time as an adult living in Europe and Central America. Finally, diverse religious or spiritual views were represented, and participants had lived or were living in various rural, urban, and suburban settings.

### **Characteristics of Interview Responses**

Participants varied in their response style to the interview questions. Typically, the interviewees were very open and willing to share both broad and



deep thoughts about Generation X, leadership needs of Xers, and specific leadership strategies that they feel work well with Xers. Responses either followed a theme common among most study participants or consisted of a more unique and sometimes in-depth perspective. Some interviewees spoke at a more personal level about experiences particular to their own life and then related those experiences to Generation X as a whole. Others painted with broader strokes first and spoke more about tendencies they noticed among social-age cohort peers; then they related those themes back to their own experiences. In either case, all twelve interviewees shared personal experiences and examples along with more general descriptions of Xer themes and/or tendencies.

### **Thematic Responses**

Themes described in the findings were prevalent in all twelve interviews. However, study participants appeared to have varying levels of importance assigned to the themes. For example, one interviewee may have spent twenty minutes or more talking about her or his view of diversity and how Xers view diversity while another may have spent only five minutes offering comment on the same topic. Time spent on any given topic appeared to relate to personal experiences, beliefs, or convictions; current relevance in the workplace; or a combination of these factors. Comment is offered during the report of findings to

demonstrate the level of intensity or reiteration of a theme within specific interviews and, holistically, throughout the twelve conversations.

### **Unique Perspectives**

Some participants offered considerable comment on a view or perspective unique to that one participant or just a few interviewees. Though not included by enough of the participants to constitute a common theme, some of these perspectives greatly enrich the meaning of the data and, thus, are included under a separate heading in Chapter Four as well as referred to as needed in Chapter Five.

### **FINDINGS**

Research findings from the twelve interviews are reported under four headings: Generation X Themes Identified by Interviewees; Xer Leadership Needs- Themes from Interview Data; Recommended Leadership Approaches/Strategies for Xers; and Other Significant Views Expressed. The first three headings include subheadings for each identified theme pertinent to the main heading. The fourth section is devoted to more in-depth exploration of meaning derived from the unique perspectives offered that appear to hold significant theories.

## **GENERATION X THEMES IDENTIFIED BY INTERVIEWEES**

The following themes were prevalent among views expressed by the twelve interview participants when they described Generation X:

1. Definitive distinction from previous generations
2. Flexibility, adaptation, and internal change orientation
3. Immediacy and pay for performance
4. Embracing diversity, choices, and freedom (Eclectic X)
5. Learning-centered, experimental journey through life
6. Career security orientation instead of job security focus
7. Pragmatic go-getters, not afraid of risk
8. Resilient and always proving worth

A detailed description of each overall Generation X theme as identified by interviewees follows with a section devoted to each theme.

### **Generation X Theme #1: Definitive Distinction from Previous Generations**

Ten of the twelve Xers interviewed described distinct generational differences that they perceive between Generation Xers and other generational groups, and six of the ten that identified this theme either felt very strongly about it or referred to the generational distinction repeatedly. One study participant

declared that the difference between Xers and older generations is like a “Barnaby Jones culture versus an MTV culture.” Additionally, while making the generational distinction, three interviewees also described a definitive peculiarity that they perceive within Generation X. They commented that Generation X has a unique separation, or incongruence, between behavior of professional Xers in community colleges compared to service level employees. Further, contrast was offered with older generational groups where the interviewees perceived Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation as being more congruent within each generation regarding professionals and service level employees. One interviewee in particular expanded upon this concept, and further exploration is offered in subsequent sections.

## **Generation X Theme #2: Flexibility, Adaptation, and Internal Change**

### **Orientation**

Ten of the twelve interviewees portrayed Xers as having an internal orientation to change, and six of the ten expressed this opinion very strongly. Eight went on to say that Xers tend to be adaptable and/or quick to adapt, with five expressing this view powerfully. Nine interview participants (and four strongly) suggested that Xers communicate rapidly and with great flexibility through a media-influenced, imagery-oriented communication style. Additionally, ten interviewees (four intensely) stated that Xers favor innovation

and dislike a focus on tradition. Finally, four participants said that Xers tend to have a short attention span.

One interviewee remarked, “Xers are adaptable. We have a chameleon effect... bosses need to know this. We adapt to the needs of our surroundings... if I have to meet with people in charcoal suits, white shirts, and ties- then I dress accordingly. The rest of the time I dress however I want.” Other Xers interviewed expressed similar ideas about their orientation to change. Most viewed the changing, chameleon effect as a natural and internalized way of being inherent in many Xers. Interviewees who addressed this notion appeared okay with the chameleon style, though some said that they think older generations do not know how to take this and may perceive Xers as indecisive or even wishy-washy.

Xers, however, view constant change as a given. One interviewee explained, “There has never been a time in my life that didn’t have constant change. I am bored without change.” The Xer internal orientation to change may be just one component of a larger internal versus external orientation dynamic that distinguishes Generation X from previous generational cohorts. Further exploration of this point is included toward the end of Chapter Four and in Chapter Five.

### **Generation X Theme #3: Immediacy and Pay for Performance**

Ten of twelve interviewees highlighted an Xer need for immediacy and immediate gratification. One older Xer particularly noted this difference between Xers and Baby Boomers. Contrary to many of the earlier (pre-1995) writings about Xers, study participants did not attribute this to a lack of maturity in most cases. Rather, they described how Xers matured during such societal and personal change, progress, and choice that (regardless of overall maturity level) Xers have simply been conditioned to respond to and seek out immediate gratification.

Regarding careers, then, seven study participants noted that Xers do not and will not pay dues within an organization like previous generations have done- nor should those elder generational cohort members expect Xers to follow the dues-paying precedent. Two interviewees that commented on this topic, in particular, stressed a relationship between paying dues and an overall Xer need for obtaining pay for performance rather than the traditional pay for tenure or experience.

Nine interviewees described the pragmatic and entrepreneurial aspects of Xers and how those characteristics translate into a need of pay for performance. According to the interviewees, Xers most often view the working world as an opportunity to make a value-add contribution. And, if a person is able to add more value- regardless of tenure or experience- then that person should logically

be paid according to how much contribution they make. The six participants who highlighted or continually included this conversation throughout the interview further explained that they feel an acute generational gap between Xers and the older generations who they see as more job-security focused instead of performance minded. A few went on to say that, if they were not paid for performance, they would stay in the current career field to gain experience and then simply move on to something more interesting, more challenging, and with a justifiable financial return for their time investment.

Finally, as a sort of subset discussion about dues paying, some of the Xers interviewed offered comments on the topic of “face time”. They stated that Xers often view face time as a needless waste of time that could be spent more productively solving problems and challenges or getting rest and relaxation- so that they would be sharper and more productive during regular work duties. A few further contrasted Xers to Baby Boomers in particular, who they described as simply less competent if it took that much time to do a job that Xers could do more efficiently.

#### **Generation X Theme #4: Embracing Diversity, Choices, and Freedom (Eclectic X)**

All twelve interviewees indicated a belief that Xers are more accepting of diversity than previous generational cohorts. Moreover, eleven depicted Xers as

people who typically embrace and enjoy diversity in people, culture, music, religion, and life in general. Seven study participants expressed strong opinions supporting the notion that Xers embrace *diverse forms* of diversity in a continual lifelong journey that is all about the experience- a true integration of the saying, “Life’s a journey- not a destination.” One Xer interviewed said, “Xers value diversity. We want it in our work and our lives... all forms of diversity... but older generations just don’t get it. They don’t understand Xer views of diversity.”

Ten interviewees (four strongly and repeatedly) described Xers as people that are eclectic in nature and draw upon multiple sources to create reality and meaning. On the experiential journey of life, one said, “It’s all good... I just want to try everything new... like the newest restaurant in town or a new song on the radio.” Further, all twelve consistently extended appreciation of diversity to the workplace and extolled the virtues of a team environment with broad-based input.

Dialogue about Xers embracing diversity often led to conversation during interviews about Xers’ love of freedom and choices. Eight interviewees depicted Xers as people that highly value freedom and the freedom to make choices. Four study participants, in particular, offered compelling explanations highlighting Xer experiences during formative years. They explained that, as Xers growing up, they had literally gone from rotary dial telephones to cell phones and high speed Internet; from three or four television channels to hundreds of options; from two restaurants in town to an affordable selection of eclectic cuisine options; from



radio stations that played only one kind of music to current stations offering variety formats; and from religious upbringings that celebrated teaching of the “right” beliefs to more eclectic views of spirituality woven together by exploring multiple worldviews.

Thus, Xers tend not to recall the “good old days” but, instead, think of the past largely as an inconvenient time when their options were limited and frustrating. One interviewee said, “... I like being in my thirties... growing older is a good thing for me, because it has empowered me to do what I want, when I want. Now I have the resources to make my own choices... this is different from older generations where people seemed to hate getting older or reaching milestone birthdays.” In contrast to previous generations, many Xers grew up with considerably more time spent being responsible for themselves and sometimes others. Therefore, the Xers interviewed characterized generational cohort peers as people that often accept, expect, and enjoy the responsibility that comes with freedom- particularly those in professional careers.

### **Generation X Theme #5: Learning-Centered, Experimental Journey Through Life**

All study participants characterized Xers as learning-centered, and six placed very strong emphasis on the learning-centered theme. Nine interviewees further expanded upon the notion with comments about an adventurous,

experiential aspect they perceive in Xers. Five of the nine who spent time describing this adventurous nature accented the concept with stories about how Xers often see life as a grand adventure- a learning journey that is all about the experiences a person can live and the learning that takes place continually. Said one study participant, "... [Xers want to] have an experience and get some experience." Seven study participants (four with much emphasis) went on to express conceptualizations of this learning-centered adventure as one where experimental learning is highly valued.

The aforementioned concepts were interwoven, and often related directly to discussion about Xers working in community colleges. Interviewees described Xers at work in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges as people who seek out learning opportunities in both formal and informal settings. One interviewee stated, "Xers like to learn broadly. They like cross-training and lots of it." Mentoring was a term referred to often as a good fit for the continual learning need prevalent in Xers. Additional comments about Xer learning-centeredness are included later in Chapters Four and Five.

## **Generation X Theme #6: Career Security Orientation Instead of Job**

### **Security Focus**

Ten interviewees (five ardently) spent time contrasting Xer needs for career security with Baby Boomer and Silent Generation needs for job security.

Eight (four continually) referred to Xers as very mobile- people with portable careers where the safety net is not maintained by slowly climbing the ladder within an organization, but is instead maintained by continual learning and broad-based career development. Xers that commented on this topic placed more value in developing and broadening tangible skills to ensure career safety in a potentially volatile market and economy-driven career world than in relying on an institutional relationship. They depicted job security as more of a fantasy belief among older generations who had matured during a time of expansion and opportunity versus Xer maturation during a time of economic strife, downsizing, and upheaval as the country moved from industry to information and technology. One interviewee commenting on job security said that older generations view hierarchical positions (like a dean's position) as the "Ultimate Chair" that they have spent their life working for and waiting to get into. By contrast, Xers place little value in the "Ultimate Chair" concept, because they see virtually all "chairs" that one might occupy as transitory.

Further conversation highlighted how fast skills become outdated. Xers, according to the interviewees, view specializing too much or too long in one career, job, position, or skill as *dangerous*. For example, one interviewee expressed embarrassment at having been in one career position for over seven years. The Xer felt that peers were learning, growing, and moving forward while stagnation was a personal career pitfall beginning to happen. Summarizing this

line of thought, the same study participant said, "...we [Xers] connect, make a moment, do great things, and leave a self-sustaining legacy."

Half of the interviewees mentioned an entrepreneurial nature common among Xers. They described it as a natural phenomenon that developed due to a combination of opportunity during a rapidly changing technology-based economy and necessity due to an overabundance of educated and experienced Baby Boomers just ahead of Xers on the career ladder. Rather than believe in or focus on job security possibilities, Xers are more inclined to relish the adventure and experience gained through entrepreneurial ventures that offer instant empowerment, self-reliance, and upward mobility.

#### **Generation X Theme #7: Pragmatic Go-Getters, Not Afraid of Risk**

Seven study participants identified Xers as risk-takers, and eight (four strongly) added comments that Xers tend to be pragmatic, solution-focused go-getters. Seven interviewees called Xers fearless, while nine said Xers are independent. Additionally, five people described Xers as having a "nothing to lose" attitude.

Most Xer descriptions of this theme included conversation about why the interviewee views Xers as pragmatic, solution-focused people that are not afraid to take risks independently. The aforementioned economic climate coincided with an upbringing that often rewarded Xers for independence and responsibility

to create a generational theme. Achieving success to Xers entails thinking quickly on one's feet, responding to a multitude of challenges simultaneously (many of which the Xer has not had experience handling), and focusing on rapid resolution of the problem at hand so ready response to the next challenge can be assured. This rapid, "think and act on the fly" approach was a point of distinction interviewees used to clarify generational boundaries between Xers and older generations.

In general, interviewees appeared to have a consensus that Xers are often mistaken as being reckless by elder supervisors, peers, and subordinates. Contrasts were offered expressing exasperation that Baby Boomers and Traditionalists move slowly and often waste valuable time that would be better spent addressing the next challenge or taking time off to revitalize one's energy in preparation for the next challenge.

An underlying, internal change orientation common among Xers also appears to be a relevant factor differentiating Xers from older generations who plan and prepare for change more externally. Xers interviewed expressed comfort with the fast pace associated with change and described their contentment in ambiguity almost as something they didn't know how not to do. One interviewee stated, "Boomers did not go through the changes [during formative years] that I've gone through." Instead, Baby Boomers were already established as adults during much of the technological advancements leading to the Information Age.

Baby Boomers came of age during a time when people were expected to thoroughly learn new concepts, products, and procedures; one interviewee said, "...they [Baby Boomers] have a need to learn it all before they implement." Conversely, Xers came of age during a time when it was rarely possible to learn things thoroughly prior to implementation, so Xers do not typically think it is possible to fully learn things. They are more likely to view such tactics as a waste of time. Further examination of this particular generation gap is offered throughout Chapters Four and Five.

#### **Generation X Theme #8: Resilient and Always Proving Worth**

A resilient, survivor mentality was characterized as common among Xers by nine study participants. Eight (three fervently) went on to describe Xers as constantly needing and wanting to prove worth. This theme is, perhaps, related to the previous theme. One way interviewees explained the perceived generational need of resiliency and proving worth was that Xers boost self-worth (and prove worth to others) by handling tough challenges efficiently. Since Xers came of age in a world where few challenges are mastered for long, the interviewees shared thoughts about Xer worth being tied directly to efficient, effective responses as challenges arise rather than long-term answers that require further attention and maintenance. In other words, where Baby Boomers idealistically solve problems and plan to maintain the solution to demonstrate worth, Xers tend to view such

endeavors as largely irrelevant or even impossible. The Xer goal is to demonstrate worth by resolving challenges pragmatically with self-sustaining solutions. Thus, the legacy of an Xer's work is efficient mastery of problematic puzzles where the solution or resulting structure is self-sustaining and flexible enough to adapt for future needs.

Solving tough problems with self-sustaining solutions is part of the Xer safety net. Said one interviewee, "Xers don't take safety for granted. I have to [continually] demonstrate competence... there is a lack of a support structure to hold me up if I fall. Since there is no safety net, I must continually create and re-create my own safety net." The assumption expressed was that the traditional safety net (the employing organization) that older generations rely upon is, at best, unpredictable or even unreliable for Xers. Thus, Xers put faith in themselves and continually developing their own abilities in order to feel secure. This means that Xers may need considerably more self-reliance and continual learning opportunities at work in order to meet basic safety and security needs.

#### **XER LEADERSHIP NEEDS- THEMES FROM INTERVIEW DATA**

The following themes were prevalent among views expressed by the twelve interview participants when they described Xer leadership needs:

1. Inclusion/empowerment- freedom with responsibility
2. Variety, creativity, and fun

3. Outcome-focused problem solving with immediate impact
4. Learning-centered continuous quality improvement with mentoring
5. Embracing diversity with customized leadership
6. Respect for ability rather than longevity
7. Time and sincerity for a personable approach

### **Xer Leadership Needs Theme #1: Inclusion/Empowerment- Freedom with Responsibility**

All twelve interviewees described a generational need for more empowerment and fewer top-down directives, and eight highlighted this need as a primary consideration. Similarly, all twelve (seven compellingly) stressed Xer needs for inclusion and collaboration. All twelve insisted that they and Xer peers *detest* micromanagement. As an alternative, the twelve interviewees (eight passionately) explained that Xers need considerable freedom and trust in their abilities and integrity. On the other hand, study participants indicated that supervisors basing trust on experience rather than ability comes across as condescending and disrespectful to Xers- particularly when the Xer's ability and initiative regularly produce better results than others with more experience but inadequate performance. Interviewees consistently described such scenarios as de-motivating. As an alternative, interviewees willingly paired trust with



responsibility; three conversations included dialogue about a need for accountability with the freedom and trust.

Freedom combined with trust and accountability means empowerment. One study participant said, “When you’re handed a process, you want to make it your own- with the power to improve it.” Another added, “Empowering is key... Xers like the challenge- set the bar high, then let me go get it... Xers like a bottom line. They are happy when creatively solving problems and making a contribution.” The same interviewee went on, “Xers need lots of rope... give me the end result [a goal]- not the process [how to achieve a goal].” Yet another Xer added, “...Xers need enough rope to hang themselves... but leaders need to provide training and consulting support as Xers solve problems and address challenges in the workplace.” Xers then, like to be utilized to solve problems rather than just to implement solutions.

### **Xer Leadership Needs Theme #2: Variety, Creativity, and Fun**

Ten study participants (seven strongly) noted that Xers need change in the work environment. Eleven (three passionately) linked an Xer need for creativity with the Xer love of variety and change-orientation. Further, nine (four powerfully) described a need for fun and often associated fun with creativity and change.

Seven interviewees went on to relate how comfortable they believe Xers are with ambiguity, and three particularly stressed this perceived generational comfort zone. Descriptions of change orientation common among Xers most often included change for the sake of continual improvement. Variety, creativity, and fun were included in the dialogue as components augmenting and, in some cases, supporting a change-oriented environment that always moves toward progress and improvement. Some study participants noted that if they did not have variety as a normal part of their job, they would find ways to create variety and fun. None of the interviewees appeared remotely in favor of a status quo environment.

### **Xer Leadership Needs Theme #3: Outcome-Focused Problem Solving with Immediate Impact**

Eleven interviewees (eight fervently) expressed an Xer need for pragmatic, outcome-focused leadership. Even the one study participant that did not directly address this theme alluded to an outcome-orientation for Xers rather than a process focus. Dialogue shared describing the theme was interwoven into other themes as well as expressed directly in conversation about the topic. Epitomizing this notion, one interviewee stated, “It [my career] is about the impact I can make and the quality of life while making the impact.” Another commented, “... the old, ‘it didn’t work back then, so it won’t work now’ mindset

doesn't cut it." Another added, "We [Xers] enjoy problem solving." Still another contributed, "Xers don't like bureaucracy. We just want to solve problems in a team environment. Xers need to see the end result." Thus, the Xer leadership needs of pragmatism and an outcome focus with immediate impact were supported in a myriad of ways throughout the interviews.

One type of description offered included stories about Xers who were very real-world savvy, yet had to endure work environments where they were treated as if they could not possibly understand issues due to a lack of experience. Instead, some articulated that more experienced colleagues tended to focus on theories of how to handle issues or concerns, and that those theories were often out of touch with reality that was readily apparent to them, as Xers. One interviewee stated, "Xers would rather embrace diverse skills and put it on the table as part of getting together... self-assess, identify strengths, then play to those strengths. Xers do this more than previous generations."

Other interviewees shared notions about rapid, imagery-oriented communication common among Xers- almost like a dialect or sub-culture within the workplace environment- that allows Xers to communicate rapidly with each other to optimize time for practical productivity. An example that came up in a conversation was one Xer saying to another, "Wonder Twin Powers- Activate!" The comment is an imagery-oriented reference to a cartoon many Xers watched during childhood where the "Wonder Twins" activated their super powers by

connecting with each other, each assuming a form or shape appropriate to the immediate goal, and then quickly and cooperatively tackling the task at hand. To Xers then, the term “Wonder Twin Powers- Activate!” is an imagery referenced communication that means a common goal has been identified and agreed upon, distinct roles are required and each person is willing to play the appropriate role, and cooperative action can begin. Xers might use such an imagery-oriented style to speed up the communication process and move toward a solution rather than spend time with extensive, dialogue-oriented planning.

Another common conversation topic supporting the pragmatic outcome focus was the Xer need to make an immediate, tangible impact. Eight interviewees (five strongly) suggested that, since Xers do not usually plan to remain in one job for an extended time, their goal is not to build an empire to securely hold a position and continue contribution. Instead, the goal is to make an immediate impact that will be self-sustaining long after they leave- for the benefit of the organization, coworkers, and constituents alike. Thus, the reality that Xer study participants expressed really was like the Lone Ranger- do a good deed, leave a silver bullet, and move on. However, Xers interviewed did demonstrate some understanding of how this approach might affect older generations. This understanding was exemplified by one study participant who commented, “Xers need to understand how our fast pace affects tradition.” Taking the time to

explain traditions, rather than just demand Xer adherence to them, is more likely to meet Xer needs for inclusion and contribution resulting in immediate impact.

#### **Xer Leadership Needs Theme #4: Learning-Centered Continuous Quality**

##### **Improvement with Mentoring**

Xers traveling this journey of enrichment, according to the interviewees, do not expect the benefits of their work to simply improve others. Actually, they expect to continually reap rewards as well through personal and professional improvement in a true win/win scenario. All twelve participants indicated that Xers have a definitive need for learning-centered leadership and continual learning opportunities. Ten of the twelve highlighted this need extensively, and they described the Xer need for continual learning as both formal and informal-but ongoing in either case. Formal learning concepts included ongoing training, formal mentoring, professional development opportunities, and conferences or classes. Less formal learning needs included interactive learning shared between peers, superiors, and subordinates.

Several interviewees also expressed a fairly significant leadership need regarding less formal mentoring. While they appeared to view themselves and Xer peers as competent professionals who need more freedom than direction, they also indicated a desire to have talented mentors who would take the time to play a consultant role. One interviewee noted, “My leaders must be teaching me. If not,

they *are not* my leaders.” Another added, “...[leaders should not] blow sunshine around... tell it straight, and give me feedback.” Additionally, the Xers interviewed stated that they enjoy seeking out answers by consulting mentors. One interviewee said, “Xers like guidance but *not* directives, because Xers are open about saying ‘I don’t know’... the open learning format many Xers experienced during elementary school encouraged us to explore in order to learn and just ask when we needed help.” The interviewees saw this as a natural step to embracing continuous quality improvement (CQI).

All study participants said that CQI is just a natural for Xers. Four interviewees, in particular, emphasized that Xers need the challenge of continual improvement in order to feel motivated. One interviewee said, “There is no other way than to change and improve.” Several stated that Xers usually seek out continuous improvement on their own, because it is part of their internal psyche. Thus, external CQI plans are often viewed by Xers as necessary to encourage improvement in others, but a strategic waste of time for Xers already oriented toward CQI as a way of being. Their preference was for customized leadership that would enhance eclectic Xers’ already strong orientation toward continual learning/improvement, pragmatic outcome focus, need for immediate impact, and appreciation of diversity.

### **Xer Leadership Needs Theme #5: Embracing Diversity with Customized Leadership**

Ten interviewees (five expansively) described a need for leadership that is flexible, situational, customized for individuals, or a chameleon effect; in essence, they said that Xers need leadership as eclectic and diverse as the generation itself. Ten study participants, and four in particular, highlighted the eclectic nature of Xers and postulated that a “one size fits all” approach to leadership would have very limited success with such an eclectic social-age cohort. Diversity, appreciation of diversity, and Xers’ penchant for embracing diversity further supported the notion that successful Xer leadership depends upon continual adaptation to individual needs. Ten interviewees (seven compellingly) articulated that Xers are a diverse generation, they will continue to embrace diversity, and they need a similar engagement with and appreciation of diversity from leadership.

### **Xer Leadership Needs Theme #6: Respect for Ability Rather than Longevity**

Xers interviewed unanimously cited respect as an Xer leadership need. Four of the twelve particularly addressed this need, and most related respect to ability rather than longevity. Feeling important and valued was a concern for nine interviewees, and all twelve (two forcefully) stated a need to be listened to. Another angle ten interviewees used to describe the Xer need for respect included

a characterization of respect as something that should be based on ability, regardless of a person's title in the organizational hierarchy.

### **Xer Leadership Needs Theme #7: Time and Sincerity for a Personable**

#### **Approach**

Ten interviewees (two strongly) cited time for interaction as an Xer leadership need. One study participant said simply, "Xers take a *lot of time*." Not only was time stressed, but how the time might best be utilized was also shared. Ten study participants (three intensely) shared ideas about an Xer need for praise and a personable approach. An important distinction was made that Xers do not need things to be personal but, rather, personable.

Professional Xers, in particular, were seen as being able to compartmentalize work and personal lives. Service level Xer employees were described as less inclined to separate work from their personal lives and concerns. Either group, however, needs sincerity among leaders according to ten interviewees (five stressing this need). The personable approach needed, then, was portrayed as a sincere interest in each employee with enough time allowed to make the effort genuine. One study participant declared, "Image is not so important [to Xers], particularly if it is pretentious." Xers need leaders who are true to face value. Another said, "Genuineness is needed. They [leaders] must *walk the talk*. Xers have a great, built-in bullshit detector and lose respect for



people who don't do their jobs or follow through.” One other interviewee added, “Loyalty [for Xers] is to people more than organizations. Loyalty is derived from interest in my personal growth and contribution.” Xers may have a particularly difficult time feeling loyalty to someone they do not respect or trust. Because Xer loyalty is derived more from a personal connection than at an organizational level, leaders' integrity and sincerity are paramount.

### **RECOMMENDED LEADERSHIP APPROACHES/STRATEGIES FOR XERS**

The following themes were prevalent among views expressed by the twelve interview participants when they described leadership approaches and strategies that they use successfully with Xers:

1. Embracing Diverse Xers with Customized Leadership
2. Avoiding Micromanagement by Empowering and Supporting Xers With Freedom, Responsibility, and Inclusion
3. Taking the Time to Support Continuous Improvement in an Immersive Learning Environment with Good Mentoring
4. Respecting Xers' Need to Communicate Efficiently and Solve Challenges Quickly with Tangible, Self-Sustaining Solutions
5. Showing Respect for Ability, Encouraging Fun and Creativity, and Praising Sincerely

### **Xer Leadership Approach/Strategy Theme # 1: Embracing Diverse Xers with Customized Leadership**

Eleven interviewees (eight powerfully) stated that one particularly successful leadership strategy they use with Xers is to embrace the diversity inherent in the generation and customize leadership. Various terms were used to describe this phenomenon including chameleon effect, situational leadership, and customized leadership. Other supporting comments described playing to Xers' multi-tasking strength, recognizing that Xers have different gender rules than previous generations, and acknowledging that Xers embrace diversity differently than other generations and do not accept "one size fits all" approaches. In essence, because Xers tend to view the world as a diverse blend of multiple realities, they require leadership that is responsive to multiple worldviews, methods of operation, and ways of being.

### **Xer Leadership Approach/Strategy Theme # 2: Avoiding Micromanagement by Empowering and Supporting Xers With Freedom, Responsibility, and Inclusion**

Xers interviewed unanimously rejected the concept of micromanagement, and most described such practice as tremendously de-motivating. One study participant commented, "Don't ride my back... trust me, I'm not stupid." As an alternative, the model all twelve (eleven strongly) favored was an

inclusive/collaborative approach where ownership is facilitated. Allowing freedom and choice was cited as an integral practice by all interviewees. They also expressed success empowering Xers with a combination of respect, freedom, and responsibility. In other words, the empowerment and inclusion that the interviewees preferred as followers developed into the same style by which they like to lead. They were most interested in exemplifying the same support that they enjoy from leaders.

All study participants (eight intensely) favored a supportive strategy similar to servant leadership where the leader's job is to ask questions about followers' needs and then meet those needs- rather than use directives. Case in point, seven interviewees (four fervently) said that leaders should forget traditional hierarchical approaches with top-down directives as a standard operational method; they simply do not meet Xer needs. Additionally, all twelve interviewees indicated that work is just a part of the life journey for Xers. Therefore, as leaders, the interviewees maintained that flexibility is key in successfully leading Xers. Rigid micromanagement and top-down directives are not only de-motivating to Xers, but they are also unacceptable; Xers will simply find another job (or career) under such conditions. Instead, an advisable approach is to guide and mentor learning-centered Xers.

**Xer Leadership Approach/Strategy Theme # 3: Taking the Time to Support Continuous Improvement in an Immersive Learning Environment with Good Mentoring**

All twelve interviewees, and ten quite expansively, experienced success leading Xers by supporting the natural Xer inclination toward continuous learning and improvement. The desired learning environment was a two-way exchange in a guiding/mentoring/consulting structure. Several interviewees pointed out that this style of leadership often takes more time than other styles that require less relationship building.

Taking a lot of time and using good listening skills, though, were thoughts shared by nine interviewees as vital to successful Xer leadership. Many stressed that leading Xers takes more time and involvement than leading people from the Baby Boomer and Silent Generations, who the interviewees portrayed as less likely to question why and more likely to respect hierarchies and directives. Additionally, three study participants commented that taking time to teach Xers how to understand tradition(s) rather than forcing the concept on them with “that’s the way we do it” or “that’s the way it’s always been done” explanations can be very helpful. The overall message was that the time taken up front when leading Xers is worth it, because it allows the leader to stay away from ongoing power and control structures and efforts that de-motivate Xers.

**Xer Leadership Approach/Strategy Theme # 4: Respecting Xers' Need to Communicate Efficiently and Solve Challenges Quickly with Tangible, Self-Sustaining Solutions**

Ten interviewees, seven in particular, spent considerable time explaining how keeping things moving briskly in a solution-focused environment is helpful with Xers. The Xer need for immediate gratification was described as an asset in several ways related to problem solving. First, Xers are less likely to engage in turf wars, which many see as a waste of time. Second, the rapid, imagery-oriented communication style many Xers utilize encourages speedy resolution of workplace problems or puzzles. Third, a rapid pace focused on solutions creates an environment where a lot can be accomplished in a short amount of time. Finally, part of the Xer need for immediate gratification (as it relates to the end result) includes creation of a tangible, self-sustaining solution that will function regardless of who is around to maintain it.

**Xer Leadership Approach/Strategy Theme # 5: Showing Respect for Ability, Encouraging Fun and Creativity, and Praising Sincerely**

The work atmosphere and interpersonal relations interviewees depicted as key to good Xer leadership were based upon respect. Seven interviewees (four compellingly) maintained that many Xers are accomplished adults who need to be acknowledged accordingly. A few described personal experiences where they

had been treated like the “kid” at high level meetings, even when they may have been the leading knowledge expert on one or more topics during the meeting. Five interviewees said that successfully leading Xers includes encouragement of fun, creativity, and innovation. Nearly all study participants shared thoughts that Xers respond well to a fairly informal environment at work. Finally, five interviewees thought that public and private praise, when expressed sincerely, was very helpful for Xers.

#### **OTHER SIGNIFICANT VIEWS EXPRESSED**

Three other significant theories or ideas were expressed during the interviews that, individually and collectively, add considerable meaning to the understanding of Xers as co-constructed by the researcher and interviewees in the context of this study:

1. Internal –vs- external orientation for change, diversity, and CQI
2. Distinction between professional Xers and service/support level Xers
3. Bimodal and tri-modal views of Generation X

#### **Internal –vs- External Orientation for Change, Diversity, and CQI**

One concept that surfaced during many interviews was a notion that Xers have an internal orientation to several things such as change, diversity, and continuous quality improvement. Conversely, Baby Boomer and Silent

Generation coworkers, subordinates, and supervisors were portrayed as relating to these and similar topics more externally. In other words, many interviewees described change, diversity, and CQI as something Xers are- not something that they do. For Xers, these subjects are like an internal body organ that just functions or like a person's body breathing naturally without thought or plan. On the other hand, Baby Boomer and Silent Generation counterparts were seen as *performing* change and change initiatives, *accomplishing* diversity, and *achieving* CQI- all as if the change, diversity, and CQI were external things that need to be managed.

The difference between internal and external orientation regarding the aforementioned topics was a noteworthy point. Further exploration of this idea is included in Chapter Five.

### **Distinction Between Professional Xers and Service/Support Level Xers**

Several distinctions were made between Xers working in professional positions and those working in service or support level positions. Although leadership needs were described as similar in some ways for both sectors within Generation X, different needs were also noted. For example, Xers' love of freedom might mean different things to professional versus service level employees. Some interviewees said that professional Xers need considerable freedom in order to be creative and expand upon their job duties to continually

improve and increase contribution. By contrast, service level Xer employees may need freedom at work to arrange duties and feel empowered so that they can be finished with work on time at the end of each day. Service level Xers, then, experience more freedom by managing their own schedule to ensure that the contribution they make matches the requirements of their position without the need to do extra work. Thus, the need for freedom is necessary for both segments within Generation X, but the basic freedom of managing one's own schedule is not sufficient for professional Xers. Professional Xers need additional freedom- and need freedom in more manners- in order to actualize their potential.

A similar dynamic was depicted regarding flexibility. Service level Xer employees were portrayed as needing considerable flexibility with work schedules. For instance, if the work week consists of forty hours, service level Xers might like permission to arrive early on days they wish or need to leave early. Conversely, professional Xers would likely demand more flexibility to work where they want and when they want- as long as the end result is achieved optimally. Additionally, professional Xers were characterized as needing flexibility to define and continually shape their roles, initiatives, and final products. Again, what is necessary concerning flexibility for both Generation X subgroups is not sufficient for the professional Xers.

The reason offered to explain professional Xers' additional needs compared to service level Xers was how each group views responsibility.



Professional Xers were depicted as people who embrace responsibility and, in fact, often experience frustration if the responsibility entrusted with them is limited. On the contrary, service level Xers were portrayed as less likely to need, much less want, responsibility. Instead, interviewees said that service level Xer employees are more interested in just getting work completed efficiently and then enjoying the freedom of leaving work at work- without further accountability or involvement.

Clearly, a definitive difference was outlined between the two groups within Generation X. Interviewees expressed that service or support level Xers respond to leadership in similar ways with professional Xer colleagues- but for distinctive reasons and to different degrees. Since professional Xers embrace responsibility, they demand even more involvement and self-direction. One interviewee described the two groups as service economy participants and knowledge economy participants. Leadership needs were depicted like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Creativity and autonomy, for example, might exist at or near the top of the needs hierarchy for both service economy participants and knowledge economy participants. However, it would likely make up a much larger percentage of the overall needs of professional Xers. A somewhat similar dichotomy exists in how the two groups view input of time and work for a pay-for-performance return on the investment. Both sectors are likely to demand pay

for performance, but they may have very disparate concepts of what constitutes performance.

Service economy participants are trading their time and service for a paycheck. Knowledge economy participants are exchanging their time and effort for an opportunity to share and gain knowledge so that they can make an impact while earning a paycheck. In either case, however, if the time and effort input (and knowledge for professional Xers) is not rewarded justifiably by an equitable return on the investment, then the Xer would feel de-motivated. One study participant offered, “Xers have a greater business perspective at an earlier age... like an ongoing, internal cost-benefit analysis.” Again, how Xers utilize this characteristic may depend upon whether they are service economy participants or knowledge economy participants.

### **Bimodal and Tri-modal Views of Generation X**

Additional dialogue during interviews revealed that some study participants perceive Generation X as having a bimodal or even tri-modal distribution. The bimodal view included description of older Xers as sharing many generational culture qualities with younger Xers, but also as more respectful of Baby Boomer and Silent Generation coworkers, subordinates, and supervisors. Older Xers were also portrayed as having a better understanding of traditional organizational hierarchies and politics. By contrast to younger Xers, the older

Xers appeared to some interviewees to be more patient negotiating the hierarchies and political landscape; better able to accomplish things because of their understanding and patience; and better able to interface with traditions. Speculation was offered that these qualities apparent among older Xers might simply be due to age/maturity, or it could be because older Xers are just closer to Baby Boomers and have interacted with the older generations more.

One Xer interviewed further expanded upon the notion that there might be even more intra-generational differences apparent within Generation X. This conception included a tri-modal example dividing Generation X into three sections: older Xers, middle Xers, and younger Xers. In this iteration, the older and middle Xer groupings matched the descriptions offered previously separating older and younger Xers. The unique part of the tri-modal concept was the additional categorization of the youngest Xers. The youngest group was portrayed as the most irreverent of all Xers and, by far, the least likely to successfully interact with older generations or even older Xers.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Chapter Four included an overview of the study; an explanation of how participants were involved and how data were analyzed and reported; a description of the study context; and a report of research findings. Overall Generation X themes, as identified by interviewees, were shared in considerable

detail. Xer leadership needs and leadership approaches or strategies that study participants described as successful were also included. Additionally, three topics explored in interviews- but not stated by enough interviewees to represent a common theme- were covered in a section devoted to other significant views expressed.

Interviewees portrayed Generation X as a social-age cohort that has unique leadership needs compared to other generations. In Chapter Five, further analysis will be offered comparing data reported in Chapter Four to literature reviewed. Particular attention will be devoted to examining how Xer themes from interviews relate to Xer themes from the literature. Additional examination of all pertinent data will focus on what overall implications might exist between leadership theories identified in Chapter Two and research findings about Generation X characteristics and leadership needs.

## **Chapter Five- Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study began with an overview of the generational shift occurring in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges. The introduction in Chapter One included an explanation that, while a considerable number of experienced community college administrators (as well as faculty and service positions, for that matter) are currently retiring or nearing retirement, the social/age cohort commonly called Generation X is coming of age and will likely fill many vacancies. For the purpose of this study, a succinct definition of Generation X was offered with acknowledgment that this is not the only way to define Generation X. In fact, membership in or identification with a generation is at least partly self-defined. Therefore, acknowledging inherent limitations, the study was developed contextually to capture relevant Xer viewpoints and open a dialogue about possible implications of an impending Xer plurality in community colleges.

Since no studies specifically linking Xers with community college leadership were found, this research effort was structured as a qualitative search for meaning in a specific context. Twelve selected community college administrators that self-identified as Xers were interviewed to provide a window

through which Generation X themes, Xer leadership needs, and Xer leadership approaches might be viewed. Analysis in Chapter Five will begin with a comparison between themes and other pertinent ideas generated from interview data (reported in Chapter Four) and themes from literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Comment will then be offered about the potential fit for Xers with selected leadership theories reviewed in Chapter Two, based upon combining concepts from Generation X literature analysis and interview data. In essence, a Generation X reality as co-constructed by the interviewees and interpreted by the researcher will be triangulated with Generation X literature and leadership theories in order to offer a potential blueprint for successful interaction with Xers.

A theory of Xer views on organizations and organizational structure will then be offered. Review of Generation X literature and supporting comments by all twelve interviewees indicates that Xers may have a vision of institutions and organizational structure that is considerably different from traditional structures developed by Baby Boomer and Silent Generation counterparts. This markedly dissimilar perception of organizations may have significant impact on how Xers interact with other generational groups at work. The intergenerational dynamics will be examined using the SLEEPE principle (William Moore, Jr., personal communication, May 2001). That is, the intergenerational implications will be considered by looking at social, legal, economic, educational, political, and

ethical perspectives. A summary and recommendations for further study will conclude Chapter Five.

### **COMPARISON BETWEEN INTERVIEW THEMES AND LITERATURE THEMES**

Seven themes were identified in Chapter Two from a review of Generation X literature, as well as an overall eclectic quality apparently inherent in Xers. Literature themes describing Xers included: Flexibility, Skepticism, Collaboration, Goal Orientation, Technological Savvy, Intrepidness/Irreverence, and a Mature/Immature Dichotomy. While the study was primarily structured to elicit interview responses about Xers in the specific context of early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community college leadership, all twelve interviewees did offer broader generalizations about Generation X. The seven literature themes were supported by comments from interviewees, though some themes were more prevalent. Additionally, the overall “Eclectic X” concept was even more strongly expressed in the interviews. Conversely, in the literature review, the eclectic nature of Xers was treated more like a meta-theme that is infused throughout the other themes. Although study participants often described the eclectic Xer quality singularly, further examination of the data revealed that the concept is, indeed, woven throughout many themes and topics in both interview data and the literature.

Flexibility was a literature theme supported tremendously throughout interviews. Often, the Xers interviewed described themselves and social/age

cohort peers as very flexible, adaptable, and internally oriented to change. Interviewees also portrayed Xers as much more comfortable with ambiguity than older generations. Further supporting comments explained that Xers are like chameleons, flexibly adapting to their surroundings and blending in with whatever attributes a situation or setting may call for. Thus, through multiple examples, interviewees strongly supported the literature theme of Xer flexibility.

Study participants also described Xer skepticism in several ways, though many did not use the exact term “skeptical” when describing Xers. Instead, interviewees often framed the conversation more positively by indicating preferences for straight-talk; describing exasperation toward tradition and, particularly, traditional processes in which they saw little value; or sharing a disdain for top-down directives that they neither understood nor trusted.

Collaboration was another literature theme mentioned repeatedly in interviews. Several interviewees indicated that they prefer to collaborate with people who offer diverse perspectives while remaining outcome-focused. Some study participants went on to share that collaborating with theory-focused and idealistic co-workers from the Baby Boomer and Silent generations was often frustrating. Thus, perhaps a better melding of these premises would be to use the overarching term “inclusion” with collaboration as a process whereby inclusion might be achieved. Further examination of collaborating with and among Xers is



offered later in Chapter Five under sections highlighting social, educational, and political considerations.

Goal orientation was an Xer literature theme very strongly supported throughout interviews. However, goals described were not the traditional long-range goal setting common among Baby Boomers and The Silent Generation where a goal is set, a plan is made to reach the goal, and then the plan is followed. Rather, interviewees described Xer goal orientation as a pragmatic outcome focus related to problem solving. Goals, as viewed by Xers, are more immediate. Successful goal achievement for Xers includes solving immediate challenges efficiently and effectively with self-sustaining solutions rather than creating long-range goals and plans. Xers interviewed largely described long-range, futuristic goals as impractical in the fast-paced, ever changing early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Thus, a great potential for miscommunication exists between Xers and older generations regarding goals; the same words and typical phrases about goals do not appear to mean the same thing to Xers as they do to Baby Boomers and members of The Silent Generation. Additional comment is offered in subsequent sections contrasting the generational cohorts.

Technological Savvy was a literature theme that was supported by interview dialogue, but it was usually described as a given rather than a major theme. An example is found in the conversations about change; changes in technology and Xer comfort with continual adaptation were cited often in

interviews. However, the focus was on Xer comfort with change. Technology was most often used as an example to describe the Xer change orientation, which seemed more important to most interviewees.

Intrepidness and Irreverence were also referred to in most interviews. Many study participants depicted Generation X as increasingly intrepid and irreverent chronologically by birth year. In other words, interviewees indicated a belief that younger Xers are even more intrepid and irreverent than older Xers. Some used a bi-modal or tri-modal model superimposed on the overall Generation X birth years to describe this phenomenon, while others made more general statements. It is important to note that the actual age of an Xer was not usually given as a referent or determining factor for intrepidness and irreverence. Instead, generational position was the explanation offered.

The Mature/Immature dichotomy described as a literature theme in Chapter Two had similar support in the interviews- as well as unique explanations about how these Xer characteristics may have evolved into current generational dynamics. Perhaps the most relevant conversation offered during interviews regarding maturity and immaturity among Xers was the dialogue about knowledge economy participants and service economy participants.

Xers who embraced maturity accepted considerable responsibility- often at a very young age. Thus, they learned to handle significant levels of responsibility much earlier in life than many Baby Boomer and Silent Generation counterparts.

In essence, they grew up fast. Furthermore, since the responsibility was often embraced without strong adult guidance, they learned to be self-sufficient and ask for help as needed from elders worthy of a mentoring role.

Conversely, Xers who rejected responsibility during formative years may be more likely to have evolved into service economy participants. As outlined in Chapter Four, the service economy participants might share many common attributes with professional, responsibility-loving Xers; but similar characteristics like a love for freedom and flexibility would most likely manifest much differently for service level Xers. This sector of Generation X- that appears on the surface to be less mature- may have developed a unique maturity where freedom and flexibility are a means to escape responsibility rather than embrace it like professional Xers. Just as Generation Xers holistically define things on their own terms, perhaps service level Xers define maturity in their own way. Therefore, to say that these Xers are immature may in many cases be an inaccurate superimposition of older generations' definition that maturity equals embracing responsibility at work.

In either case, what may have started as maturity or immaturity during formative years could have contributed to career and educational choices as adults that led to the Xer dichotomy between service jobs and professional careers. If this is the case, then implications for successful leadership may be tremendous. People often think of service level jobs as occupations that workers are stuck with

due to a lack of ability, motivation, or education. However, if Xers in these jobs often *choose* the service level occupations to keep work responsibilities to a minimum in order to more fully enjoy life outside work, then leadership strategies designed to encourage responsibility-loving professional Xers and dues-paying Baby Boomers are likely to meet with little success or even de-motivate Xer service employees. Service level Xers may, in fact, have great ability and motivation. They may also have chosen to avoid formal education, preferring instead more practical forms of on-the-job training. Thus, getting to know Xers individually and customizing leadership- as suggested by interviewees- may be helpful with Xers in general but might be particularly paramount when leading a cross-section of professional and service level Xers who require different motivations.

This is not to say that similar strategies would not work with Baby Boomers or other generational cohorts, as well. In fact, the customized strategy might be well received by nearly anyone. Yet, Xers may need this approach even more than other generations. Therein lies the difference that many interviewees described between Xers and previous generational cohorts. Sometimes distinctions between Xers and other generations are vast and easily identified; in other cases the difference is more a matter of the degree to which an attribute exists or the prevalence of a characteristic or leadership need among Xers compared to other generations.

Overall, Xer needs manifesting as interview themes were much more focused on community college workplace issues than were themes found in the literature. This was somewhat expected and is likely a natural by-product of interviewing a group of similar aged professionals within such a specific context. More detailed analysis of interview themes is offered later in Chapter Five utilizing the SLEEPE principle in a section comprehensively devoted to comment on implications for generational groups interacting at work. Interview themes and Xer literature themes are inclusively related to potential fit with selected leadership theories described in Chapter Two.

#### **POTENTIAL XER FIT WITH SELECTED LEADERSHIP THEORIES**

Assessing potential Xer fit with selected leadership theories may help provide ideas about how to most successfully lead, follow, and interact with Xers in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges. However, prior to offering analysis, due acknowledgment is given to the fact that any recommendations presented are based upon the assumption that knowledge gained from literature review, interviews with twelve Xer community college administrators, and a lifetime of experiences as an Xer qualify the researcher to draw preliminary conclusions and make worthwhile recommendations. Further research done quantitatively and, therefore, generalizable would be advisable to augment recommendations from this research effort.

This study was structured to view Xers through a lens of leadership. Included under the broad scope of leadership is followership. In other words, Xers were examined as leaders, as followers, and holistically to determine which leadership theories might be most appropriate when working with Xers. Since Xers interviewed were usually quite consistent between how they lead and how they like to be led, a combined view of Xer leadership/followership is assumed throughout Chapter Five. Report of ideas about which leadership theories best fit Xers, and how they fit, includes an assumption that the person in the presumed leadership role could be from any generation- though interviewees were all Xers. Additionally, concepts that are suggested as useful for leading Xers are meant in no way to exclude potential success leading members of other generational cohorts or of individual people within any generation. Thus, to reiterate an important point mentioned in previous chapters, this study is not meant to be all-inclusive or all-exclusive in any manner. The following analysis offered is intended to open a dialogue about Xer leadership needs and provide keys for successful interaction with Xers.

Several leadership theories were discussed in Chapter Two under four broad headings: Trait Approach, Behavior Approach, Situational/Contingency Approach (with examples from Path-Goal Theory and the Teaching As Leading Inventory), and the Power and Influence Approach (with examples from a Transactional model and a Transformational model). Also, the Learning College

concept was related to both Transformational Leadership and the organizational theory of Self-Designing Bureaus. Each of these leadership approaches provides a comparative model for considering Xer leadership needs.

The Trait Approach is least likely to be helpful when leading Xers. If standard leadership traits actually exist, Xers are too eclectic to respond uniformly to such traits. Instead, overall good leadership traits might be examined to decide which particular traits work best with Xers. In particular, traits that work well with professional Xers as compared to service level Xers may be helpful. In a sense, this study will provide one such template of leadership trait ideas. However, to assert that a person could be born with an inherent set of traits that makes that person a good leader of Xers would be erroneous. As evidenced throughout the literature and interviews, Xers tend to function somewhat like chameleons- and they need leadership that responds in kind.

Similarly, the Behavior Approach offers limited applicability. Xers need a combination of task-focus and relationship building that varies from person to person. Xer needs even change situationally, so particular task-oriented or relationship-oriented behaviors that work well for an individual Xer under a given circumstance might not apply if the situation is changed. More important, perhaps, is *how* tasks are structured and *how* relationships are built and maintained. Again, due to the eclectic nature of Xers, the *how* in either case is likely to change according to both the person and the circumstance.

More useful for understanding Xers is the Situational/Contingency Approach. Both the Path-Goal Theory and the Teaching As Leading Inventory (TALI) models contain leadership styles defined in a quadrant approach. Clearly, some of the styles indicated are better suited for Xers than other styles. Since the models are both under the umbrella of the Situational/Contingency Approach and both have similarly structured quadrants, the two theories will be evaluated simultaneously.

The directive style from Path-Goal Theory and the Theorist concept from the TALI are both likely to have significant problems when implemented to lead Xers. All twelve interviewees adamantly stated that they abhor micromanagement and respond unfavorably to top-down directives. Additionally, the practical outcome focus common among interviewees and supported in the literature indicates that a Theorist style would alienate Xers. Differentiating from Baby Boomers was described in both the literature and in interviews as important to Xers. The theorist approach that may be well received by idealistic Boomers is more likely to be rejected by pragmatic Xers.

However, a deeper dynamic also appears to exist within Generation X regarding both aforementioned styles. Professional (and particularly older) Xers may be more likely to adapt favorably to a Theorist style due to their age proximity to Baby Boomers, their interactive experiences with older generations and organizational structures, and their attention to excellence as knowledge



economy participants. Conversely, service level Xers may be even more averse to the Theorist style due to its non-applicability for daily duties. Since the goals of service level Xers lean toward equating input of work for output of pay (with less regard to time at work invested for self-development), they are even less likely to see value in theory-based initiatives. Contrarily, a Directive style may be somewhat accepted by service level Xers if it absolves them of responsibility. Professional Xers are likely to respond exceedingly poorly to directives, unless they are simply given a directive to achieve a certain goal and then offered the freedom and responsibility to achieve the desired end result.

The Supportive model from Path-Goal Theory and Supporter style from the TALI are probably more helpful for leading Xers. Again, though, there is a difference in the type of support needed for service economy participants and knowledge economy participants. Service level Xers, as indicated in interviews, may need more personal support and encouragement. Since they are more likely to bring personal issues into the workplace and work to support their own personal lives and interests outside work, they will require more time by leaders devoted to building a personal relationship. On the other hand, professional Xers will need more support and time devoted to helping them actualize their abilities. As knowledge economy participants, professional Xers need more support in the form of mentoring, career development, and personhood development. Neither set of supportive needs are necessarily better or worse, they simply are different

methods by which a Supportive style leader might utilize her/his strengths to customize leadership for individual Xer needs.

The Participative style described in Path-Goal Theory is most likely a great fit for Xers. Professional Xers, in particular, need significant involvement in decisions that affect them. As outlined in Chapter Four, the goals of professional Xers are centered around learning and making worthwhile contributions that create impactful, self-sustaining solutions. Inclusion in problem solving rather than just implementation of solutions is what Xers thrive on. Therefore, a Participative leader is likely to keep Xers- especially professional Xers- motivated and productive. Service level Xers are likely to enjoy participation as well, as long as the final expectation does not involve responsibility that they would perceive as beyond their job description.

The Influencer style proposed in the TALI is loosely related to the Participative style. However, participation may be one method to influence- so the Influencer style is more comprehensive. Influencing has both positive and negative implications when leading Xers. If seeds of ideas are planted among Xer followers in an attempt to get them to engage in inclusive organizational problem solving, then the leader will probably experience huge successes. On the other hand, if attempts are made to influence Xers in a top-down fashion, then Xers will probably ignore the attempt or even subvert it. Xers are not likely to stage a collective protest (with notable exceptions in a traditional union environment).

Rather, Xers are all about ownership. If they do not own an idea or process, at least in part, then they will usually not engage in efforts supporting the initiative. Attempting to create buy-in for a preconceived idea or plan is tantamount to disaster when leading Xers. Observations of older generations, supported by conversations with interviewees indicates that Baby Boomers and Silent Generation members often attempt to create “ownership” through a buy-in process. One Xer interviewed described this practice, “... it sets off my BS detector...” Ownership, as defined by Xers, is something that is owned through involvement and collaboration from the very beginning- not something that they develop an affinity for in later stages of development. Influencing Xers, then, requires considerable time and inclusion to create true ownership.

The Achievement-Oriented approach from Path-Goal Theory and its counterpart, the Achiever style leader illustrated in the TALI, are also a reasonably good fit for Xers. Clearly apparent in the literature and supported by dialogue during interviews, the pragmatic outcome focus common among Xers leaves little doubt that an achievement focused leader would be a good Xer fit. Again, though, a disparity is evident between professional and service level Xers. Since “achievement” is defined much differently concerning service economy participants and knowledge economy participants, the Achiever style leader must again customize leadership to meet individual Xer needs. Service level Xers tend to define achievement as accomplishment of tasks within the requirements of the

position they hold. Professional Xers often expand upon the definition and attempt to develop both personally and professionally within the career arena. As mentioned previously, what is necessary for both groups is not sufficient for professional Xers. The professional Xers are more focused around the career and see it as a vehicle to self-actualize. By contrast, service level Xers tend to see their career as a means to an end, and often plan to self-actualize outside of work on their own time.

The Power and Influence Approach, including both Transactional and Transformational Leadership models, is also valuable as a framework for scrutinizing Xer leadership needs. Transactional tactics may have some merit, particularly with service level Xers. If Xer service economy participants appreciate an “input equals output” mantra for engagement at work, then the transactional practice of give and take may be successfully utilized. Professional Xers, though, probably prefer the learning-centered, collaborative approach used in Transformational Leadership.

According to interviewees, and supported in both literature and through my life experiences as an Xer, professional Xers live continually transformative lives. In a sense, professional Xers who self-actualize largely within their careers in a collaborative, outcome focused, change-oriented, learning-centered manner probably know no other way than continual transformation aimed at improvement. Mentioned previously in Chapter Two, the words of Beaudoin

(1998, p. 46) eloquently capture the transformative nature of Xers, “We are a fashionable generation, constantly re-imagining each moment, assuming the future to be a chain of unending renegotiations of moments...” Since transformational leaders create shared visions and empower followers to achieve the collective ideal, Xers enjoy all the right ingredients for success on their own terms in this leadership model. Followers are included early in any initiatives, they have considerable input in problem solving and how the goal is shaped, and they are then granted freedom with responsibility to achieve the desired results. Though service level Xers may shy away from the responsibility inherent in such an approach, professional Xers would likely thrive under such practice. The top-down directives and micromanagement that Xers despise are simply not present or are kept to a minimum in a transformational approach. Thus, the Transformational Leadership model is probably comprehensively the best leadership approach for most Xers.

One manifestation of the Transformational Leadership model is the Learning College concept, an educational form of a Self-Designing Bureau. Again, Xer fit is substantial. The Learning College is a Self-Designing Bureau that relies upon inclusion, development of a shared vision, broad input in problem solving, continual learning, and demonstration of results. Initially, the demonstration of results portion of the Learning College movement appeared somewhat problematic for Xers. After all, the goal of most professional Xers is to

*achieve* results- not document them. However, if documentation of results achieved can be presented to Xers as an opportunity to increase career security through portfolio building, then Xer interest is likely to increase. Furthermore, if Xers can be involved in helping to determine ways to prove worth, then they will have ownership in the process rather than being asked to buy-in to someone else's idea. Finally, since Xers enjoy problem solving, the need for demonstrating or documenting results might be presented to them as a question instead of a directive. The problem could be presented, for example, as an organizational need to demonstrate achievement to legislators in order to increase support through community college financial allocations. Xers would likely tackle the problem and come up with a solution that documentation of success is vital to appropriately impress legislators.

In the aforementioned example, it may seem easier to just institute the directive instead of taking the time to create ownership. However, if Generation X literature is accurate and the Xers interviewed for this study are correct, then it will take even more time (and consistently de-motivate Xers in the process) to attempt directives with buy-in. Further, the micromanagement required to clean up a lack of implementation for initiatives that did not involve Xers during developing stages will create extreme de-motivation and discontent among Xers. In short, leaders may be selling, but Xers are not buying. Xers require the time up

front, in a transformational leadership tradition, in order to own and implement processes or initiatives.

All told, Xer views of leadership indicate that members of Generation X tend to view organizations much differently than the traditional, hierarchical structures that are common in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges. The next section includes information about how Xers *do* perceive organizations and organizational structure.

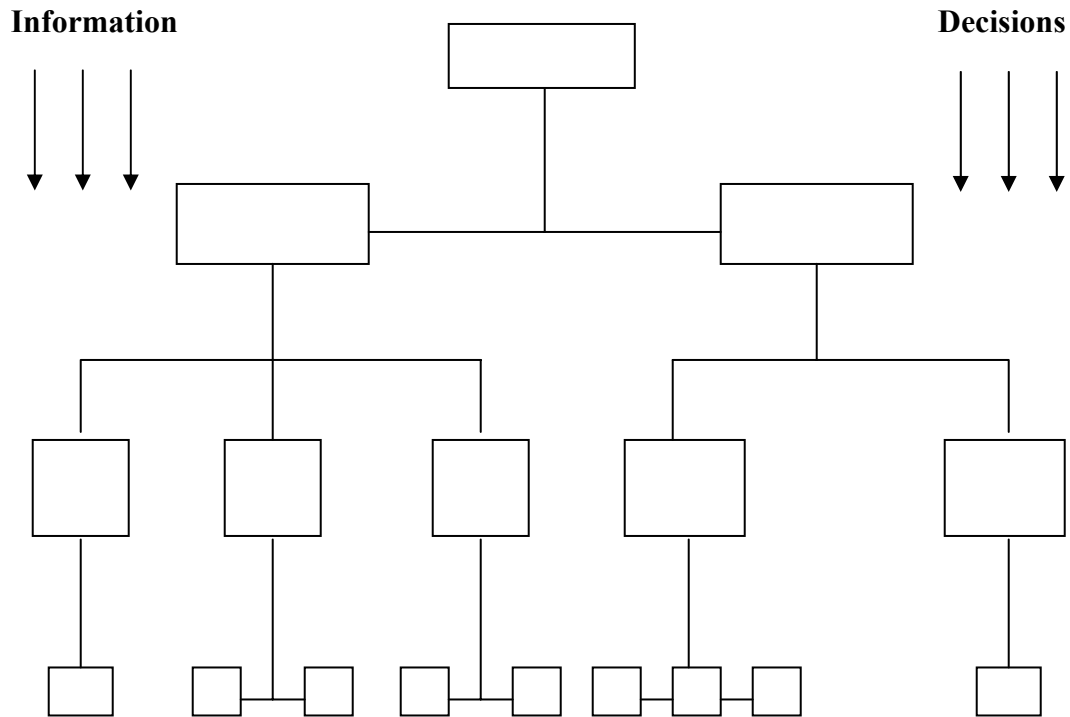
#### **XER VIEWS OF ORGANIZATIONS**

Since Xers internalize change, they tend to see organizations as naturally changing. Learning is a necessary part of personal and organizational change, so Xers view learning and adaptation as a vital component of organizational health:

In a true “learning organization,” everyone is encouraged to learn whenever necessary to improve a process, a product, or a service... adapt to changing conditions without building up a wall of policies and procedures that constrain creativity... [this] creates a climate in which people feel it is safe to experiment and to take the risks that accompany experimental behavior. In the days ahead, only organizations with such climates will survive. (Mink, et al, 1993, p. 9).

Though organizational structures vary considerably, many community colleges at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have a bureaucratic structure that encourages top-down flow of information and decisions rather than creativity and development of a shared vision (see example, figure 5-1).

**Figure 5-1, Traditional Organizational Structure**

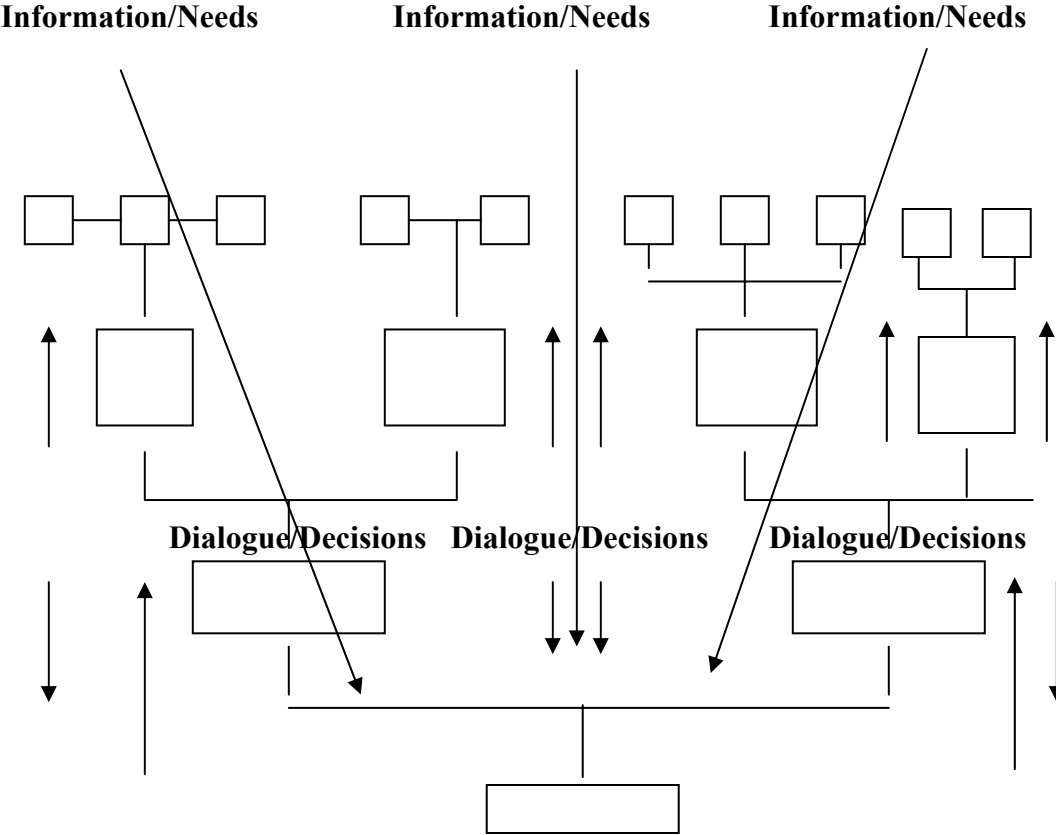


In these institutions, the organizational structure is patterned after a factory model from the Industrial Revolution era or even a military command structure. Xers find this structure limiting, or even stifling. It encourages micromanagement and top-down directives in a “command and control” effort. However, “...when goals are dictated from the top, no one else in the organization really “owns” them, and nothing really changes. Also, more errors will be introduced.” (Mink, et al, 1993, p. 75). Xers need ownership, so command and control efforts in a top-down fashion are problematic. Since many Xers spent



formative years and early adulthood with little structure and control mechanisms, they may strongly or quietly resist leadership styles and organizational structures designed to ensure conformity. Instead, as one interviewee observed, Xers are likely to view organizational structure as something that should promote interactive communication and problem solving in a supportive manner (see example, figure 5-2).

**Figure 5-2, Xer View of Organizational Structure**



Thus, Xers tend to place little value in titles or position orientations within an organizational structure. Instead, they rate a “superior’s” worthiness in relation to how well and consistently they are included and supported in dialogue and decisions that affect them. Unlike a traditional organizational power structure, where administrators farthest from the phenomenon may hold the most power to affect change (Northcutt, 2002), most Xers see power, change, and leadership phenomenon as interrelated and, therefore, shared. From the typical Xer viewpoint, information and needs should often be initiated or defined by students and the front-line people who interact with them. After interactive and inclusive dialogue about the needs, decisions can be reached with shared input and responsibility for implementation.

This is not to say that an initiative could not come from the middle or top (in this case, bottom) of the hierarchy. Rather, it is to indicate that success in leading Xers will come from involving them in problem solving instead of giving them directives to implement plans. As evidenced in the literature and throughout interviews, Xers need little in the way of command and control to bring about change and continual improvement. In fact, Xers tend to find command and control efforts very de-motivating. Professional Xers, in particular, are already oriented toward continual learning and improvement. And, their internal orientation to change ensures ongoing adaptation with simultaneous rejection of status quo.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR GENERATIONAL GROUPS INTERACTING AT WORK**

An entire body of literature has been written that differentiates Generation X from other social/age cohorts. Interviews conducted for this study consistently support the premise that Xers are, indeed, unlike other generations in many ways. Accordingly, the differences inherent in Generation X culture produce considerable implications for Xers interacting with other generational cohorts while working in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges. Comment is offered throughout the remainder of Chapter Five about the social, legal, economic, educational, political, and ethical repercussions of other generational groups interacting with Xers during a period of increasing Xer participation as community college leaders and employees.

### **Social Considerations**

Generation X administrators are joining a long-established group of executives that may largely have a social/age perspective much different from their own. Moreover, they will also be supervising several members of the Baby Boomer and Silent Generation in addition to Xers and Millennials. Social considerations, then, are significant.

Xers are most likely to lead the way they like to be led. Such practice will probably be welcomed by Xers, and it may be refreshing to others as well. However, more tradition-focused colleagues could find Xers' fast, innovative, and

sometimes irreverent approach disconcerting as inevitable social interaction occurs between generational groups. Xer comfort in an ever-changing, ambiguous environment may be challenging for long tenured co-workers and supervisors who handle change more externally. Further, since many community colleges were formed in the mid 1960's to mid 1970's, many of the current and upcoming retirees that Xers are replacing have spent an entire career building the community colleges that they must now entrust to a new generation of leaders. Pragmatic Xers will need to be aware of the social repercussions of too much change, too fast.

Additionally, both long-tenured Baby Boomer/Silent Generation employees and newly arrived Xers need to understand that the groups define ownership much differently. Baby Boomers and members of the Silent Generation usually define ownership in regards to commitment and maintenance. Xers, on the other hand, define ownership by involvement in project/initiative/plan development- a sort of "instant ownership". This is not to say that either perspective is correct or incorrect- just that the perceptions are not necessarily similar. Mutual respect and time to communicate effectively about needs and expectations will be paramount for successful social interaction.

Perhaps a good example of developing mutual understanding lies within the concept of internal versus external change orientation. Xers need to understand that elder generations tend to view change externally. Their formative

experiences included more idealistic *desires* for changes than the utterly unavoidable and comprehensive societal level changes experienced during Xer formative years. Members of the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers experienced the world of constant flux and information overload more often from an adult perspective or, at least, from an early-adult perspective. Equally important, older peers need to realize that Xers *cannot comprehend* of a time that did not have constant change and more information available than anyone could ever hope to learn. So, Xers' comfort with change and ambiguity was learned in the school of hard knocks. The result is that getting something a certain, desired way and then working to maintain a status quo is not only something Xers would not naturally do, it would also be viewed as inadvisable or even impossible.

Xers also view diversity much differently than previous generations. Community colleges are arguably the most diverse higher education institutions in America. The community colleges' commitment to open access results in a diverse student body requiring multiple teaching strategies. An instructor can have a class composed of teenagers to senior citizens from several ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds with academic abilities ranging from semiliterate to merit scholar... Above all else, the future faculty member needs to be committed to working with and empowering students with widely diverse backgrounds, motivations, work habits, and goals (Murray, 1999).

Having such a diverse student body, most community colleges are continually attempting to diversify faculty, staff, and administration. From a social perspective, Xers will likely find this very natural, considering their internalization of *diverse forms of diversity*. Older colleagues, though, may have a more external orientation to diversity. Consequently, each group may have different diversity training needs. Baby Boomers and Traditionalists may respond well to training that exposes them to diversity. Xers, by contrast, would probably rather experience diversity than view it. They will see attempts to expose them to diversity as superficial, and will most likely push for a social environment where diversity is a given rather than a program.

Another social consideration is that Xers often prefer an informal environment. As a result, they can be perceived by elder generations as less professional. Conversely, the more formal structures and processes inherent in traditional bureaucracies are viewed by Xers as stifling and boring. Again, social implications are enormous- particularly regarding respect. Since Xers are very outcome-focused, they respect the creation of positive outcomes. Traditional bureaucracies that are more process-focused, then, frustrate Xers. People within those bureaucracies who support process and control (especially when they do so to the detriment of improved outcomes) run the social risk of losing Xers' respect. As unwieldy as it may seem, Xers need to be mentored as to *why* the process is relevant- if it is indeed relevant- because they cannot possibly know the history.

This is an important point where Xers can be a value-add; pragmatic Xers will shrewdly evaluate processes and help revise them to improve both efficiency and effectiveness. However, older generations who created the current processes, procedures, and organizational structures must realize that Xers have no sacred cows. Xers are interested in two main things- outputting creativity and achieving immediate, impactful, self-sustaining solutions. Their efforts are not intended to disrespect current structures; they just do not believe that any structure is permanent and have difficulty understanding why anyone would attempt to statically maintain something that might be improved.

### **Legal Considerations**

There were no overtly apparent legal considerations differentiating Xers from other generational cohorts. Literature reviewed and dialogue during interviews might indicate that Xers are likely to appreciate reduction of bureaucracy and a relatively free environment without many legal restrictions. However, this does not mean that Xers would function much differently regarding legal issues. The fast pace at which Xers tend to operate might afford clues as to how training on legalities could be successfully implemented. Pragmatic, involved training such as role-playing delivered in an up-tempo fashion is likely to work well. Xers will appreciate the visual imagery associated with this type of

training effort. On the contrary, legal training that relies heavily upon written text information would probably be much less effective.

### **Economic Considerations**

Xers have a drastically different view of economics than older generations. Baby Boomers, raised by Depression-era parents, were continually taught to maintain financial security rather than pursue risky financial ventures or career moves. Boomers also reached adulthood at a time of economic expansion in the United States. The career world encouraged Boomers to work long and hard; show face time at all costs; and please the boss in order to ensure job security, financial advancement, and career opportunity in the company. Xers have a nearly opposite perspective. They matured during economic recession and corporate downsizing where dues-paying Boomers and Traditionalists were laid off, often after many years of loyalty within one organization. Additionally, with so many young to middle aged Baby Boomers just ahead of them on the career ladder (firmly entrenched to stay there) and the rapid changes of the technology era, Xers faced a career world where staying in one job meant becoming obsolete. This is pertinent to community colleges, because compensation structures were set up to reward the needs of The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers. Xers have different needs.



Tenure, for example- long seen as a reward ensuring security- offers little reward for Xers. Most Xers intend to stay within one job for two to five years rather than 25-30. Thus, tenure that is so paramount to traditional educators has little appeal for Xers. Further, pay structures in most community colleges are set up to reward longevity and experience. Those structures support employees who are interested in job security. Again, Xers simply have different needs. Xers view job security as a myth; they want career security. And, Xer work goals (particularly professional Xers who will fill administrative and faculty vacancies) are focused on outcome achievement. These Xers will increasingly demand pay for performance, or they will simply change jobs or careers after becoming frustrated with salary schedules that reward more experienced, yet sometimes less competent peers.

A better alternative for Xers would be to revise salary structures to award pay for performance. Additionally, instead of offering tenure, community colleges should consider compensation packages that include flexible time structures and ongoing educational opportunities. Many Xers would rather learn new skills that enhance career security than specialize in one area and risk becoming de-motivated chasing a job security myth that they do not believe in or desire.

This concept presents much challenge to established organizational practices aimed at maintaining low employee turnover and predictable budget

control. Maintaining a healthy budget, though, would be possible by utilizing incentives of flexibility and ongoing educational opportunities rather than just increasing pay for good performance. Pertinent to understanding how this might work, and to comprehending inherent challenges, is realizing that Xer expectations are not the same as previous generations. For instance, Xers do not usually expect everyone at an equal level, with the same amount of experience, or with an equivalent job title to be paid the same. However, that generally *is* the expectation of Baby Boomers and The Silent Generation.

Providing that literature reviewed was accurate and interviewees were sincere, Xers would rather have customized leadership and customized earnings. That would allow an Xer to build his or her own career and financial security, and would likely motivate the Xer to self-actualize to the highest level possible. Tradition-oriented community college administrators and faculty, though, could easily find such a compensation plan threatening. It would threaten their primary need- job security. Thus, communication of needs, expectations, and mutual respect are again paramount.

A blended transitional salary structure might be advisable to smooth the generational shift. Perhaps incoming Xer employees could be given a choice to participate in the traditional salary structure or choose another option. An alternative that utilized flexibility and training incentives (as well as some measure of pay increase for exceptional performance if possible) would likely hit

a home run with Xers. Current employees from older generations, given the same choice, would have an opportunity to maintain their own job security by choosing to stay within the traditional structure. Thus, any threat they may feel by a new approach would be negated. In other words, a “both/and” scenario would probably work much better than an “either/or” situation- even though it would increase complexity. Increased complexity by customizing leadership practices to meet Xer needs is consistent with literature and interview data, and should be expected to successfully meet Xer leadership needs.

The current economic climate at the time of this study should also be considered. After a period of growth and abundance in the 1990’s, economic strife (as this study is written in early 2003) has again become a reality. “...America’s private and public employers are undergoing a continuous process of job elimination and job creation as a necessary and competitive technique.” (Zeiss, 2000). The stock market is volatile, and businesses in the public and private sector are rearranging themselves in a “rightsizing” effort described by Zeiss. This must be utterly disconcerting to recent and impending retirees who have spent a lifetime saving and planning. Xers, on the other hand, are more skeptical by nature. Though decreasing state aid and a federal shift diminishing grants and increasing loan burdens are important, as is the overall economic downturn, it is less likely to bother Xers. They are more likely to view such events as pragmatic problems that need a solution- just the kind of challenges

Xers thrive on. Nor are Xers likely to find such economic downturn as stressful as elder peers. Xers are in earlier stages of retirement planning and have many working years left in which to grow their financial portfolios.

### **Educational Considerations**

Clearly evident in both literature and interviews, Xers are learning-centered and motivated by learning experiences. There is again a discrepancy between professional Xers and service level Xers. While both generational sectors may value ongoing training and educational opportunities, professional Xers are likely to want and need continual learning even more than service level Xers. Training opportunities for service level Xer employees, then, might best be offered to improve workplace efficiency. Professional Xers will probably need more extensive ongoing learning and an immersive, learning-centered environment aimed at increased *effectiveness and contribution*. Thus, the educational needs of each sector within Generation X will be satisfied.

The Learning College climate affords a transformational, learning-centered environment with many opportunities for Xer learning and inclusion. Peter Senge (1990) described learning organizations as creative, inclusive, innovative, collective, and an environment where people perpetually learn how to learn together. One preferred Xer method of learning apparent during interviews is mentoring. Again, the Learning College mantra is an outstanding fit. Properly

paired with good mentoring programs, creation or augmentation of a Learning College may also have social and political benefits within the community college. While Xers would be allowed inclusion and an ongoing learning environment designed to stimulate collaboration and continuous quality improvement, Baby Boomer and Silent Generation peers would have constant opportunities to mentor Xers. If Boomers and retiring Traditionalists can mentor Xers as consultants rather than in a directive manner, then Xers are likely to flourish while building good communications bridges and lasting relationships. In this manner, outstanding traditions might be preserved while outdated processes could be appropriately revised.

### **Political Considerations**

Political implications of an impending Xer plurality in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century American community colleges are enormous. Though older Xers were often depicted in interviews as able to understand organizational politics and function fairly successfully within existing structures, younger Xers were described as more irreverent and more likely to just ignore political considerations. An important limitation to note, however, is that all twelve interviewees were from the older half of Generation X. As such, their perception of younger Xers was presented from their own perspective rather than from the perspective of younger Xers. If their views are accurate, then older Xers may find themselves in the role

of mentor- teaching younger Xers how to successfully navigate organizational politics.

Important points to consider are, again, related to understanding differences inherent in how Xers perceive organizational politics compared to traditional views. Since Xers place little value in titles, the “Ultimate Chair” title or position that elder peers have spent a lifetime respecting and aspiring to holds insignificant power over Xers. A comment made by a Baby Boomer working as a dean and observed in a community college new student orientation during the summer of 2000 exemplifies the very disparate generational viewpoints. Upon introduction, a new student asked, “What’s a dean?” The Baby Boomer holding the position replied, “I’m the one with the reserved parking spot. I worked twenty-five years to get that parking spot...” Conversation among Xers afterward indicated a loss of respect for the dean and even ridicule that it had taken as long as twenty-five years to get a reserved parking spot. Xers dismissed the hierarchical, authoritative comments made by the dean as irrelevant. In fact, from an Xer perspective, the comments only served to undermine the dean’s power and influence rather than bolster it.

When confronted with practices contradictory to inclusion and mutual respect, as in the aforementioned case, Xers create their own power structure to operate and successfully interact within existing organizational power and politics. Thus, power vested in a title is not real power to Xers. Xers who aspire

to higher titles are likely to do so in order to provide more support and impact within the organization, and to have more freedom to creatively produce solutions. Since they do not tend to view the positions as holding intrinsic power, they are less likely to seek advancements to gain power over others.

Once again, the possibility exists for misunderstanding- in this case due to incongruent perspectives about what is politically important or relevant. Another example, obvious in both literature review and interviews, is the concept of face time. As covered in earlier chapters, Boomers view face time as an important and strategic tool to help them impress the boss, ensure job security, and position for professional advancement. It is a political maneuver designed to demonstrate worth. Xers regard worth differently. For Xers, face time is seen as wasted time. Demonstrating worth, for Xers, means producing outstanding results efficiently and effectively. Thus, face time is not viewed by Xers as a necessary political strategy. It is more likely to be viewed as a demonstration of inefficiency.

On a broader scope, district-wide and statewide politics are important for any community college district. Learning-centeredness and inclusive mentoring once more present a model for successful intergenerational dynamics. Xers were described in literature and interviews as socially liberal and fiscally conservative, though often disengaged politically. A higher percentage of Xers register to vote as independents than previous generations who more often choose a specific political party affiliation. Thus, the importance of politics must be impressed

upon Xers who tend to undervalue political process- and the best way to do so is to involve them in political learning opportunities with follow-up dialogue about how to solve related problems.

At the district level, implementation of the Carver model for Board of Trustees policy governance will most likely be strongly favored by Xers who detest micromanagement. A major tenet of the Carver Model is that the Board is a policy-making entity, while the President is responsible for administering the college (Smith, 2000).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Xers and other generational groups alike might all appreciate Richardson's (1993) four step process for ethical decision making: 1) Recognize the problem; 2) Use all information ensuring that it is factual and fair; 3) Decide what to do with the information; and 4) Be accountable to self and others by being able to explain the decision. Therefore, there does not appear to be a great difference in how Xers view ethics. Xer strength, however, likely lies in steps #1 and #3 from Richardson's model. Shrewd and pragmatic Xers easily delineate problems and actively move to tangible solutions, so their value-add in organizational ethics will probably include problem identification and action to reach resolutions.



## **SUMMARY**

In 1971, William Moore, Jr. wrote that the unprecedented numbers of new community college administrators across the country were like blind men on a freeway. The current, tremendous wave of retirements in community college leadership roles will put Xers in a similar position. However, a lifetime of problem solving and early maturation for professional Xers has positioned them well to lead American community colleges through the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Xers are not likely to lead the same as previous generations. They will more likely adapt as they go- customizing leadership inclusively and supportively with a focus on self-sustaining outcomes. A learning-centered approach with inclusion, empowerment, and good mentoring is the vehicle that will promote successful interaction between Xers and other generations. Properly encouraged, people from all generational groups with diverse perspectives will continually transform community colleges to meet contemporary and future needs. A kaleidoscope effect will result (Fuchs, 1990); and each learner, instructor, staff member, and leader will add to the community college social and cultural mosaic.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

While Xers were viewed primarily as stakeholders for this research project, the question of organizational culture and how Xers impact and are

affected by that culture arose and would merit further study. The following questions might be included in subsequent research:

- How and to what extent do Xers currently impact organizational culture?
- How much effect will they have on it as they rise in numbers and positions of influence?
- Will Xers (or any generational cohort that numerically dominates the workplace) create their own culture?
- Are Generation X research findings suggesting that there is a *generational-centric* dynamic similar to Afro-centric (Warfield-Coppock, 1995) or feminist (Gilligan, 1982) theory?
- Or, might Generation X be considered an oppressed generational cohort, as some authors implied?
- Is the post-1995 Xer rhetoric the language of the oppressed; the language of a generation needing a voice and now old enough and educated enough to speak; or is it perhaps both?
- If Xers are a good fit for learning organizations, is it because they happen to fit contemporary needs, or did the learning organization paradigm develop, in part, as a response to Xers' needs?

The qualitative approach from a Constructivist/Interpretivist perspective utilized in this study may encourage further study by quantitative researchers who might seek to expand upon the research. Subsequent researchers might use quantitative data to test ideas generated in this study via deductive logic and then make generalizations about leading Xers in American community colleges.

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## **Vita**

Allen Floyd Goben was born in Chariton, Iowa on April 9, 1968, the son of Mirella (Segalotto) Goben and Aulden Allen Goben. After graduating from Mormon Trail High School (Garden Grove, Iowa) in 1986, he entered Indian Hills Community College (Ottumwa, Iowa). Transfers to Iowa Central Community College (Fort Dodge, Iowa) in 1988 and Iowa State University (Ames, Iowa) in 1990 led to a Bachelor of Science degree in History, awarded at Iowa State University in May 1993. After coaching throughout undergraduate studies, as well as working other jobs to pay for college, he worked full time as a teacher and coach in secondary schools before moving to the post-secondary level as an admissions and marketing representative in 1996-97 for DeVry Institutes of Technology (Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois). In January of 1997, he began graduate studies at Drake University (Des Moines, Iowa), majoring in school counseling. Throughout graduate studies, he worked as a school counselor- first in 1997-98 at Southeast Warren Community Schools (Liberty Center, Iowa), then from 1998-2001 at Indian Hills Community College (Ottumwa, Iowa). Concurrently, he completed his Master of Science in Education degree with a School Counseling major at Drake University in May 1999. He entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin in May 2001 in the Community College Leadership Program, Department of Educational Administration, College of Education. After completing a doctoral internship at Central Arizona College (Coolidge, Arizona) in the fall of 2002, he accepted a position as Dean of Academic Affairs and Workforce Development at Central Arizona College in January 2003.

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