Forging an Identity: An Insider-outsider Study of Processes Involved in the Formation of Organizational Identity

Dennis A. Gioia
The Pennsylvania State University
Kristin N. Price
Deceased
Aimee L. Hamilton
The Pennsylvania State University
James B. Thomas
The Pennsylvania State University

We investigated the processes involved in forming an organizational identity, which we studied during the founding of a distinctive new college by using an interpretive, insider-outsider research approach. The emergent grounded theory model suggests that organizational identity formed via the interplay of eight notable processes, four of which occurred in more-or-less sequential, stage-like fashion—(1) articulating a vision, (2) experiencing a meanings void, (3) engaging in experiential contrasts, and (4) converging on a consensual identity—plus four recurrent processes that were associated with two or more of the sequential stages: (5) negotiating identity claims, (6) attaining optimal distinctiveness, (7) performing liminal actions, and (8) assimilating legitimizing feedback. The findings show that internal and external, as well as micro and macro influences affected the forging of an organizational identity. In addition, we found that both social construction and social actor views of identity-related processes were not only germane to the formation of organizational identity but that these processes were also mutually constitutive in creating a workable identity.

No concept is more essential to understanding the notion of a "self" in society than the idea of identity (Mead, 1934; Erickson, 1959). In recent years, the reach of the identity concept has extended to more macro levels of analysis and now is becoming central to understanding what it means to be an organization in society as well (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Ashforth, Rogers, and Corley, 2010). The study of organizational identity is now a flourishing domain among organizational theorists and researchers. Since Albert and Whetten's (1985) foundational piece, researchers have embraced the idea of organizational identity and explored its implications in a variety of settings (e.g., Adler and Adler, 1988; Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, and Hunt, 1998). Identity has been found to serve as an important but usually subliminal guide for many consequential organizational activities, including strategic decision making and issue interpretation (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Glynn, 2000; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003), organizational change (Reger et al., 1994; Chreim, 2005; Martins, 2005; Nag, Corley, and Gioia, 2007), and how organizations approach relationships with stakeholders (Brickson, 2005). Although there have been a number of studies that deal with ongoing organizational identity construction (e.g., Fiol, 2002; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Coupland and Brown, 2004) and a few studies that deal with some facets of identity formation in organizations (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1998; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger, 2007), there has been no comprehensive study of how organizational identity forms from inception.

In the existing literature, the origins of organizational identity have tended to be taken for granted as (1) an expression of founders' values (e.g., Stinchcombe, 1965; Fligstein, 1987; Baron, Hannan, and Burton, 1999, 2001; Hannan et al., 2006), (2) derived from industry membership (e.g., Rao, Davis, and

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Ward, 2000) or organizational form (e.g., Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000; Polós, Hannan, and Carroll, 2002; Hsu and Hannan, 2005; Hannan, Polós, and Carroll, 2007), or (3) assumed to come about via other processes that have not been adequately studied. Scott and Lane (2000) employed what could be called the invisible hand of the founder approach when they argued that founders' and leaders' expressions of core organizational values, as well as the actions taken to disseminate these values, influence identity construction. Their conceptual treatment portrayed founders and leaders as people who make sense of the organization's mission and values and also "give sense" to members (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) via expressions that make the organization distinct from others and characterize the organization over longer periods of time. Consistent with this stance, Rodrigues and Child (2008: 888) noted that "the organization as a social actor is likely to be heavily conditioned by the identity that its leading group articulates for it." These perspectives share an apparent presumption that understanding identity formation processes is largely unnecessary because an organization's identity can be readily inferred from industry membership and/or the founder's vision. Certainly both industry category and founders' blueprints are important influences that circumscribe identity formation, but they do not give us adequate insight into important elements of identity or the actual processes by which identity forms. Coarse-grained categorizations and founding visions, in general, provide only partial understandings of identity in the same way that noting an individual's gender or ethnicity does not give us deep insight into key aspects of her or his identity or the processes by which that identity was formed. As Stryker and Burke (2000: 291) put it, "identity cannot simply be inferred from social locations."

To our knowledge, only three works have studied organizational identity formation, per se. Each touches only on some limited aspects of identity construction, but collectively they serve as a good point of departure for a more holistic consideration of identity formation. Czarniawska and Wolff (1998) studied two new universities in already established educational fields. One university succeeded because it acquired an identity that was in accord with its institutional field and therefore was acknowledged as "one of us" by the other universities in the region. The other failed because it remained a "stranger" in its institutional field. The comparative cases do not address the specifics of the identity formation process that took place within either university, but they offer potential clues to two important aspects of that process. First, the cases suggest that new organizations may attempt to mimic existing organizations. Second, how new organizations present themselves to their external audiences may be critical, not only to the formation of their identities but also to their survival. Similarly, Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger (2007) noted that identity construction occurs within the wider context of the industry in which an organization competes, so identity is defined with reference to rivals and non-rivals (see also Porac et al., 1995). Based on their study of firms within the developing industry of business coaching, Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger (2007: 509) argued that members undertake identity construction work "not for its own sake, but to facilitate legitimacy formation as the

endorsement and support of their organization's actions and goals." The authors surmised that members were compelled to do the identity construction work because the industry itself was new and therefore did not provide a clear categorical imperative on which new firms could base their identity. They did not directly address this assumption in their study, but their findings do suggest that resolving ambiguity is an important part of the identity formation process, as Corley and Gioia (2004) previously noted in studying a company as it tried to establish itself as an independent entity after it was spun off from a *Fortune 100* firm. They found that the most important insight for understanding the identity of the spin-off was the issue of coping with "identity ambiguity" and deciding who it wanted to be in its competitive domain. In addition, they found that the leaders' sensegiving attempts, choice of new industry referents, and discrepancies between identity and "construed external image" (see Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) were also important to establishing the spin-off's identity. Taken together, these three studies of organizational identity formation suggest that the process is likely to involve attempts both to attain legitimacy through mimetic processes and to construct some dimensions of distinctiveness within the organizational field, as well as a receptive external context for those efforts.

These general conclusions are in accord with related work that suggests the importance of membership in group, industrial, or organizational fields. Tajfel and Turner (1986), for instance, emphasized that people and groups identify themselves according to category membership, and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) noted a similar tendency for organizations to define themselves in terms of other organizations in a given industry. Scott (2001) proposed that mimetic mechanisms provide a cognitive foundation for the construction of identity, and Porac, Wade, and Pollock (1999: 271) argued that industry categories serve as an "interpretive core" from which firms derive their identity. Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) noted that an identity claim gains legitimacy when that claim accords with its wider context, and Pedersen and Dobbin (2006) argued that organizations create legitimacy by adopting recognizable forms and delineate identity by touting their uniqueness.

In addition to the three above-noted studies that deal explicitly with aspects of identity creation, there are a number of other studies that consider the issue of organizational identity change (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Reger et al., 1994; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Fiol, 2002; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). To the extent that these works delve into the processes through which identity change takes place, they supply some possible grounds for understanding organizational identity formation because similar dynamics might be involved. The main theoretical footing provided by these studies is that they tend to affirm two general notions: that adapting to external forces is an important influence on identity change and that both internal and external images of the organization matter in prompting attempts to change identity, especially discrepancies between internal and external identity/image perceptions (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). Related processes could

influence identity formation as well. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000), for instance, argued that interactions among members, as well as interactions between insiders and outsiders affect organizational identity. Similarly, discursive approaches to understanding identity emphasize that "self-other" discourse is critical to identity construction (see Ybema et al., 2009). More generally, social identities are affected by sets of meanings that an actor (person, organization, country) attributes to itself while adopting the perspective of other significant parties, as Wendt (1994) noted in considering international relations. Or, as Mead (1934) and Berger and Luckmann (1966) observed, social actors form identities by learning, via interaction, to see themselves as others do. At the same time that people and groups define themselves in terms of attributes that are central to the collectivity, they also attend to their differences relative to others (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Steele, 1988). At the individual level, Brewer (1991) argued that people attempt to achieve a state of "optimal distinctiveness"—sufficiently similar to a preferred group, but different enough to be distinctive.

Taken together, these works—from the micro/individual level of analysis (Mead, 1934) to the macro/national level of analysis (Wendt, 1994)—imply that organizational identity formation is likely to be a complex process subject to multiple influences and infused with ambiguity and one in which organizational identity is not defined solely by founders and leaders but negotiated by both insiders and outsiders. Yet, even taken together, these works provide only limited insight into how the interplay of such processes might affect the actual formation of an organizational identity. Legitimacy-seeking, for instance, is certainly one functional explanation for why organizational members engage in identity construction, but it does not explain how. Existing work thus provides a limited understanding of how organizational identity forms in nascent organizations, a process we examine here. In this study, we delve into the processes and practices that lead to the emergence of a new organizational identity.

At the individual level, Linstead and Thomas (2002: 5) have characterized the identity formation process as "managing the tension between the unfolding demands presented by the answers to the continuously posed questions 'What do you [the organization] want from me?' and 'What do I want to be in the future?'" The former question has to do with one's identity as a social actor in organizational space, while the latter question has to do with the social construction of a personal identity. Yet these questions are not discrete; they are inextricably intertwined. Elevated to the organizational level, these questions also represent the two dominant perspectives in the study of organizational identity: the social construction and the social actor views of identity, reflected in our two guiding research questions: How do members of a nascent organization develop a collective understanding of "who we are as an organization?" and How does a newly created organization develop a sense of itself as a social actor in its field or industry?

Perhaps the liveliest current debate in the organizational identity literature concerns whether researchers should

construe identity from the aforementioned social construction or social actor perspectives (Whetten and Mackey, 2002; Corley et al., 2006; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Whetten, 2006). As noted, according to the social constructionist view, identity involves members' negotiation of shared meanings about "who we are as an organization" and places the focus of attention on the shared interpretive schemes that members collectively construct to provide meaning to their organizational experience (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000; Whetten, 2006). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) noted that this view implies an emphasis on the sensemaking processes associated with the social construction of identity as meanings and meaning structures are intersubjectively negotiated among organizational members themselves (see also Fiol, 1991). According to the social actor view, however, organizational identity is a property of the organization itself as an entity, or social actor (see Whetten and Mackey, 2002; King, Felin, and Whetten, 2010), and is discernable mainly by the patterns of an organization's entity-level commitments and actions (Corley et al., 2006). Whetten (2006) called these commitments the identity claims, or referents, that signify the organization's self-determined and self-defining position in social space. Within that social space, identity is also a contextualized and comparative phenomenon that identifies the organization as being like some organizations and unlike others (Glynn and Abzug, 2002; Rao, Monin, and Durand, 2003). In this view, organizations are more than social collectives, in part because society treats organizations as if they were individuals, assigning them legal status as collective social actors. The social actor perspective, therefore, treats organizational identity essentially as a set of institutional claims that explicitly articulates who the organization is and what it represents. Such public claims ostensibly supply a consistent and legitimated narrative to all concerned parties, thus facilitating the construction of a collective sense of an organizational self (Czarniawska, 1997; Whetten and Mackey, 2002). The important point in this view is that the locus of organizational identity does not reside mainly in the interpretation of the members, but more in the institutional claims associated with the organization (Corley et al., 2006; Whetten, 2006). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) noted that this conception tends to emphasize the sensegiving function of identity, linking identity construction to the need to provide a coherent guide for how the members of an organization should behave and how other organizations should relate to them (Whetten, 2006). Most notably, Whetten (2006) argued that the social actor conception undermines the stance that organizational members' own collective beliefs about the organization should solely define an organizational identity.

The impression left in the literature is that these finely drawn positions are quite disparate, perhaps to the point of bordering on mutually exclusive stances, but it is not clear that they are. We studied the formation of an identity by an organization that aspired to be a member of a domain that was itself forming, so we had an opportunity to address the issue of whether social construction and social actor views were relatively exclusive or somehow reconcilable. The social actor perspective typically presumes an existing identity; yet in our

case study, there was no clear, fully formed, external point of reference that the organization could use as a definitive basis for its claims. Further, we were examining a developing organizational identity, so looking solely at claims made by the organization mainly would have illustrated the content of the identity (a declarative statement about the organization, i.e., what the elements of an identity are). Although content is interesting, we were most interested in understanding how an organizational identity develops (an interrogative process, i.e., how does identity form?). Given our process orientation, when we launched this study we initially focused mainly on the sensemaking (Weick, 1979) and sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) processes that people employed as they interacted and negotiated with each other and with their environment to arrive at some understanding about who they are. Yet it became apparent to us as we considered the empirical evidence that identity formation also involved key processes concerning the legitimization and consolidation of the new organization's self-defined position in its social field (i.e., its identity as a social actor). We found that viewing organizational identity formation simultaneously from social construction and social actor perspectives not only produced a better sense of the processes and practices involved in the forging of an identity but also provided an avenue for understanding these processes not merely as complementary (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) but, rather, as mutually recursive and constitutive.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

We gathered data from five types of sources during the founding of the College of Interdisciplinary Technology Studies (CITS, a pseudonym) within State University (or State U, also a pseudonym): (a) semi-structured interviews with people involved in the formation of the school (the Appendix shows the generic protocol), (b) archival data from CITS during its embryonic years, including meeting minutes, (c) archived communications (written and electronic) by faculty, staff, and administration to inside and outside stakeholders during the formation process, (d) non-participant observation, and (e) the founding CITS dean's private journals, chronicling CITS's history in real time as recorded in his meeting notes, memos, reflections, etc., for his personal use in documenting the early history of CITS. The CITS dean himself served as our primary informant; initial interviews with him identified other founding members who could provide insight, whom we also interviewed—i.e., we used a "snowball technique" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to identify members of CITS so we could investigate how CITS formed a new organizational identity. Overall, we conducted 33 formal interviews in years 4 through 7 of CITS's history and many informal interviews, including interviews with the five original faculty members, additional present-day faculty, staff, alumni, and State U's president and provost. Each formal interview was 30–70 minutes in length, digitally recorded, and then transcribed. Table 1 displays a detailed list of all data sources, as well as the audience and source for whom that information was created.

Table 1

Data Inventory

Data type	Quantity	Original data source	Original (intended) data audience
Interviews	33	Informants	Analysis for this study
Strategic report	42 pages	Strategic Planning Committee	CITS Planning Committee, State U President, and Provost
Chronological journals	6, with 1,660 pages total	CITS dean	Personal use and record keeping
Bi-weekly e-mail reports	7, covering the 13 months prior to CITS's launch date	Assistant to the provost	Provost
Archival records	Approximately 10,000 documents	Meeting minutes, letters, notes, copies of speeches, and memos spanning 4 years	Committee members, letters to state leaders, other campuses, colleges, universities, state governor
CITS Strategic Plan Report (years 8–11)	A six-year review and plan for the future; 50 pages	CITS Dean's Office	CITS stakeholders, including donors, faculty, potential new hires, recruiters, and industry leaders
Observational data	Approximately 100 hours	Principal investigator's notes from two 3-day industry conferences at State U	Analysis for this study
Conference video	1 hour, 29 minutes	Taped by professional videographer	Conference attendees; members of information schools
Conference minutes	63 pages	Compilation of notes written by 10 different conference participants	Conference attendees
Materials from peer schools (e.g., promotional materials, letters from the dean)	272 pages, from approximately 15 information school programs	Corporate communication offices, public relations offices of individual information schools	Potential students and their families, donors, and recruiters
CITS in-house document	4 pages	CITS dean	CITS career center, recruiters, new employees
CITS Web site		In-house corporate communications office materials	Prospective and current students, faculty, donors, and recruiters, and the general public

Purposeful Sampling

We employed purposeful sampling (Kumar, Stern, and Anderson, 1993) of all key informants who had insight into the formation of CITS or unique access to knowledge of organizational history, strategies, and actions. Purposeful sampling was an integral part of the constant comparison technique we employed, repeatedly comparing data across informants and over time (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and was a critical part of the data gathering stage of this study. Overall, our interpretive approach involved an iterative process of simultaneously collecting data, analyzing the data, and seeking new informants based on information deemed important by prior informants. This process resulted in an evolving and increasingly focused sample until no additional embellishment of emerging themes occurred, or what Glaser and Strauss (1967) termed "theoretical saturation," as we worked to develop a grounded theory of organizational identity formation.

Categorical Analysis

We began our analysis by identifying relevant concepts in the data and grouping them into categories (open coding). For this analytical step, we used in-vivo (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) or first-order (Van Maanen, 1979) codes (i.e., terms and language adequate at the level of meaning of the informants) whenever possible, or a simple descriptive phrase when an in-vivo code was not available. Next, we engaged in axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), wherein we searched for relationships between and among these categories and assembled them into higher-order themes.

We coded the data using NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis program, to keep track of emerging categories. Doing so allowed for quick reference to similar concepts and their representative examples that could be collapsed into fewer categories and themes, as well as collections of examples that needed to be parsed into more fine-grained categories. We allowed concepts to continue emerging until we had a clear sense of the developing relationships among categories and their related themes and until additional interviews and analyses failed to reveal new relationships. We made statements of findings only if we corroborated a given finding across multiple informants (to mitigate the possibility of problems associated with retrospective accounts). Representative quotes, therefore, represent only corroborated findings.

Insider-outsider Approach

As an additional feature of this research project, we employed an insider-outsider approach (Evered and Louis, 1981; Bartunek, Foster-Fishman, and Keys, 1996; Bartunek and Louis, 1996) to give voice to a knowledgeable insider who could best articulate the rationales for conceptions and actions that affected the formation and development of this new organization. During the execution of the research, we also decided to engage our primary informant, the founding CITS dean, as an inside researcher who would later offer post-hoc, overarching "metacommentary" on the findings. In this sense, he was simultaneously an "actor" involved in the formation of CITS's identity and an analytical "observer" of the process. The dean was a true knowledgeable "double agent," in that he was simultaneously familiar with the practical difficulties of founding a new organization and also well informed about the conceptual issues involved because he had been a management scholar who understood organizational strategy in theoretical terms.

The dean provided many insightful commentaries throughout the findings in his role as primary informant. Because of the key role of the dean, however, we needed to take steps to avoid insider bias, so he did not participate in the analyses of the data that the outside researchers conducted. The other authors were researchers who had no direct connection to the school. By presenting ourselves as outsiders, while offering informants assurances that the dean would not have access to the data and that all first-order data would be reported anonymously, the outside researchers were able to maintain a scholarly distance, thus allowing immersion in the study while minimizing bias. We reserve the term "dean's

metacommentary" for his post-analysis remarks because they took an encompassing view not only of the findings concerning a given theme but also of the entire study. The dean made these metacommentaries when we presented our findings to him after we had gathered all data and completed the initial theme analyses. We were able to corroborate the content of his remarks with the chronological journal entries, thus allaying concerns about the potential for bias in retrospective interview data. The dean's metacommentaries also offer a form of member check on the analysis, i.e., verification with an informant that an analysis is credible, as well as further theoretical and practical insight into the phenomena we observed. We present selected quotations from the dean's metacommentaries following the discussion of each of the second-order themes in the findings below.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

To ensure that our analyses met Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness, we employed two additional techniques. The first was "peer debriefing" between the outside researchers. One of the authors had primary responsibility for gathering and initially analyzing the interview data. The other outside researchers adopted a more general orientation—noting areas requiring more data, formulating follow-up interview questions, playing "devil's advocate" by offering alternative explanations for developing findings, and considering the data at a level beyond the details contained in the large qualitative database. All outside authors were involved in the actual data analysis so that the credibility of the findings would not rely solely on the interpretations of a single analyst. Consistent with this approach, and as a second procedure aimed at ensuring trustworthiness, we performed two separate intercoder agreement assessments. In both, disagreements between coders served as the basis for discussions about how to strengthen the codes and thus improve the trustworthiness of the interpretations. In the first, we calculated intercoder agreement among the outside researchers on the relationship between the first-order categories and the second-order themes. The researcher who conducted the initial data analysis gave each of the other outside researchers a selection of first-order categories and requested that they sort them into the emergent second-order themes. That intercoder agreement was 0.91. The outside researchers discussed all discrepancies in coding until they reached a unanimous decision about how to code each discrepancy. In the second assessment, the researcher responsible for initial data analysis asked three other coders, all familiar with qualitative methods but with no attachment to this study, to sort data samples that were representative examples of first-order categories into the second-order themes that the outside researchers had generated from their analyses. She provided each independent coder with definitions of the second-order themes, when requested by the coders. She then calculated the average agreement level of each coder with the overall coding scheme; the agreement level was 90.6 percent, indicating a high level of agreement. We believe that these two assessments demonstrate the credibility of our analysis; as is always possible with interpretive research,

however, other researchers might draw somewhat different conclusions from the same empirical materials that we analyzed.

CREATING A NEW ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Contextual Background

By the mid 1990s, industry and state leaders were asking universities to produce qualified information-science-oriented graduates for the state's workforce. Other universities within the state's education system were not fulfilling the needs of the state's industries, and an opportunity existed to create a school specifically tailored to meet their information-related needs. The president of State University therefore announced the need for "greater strength in the area of information sciences and technology" (State of the University Address, Year 1). He concluded that State U should develop a school to focus on integrating technology, information, and users, which would educate students for the changing demands of the workforce. Programs loosely related to the one proposed were in place at approximately ten other universities in North America. The president proposed the outline of a vision for a future-oriented school, within the larger domain of information technology-related education yet built from the ground up, not replicating any other program in the country. It would be housed in its own new building on the State U campus and would produce graduates well prepared for working in the information age. This new school would eventually become the College of Interdisciplinary Technology Studies (CITS), a school separate from existing functional schools and programs at State U. The interpretation of this guiding vision by the soon-to-be-appointed dean eventually began to emphasize a multidisciplinary character. Though contained within a larger university, CITS was structured to operate as an "autonomous start up" ($Faculty_{12}$).[1] The new dean reported directly to the university provost, and CITS controlled its own major operating functions. CITS had considerable autonomy, but it did still exist within the context of State U's image and "brand." As the dean told us,

> [CITS's] identity was clearly going to be embedded within [State U]. . . . We did not want to lose sight of the mother ship, but we wanted to be seen as distinctive within the larger community of I-schools [information-oriented schools]. We wanted to leverage the brand and the stability and safety of the mother ship, but emphasize our distinctiveness within the I-school group.

Table 2 presents the chronology of events, as well as our data collection points, in relation to the creation and development of CITS. Our timeline for CITS's identity formation process begins in Year 0, when the president established a feasibility committee to study the possibility of creating an information-related program at State U.[2] This group of fifteen people consisted of faculty from around the university and several administrators and was chaired by the university's executive vice president of research/provost. The group formed the backbone of ten subsequent committees that would all be instrumental in establishing the curricula and administrative policies of CITS. State U's president was continually involved in the initial stages of the formation of CITS, although he

1
For direct quotes from the interviews, the numerical subscript identifies individual faculty members, staff members, or alumni.

2
To simplify our presentation, Year 0 is a term that covers all pertinent events that preceded CITS's formal establishment (a 16-month period).

Table 2

Timeline of Events in CITS's Formation

Month	Activities related to CITS's formation and development	Data sources
	Year 0	
Sept.	Strategic planning committees formed	Archival records (including e-mails)
Jan.	Fortune 500 focus groups formed	Archival records
Feb.	State business and government focus groups formed	Archival records
May	Consultation and benchmarking with departments/colleges	Archival records
	Public release of CITS Strategic Planning Report	Archival records
June	Consultation with Faculty Senate committees	Archival records
July	Approval of plan for external support	Archival records
	Consultation with Faculty Senate Council	Archival records
Aug.	Curriculum committee begins development of Associates and Baccalaureate curriculum for other campuses in university system	Archival records
Sept.	Board of Trustees approves CITS	Archival records
	State of the University Address: State U president announces formation of CITS	Archival records and address transcript
	Search for dean launched	Archival records
	Faculty recruitment and identification of interim space	Archival records
	Recruitment plan for first cohort of students approved	Archival records
Oct.	Follow-up discussions and focus-groups with industry liaisons	Archival records
Nov.	Preliminary proposal for new building approved	Archival records
	Year 1	
Jan.	Dean's journal #1 begins	Journal
Apr.	CITS dean appointed	Archival records
May	Collaborations sought with other colleges and universities in the state	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
July	First faculty appointments; 5 faculty hired	Archival records
Aug.	CITS welcomes first class of undergraduate students	Archival records
Nov.	Building committee is in "schematic design" stage; meets for the second time	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
	Year 2	
Jan.	Dean's journal #2 begins	Journal
June	5 new faculty hired (total faculty now = 9; one of original faculty left)	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
July	Offices expand to larger space, displacing other university employees	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
Sept.	Three program-related minors established	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
	19 campuses in the university system on board and offering CITS program	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
	513 students begin program across all campuses	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
	Year 3	
Jan.	Dean's journal #3 begins	Journal
Apr.	CITS wins first external grant for interdisciplinary research	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
Sept.	Doctoral program begins	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
Oct.	Groundbreaking for new building	Archival records
	Year 4	
Jan.	Dean's journal #4 begins	Journal
Mar.	Major external grant for interdisciplinary research	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
Oct.	Main interviews begin	Interview transcripts

(*continued*)

Table 2 *(continued)*

Month	Activities related to CITS's formation and development	Data sources
	Year 5	
Jan.	Dean's journal #5 begins	Journal
Mar.	Master's program begins	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
May	First full class of baccalaureate students graduates	Archival records
Nov.	New building ready for occupancy	Archival records and informant interview transcripts
	CITS alumni association becomes official	Archival records
	Year 6	
Jan.	Dean's journal #6 begins	Journal
	New building dedicated	Archival records
	Year 7	
Jan.	Dean's journal #7 begins	Journal
July	Main interviews conclude	Field notes
Sept.	Board of Trustees approves transition of school to a college	Follow-up interviews with selected informants
	First annual information school conference at State U	2nd author attends conference
Nov.	CITS dean announces his resignation	Follow-up interview with dean
	Year 8	
Jan.	CITS officially becomes a college	Archival records
May	New dean of CITS is named	Archival records

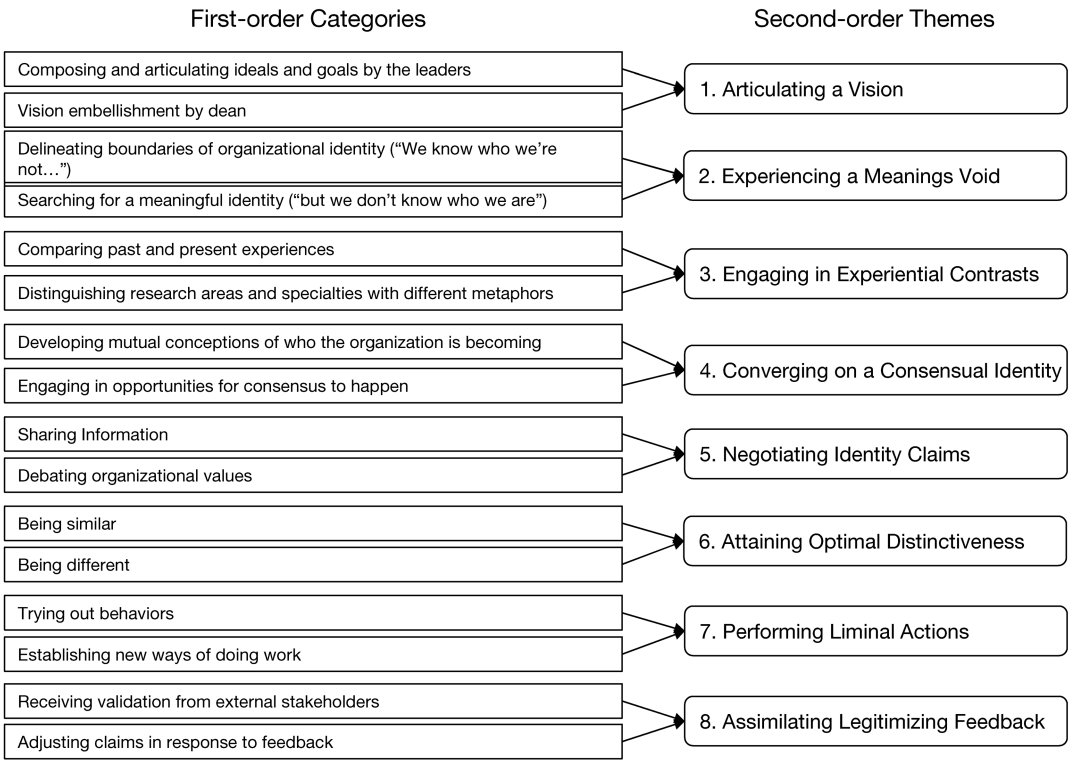
limited his involvement to information sharing, providing fiscal resources, and giving the necessary symbolic support from the university level. Leaders of the initiative, one of whom would later become dean of the new school and another who became the associate dean of research, came from various disciplines within State U. None of the other members of the feasibility committee ended up taking positions within CITS.

CITS's eventual faculty (five faculty hires the first year with approximately five each additional year until Year 7) were trained mostly in specific functional domains (because there were few cross-functional scholars available). Many held joint positions across multiple departments and schools within State U. Prospective faculty published in their respective functional journals but also did multi- and interdisciplinary research and were invested in seeing the program grow in prestige and size. Those hired to join CITS showed evidence that they were interested in, committed to, and able to do research that bridged at least two of the three core dimensions—"information," "people," and "technology"—that were central to CITS's purpose and mission.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 illustrates the structure and ordering of the data from specific, first-order categories used by informants to more general, researcher-induced second-order themes. Because of their direct relevance to identity formation, the second-order themes served as the basis for the subsequent grounded theory of identity formation. Figure 1 is not

Figure 1. Data structure.



intended to be a causal or dynamic model but, rather, is a representation of the core concepts and their relationships that served as the basis for the emergent theoretical framework and a full grounded theory model.

Table 3 presents representative quotations and events that substantiate the second-order themes we identified. The first four themes—articulating a vision, experiencing a meanings void, engaging in experiential contrasts, and converging on a consensual identity—occurred in more-or-less sequential, stage-like fashion. The latter four themes—negotiating identity claims, attaining optimal distinctiveness, performing liminal actions, and assimilating legitimizing feedback—were recurrent and associated with two or more of the sequential stages of identity formation. Together, these sequential and recurrent themes led to the development of the grounded theory, articulated after the findings narrative.

Theme 1: Articulating a Vision

The first step in the identity formation process was the founders' formulation and articulation of the guiding vision, i.e., the broadly construed intentions about organizational purpose that formed the basis of CITS's initial identity claims. This step extended over approximately 18 months, beginning in Year 0 and ending in Year 1 (see table 2 for the associated timeline of events). As noted above, the president of State U formed a tentative broad vision for CITS before formally launching the school (Year 0). He engaged in scanning other programs, benchmarking, overseeing focus groups with leaders from industry, government, and other universities,

Table 3

Representative Quotes, Events, and Archival Entries Underlying Second-order Themes

Theme 1: Articulating a vision	
Articulating ideals and goals	"Not too long after I became president, of course, I started thinking about academic programs and opportunities at [State U] and I felt we were now in the information age and [State U] had some strength and needed to have greater strength in the area of information sciences and technology. There was a whole gap in there; it was also a huge growth opportunity and growth area. So I decided rather than get everybody fighting with each other about what we should do, and me trying to merge departments or steal people or reorganize the university, we will start a new unit, a new school, [CITS]. It would be [*inaudible*] multifunctional. We would build a new building, which we needed anyway, and we would co-locate it with the Department of Computer Science and Computer Engineering so that whatever synergies could come about by all being in the same building and potentially collaborating together." (State U president)
Vision embellishment by dean	"Initially, we looked to [the dean] for leadership about the vision and then worked on refining his interpretations over time." (Communications director)
	"Oh, yeah, he [the dean] was the main mover, not just about implementing the president's vision, but getting the vision to have some specifics about it." ($Faculty_{18}$)
Theme 2: Experiencing a meanings void	
Delineating boundaries	"When people were hired . . . the identity turned into the 'we're not'—we're not business informationists, we're not computer scientists, we're not. . . . " ($Faculty_{13}$)
	"That 'who we're not' business went on for a while. It was obvious we weren't going to be a computer science school. What wasn't obvious was what we were going to be. We were in the wilderness for quite a while in the beginning." ($Faculty_{7}$)
	"The first two years were who or what we weren't—it was some version of identity by exclusion. We weren't computer science, we weren't library science, and we weren't MIS. Everyone was always speaking in the negative—in the sense of articulating to ourselves who we aren't, not who we are." (CITS dean)
Searching for a meaningful identity	"It'd be interesting to have information science people on our faculty—but don't try to define *me* as an information scientist; I didn't come here to be in an information science school." ($Faculty_{20}$)
	"Oh, jeez, we were just lost. This interdisciplinary orientation was OK in the abstract, and almost all of us agreed with it, in principle, but when it came to figuring out how we were supposed to incorporate it, none of us had a clue what that meant." ($Faculty_{19}$)
Theme 3: Engaging in experiential contrasts	
Comparing past and present experiences	"People had come from their previous experiences, which had created for them patterns of cognition. So they uprooted those and brought them here . . . and everyone does that." (CITS dean)
	"There was some game-playing to all those discussions about who we were going to be. You know, 'when I was at Texas, we did it this way'—implying that that was the model we should use, which of course favored the guy from Texas. At least it gave us some sense of the possibilities, though. I'd say it helped us, even if we were looking not to replicate existing models." ($Faculty_{20}$)
Using metaphors to distinguish research areas and specialties	"At [CITS], we are proud of the strength and diversity of our sponsored research. Our research tree is both a fitting symbol and a good metaphor to illustrate the scope, relationship, and growth of sponsored research at [CITS]. In such a dynamic field as ours, "offshoots" and new branches appear on the tree over time. Ever changing yet strongly rooted. Ever growing yet reliable and sturdy." (CITS Web site)
	"The building was a metaphor for what we were creating philosophically: one brick at a time, laying the foundation for our program. The building has paralleled our development. We started in both places with an empty lot. While the building is a physical bridge across [the] street to West Campus and the growth occurring there, it also represents an intellectual bridge linking education and research to the new needs of society." (Year 8 Strategic Plan Report)
Theme 4: Converging on a consensual identity	
Developing mutual conceptions of who the organization is becoming	"Shared is when you bring together all the applications. In other words, they need this technology, we have these users—how do we serve them? So it's the whole spectrum—where they come together. That defines who we are." ($Faculty_{18}$)

(*continued*)

Table 3 *(continued)*

Representative Quotes, Events, and Archival Entries Underlying Second-order Themes	
Theme 4: Converging on a consensual identity	
	"I think that's what makes our school so rich is that there is not just a common vision, but that we got to a pretty common agreement about who we thought we were." ($Staff_{14}$)
Engaging in opportunities for consensus	10 cross disciplinary subcommittees to form CITS.
	Retreats and brown bag lunches within CITS to discuss the character of the school.
	"A lot of us went to those brown bags. Not just the dean and the faculty. Many times the dean invited the staff in, too. After a while, things came together. I thought those discussions were pretty good. Helped a lot to bind us together, I think." ($Faculty_{10}$)
Theme 5: Negotiating identity claims	
Sharing information	"[The dean] does a lot of work to build the sense of community here and shares information [with everyone involved] about the way we go about things and the way we position ourselves." (Assistant to the provost)
	"When we started this school it was just a blank sheet of paper. We had never done faculty recruiting, promotion, tenure, anything like that so it was a good idea when we formed the various committees because everybody could bring in how they did it in engineering, or in the business school, or wherever. So you had many different twists on things and what you could do. We shared everything [with everyone in the school], so we discussed how we wanted to do things and how we wanted to present ourselves to the rest of the university." ($Staff_{14}$)
Debating organizational values	"People were jockeying for their own way because it was their personality and prior billing of trying to get their select group, or their node of people they have working in their research areas, they wanted theirs to be the strongest so they were jockeying for position. You could understand it, really, because they believed in their own values, but, then, other people had other different values." ($Faculty_{8}$)
	"The issues that were key to faculty are faculty recruitment, they're always trying . . . to influence your environment. So if I hired X I have somebody that thinks like me—that gives us a sphere of influence that is larger than the one that I had." ($Faculty_{12}$)
	"Curriculum battles are where an awful lot of identity things show up." ($Faculty_{13}$)
Theme 6: Attaining optimal distinctiveness	
Being similar	Copying best practices; recommendations in Strategic Planning Report's fifth chapter to emulate other information schools.
	Scanning & benchmarking; Focus groups with 500 private and government sector employers; fifth chapter of Strategic Planning Report describing 20 benchmarked organizations (information field and other academic disciplines).
Being different	"One executive who summed up the situation, said, 'To be attractive for corporate support [State U] has to demonstrate this is a fundamental change, not incremental.' Another echoed this statement, indicating that, 'The IST proposal must be sufficiently different in order to be noticed.' " (Strategic Planning Report: 35)
	"The building's significance should not be downplayed. The building was a unifying factor, a vehicle for demonstrating the program's strengths, uniqueness, and offering exposure." (CITS advisory board member in Year 9 Strategic Plan Report)
	"Such a balancing act. We wanted to be different and we just pounded on that, but we couldn't be *too* different or we wouldn't be members of the club. Got to be like them, but not just like them." ($Faculty_{23}$)
Theme 7: Performing liminal actions	
Trying out behaviors	"The dean really encouraged us to write up these research proposals aimed at funding earmarked for interdisciplinary social science research—not interdisciplinary IT research. I didn't think we had a chance, but I tried it anyway, and we got it." ($Faculty_{24}$)
	"In lieu of a history, you fight for the identity. Because a history, norms, mores, a culture that defines who you are is very important. In the beginning there is very little organizational memory, so what happens is that in lieu of that . . . you engage in the process of creating it, refining it, doing it. That is where the action comes in. You try out some things that reflect an identity and see if they work. If they do, you are helping to create an organizational memory." (CITS dean)
Establishing new ways of doing work	"The first two years you're just building cross-training skills. . . . You can't really say what you're doing yet because you're just learning the basics, but once you get into your junior

(*continued*)

Table 3 *(continued)*

Representative Quotes, Events, and Archival Entries Underlying Second-order Themes	
Theme 7: Performing liminal actions	
	year . . . you're actually using your knowledge and you're trying out your [interdisciplinary] skills in solving applied problems and you say, 'Oh, this is what it's all about.'" ($Alumnus_{02}$)
	"I think people are still struggling with [defining CITS]. . . . I like to think of my job as what I do in conducting my research. I'm trying to be true to the idea for the school. So, I try to reach out to other researchers in the school who are from other disciplines. . . . That's what I do now. So when you say, 'What is [CITS]?' I'm probably going to tell you it's what I do in my research, which is now more interdisciplinary than it ever was before; it could be also defined in what I do in my teaching." ($Faculty_{16}$)
Theme 8: Assimilating legitimizing feedback	
Receiving validation from external stakeholders	"The I-Conference was a big success. Bigger than we had hoped. It put us on the map, because all the people we wanted to know about us not only knew about us now, but were giving us all kinds of accolades about what we were doing and how well we were doing it." (Communications director)
	"The way the school was formed there was buy-in from everybody across the university—people from other campuses, other colleges, things like that. I've been with the university 24 years and I've never seen a development of a college like [CITS] with all the buy-in from many, many different areas." ($Staff_{14}$)
	Years 6–9: "Cumulative Placement Percentage (Bachelor's program): 94%" (CITS Web site)

and initiating a formal strategic planning report months before he made public his vision for a school that would somehow integrate technology, information, and users.

The president's vision circumscribed the boundaries within which identity formation would occur. As a preliminary identity claim, the vision specified the broad contours of the eventual organizational identity by generally ruling in certain categorical features while explicitly or implicitly ruling out others (i.e., we are a school of information, not a school of computer engineering). For CITS as a social actor, however, this vision lacked the detail associated with existing organizational types because the industry context, including definitive organizational categories, was itself emergent and still being defined. When the president announced that the Board of Trustees approved the establishment of CITS, he introduced the school as being "responsive to urgent workforce needs" and as "[serving] the needs of students." In short, he introduced a wide-ranging approach that "emphasizes cross-functional teaching, research, and service, and involves linkages with other colleges" (State of the University Address, Year 0).

> The president talked about the role [State U] would have in preparing tech-savvy students for the workforce. Behind the scenes, however, he handed the details for defining and implementing the school over to the leadership committee. From this committee, the man who would later become the dean of [CITS] began to carry the torch early on, articulating the vision and concept of what the program would become. (Assistant to the provost)

> The [eventual] dean provided really excellent direction of the school and is the motivational soul of the school in terms of moving all these different groups toward a common purpose and interest; he's really the hidden hand of [CITS]. ($Faculty_{16}$)

As a result of the strategic planning report, focus group feedback, and stakeholders' expectations, the eventual CITS

dean, in his role as a leader of the strategic planning committee, began to work with committees to set up a curriculum, get it approved by the Board of Trustees, and establish admissions. The initial vision, as verbalized by the university president, needed to be elaborated in more detail. The eventual dean realized this: "The level of [the vision's] specificity changes as you go up. The president provides the broad picture within which identity forms: 'create a school that produces leaders for the digital age,' but that charge doesn't tell us much about who we want to become within that broad outline. The faculty and staff, even the students, want more detail." As the assistant to the provost said, "There were a number of things that had to be done in parallel and a number that had to be done in series. The trick was getting it done in a very short period of time." In April of Year 1, the dean was formally selected from a pool of candidates, ending a seven-month search. After his appointment, he worried about attracting faculty because CITS did not yet have a dedicated building or any physical representation to indicate its existence. For the first five years, CITS administration and faculty offices were housed off campus in rented space. Classes were held in various locations across State U's main campus that changed from semester to semester to accommodate the needs of other, more established colleges within State U. "The only articulation of who or what the organization was, in the early months, was the courses" (CITS dean).

Soon after his appointment in Year 1, the dean began to express the need to have a clear sense of organizational identity to forge a working organization: "Just who or what is [CITS]? What do we value?" (dean's journal #2). "It was clear to me that if we were going to be the leader in this new field . . . we needed to be interdisciplinary—and that 'being interdisciplinary' needed to be central to our sense of self, our identity" (CITS dean). The dean and the strategic planning committee (and subcommittee) members began to piece together a framework articulating who and what CITS would be, with only the founding vision and the blessing of State U's president to guide them. An early job posting described only the general vision of the school before providing information about the work atmosphere of State U, with no description of CITS or specifics about the type of researcher CITS was looking for (archival records). The one thing that was clear to prospective faculty as they heard the general vision and saw the steps being taken to pursue it was that "we wanted to be somewhere . . . that didn't force us to fit into a traditional role" ($Faculty_{13}$). There were pointed questions about the vision from the dean's perspective ("How does it differentiate us? How do we know when we get there?"—dean's journal #1), which were clarified only later.

Dean's metacommentary: We had to translate [the president's vision] into a sharper operational vision that articulated specific goals, core values, design features and all the rest of it. We were bringing in very disparate groups from different research traditions, methodologies, and so on, and trying to meld them together. So we were trying to find a common denominator that would define for us the sense of identity. . . . We had decided on this interdisciplinary intersection of information, technology, and people as a central element, but we had to be careful so people wouldn't retreat into their

particular silos because they didn't own the identity. They had to accept that of their own volition.

Theme 2: Experiencing a Meanings Void

In the second phase, in Years 1 and 2, the ill-defined identity prompted founding members to experience a meanings void and to explore ways to fill it. The concept of the meanings void is best expressed by the statement, "We don't know what it means to be what the founding vision says we are supposed to be." In this step, the members engaged in sensemaking to give meaning to the president's vision, which constituted the basis for CITS's first formal identity claim. Focus groups with 14 *Fortune 500* executives and 12 other executives from industry and government (archival records) had told the strategic planning group that State U needed to make a "bold break with current programs" (dean's journal #1). They "encouraged [State U] to avoid incremental models and to design instead, a fresh way to integrate . . . so that [State U] could be the first major school to integrate major curricular reform" (archival records). The strategic planning group had noted a number of best practices from the benchmarked universities—e.g., curricular approaches, pedagogical styles, and areas of faculty research—and recommended that CITS should be similar enough to other information schools so that insiders and outsiders considered CITS to be in the same academic domain, yet different enough that CITS had its own niche (field notes). The planning group then began a search for "academic leaders who will set the direction of the new school" (Strategic Planning Group Report: 9; Year 1). Despite the competitive niche, a "distinction with excellence" from other programs (dean's journal #2) and availability of potential faculty, the faculty search was harder than expected because of the difficulty in describing what the CITS program would be. As the assistant to the provost told us, "What made it difficult was we didn't have a program. We were trying to entice faculty members to come to a program that really didn't exist. . . . For a faculty member to walk into a program like that—there is a lot of uncertainty in that. That's not the most stable job that you could look for." At first, members filled the meanings void by defining "who we are *not*," because they found it easier to arrive at a consensus about this than declaring "who we are." Indeed, over the first two years, the strategic planning group and those involved in bigger picture planning became quite adept at describing who and what CITS *was not* (field notes).

In the first two years following the inception of the strategic planning group (Years 0 and 1), no shared sense of identity emerged. There was little to which the committee and those involved could refer that described what or who CITS was. They discussed the tentative parameters of who they might become, but "left a void in the middle that they needed to fill" ($Faculty_8$). "We knew we were to be some unusual sort of information school, but we really had no good sense of what kind" ($Faculty_{22}$). CITS members knew they were to be different from other existing programs that distinguished themselves as "the first," "specialists in," "information experts," etc. (archival records), but CITS members had yet to articulate to themselves some agreed upon elements of their own identity.

CITS faculty characterized themselves as "muddling through" in Years 1 and 2 ($Faculty_5$). They were so caught up in their daily work of research, teaching, and the responsibilities of running a new school that they often did not concern themselves explicitly with the identity of CITS, unless confronted with the need to explain themselves or their program to outsiders. As an alumnus said, "I think probably it was [faculty member] who first told me what [CITS] wasn't. He said it wasn't engineering, it wasn't business, and it wasn't comp. sci., and they explained the reason why it wasn't. It was almost easier in the beginning to say what it wasn't than what it was. He didn't really know what it was just yet" ($Alumnus_{02}$). In contrast, those staff and administrators charged with developing and managing the broader goals of CITS and who often had to explain to donors, industry leaders, high school counselors, parents, state officials, and other outsiders who CITS was, regularly found the meanings void to be a problem (dean's journal #2). The career center offices of CITS even developed an internal document that explained how they differed from other academic domains (archival records). Not having a core identity hampered efforts to attain legitimacy and was a persistent problem for those who interacted with outsiders.

Through the act of "void filling," members began to articulate facets of organizational identity and formulate claims that they could test out among themselves and with outsiders (field notes). This effort allowed members to delineate more finely the boundary contours of the organization that were established in the initial vision articulation. It also laid a foundation for an eventual consensus regarding "who we are." "We went through filling that void [asking] 'what's the rationale for this organization?' I think identity, the answer to the 'Who are we?' question, came as a rationale for existence" ($Faculty_{10}$).

Dean's metacommentary: It was impossible to say who or what we were at first. Having ourselves categorized as an "information-related school" wasn't enough. Figuring out who we were couldn't come until we decided who we weren't. We couldn't become a fellowship without going through the Mines of Moria first, so to speak. Had to be lost before we could be found. And we found ourselves by putting substance into the void. I had to let that process play out and it wasn't comfortable; I could guide it, maybe, but not dictate it. If I tried to dictate it, nobody would have bought in.

Theme 3: Engaging in Experiential Contrasts

As a social actor, an organization's viewpoint is usually heavily influenced by its history. Without a history as a guide, however, CITS needed to develop other means to construct an identity. Within CITS, members began to construct aspects of "who we are, as an organization" by comparing their prior experiences in other organizations to their experiences in the new organization. This step of engaging in experiential contrasts occurred most obviously in Years 2 and 3. Once the broad vision and the boundaries of CITS's identity had been demarcated, and after new members confronted the meanings void, they then had to work at making sense of their new organization—i.e., to fill the meanings void so that they could develop a sense of who they were and refine their claims as an organization. In their first year, CITS received

over 100 applications from faculty and staff within the university (archival records). Some State U faculty "were interested in protecting the interests of their departments, some were interested in transferring into this new program, and some were happy where they were, but saw this program as doing things that they would like to collaborate on" (assistant to the provost). The leadership eventually decided against accepting any new hires from inside State U, instead choosing their first faculty members (five in total) from other universities (archival records), which had major implications for identity. This choice reflected the desire of CITS's founders to create an organization with an identity that was distinct from the identity of other units within State U (dean's journal #2). A core feature of this new identity was the concept of "being interdisciplinary," a concept that was not generally part of State U's existing identity.

Although this tactic sidestepped some political minefields—"There were certainly concerns on the part of deans and department heads as to whether [CITS] was going to overlap them too much or displace them, or worse . . . that [CITS] was going to get all the funding" (assistant to the provost)—it also increased the variety of backgrounds that CITS encompassed. In the new organization, the absence of history prompted members to draw on their experience in other organizations as a referent for making sense of the present situation. This process led to workable conceptions by members of how the organization was similar to and different from other organizations. New entrants into CITS continuously compared and contrasted their previous experiences at their former institutions, for better or for worse, with the new processes CITS was developing (field notes). "People would bring up examples of other schools that were just nightmares" ($Faculty_{17}$). "When we bring people from all these backgrounds together in the face of an ill-defined structure or one that is emerging . . . people often revert to what they know, which is their previous organization" ($Faculty_{16}$). As another faculty member stated, "I always compare [CITS] with [my first institution], because that is the place I 'grew up' and where I learned about how to understand the world and peer institutions. It is more like an ideology issue—where you were born and where you grew up will largely decide how you look at the world" ($Faculty_{15}$).

> [The dean] came up with this term called the "intellectual fetal position." When under stress you revert to that—you don't relax; you pull back. I think it explains a lot of [the challenges to] interdisciplinary research. As soon as you get pushed, instead of figuring out why you got pushed, you draw back. I see it again and again and it explains a lot. The early years were a great deal of this. ($Faculty_{13}$)

The first part of this stage represented a time in which CITS as a social actor lacked affirmative identity referents that could serve as guides for making important decisions. By the end of this stage, organizational-level identity referents began to develop. Several visual organizing symbols began to be used in conversations to help individual members explain how their work or CITS's identity related to or was different from other disciplines and other programs. The first symbol appeared early in Year 2 at a faculty retreat: a two-dimensional

"research triangle," with each point representing one of three interdisciplinary fields—information, technology, and social science (i.e., people) (dean's journal #2). "[CITS] used a triangle model to represent our three interdisciplinary aspects. Other schools like Michigan also have their own symbols to state the importance of various components" ($Faculty_6$). Founding members of CITS used these symbols as the basis for critical decisions. For example, CITS evaluated new faculty hires according to how well they "fit the triangle" (CITS dean), meaning how well they combined two or more topics of research. For these hiring decisions, members looked to their understanding of what it meant to be interdisciplinary and the claims they had made to themselves and in their public materials and course descriptions, then decided who to hire that would fit their claimed interdisciplinary identity, which, in turn, bolstered their sense of being an interdisciplinary school. In addition, experiential contrasts enabled internal comparisons. By using symbols, members compared and contrasted their specialty areas to those of their colleagues and were thus able to clarify their own roles. "We talk triangles here. 'Which side of the triangle am I on? Am I on the side, in the middle, what point? Where do I want to be on the triangle?' I let [the faculty] discuss this at length. Eventually they began to view the whole thing as 'us.' . . . You can even decide where within us you are" (CITS dean). As more faculty members were hired, each specializing in an increasing array of disciplinary topics (again strengthening the core notion and claim of "being interdisciplinary"), they supplemented the triangle with another visual image: a "research tree" that illustrated the research themes with which the faculty most concerned itself. The roots of the research tree were the same three elements articulated by the triangle, with the branches extending toward different applied areas. "[CITS] defined its interdisciplinary nature first, then got people to branch out into different applied areas" ($Faculty_{15}$). For those unfamiliar with other "branches" of research, the tree proved helpful in orienting faculty to the research domains their colleagues were interested in as well as giving an understanding of how their own research might be related.

> The hiring is actually at the level of the branches. That's what the tree is about. . . . People look at it and say "what branch, would this person be on?" Our only hope of being able [to integrate] was our ability to be trees and triangles, instead of one discipline or silo-ed. It doesn't always mean that combination is within [CITS]; it can't be. Most of our faculty have joint appointments with other departments, with the understanding that "interdisciplinary" means going beyond the walls of [CITS] to engage with the other disciplines. (CITS dean)

These metaphors helped CITS members make sense of themselves as a collective by providing a point of self-reference to orient themselves and their new program, which they could contrast against past experiences and use to differentiate themselves from other programs (field notes).

Dean's metacommentary: There needed to be a process for developing ways of fulfilling the vision of a distinctive information-related school. Remember, there was no institutional memory here. The process that evolved was one where people compared the founding vision of the school to their past experience at other schools *and*

compared their interpretations of the vision with other new members of *this* school. It was sometimes a contentious process, too. Of course, people initially preferred the comfort of their own silos or they preferred reverting to a comfortable past, modeling after what they already knew. We spent months trying to do anything to get people out of their fetal positions. The thing is, if you really want to be different, you need to engage in some process that tells you how you can be different. But my hand wasn't much in this process—other than insisting that we couldn't model ourselves after some other existing school. This past/present contrast process evolved on its own.

Theme 4: Converging on a Consensual Identity

In the final stage of the sequential processes, occurring predominantly in Years 4 and 5, members began to form a consensus about what they believed were the central, distinctive, and putatively stable features of the organization. They were able to go beyond agreement on who they were not and start agreeing on affirmative aspects of who they were as an organization, as their beliefs and claims aligned and reinforced each other. Although there was almost unanimous agreement that CITS was a "professional, practice-oriented school," the main distinguishing identity referent, to which virtually everyone agreed, centered on the idea of being interdisciplinary (field notes). This notion had been an undercurrent in the conceptualization and conversations about who and what the new college was going to be, but over time this idea became the core concept conferring distinction for the members of the new school. As one new faculty member put it, "We took all the president's talk about 'integration' and being 'multifunctional' and with the dean's guidance translated it into the core idea of our identity, being interdisciplinary. People converged on that core as a really good thing" ($Faculty_{17}$). The dean further noted that

> The interdisciplinary notion is absolutely key. It seems obvious in retrospect, but it wasn't all that obvious at the time. Most were either involved from either an information systems perspective or a pure technology perspective. By melding the information piece with the technology piece and adding in the social science piece, the interdisciplinary idea really became rooted in us. It was at once unique and challenging because you had to meld a whole bunch of stove pipes to make a stream of smoke. Different stovepipes, too, because we had people that were rooted in theatre, history, engineering, computer science, information science, the law . . . from psychology, from sociology, from gender studies . . . they were just all over the traditional academic map. The trick was for us to understand that collectively we could inform on "information" better than anyplace in the country.

Different stakeholders began to affirm CITS's identity as it emerged and coalesced. A consensual identity formed as stakeholders (both insiders and outsiders) accepted the vision and goals of CITS and found ways that they could both validate and influence who CITS was. People from across other colleges and campuses affirmed CITS as a worthwhile concept and school, further bolstering the identity (field notes). CITS was unique in that it "defined its interdisciplinary nature first and then influenced constituents and stakeholders to fill in what that looked like" ($Faculty_{15}$). "CITS deliberately let stakeholders have a say in influencing the identity. . . . The

original folks had ownership [of the identity], they built it, implemented it, and engaged it" (CITS dean) to the point at which there were debates about who embodied the interdisciplinary concept the most.

A consensual identity eventually emerged in part because many different stakeholders had opportunities to come together and see CITS as CITS saw itself, to express similar values, and to assess how CITS fit into their larger domain. CITS faculty and staff allotted time at retreats and brown bag sessions to discuss identity-related issues, which helped them move toward shared understandings (field notes). The dean said that with greater shared understanding of what an interdisciplinary CITS scholar looked like, he could, "bring in a lawyer, a computer scientist, a sociologist, a psychologist, and they would all find their place in the community. . . ."

> In terms of [CITS], everyone here believes something needs to be done to address a wide variety of issues concerning technology, information, and users and believes that it is impossible to get it done with one particular approach. It is such a common ground that I believe it holds people together. As long as we understand how each individual can contribute to the big picture, the shared interdisciplinary identity can be held. ($Faculty_{15}$)

As the organization grew and people self-selected into CITS, they also agreed to the interdisciplinary goals and vision articulated by the people who recruited them (field notes).

> Dean's metacommentary: Although there were people who wanted to pursue their own paths, eventually everyone seemed to come together—in principle and in practice—on the "interdisciplinary" piece as an identity anchor. That piece everyone publically agreed on (faculty, administrators, students), although they might have defined it in somewhat different terms—who they interacted with, etc. I knew we were there when our resident computer science guru chided a colleague at a meeting, saying, "Hey, those social science types are OK." . . . To make this identity core work, though, we needed external validation to help us internalize our developing identity. The best moments were when executives like Michael Dell or other scholars would get up in presentations and say, "This is exactly where we ought to be going." You can bet that I picked up that kind of stuff and ran with it, touting it to the hills inside and outside.

Integrating Sequential and Dynamic Recurrent Processes

CITS and its members moved through the four phases described above in essentially a sequential fashion. As these progressive processes unfolded, they intersected with a set of dynamic processes comprising four recurrent themes. These themes were not equally apparent during every step of the progressive process; rather, they moved in and out of saliency as the sequential phases proceeded.

Theme 5: Negotiating Identity Claims

The recurrent theme of negotiating identity claims centers on the evolving negotiations in which members engaged to decide what identity claims they would make to define themselves to each other and for outside stakeholders. These negotiations occurred throughout the sequential processes described in Themes 1–4 and occurred largely via interactive discussion, discourse, and debate about "who CITS was to

become" (field notes). These identity negotiations were useful to CITS members to "put their minds on the table, so to speak" (Faculty$_{20}$) and to help them collectively negotiate the values of the organization, the claims they would make on its behalf, and the actions they would and would not engage in as a consequence of those agreed-upon values and claims. The faculty found themselves often arguing over value differences surrounding research topics and methodologies and the establishment of norms regarding, for example, promotion criteria and resource allocation. The CITS dean commented that "at one point early in the history it was 'my science is better than your science.'" There were regular discussions about which journals counted for tenure, disputes about whether qualitative or quantitative research was "real" research, as well as debates about what theory was and was not. The "vibrant and dynamic tensions" (Faculty$_{18}$) that erupted forced CITS members "to argue and provide a rationale as to why [a particular approach] was valuable to an interdisciplinary program" (Faculty$_{9}$).

Members made identity claims to each other and to external parties via their statements about the implications of the articulated vision, their commitments on behalf of the organization and their actions. Describing and explaining themselves to other departments and colleges at State U was a regular and self-enlightening occurrence for CITS members, because the claims they made in describing themselves, as well as the responses to those claims, led them to consider who they were becoming (field notes). Having to explain even the basic value of CITS's interdisciplinary domain became a common episode (field notes). "If you were to ask an engineering or a computer science student, they would say [CITS] students aren't necessary" (Alumnus$_{03}$). CITS members needed to explain the necessity of CITS, while convincing other colleges within State U (e.g., the business and engineering schools) that they were not trying to take over or render existing departments unnecessary. When the initial faculty search brief went out, CITS publicized the openings to the faculty of State U explaining that they were accepting applicants but that *applications required permission from the faculty member's home department* (archival records), a policy expressive of CITS's interdisciplinary values and desire to collaborate with other programs and researchers, not to fight against or pirate from them.

Some claims solidified early; others were debated, revised, and refined as the sequential processes ran their course. In Year 3, one of the core courses for CITS's new curriculum was revisited in terms of how it fit with CITS's identity, and there were frequent opportunities to (re)negotiate what CITS was doing and how it was doing it (dean's journal #3). In Year 4, the dean was still noting questions about how the school's "student centered" approach would mesh with its research agenda and the publication policies of the school as faculty were being reviewed for tenure (dean's journal #4). CITS's negotiations also expanded outside the boundaries of State U as CITS considered its identity and relationship to the broader, developing field. "How would we want to shape this field? We think the field should have those same fundamental values and respect for interdisciplinary work and larger themes that we believe in" (CITS dean).

Dean's metacommentary: Debating among ourselves who we were going to be was necessary because of tensions that existed among the different perspectives. The whole process of trying to reconcile differences led people to discover that they could talk to each other and find common ground and that's just what happened. Furthermore, people not only had to reconcile issues among themselves, but also had to decide how we presented ourselves to external audiences. . . . A number of things came out of these dialectical collisions. One debate had to do with whether we should, for instance, hire somebody who is an expert in database so they could provide insight into that piece of a larger interdisciplinary puzzle, versus hiring the picture on the puzzle box, not the piece of the puzzle. I didn't mind this conversation playing out, because our objective was to have a faculty that was interdisciplinary in the collective, so I didn't care if we got there by pieces or by pictures. . . . Any time you get into the interdisciplinary concept, everybody is on board—so long as they believe that "my field" is the favored one. The irony is that the strength comes from the interdisciplinary perspective, not the knife fights around different perspectives. If those fights were to dominate it would lead to our demise. . . . I had to push and push on the "higher-order" interdisciplinary focus.

Theme 6: Attaining Optimal Distinctiveness

At several points during the sequential progression, CITS made efforts to define what was similar and different about it compared with others in its field. Being similar enough to competitors to gain legitimacy while being different enough to reap a competitive advantage was the operative idea behind these comparative assessments, a phenomenon captured succinctly by Brewer's (1991) notion of "optimal distinctiveness." To orient themselves and others about who they were, CITS members used already-established referents that would be at least somewhat familiar to internal and external stakeholders. Appearing similar to a select few other schools helped CITS's entrée into legitimate academic and professional environments. CITS members "did not want to be seen as a totally new entity from the outside" ($Faculty_{11}$). In addition, members needed reassurance as they moved from previous experience to a new beginning that not all would be unknown. For CITS it was important to highlight attributes that it would adopt to exemplify its similarity to the established academy and the assumed leaders in the new I-field (field notes). Though CITS did not hire from inside State U, it intentionally hired from some of the already established (or perceived) leaders of the developing I-school movement. During promotion and tenure committee discussions, CITS usually had to bring in people from other disciplines to help the committee understand the new CITS interdisciplinary faculty. As the dean said, "Somebody on the [promotion and tenure] committee had to provide internal legitimacy to these peoples' work. We tried to act in accordance with our interdisciplinary perspective in our research proposals, courses and other kinds of activities, but we didn't get away from disciplinary orthodoxy, because the academy is not set up to do that."

The dean explicitly stated that he felt that CITS needed "to be similar enough to other schools to be taken seriously but yet confront the realization that CITS also needed to be different:

How far do you go [in trying to be different]? You don't want to hit a 2 iron because you need distance, but send it into the woods. Really, it

was always a question of how far do you want to hit the ball without knocking it out of bounds, kind of thing. You want to play on the golf course with the big boys, but you don't want to upset them by being too different. At the same time you want to make your mark by having something distinctive.

The desire to be similar enough to "the big boys" kept CITS looking for credible benchmarks and policies and practices that would be associated with a top school (field notes).

Despite CITS's efforts to be viewed as similar to schools in a select group, it also worked to differentiate itself. In his notes from an early staff meeting, the dean emphasized that there eventually needed to be a "shift in emphasis from: 'who do we want to be?' to 'what do we want to do?' " as the identity evolved and members took more ownership of it (dean's journal #2). The more distinct from other related programs and schools CITS became, the more its identity was reinforced. Not only did members progress from knowing "what CITS was not, to what it was," so also did external audiences (field notes). In Year 4, there was a noticeable push to make sure all the State U campuses involved with CITS could comfortably articulate the CITS program to applicants (dean's journal #4).

Every member of the I-school group became invested in trying to figure out who they were and how they would act to be consistent with the concept of an I-school. We even collectively hired a PR [public relations] firm to help articulate who we were to students, employers, donors, and even ourselves, as well as to others in the academy. . . . We realized early on that we could not define ourselves separately and hope to gain legitimacy with that group. (CITS dean)

As CITS members made the transition to understanding who CITS was and how it differed from other schools, they also took action to influence others to recognize their core values, claims, domains, and distinctiveness as well. It was important that others perceive CITS as distinct from peer schools and as a separate, valuable program at State U (field notes). Rather than taking courses from other programs and bundling them together, the dean had always insisted that all the courses be new: "If we took courses from another program, we were taking that identity." When another of State U's campuses, which offered a somewhat similar interdisciplinary degree, came to the dean asking to have the CITS program at the satellite campus accredited by CITS, the dean asked why, only to be told by the campus representative that the CITS program at the satellite campus "was pretty much like [another] program [within State U]." The dean quickly shot back, "Well, then you're not doing your job differentiating."

This deliberate attempt to define not only an identity but also an external image (how others saw CITS) was crucial to the internal institutionalization of CITS's identity, especially in the first five years when the faculty and staff either had no home or were in the basement of a non-descript building with little to claim as their own (field notes). "All we had, at the end of the day, especially when we were living in a basement, was our image" (CITS dean). At that point, there was little that was tangible to distinguish CITS as a distinct program within State U. The construction of a new building in Year 5, however,

was a watershed event in CITS's history and in engraining its emerging identity. When asked about the importance of the new building CITS was eventually housed in, State U's president said:

> It's a signature building by one of the world's great architects. . . . I think it's very important because of its location, because of the quality of the building. In some ways it set the standard for future architecture at [State U] instead of just building your regular old box type building. I mean, it really is a precursor; it set the stage for hiring nationally eminent architects for the law school, the business building, the material and life science buildings, and the new school of architecture and landscape architecture.

The CITS building literally and metaphorically helped distinguish CITS from other programs and schools, helped make CITS more recognizable, while paving the way for CITS to be seen as a ground-breaking, cutting-edge school (field notes).

Dean's metacommentary: There was no map for navigating this territory. Being new, we wanted to be related to something called the I-Schools, and yet be somehow unique. That was one of our biggest dilemmas. There was a fear that if we were too distinctive, we would be seen as a renegade or would be outliers to the general community that we wanted to belong to. We wanted to be different, you see, but not *too* different. . . . The building was extraordinarily important; it became an icon for our newness and our identity. We got a building that somehow helped define who we were, so when we got it, we said, "We are somebody," and not just somebody, but somebody distinctive. This whole process came full circle; we first figured out who we thought we wanted to be, made a lot of public statements about who we wanted to be, got feedback saying others believed and accepted us as who we wanted to be, got a building that represented who we wanted to be, and that convinced us that we were who we wanted to be. Pretty cool.

Theme 7: Performing Liminal Actions

The recurrent theme of performing liminal actions became prominent during the middle two phases of the sequential processes. As CITS was developing its identity, it engaged in a series of "liminal actions," which included trying out behaviors and adopting provisional new ways of doing work. Liminal actions, a concept we derived from van Gennep's (1960) notion of a liminal phase, are those taken with a sense that the rules and expectations have yet to solidify, so actions happen in a tentative manner. Expectation of the development of a future identity triggered tentative structuring activities, in which members took actions as if the identity was already clear and "real." CITS evolved a series of these "low stakes," exploratory behaviors consistent with its identity claims that, if successful and accepted as legitimate by insiders and outsiders, became a more detailed feature of CITS's identity.

Aside from doing collaborative research together, the CITS faculty still had some difficulty applying the label of interdisciplinary researcher to themselves prior to Year 4 (field notes). Although joint appointments were a part of the hiring process, one of the first CITS professors initially put his title down as "Professor of [CITS] and [Discipline X];" although this was technically correct, joint appointments outside of CITS were just courtesy appointments. The CITS dean called this behavior to

the professor's attention, to which the professor responded, "Well, I don't want to disappoint my colleagues in [my home discipline]. I don't want to alienate them, or have them think I've left," or as the dean understood it, "I don't want them to think I'm part of an interdisciplinary school; you still need me to have one foot in each world" (CITS dean). Reluctant to claim the title of interdisciplinary researcher or remove themselves from the confines of their functional backgrounds during CITS's first few years, faculty members eventually became more confident in applying the CITS interdisciplinary identity to themselves and acting accordingly by initiating more collaborative, interdisciplinary research.

Perhaps the best example of tentative action in alignment with CITS's emerging identity as an interdisciplinary school, however, was CITS's application for grants, applications that resulted in awards of over $20 million earmarked explicitly for interdisciplinary research (archival records). As the dean said, "People started applying for these NSF grants, expecting to be turned down, and instead they won them. They started looking around and saying, 'Hmm, I guess the reason we got that is because the information scientist and the cognitive scientist and the computer scientist and the social scientist were all on one team.' " Such successful liminal actions were important in affirming the initially ill-formed idea and claims of "being interdisciplinary." After members tried out behaviors consistent with this identity (e.g., by seeking interdisciplinary grants), both the idea and the articulation of themselves as an interdisciplinary school were strengthened (field notes). In the wake of winning major grants, CITS was now becoming a clear, identifiable entity and a successful one at that.

Dean's metacommentary: Identity is not just an abstract idea. It's intertwined with what you do as an organization, and with your success at what you do. To decide who you are requires doing something, taking some tentative baby steps; when those baby steps work out it helps to firm up your identity. Getting these grants when we thought they were a long-shot was a big leap for us, and certainly for the development of the identity. . . . To be able to act out that "I'm interdisciplinary and I'm proud of it" was tremendously important, because the field, often unwittingly, doesn't facilitate the work of an interdisciplinary researcher. But there was enough success that people now wanted to at least wear the T-shirt. We put ourselves forth as interdisciplinary, we acted as if we were interdisciplinary, and we got validated as interdisciplinary.

Theme 8: Assimilating Legitimizing Feedback

Receiving legitimizing feedback pertains to stakeholders' affirmations that the organization is achieving legitimacy, i.e., that its actions are "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995: 574). CITS used such feedback to affirm and bolster its identity-related beliefs. This recurring theme was most prominent during the last two stages. As CITS became a more prominent entity, known for its students, research, and programs, other units at State U began to take notice. "[Other schools] feel threatened because many companies only go to [CITS] now for job candidates . . . they don't want someone educated in just one perspective; they want a [CITS] student" (Alumnus_{04}).

CITS had organized its coursework and majors differently than most other programs at State U, incorporating, for example, mandatory internships, team projects, and foreign language requirements. Consultation and collaboration with industry proved increasingly successful as CITS regularly posted a placement rate nearing 98 percent, and starting salaries typically were among the highest received by State U undergraduates (CITS Web site, Year 6). Such placement and salary figures were deemed to be major legitimizing signifiers. One faculty member explained that he'd been working with the Department of Defense, and he had "gotten nothing but positive comments, like 'This is exactly that kind of student that we want. We are willing to give money to a school like [CITS]' " ($Faculty_{16}$). He also said, "This is very positive if you look at our outside audience. In terms of government, business, and industry we've been extremely effective." CITS was gaining in both external and internal legitimacy (field notes).

Members also began getting external approval at conferences where others were talking about CITS positively. CITS members went to conferences touting themselves as interdisciplinary. That claim was accepted and affirmed by others at the conferences, which led members of CITS to see themselves as interdisciplinary scholars and to more regularly and deliberately claim the role of interdisciplinary researcher for themselves. The convening of the first dedicated I-School Conference in Year 7, organized by CITS and held at State U, was a boon to CITS members because it was an opportunity to see the commonalities the programs shared and to discuss common research areas and concerns, but also to differentiate CITS from its peers (field notes). More importantly perhaps, it was an occasion to recognize that the I-schools were developing their own distinctive field of scholarship—that they were the founding programs in what was becoming a new domain. As the dean said, "The real test of legitimacy was that those schools who were not at the conference got upset because they had not been invited. The debate was over who should be included in the club. The fact that prestigious programs wanted in to a club where we were welcomed, even respected, gave us a greater sense of importance and, yes, legitimacy."

For CITS members, the conference was also an opportunity to emphasize CITS's distinctiveness. As the dean explained, "We didn't host [the conference] just because we thought it would be interesting; we hosted it because I wanted to make sure that people saw who we were, what we were, what we were capable of and what difference we were making." Coming together with other I-schools and I-researchers allowed CITS members to "connect firmly with existing education and research programs" ($Faculty_{11}$). As a result, "outsiders can understand what [CITS] is doing. Then, with a solid foundation, [CITS] can pursue its own direction and gain its own identity" ($Faculty_{17}$). The first I-School Conference, therefore, was a heady time for CITS members, as they discovered that their emerging identity within an emerging field was not only distinctive but was recognized and legitimated; this discovery helped to institutionalize their identity. Externally, the conference helped to legitimize; internally, it helped to validate the emerging identity (field notes).

Dean's metacommentary: In the end, you need to develop a sense of who you are, but you need to get others to affirm it. And those two processes work together. Developing our identity, and getting responses to the identity we wanted to project, was a nerve-wracking thing. We got a lot of reactions that caused us to blink. In the early days I was blinking a lot. We had built a curriculum, a sense of purpose, symbols to represent this identity we were trying to enact. But at the end of the first four years, when the first graduates were going out, I was petrified. We had taken all these chances, made ourselves different, and taken on some internal and external doubters. We saw ourselves as mavericks, even within the university, and we had no well-defined disciplinary area. Yikes! How would these first graduates fare? But then they all got hired in 15 minutes, and that was the greatest thing that ever happened to us. . . . We were trying to build an identity for our school, but we were also helping to build an identity for our field, our academic community, too. . . . Taking the leadership role [by organizing the conference] helped us define a niche for ourselves within that field and gave us a sense of legitimacy. I could say to [members of CITS], "This is who we want to be or this is who we are," but to have others in the field say, "This is who they are," gave us a real sense of legitimacy.

Postscript to the Study

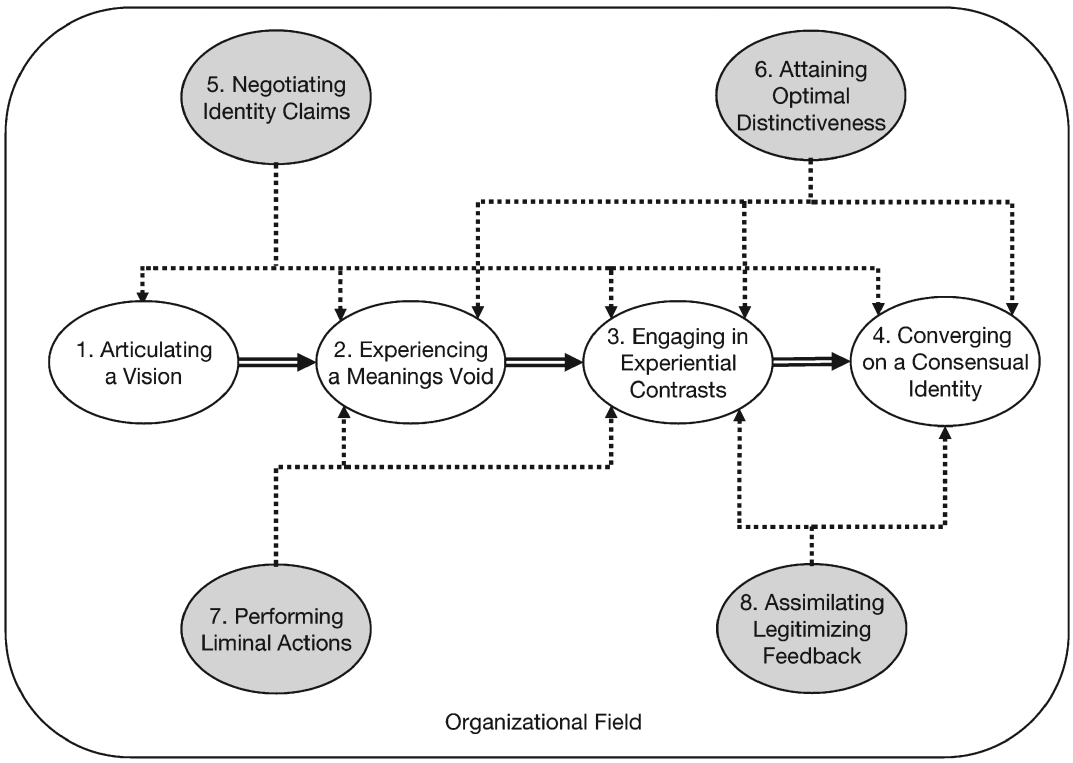
By the time the data gathering for this study ended, CITS was becoming prominent in its new and evolving field and was recognized as successful by its academic peers. Over the course of nine years, CITS evolved from its initial broad vision by State U's president to a multidimensional entity with an identity acknowledged and accepted by CITS members and their stakeholders.

A GROUNDED THEORY OF IDENTITY FORMATION

Our findings indicate that identity formation is a complex process that unfolds over an extended period of time. The data structure in figure 1 displays all the key concepts (the eight second-order themes) that emerged from the study. Yet a grounded theory needs to show not only the concepts but also their dynamic interrelationships. In this section, we present a theory of identity formation, as represented in figure 2, grounded in the data that emerged from the study.

Figure 2 situates the eight second-order concepts we identified in a process model that lends the requisite dynamism to the relationships among these key concepts and shows how CITS's organizational identity developed over time. The core of the model is a sequential process consisting of four phases, represented as unshaded ovals in figure 2, and four recurrent themes, shown in shaded ovals. Beginning on the left, the first step involves articulating a vision. This phase originated with the founders, who perceived a need in the organizational field for a different type of information school and translated this perception into a vision of the new organization and its purpose. The expressed vision simultaneously served as a basis for the nascent organization's initial identity negotiations and claims and as a categorical constraint on that identity (e.g., limiting the identity to the category of an "information-related school"). After the founders articulated the vision, they and other organizational members began negotiating identity claims formally and informally, a recurrent process that continued throughout the progression of the identity formation

Figure 2. Grounded theoretical model of the organizational identity formation process.*



*Based on the second-order themes of figure 1. Clear ovals represent sequential themes; shaded ovals represent recurrent ones. The dotted line arrows indicate the influence of the recurrent themes on the sequential phases that they affected the most.

process. This negotiation process was characterized by ongoing discussions, debates, and tensions over the values and attributes that the organization and its members would claim as features of the new "interdisciplinary" school.

As members acknowledged the vision and worked to develop claims consistent with the vision, they also confronted its ambiguity, thus leading to a second sequential phase, experiencing a meanings void. Although members had a general sense of what the organization was intended to be, they needed to construct the meanings associated with "who we are trying to become," because the attributes and actions associated with the character of their future organization were in flux and yet to be decided. As they dealt with these issues, members initially found it easier to agree on what the organization was *not*—thus eliminating possibilities and further circumscribing the boundaries of their identity—before attempting to agree on who or what they *were*. In their efforts to distinguish themselves within their field and industry, they began to work toward a goal of attaining optimal distinctiveness. CITS's members worked to fill the meanings void with identity content and processes that provided an optimal balance between similarity with and difference from other organizations in its field. Members recognized that being seen as similar in some ways to other information schools conferred

legitimacy, and yet also being dissimilar from them (by virtue of being interdisciplinary) distinguished them, so they began to tout their similarities and differences to each other and to outside audiences. They also began the process of performing liminal actions, tentative actions and commitments seen as consistent with the newly forming identity. The most prominent of these actions took the form of more collaborative research, which affirmed the interdisciplinary label internally, and more grant seeking for interdisciplinary research, the success of which produced external validation.

The continuing negotiation of identity claims, ongoing attempts to seek optimal distinctiveness, and exploratory liminal actions all played important roles in the third sequential phase, engaging in experiential contrasts. During this phase, affirmative aspects of the organization's identity content began to firm up and become institutionalized. Members worked toward the definition of their identity by using previous experiences in other organizations as a guide for appropriate (and inappropriate) thought and action in the new one and by comparing and contrasting their current experiences and perspectives with those of their colleagues to arrive at characteristics that could be agreed upon about the organizational identity. At this point, the process of assimilating legitimizing feedback came to prominence, as the organization tended to look for confirming cues from internal and external stakeholders that it was presenting itself and acting in a legitimate fashion. Such cues strengthened both the members' shared sense of who they were, as well as the organization's formal identity claims, enabling them to converge on a consensual identity, wherein the organization and its members arrived at agreement on the core attributes of the organizational identity—that is, consensus about what was central, distinctive, and expected to characterize the organization over the long term (i.e., a professional, practice-oriented, interdisciplinary school of information sciences and technology).

The grounded model in figure 2 is a simplified illustration of a dynamic progression that unfolded over time and highlights important processes involved in CITS's organizational identity formation. Though we have presented our findings in a simplified fashion, we have done so for the purpose of maintaining clarity while portraying the long and involved evolution described by our informants and our ancillary data. As is perhaps obvious (and as will become evident in the discussion), these themes formed a complex amalgamation in the forging of an organizational identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Corley et al. (2006: 96) observed that organizational identity does not "appear out of thin air," but despite some insightful theoretical efforts and a few empirical studies that addressed limited aspects of identity formation (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1998; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger, 2007), prior work has not produced a comprehensive portrayal of the processes by which identity develops. The grounded theory that emerged from this study constitutes our main contribution; it provides an illustrative model of how organizational identity forms via the dynamic interplay of eight

essential processes. This emergent model focuses explicitly on organizational identity formation, rather than identity change, threat, or persistence, which have been the focus of prior work (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000; Fiol, 2002; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Chreim, 2005; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006).

The grounded theory of organizational identity formation that we developed can be viewed as both simple and complex, or as Colville (2008) noted, it has the kind of "simplexity" that characterizes fundamental social phenomena. Central to the theory is a stage model comprising four sequential themes: articulating a vision, experiencing a meanings void, engaging in experiential contrasts, and converging on a consensual identity. The sequential ordering of these themes reflects an organizational parallel to stage models of individual identity formation (cf. Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966). Perhaps we would only be surprised if there were not some sort of stage model at the center of any identity formation process. Yet the sequential themes have a distinctive character, beginning with vision articulation, that makes individual identity formation only an indirect referent for understanding the formation of organizational identity. Interestingly, the four recurrent themes associated with the development of identity at the organizational level—i.e., negotiating identity claims, attaining optimal distinctiveness, performing liminal actions, and assimilating legitimizing feedback—do have parallels at the individual level. For example, Brewer (1991) originally conceived of optimal distinctiveness as an aspect of individual social identity. Further, the concept of liminal organizational actions bears some similarity to the tentative behavior of individuals trying out "provisional selves" (Ibarra, 1999). In addition, some features of the processes involved in negotiating identity claims and assimilating legitimizing feedback have also been found at the individual level (e.g., Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Swann and Bosson, 2008).

Within the process model, we affirmed several themes and concepts that are either apparent (articulating a vision, the eventual arrival at some level of consensus about identity) or have been featured in previous portrayals of organizational identity formation. For instance, the notion that organization members intersubjectively negotiate identity claims is not surprising. Ashforth and Mael (1996: 40) noted that intense negotiation of claims is especially likely when the organizational identity is "underdeveloped or ambiguous," as is obviously the case during initial identity formation, but they also noted that organization members are not merely "passive consumers" of identity claims; rather, they actively construct the meaning of those claims. Our study offers a view of some of the microdynamics of these negotiation processes and could be viewed, in part, as a study of the social construction of identity claims.

More importantly, however, we uncovered several themes that have not risen to prominence in previous depictions of organizational identity formation. These key processes included both the experiencing of a meanings void, wherein members struggled to understand what the initial identity claims meant and what commitments and actions would and

would not be consistent with those claims, and the means for escaping from the meanings-void trap via the use of internal and external experiential contrasts. King, Felin, and Whetten (2010: 6) noted that "an organization's point of view [as a social actor] is the path-dependent result of an organization's history." In the absence of such history, members drew on their own personal histories in other organizations as a referent for deciding what actions and commitments would be appropriate. We also found important elements of the identity formation process that pertained to the seeking of optimal distinctiveness—the essential identity-deciding process of "being the same and different at the same time" (Brewer, 1991: 475). Lastly, we found that enacting identity via liminal actions was a prominent part of the identity instantiation process. Our findings indicate that identity formation involved processes that were multifaceted and interactive, contrary to the assumptions sometimes made in literature dealing with organizational identity. This study also offers insights into and a pathway for reconciling relationships between social constructionist and social actor perspectives on organizational identity.

Implications of the Identity Formation Process Model

Our study offers two key observations that affect the assumptions scholars sometimes make about organizational identity. First, our findings call into question the assumption that organizational identity can be readily inferred from industry membership and/or the founder's vision (e.g., Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000; Rao, Davis, and Ward, 2000; Hsu and Hannan, 2005; Hannan et al., 2006). Our findings suggest that industry categorization and vision act to constrain the range of possible identities (in our case, the vision circumscribed the identity to some form of integration within the information-school domain, rather than, for example, a pure information technology school), but they do not entirely define identity—in a fashion analogous to the observation that knowing a person's gender and/or parents does not supply us with much detail about her or his identity. By taking a longitudinal perspective, we found that, in the wake of prior decisions about category membership and the "blueprint" specified by the founder(s), there were many possibilities and directions that leaders and members explored to negotiate the character and distinctiveness of identity. The assumption that organizational identity derives from category membership appears to be based, in part, on the premise that "ownership of an organization's identity resides within an organization's audience rather than within the organization itself" (Hsu and Hannan, 2005: 476). This assumption is at odds with the very definition of identity, whether it is viewed from a social construction or a social actor perspective. From both standpoints—and like individual identity—organizational identity is fundamentally a reflexive, self-referential, self-defined concept (Marcia, 1966; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000; Whetten, 2006). Identity is not decided for an organization by outsiders, even though outsiders clearly influence identity. External attributions of identity are actually images of an organization, not its identity. The larger point, however, is that the whole story of organizational identity was not told

and the outcome was certainly not assured by either category membership or founder's vision.

Second, it is clear from considering the entire grounded model that both micro and macro, as well as internal and external processes are involved in the forging of an identity. Organizational identity is progressively, even continuously, negotiated by organization members—via their interactions with each other and with external stakeholders (see Coupland and Brown, 2004). Similarly, both individual and collective processes—from vision ideation by the founders (Rodrigues and Child, 2008) to repeated negotiations on multiple levels (Ybema et al., 2009), to claims-making by the organization as an entity (Whetten and Mackey, 2002; Whetten, 2006) and legitimation by valued audiences (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983)—were all in play as necessary processes in the generation of a workable identity.

Reconciling Social Construction and Social Actor Views of Organizational Identity

In our exploration of organizational identity formation, we found that the two primary perspectives on organizational identity were not only reconcilable but mutually necessary. This study originated with a research question aimed at learning how members of a nascent organization forged their organizational identity—an orientation that represents a social constructionist perspective. Our opening constructionist stance, however, led to an inadequate formulation of the processes by which identity formed. We had discerned many instances in which our focal organization could also be viewed as a social entity making claims and taking actions within a larger social context (i.e., as a social actor). For that reason, we revisited our data using both perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in identity formation.

As Ravasi and Schultz (2006: 436) noted, proponents of the social constructionist view tend to emphasize the emergent "identity understandings" that members themselves generate. Advocates of the social actor view tend to emphasize the identity claims made by an organization in projecting an identity to internal and external parties. Ravasi and Schultz argued that these views could be seen as complementary, and it is apparent from our data that some aspects of organizational identity formation might be more directly explained by either a social construction or a social actor view. Our findings suggest, however, that the complementarity account does not go far enough in explaining the complexities of organizational identity formation. Instead, our data indicate that social actor and social constructionist views are not simply competing or countervailing views, nor merely complementary views, but rather are mutually constitutive processes that are recursively implicated in generating an identity. Identity understandings and identity claims not only inform each other, they help constitute each other because of their recursive, reciprocal relationships. Our findings provide several telling examples of this recursive process. For instance, when making hiring decisions during the experiential-contrasts phase, members first considered what it meant to be interdisciplinary, noted the claims of interdisciplinarity they

had made in their public presentations, and then hired people that fit their claimed identity, which then strengthened their definition of themselves as an interdisciplinary school. Similarly, liminal actions were important in affirming the initially ill-formed core identity, essentially completing a cycle that began when CITS members wanted "being interdisciplinary" to be their distinctive hallmark, which led them to construct a public claim of being interdisciplinary. They then tried out behaviors consistent with the initial idea and the claims (e.g., by seeking interdisciplinary grants), which strengthened their understanding of themselves as an interdisciplinary school and of their claims as such a school.

In general, our findings suggest that although members of a new organization can decide the core attributes of who they want to be, to instill a consensual acceptance of those attributes, they need to make overt claims to each other and to outsiders and have those claims legitimized. Once legitimizing feedback occurs, understandings are deepened and further claims fashioned that are consistent with that deepening understanding. Overall, then, our findings suggest that understandings affect the claims made and actions associated with those claims; the claims made and the outcomes of actions associated with those claims also affect the understandings. This is a theoretically useful extension to existing views of organizational identity formation and indicates that social construction and social actor processes are mutually constitutive in generating and developing identity. From this perspective, social-constructionist-versus-social-actor debates are dysfunctional for thoroughly conceptualizing organizational identity.

Limitations

A possible limitation attending qualitative research that employs interviews as a data source is that the informants' memories could be susceptible to retrospective reconstruction. To mitigate this problem, we gathered as much real-time data as possible from sources that included letters, memos, minutes, and press publications generated over the course of the school's startup and early development. More importantly, perhaps, we had access to the daily journals kept by the dean (one of our primary informants) for the entire period covering the formation and early years of CITS, which we used to corroborate the interview data. These journals were particularly helpful in triangulating the data in the informants' interviews and in situating informants' memories. We also corroborated all reported findings across multiple informants. For these reasons, we are confident that these steps have minimized inaccuracies stemming from retrospection.

Another potential limitation is that our initial focus was mainly on the internal social construction processes that contributed to the formation of CITS's organizational identity. Our original orientation could have introduced bias into our presentation with an emphasis only on internal processes, rather than presenting data that would show the influence of both internal and external influences on identity formation. Because of our data gathering methods and the flexibility of our interpretive approach, however, we were able to capture external, field-level influences as well. We also were able to

revisit our data for the purpose of reanalysis, as well as to gather new data, as we realized that there were other important dynamics that we needed to explain that contributed to the formation of identity. We believe therefore that we were able to account for the most germane processes in the course of conducting the study.

As is often the case with interpretive research, questions about generalizability or transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the findings arise when researchers study a single organization. Thorngate (1976) argued that studies cannot be simultaneously simple, accurate, and general; rather, researchers must choose which one or two of the three to emphasize. A case study provides the benefit of accurate observation and relative conceptual simplicity, although it trades off some degree of generalizability (Thorngate, 1976; Weick, 2005). The focal organization of our case study was forming within a field that was itself developing and not yet highly institutionalized. In this environment, founding members came to the new organization with few shared experiences and little consensus on accepted routines and practices. Although beyond the scope of our study, the broader context was certainly salient. There was a critical mass of information schools, but the field was not yet so crowded or well defined as to prohibit a new entrant like CITS from gaining ground. Interestingly, Marrett (1980) found that new organizations (women's medical societies) were more readily established in communities in which similar organizations already existed. The organizational field is arguably a boundary condition to our study, and its influence on identity formation is an appropriate topic for further research. The emergent nature of CITS's organizational field, however, also made the processes germane to our main research questions that much more transparent. Thus it was an ideal case for more clearly discerning key processes and an interesting case to provoke additional theorizing (see Siggelkow, 2007).

As an academic unit within a large university, CITS did not represent a modal organization in a typical industry. The context offered by State U very likely had an influence on CITS's identity formation and is perhaps another boundary condition for our study. The large, flourishing mother institution of State U provided significant resources to allow the school to get established. Other new organizations might have less of a safety net or none at all. In addition, CITS had a diverse group of constituents, including faculty, administrators, staff, students, and alumni. Admittedly, we could not capture all members' views on CITS's identity, and this may be another limitation of our study. We did find consensus around several key identity referents—for example, being interdisciplinary and collaborative, being professional and applied—but we did not explore how strongly or widely held these identity claims were among students and alumni.

Finally, the dean clearly played an important role in CITS's identity formation. He was adept at both holding true to a vision and facilitating the evolution of CITS's identity over time. Leaders play an important role as sensemakers and sensegivers, and it is unclear the extent to which the identity formation process would have looked different under another

founder. The particulars of the CITS case might be viewed as perhaps limiting the transferability of the findings to other domains, but the key themes that emerged in this study nevertheless have obvious relevance to many new-organization contexts and therefore are likely to be applicable, in principle, to many nascent organizations.

Directions for Future Research

This study generated a grounded theory model that can guide further research into identity formation concepts and processes. The findings suggest a series of constructive research questions as well as several specific propositions amenable to future research. As noted, we studied a new organization in a developing field. In this context, the "social codes" (Polós, Hannan, and Carroll, 2002), or the field-level expectations, about what features categorized the typical information school were still coalescing. Furthermore, routines and practices were not yet highly institutionalized, as in more mature fields and industries. One obvious question for future research is how identity formation processes differ in more established organizational fields than in less established ones. In exploring this question, three themes of our process model are especially intriguing: experiencing a meanings void, attaining optimal distinctiveness, and performing liminal actions.

Experiencing a meanings void. Prior research has noted the significance of a meanings void during identity change, but not its important stage-setting role in deciding desired elements of a future identity. For example, Corley and Gioia (2004) found that a meanings void was triggered in a new spin-off company because the parent company's identity was no longer meaningful, while a new organizational identity had not yet formed replace it. In our study, the academic domain as a whole was developing simultaneously with CITS, making it difficult to determine what other programs members could or should emulate for best practices or what criteria they might use for evaluating their program. Consequently, CITS was limited in the degree to which it could base its identity on existing institutional models. In the early stages, CITS members had to describe and explain who they were to themselves and others; they established contrasting external referents to serve as exclusionary boundaries that defined who CITS as an organization was *not*. Defining themselves by exclusion provided CITS members with temporary reference points against which they could compare themselves as they worked to form an identity that could be expressed in positive rather than negative terms. Recent research and conceptualizations have also noted the presence of the "who we are not" issue (e.g., Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001; Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger, 2007; Ybema et al., 2009). This "via negativa" aspect of nascent identity formation parallels a philosophical/theological approach of defining what a phenomenon is not, rather than what it is (Bowker, 1997) and is an interesting notion to pursue in future research. Given the key role of the meanings void in our study, does the construction of an optimally distinctive identity typically proceed from negative referents (i.e., who we are not) toward positive ones (i.e., who we are)? It is apparent that the institutional field plays an important role, but it is not clear whether the degree to which

fields are institutionalized will lead to a greater or lesser experience of meanings voids. In an established industry or field with a well-defined social code on which to draw, a fledging organization might readily develop a set of affirmative identity referents without a pronounced negative phase. Having so many external referents, however, might still lead to some type of meanings void as new organizations struggle to claim a distinctive space within the mature industry. This lack of clarity led us to formulate the following competing propositions, which emphasize the social construction perspective on organizational identity:

Proposition 1a: Members of new organizations in established fields will engage in fewer "who we are not" comparisons to decide who they are than will members of new organizations in newly developing fields.

Proposition 1b: Members of new organizations in established fields will engage in more "who we are not" comparisons to decide who they are than will members of new organizations in newly developing fields.

Optimal distinctiveness. From the social actor point of view, a new organization is motivated to claim an identity that is both similar to and different from the other organizations in its field, a delicate balance known as optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). Isomorphism confers legitimacy, while claims of difference provide a competitive advantage (Deephouse, 1999), and new organizations need both to survive. Porac et al. (1995) found that organizations socially construct their industries and their rivals based on patterns of shared attributes. Our findings suggest that perceived differences in attributes are also salient, not just for defining industry boundaries and non-competitors but also within a given industry or organizational field. Organization studies' emphasis on the "similar to" part of this formulation, with its strong focus on legitimacy-seeking has tended to underplay the perhaps equally important concern with the "different from" part—an obvious avenue for future research. It is likely that field-level influences affect how new organizations define the optimal mix of similarity and difference. Our study suggests that stressing how one is different from rivals is highly salient in the context of a developing organizational field, a notion supported by the findings of Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger (2007). It is unclear, however, whether standing out is even more critical in a crowded, more mature industry context. As noted above, in a field in which the properties of social categories are taken for granted, new organizations might have an even greater motivation to carve out a distinctive niche by claiming differences compared with competitors. Therefore, we offer the following competing hypotheses:

Proposition 2a: New organizations in emerging fields will emphasize differences from other organizations in their field and related fields more than new organizations in established fields.

Proposition 2b: New organizations in emerging fields will emphasize similarities to other organizations in their field and related fields more than new organizations in established fields.

Liminal actions. Organizational identity comprises not only beliefs, thoughts, and claims about "who we are as an organization" but also what we do (Nag, Corley, and Gioia,

2007) to express this understanding—it is a concept that organizational members enact. It is within this conceptual context that the usefulness of applying liminal actions (tentative, identity-related actions) to organizational identity formation becomes apparent. This theme draws on Turner's (1969: 95) notion of "liminal entities" that are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention." If organizational identity is not merely idea-based but is also action-based, then organizational members must make choices about which actions they see as consistent with an identity conception that will affirm their inchoate identity. Liminal actions of the type we observed are also manifestations of Weick's (1979) notion of "double interacts": people try out their conception of who they want to become not only by deciding the claims they want to make as an organization but also by taking tentative actions to see how they fit with the claims they are making and to see the kind of response those actions engender from significant audiences. As those internal and external to CITS validated these actions, CITS members assimilated the legitimizing feedback and chose the actions they would keep (i.e., what practices and procedures would become prototypical, normative, and then institutionalized) and those they would forego. The interplay between identity claims and liminal actions is a rich topic for future research. Our study suggests that liminal actions selected for their consistency with a claimed identity instantiate and become part of the consensual identity, prompting the following proposition:

Proposition 3: New organizations that link identity claims to identity-relevant actions will have their identities affirmed by internal and external stakeholders more than new organizations that do not.

Other Research Questions

Our findings provide the basis for asking several other questions. We studied an organization that was nested within a larger organizational environment. There are many such nesting arrangements, including autonomous operating units, wholly owned subsidiaries, or conglomerate member organizations, and an interesting question is whether identity formation and development differs in nested versus free-standing organizations. Although our study provided an insufficient basis for developing propositions about this topic, a general research question to guide further inquiry might be how the degree of nesting within supra-organizational structures—or lack of nesting, as in stand-alone startups—affects identity formation processes and identity content. The sequential and recurrent themes we have identified are likely to be fundamental processes involved in most instances of organizational identity formation across many domains. Furthermore, these themes and their relationships will presumably remain consistent regardless of whether new organizations are nested. The duration or intensity of each theme might vary as a function of whether the new organization is nested within a larger organization, however. For instance, within a nested organization, negotiating identity claims might take less time and involve less contestation because the new organization might be able to draw some elements of identity from the parent organization. In contrast, a new nested organization

might take longer to attain optimal distinctiveness because its members need to work more intensively to figure out how it is different from the larger organization. In a related vein, resource subsidies might allow nested organizations to take longer to work through a meanings void when compared with a stand-alone start-up that might need to deal with the meanings void more expeditiously.

Another interesting research question concerns institutional entrepreneurship. In our study, the founding dean believed that to solidify and legitimize CITS's identity claims it was necessary to take a leadership role in the emerging information school field. This suggests that in pursuit of an optimally distinctive identity, the leaders of a new organization in a new field may deliberately attempt to influence the definition of the field itself. This raises interesting possibilities for adopting an identity-based approach to studying institutional entrepreneurship, "the activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones" (Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence, 2004: 657). One perspective on institutional entrepreneurship characterizes it as a contestation over meaning and attempts to reinterpret existing practices and logics (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). Placing this idea within an identity framework, we would propose that those leaders who successfully frame the purpose of the field in terms of their own preferences exert a greater influence on the identity of that field. An interesting research question for further exploration would be how organizational leaders attempting to construct an (optimally distinctive) identity in an evolving field influence the identity of the field itself.

Further Dimensions of Understanding

Our second-order analysis generated the eight themes that constituted the key elements of our grounded theory of organizational identity formation, and it is this emergent model that represents our main theoretical contribution and serves as the basis for future research. If we further assimilate these themes, however, they can be aggregated into three more basic dimensions: (1) a cognitive dimension associated with identity conception, mainly subsuming the themes of articulating a vision, converging on a consensual identity, and assimilating legitimizing feedback, (2) a verbal or discursive dimension, mainly subsuming the themes of experiencing a meanings void, engaging in experiential contrasts, and negotiating identity claims, and (3) an action dimension, mainly subsuming the themes of attaining optimal distinctiveness and performing liminal actions. This triumvirate of dimensions constitutes a coherent constellation of elemental processes necessary for identity to develop. This level of conceptualization, however, reveals even more fundamental social organizing processes—what we term "deep processes," as contrasted with Chomsky's (1964) notion of "deep structures"—and suggests that studying identity formation processes is likely to be germane to other studies of organizing, as Weick (1995) has suggested. We believe that this study is part of a constellation of studies (e.g., Pentland, 1992; Weick and Roberts, 1993) that provide convergent evidence that important phenomena in the social domain are rooted in the interplay of

cognitive, verbal/discursive, and action-oriented processes. These deep processes are common to many, and perhaps any, human organizing phenomena. For that reason, we would expect that a study of other organizing-related processes, such as organizational culture formation, might document these same overarching dimensions, although the pertinent themes at the second-order level of analysis would very likely differ from those implicated in organizational identity formation.

There has also been a substantial amount of recent work arguing that the most fruitful approach to studying identity is via a discursive/linguistic approach (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Coupland and Brown, 2004; Harding, 2008; Driver, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009). As insightful as these studies are, at this dimensional level of understanding, we are reminded that organizational identity formation is not entirely accomplished through discursive processes. Cognitive and action-oriented processes are also significant. Furthermore, from the dimensional level it is also apparent that identity formation processes are consistent with Aldrich's (1999) view of evolving organizations, wherein institutional forces influence the possibilities available to human agents in engaging processes that over time change the institutional environment itself, an argument related to Giddens' (1976) structuration and Weick's (1979) enactment theories. Consideration at this dimensional level, therefore, implies that the kinds of fundamental processes that produce organizational identity are at the heart of many organizing processes, which further implies that identity-generating processes also are an essential part of the larger agency/structure question that underlies the understanding of many human organizing phenomena.

Whetten (2006) maintained that identity becomes prominent when organizations face fork-in-the-road choices, those that have the potential to alter the understanding of "who we are as an organization." There are few moments in the life of an organization as pivotal as those front-end moments when organizational identity is being formed. Our purpose with this study was to conduct an in-depth, empirical investigation of the origins of organizational identity. The resulting grounded theory model explicates a number of key processes that lead to the forging of an organizational identity. Our intent for the work also is consistent with Corley et al.'s (2006) hope for promoting dialogue among different perspectives, most notably, the current debate on the social-construction versus social-actor views that attends many discussions of organizational identity. Our findings suggest that both these views are necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of organizational identity, and perhaps especially its formation. More than that, however, we suggest that researchers should not consider these views as separable or complementary but as recursive, mutually constitutive processes whose interplay is important to understand in an integrated fashion. Overall, we hope that this research not only addresses a notable omission in our scholarly understanding of organizational identity, by providing a theoretical depiction of the processes involved in its formation, but also serves as a guide for future work on the identity concept more generally—a concept essential to theorizing about the "self" in society, even when the notion of a self is elevated to the level of organizations.

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APPENDIX: Interview Protocol for CITS Interviews

In what terms would you describe the identity of CITS ("who CITS is as an organization")?

1. What do you see as the primary pillars of CITS's identity?
2. What term or metaphor do you think currently best describes CITS?

How were you able to make sense of where you fit into this new school?

1. Did how you define yourself as a researcher change in any way?
2. Who did you consider your peers to be prior to coming to CITS? Are they the same now?

How did you and your colleagues arrive at a shared definition of who you were as an organization, as CITS?

If you were to think about how you'd define who you are now as a professional, how is your definition of who you are now different from how you'd define yourself at your other university or school?

Would you look at this depiction of CITS, which is in the school's strategic plan [*show illustration*]. What does this model mean to you?

We have heard that early attempts to define who CITS was as an organization tended to focus on deciding "who we are not" (e.g., "we're not computer science"). Can you describe any of those activities?

We also have heard that founding members of CITS often tried to define CITS's identity in relationship to the schools in which they had previously worked. How did that process affect the formation of CITS's identity?

The formation of the school was based on the idea of bringing together people from various disciplines (computer science, library science, sociology, business law, etc.). How do you think a common identity was formed from such disparate elements?

CITS appears to have been designed as an interdisciplinary school, which implies that there are competing interests and preferences that need to be reconciled about "who CITS is."

1. In the early days, were there tensions among the different groups making up CITS about what the central or dominant identity of CITS should be? (IT people, CompSci people, behavioral people, etc.)
2. Can you think of some examples from the early years of CITS when different factions within CITS worked to define the identity of the school according to their preferred views?
3. Why do you think people wanted to be influential about the definition of CITS?
4. What tactics did these groups use to influence CITS's identity?
5. What role did the dean play in trying to manage the differing groups and arrive at a consensual identity?

In what terms do you think outsiders describe CITS?

In your view, is there a difference in the way insiders and outsiders view CITS?

In your view, does CITS present itself differently to different groups?

In what terms do you think CITS would like to be viewed in the future (especially nationally)?