K-12 EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SUCCESSFUL INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

A Dissertation in
Workforce Education and Development

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2022
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ABSTRACT

The fundamental social problems plaguing education are “wicked” (Rittel & Webber, 1973), for they are challenging, messy, and multifarious. Currently, very few problems of this magnitude are solved independently within one school entity. Instead, school leaders routinely find themselves cooperating with leaders across sectoral boundaries to resolve diverse issues requiring input from multiple perspectives. Given the complexity of the problems themselves—as well as the issues that stem simply from the practical implications of people working together (time constraints, for example)—school leaders may want to maximize the time they spend interacting with colleagues to plan for and facilitate systemic reform. A prerequisite to capitalizing on such opportunities is a sophisticated understanding of the factors that promote successful collaboration.

Collaboration is an ambiguous term, for researchers struggle to define the phenomenon universally. Synonyms for collaboration, such as teamwork, working together, and cooperation, are often used in literature across fields of study, thus muddying readers’ understanding of its exact nature. This qualitative study examined the phenomenon of collaboration from the perspective of school leaders who willingly and voluntarily serve as members of an interorganizational body charged with the task of improving students’ achievement, transitioning students from school to work, and strengthening workforce development throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania. The Forum for Workforce Development (Forum) is comprised of leaders from school districts, businesses, non-profit organizations, and post-secondary institutions—stewards of change who recognize the need to collaborate for the purpose of solving serious problems affecting the region. The study was conducted to uncover the traits, characteristics, and attributes of the most productive collaborators among Forum members. By learning which personal characteristics the most adept collaborators possess and how the attributes manifest through behaviors, the researcher might propose to all members ways to increase the Forum’s capacity.
Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with 12 Forum members who consented to speak about their experiences as collaborators and share their thoughts about collaboration as a phenomenon, in general. Additionally, the researcher analyzed 117 documents written by, for, and/or about the Forum’s work to garner an understanding of how the phenomenon, as participants experience it, evidences more tangibly. Data were aggregated, analyzed, and compared against 22 factors identified by Mattessich and Johnson (2018) as critical for fruitful collaboration. As a result of the study, the researcher learned that, although he remains unable to define “collaboration” universally because the term means something unique and personal to each collaborator, he can cite commonalities among participants’ perceptions of what it means to collaborate successfully with fellow Forum members.

Based upon the results of this study, the researcher recommends that Forum members invite or recruit leaders known to engage readily and thoroughly, ultimately listening actively to colleagues’ ideas and suggestions before advancing the work. From a plethora of findings specific to Forum members’ interactions emerged his endorsement of forming subcommittees so that collaborators might feel more comfortable participating in open, honest conversations that nurture a sense of collegiality—the first step towards developing trust among teammates. Ultimately, if members display behaviors that demonstrate loyalty to each other, enthusiasm for the collective cause, and a sincere appreciation for unique perspectives, they will fulfill their mission of helping students become productive members of society.
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES** .................................................................................................................. x

**LIST OF TABLES** ................................................................................................................... xi

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ........................................................................................................... xii

**Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................. 1

- Background of the Study ........................................................................................................ 2
- Problem Statement ................................................................................................................... 4
- Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................................... 6
- Research Questions ................................................................................................................. 7
- Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................... 8
- Significance of the Study ........................................................................................................ 9
- Definitions of Key Terminology ............................................................................................ 10
- Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations ....................................................................... 12
- Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study .................................................. 16

**Chapter 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE** .................................................................. 18

- Collaboration as Described in Literature .............................................................................. 20
- Collaboration as a Tangible, Physical Body .......................................................................... 20
- Collaboration as an Abstract Process .................................................................................... 22
- Commonalities Among Definitions and Descriptions of Collaboration as a Phenomenon .... 24
- Interorganizational Collaboration ........................................................................................ 26
- Interorganizational Collaboration in Education .................................................................... 28
- Factors That Promote Successful Collaboration Among Educators and Their Partners ...... 30
- The Process of Building Interorganizational Collaborative Relationships ......................... 31
- The Work of Mattessich and Johnson .................................................................................... 33

**Category 1: Environment** ..................................................................................................... 36
- Factor 2: Collaborative Group Seen as a Legitimate Leader in the Community ................. 38
- Factor 3: Favorable Political and Social Climate ................................................................. 40

**Category 2: Membership Characteristics** ............................................................................ 41
- Factor 4: Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust ........................................................ 41
- Factor 5: Appropriate Cross-Section of Members .............................................................. 43
- Factor 6: Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest ........................................... 44
- Factor 7: Ability to Compromise ......................................................................................... 46

**Category 3: Process and Structure** .................................................................................... 48
- Factor 8: Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome ........................................ 49
- Factor 9: Multiple Layers of Participation .......................................................................... 51
- Factor 10: Flexibility ............................................................................................................ 52
- Factor 11: Development of Clear Roles and Policy Guidelines ....................................... 53
- Factor 12: Adaptability ........................................................................................................ 55
- Factor 13: Appropriate Pace of Development ................................................................... 57
- Factor 14: Evaluation and Continuous Learning ............................................................... 60

**Category 4: Communication** ............................................................................................... 62
- Factor 15: Open and Frequent Communication ................................................................. 62
- Factor 16: Establishing Informal Relationships and Communication Links ..................... 64
Chapter 4. FINDINGS ......................................................................................................................... 152

Overview ............................................................................................................................................. 152
Review of Research Design, Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Participants ......................... 152
  Data Collection................................................................................................................................. 153
  Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................. 154
  Participants ..................................................................................................................................... 154
Findings From Interviews .................................................................................................................. 155
Participants’ Explanations of Collaboration ..................................................................................... 155
Research Question One ..................................................................................................................... 156
  Interview Question #6 ..................................................................................................................... 157
  Interview Question #7 ..................................................................................................................... 160
  Interview Question #8 ..................................................................................................................... 162
  Interview Question #11 .................................................................................................................... 164
Themes From Research Question One .............................................................................................. 167
  Open and Frequent Communication ............................................................................................... 168
  Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust ...................................................................................... 169
  Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time ............................................................................................ 169
  Engaged Stakeholders ..................................................................................................................... 169
  Skilled Leadership ........................................................................................................................... 170
  Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome ................................................................. 170
  Multiple Layers of Participation ....................................................................................................... 170
  Appropriate Pace of Development ................................................................................................. 171
Answers to Research Question One .................................................................................................. 171
Research Question Two ..................................................................................................................... 172
  Interview Question #5 ..................................................................................................................... 172
  Interview Question #9 ..................................................................................................................... 173
  Interview Question #10 ................................................................................................................... 177
  Interview Question #12 ................................................................................................................... 180
  Interview Question #13 ................................................................................................................... 181
Themes From Research Question Two .............................................................................................. 182
  Open and Frequent Communication ............................................................................................... 183
  Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust ...................................................................................... 184
  Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest ................................................................. 184
  Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time ............................................................................................ 185
  Engaged Stakeholders ..................................................................................................................... 185
  Skilled Leadership ........................................................................................................................... 185
  Appropriate Cross-Section of Members ......................................................................................... 186
Answers to Research Question Two .................................................................................................. 186
Research Question Three .................................................................................................................. 188
  Interview Question #1 ..................................................................................................................... 188
  Interview Question #2 ..................................................................................................................... 190
  Interview Question #3 ..................................................................................................................... 192
  Interview Question #4 ..................................................................................................................... 194
Themes From and Answers to Research Question Three ................................................................. 196
  Open and Frequent Communication ............................................................................................... 197
  Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest ................................................................. 198
  Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time ............................................................................................ 198
  Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives ...................................................................................... 199
Appropriate Cross-Section of Members .......................................................... 199
Shared Vision ............................................................................................... 200
Evaluation and Continuous Learning ............................................................ 200
Answers to Research Question Three .......................................................... 200
Summary of Themes From Research Questions ............................................ 202
Other Emergent Themes ............................................................................. 204
Power/Equity ............................................................................................... 204
Student-Centered ......................................................................................... 207
COVID-19 .................................................................................................... 208
Listening ....................................................................................................... 210
Document Analysis ....................................................................................... 212
Summary of Data Findings ........................................................................... 214

Chapter 5. DISCUSSION .............................................................................. 217

Summary ....................................................................................................... 217
Discussion of Key Findings ........................................................................... 218
Discussion of Key Findings for Research Question One ............................... 219
Open and Frequent Communication .............................................................. 219
Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust ................................................... 220
Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time ......................................................... 220
Engaged Stakeholders .................................................................................. 221
Skilled Leadership ........................................................................................ 221
Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome .................................. 221
Multiple Layers of Participation ................................................................. 222
Appropriate Pace of Development ............................................................... 222
Discussion of Key Findings for Research Question Two .............................. 223
Open and Frequent Communication .............................................................. 224
Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust ................................................... 224
Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time ......................................................... 225
Engaged Stakeholders .................................................................................. 225
Skilled Leadership ........................................................................................ 225
Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest .................................... 226
Appropriate Cross-Section of Members ......................................................... 226
Discussion of Key Findings for Research Question Three ........................... 226
Open and Frequent Communication .............................................................. 227
Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest .................................... 227
Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time ......................................................... 227
Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives .................................................. 228
Appropriate Cross-Section of Members ......................................................... 228
Shared Vision ............................................................................................... 228
Evaluation and Continuous Learning ............................................................ 229
Discussion of Additional Key Findings ......................................................... 229
Power and Equity .......................................................................................... 229
Student-Centered .......................................................................................... 231
COVID-19 ..................................................................................................... 232
Listening ....................................................................................................... 232
Conclusions .................................................................................................. 233
Defining Collaboration .................................................................................. 236
Factors Leading to Successful Collaboration ............................................... 236
Recommendations for Practice .................................................................... 243
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Inverted Triangle of Theoretical Perspectives.........................................................97
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Findings, Relevant Research Questions, and Assumptions .................................................14
Table 2. Prominent Researchers’ Definitions of Collaboration..........................................................24
Table 3. The Twenty-Two Success Factors .....................................................................................34
Table 4. Levels of Intensity of Relationships Along a Continuum ....................................................79
Table 5. Research Questions at the Organization and Domain Levels .............................................88
Table 6. Matrix of Six Theoretical Perspectives Mapped Against Three Collaborative Issues ..........92
Table 7. Guiding Interview Questions Connected to Research Questions ......................................120
Table 8. Problems and Solutions Relative to Reliability, Validity, and Rigor .................................134
Table 9. The Twenty-Two Success Factors by Category .................................................................145
Table 10. Participants’ Explanations of What it Means to Collaborate ...........................................155
Table 11. Themes From Research Question One .............................................................................168
Table 12. Answer to Research Question One ..................................................................................172
Table 13. Themes From Research Question Two ...........................................................................183
Table 14. Answer to Research Question Two ..................................................................................187
Table 15. Themes From Research Question Three .........................................................................196
Table 16. Answer to Research Question Three ..............................................................................201
Table 17. Emergent Themes From Interview Data .........................................................................203
Table 18. Power/Equity Theme by Participant and Question .........................................................205
Table 19. Student-Centered Theme by Participant and Question ...................................................207
Table 20. COVID-19 Theme by Participant and Question .............................................................208
Table 21. Listening Theme by Participant and Question ..................................................................210
Table 22. Emergent Themes for Research Questions ......................................................................215
Table 23. Answers to Research Questions ......................................................................................233
Table 24. Participants’ Factors for Successful Collaboration Linked to Research ...........................237
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The path to earning my doctoral degree has been a journey—a long journey sometimes delayed by life’s circumstances. I could not have completed the journey without the assistance, encouragement, and support of many people along the way.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my wife, Lisa, and my daughter, Kacey, for bearing with me over the years as I completed the dissertation. I have been working towards my degree Kacey’s entire lifetime and have had to sacrifice spending time with her to successfully earn my degree. I am hopeful that I have modeled for her how to work hard to accomplish one’s goals. To my mom, thank you for instilling these values and always believing in me.

Thank you to my colleagues and friends who demonstrated patience and offered words of encouragement as I found the time and energy to complete the dissertation. I would also like to express my gratitude to Rege Evanov for helping with editing during the early stages of writing and Brittany Boehm for her assistance and attention to detail with formatting and editing. Thank you, Dr. William Kerr, for being a mentor over the course of my journey. Special thanks to Dr. Constance DeMore Savine for all your time, encouragement, and mentoring while I was completing the dissertation. I had numerous questions and concerns throughout the process, and you always took the time to address every one of them far above and beyond my expectations. Thank you for putting up with me throughout this process. The dissertation would not be anywhere near the product it turned out to be without your assistance.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Mark Threeton, as well as my committee members (Dr. William Rothwell, Dr. Wesley Donahue, and Dr. John Ewing), for their wisdom, expertise, and guidance throughout my journey. They have all supported me throughout this process. Also, thank you to Farhan Sadique for being my second coder.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the individuals involved with the Forum for Workforce Development (past and present), particularly the educators that participated in my study. Without this group of people there would not be a research study. Thank you for always striving to do what is in the best interest of our students.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Researching the subject of collaboration is critical because of the frequency with which educators reach outside their boundaries for assistance. As problems in education persist and grow to affect broader communities, solving the problems requires a more comprehensive approach beyond that of any single agency, organization, or social sector (Malin & Hackmann, 2019). Collaboration has proven essential for solving the complex social problems plaguing today’s schools, and learning ways to collaborate more effectively across organizational boundaries is imperative. As Anderson (2019) explained, “Getting different people to work together to solve complex problems that affect us all is a critical 21st century skill that’s worth mastering” (p. viii).

Encouraging collaboration requires educators to identify the factors that promote and hinder effective collaboration and to reflect in order to determine how well they relate to others. Additionally, K-12 educators might consider how best to nurture and sustain collaborative relationships with organizations that can advance their agendas. By investigating reliable research to inform their work as related to collaboration, and then by reflecting actively on their own behavior while collaborating, K-12 educators can develop professional identities that invite progress.

To understand the complexities of collaboration as a vehicle for solving complex problems, this study examines the factors respondents perceive as most significant for fruitful, productive collaboration. The researcher will ask respondents to acknowledge the factors they believe contributed to the accomplishment of their goals and to successful collaboration. Then, the researcher will categorize responses according to emergent themes and compare his findings with those detailed in the review of literature (Chapter 2). In sum, the researcher is interested in learning whether the respondents’ perceptions of success factors align with those previously identified.

More specifically, the intent of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore the subject of interorganizational collaboration through the perspectives of K-12 educators who actively
communicate as members of an interorganizational team, formed to enrich the connections among education, workforce quality, and economic development of a region in Southwestern Pennsylvania. By understanding how these regional leaders unite to solve their problems, we may identify the attributes, traits, and characteristics that either encourage or hinder their collaborative process. Consequently, by reviewing this research, educators with the desire to solve problems and to make change via interorganizational collaboration might reflect actively on their own behavior as applicable to this study’s findings. Additional training opportunities addressing the factors that promote successful collaboration could also be offered to educators to better prepare them to contribute to fruitful interorganizational collaboration.

This chapter presents as an outline of this in-depth study of interorganizational collaboration. The following sections of Chapter 1 detail: (a) background of the study; (b) problem statement; (c) purpose of the study; (d) research questions; (e) theoretical framework; (f) significance of the study; (g) definitions of key terminology; (h) assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; and (i) summary and organization of the remainder of the study.

**Background of the Study**

Large organizations rarely solve major problems or make significant changes in isolation. Instead, organizations typically align with other organizations to achieve desired outcomes. “In all spheres of life, relationships among public and private organizations are built in order to deal with complex societal problems and to address economic challenges that cannot be dealt with by single organizations” (Schruijer, 2020, p. 1). As early as 1992, Hanf and O’Toole recognized, “there are very few...problems that still can be dealt with, let alone solved, within or by one or a few organizations working alone” (p. 165). This purposeful, interorganizational alignment, grounded in a relationship among all parties involved, inspires collaboration. When effective, interorganizational collaboration leads to the accomplishment of goals, to solutions to problems, and to systemic change.

The American public-school system changes constantly—largely due to state mandates and the collective recognition that schools’ responsibility is to prepare students to engage as productive citizens in
an ever-changing global society. Education as an institution is perpetually in flux because school reform
must reflect changes in society, and society changes continually. Though educators are often charged with
the tasks of generating plans for quality reform initiatives and enacting changes within their school
systems accordingly, they rarely can meet their objectives without assistance from outside their
organizations. As social issues become more complex globally and as schools’ responsibilities grow
proportionally, interorganizational collaboration to address issues and to solve problems has become a
hallmark of school culture (Van Brugge, 2012).

Collaboration, in general, takes numerous forms; individuals within an organization might work
together, or leaders might reach outside their organizations to address concerns. For example, educators
who wish to make change often need to consult or work with institutions across organizational, sectoral,
and national boundaries as they may offer guidance, supply resources, and provide support. Modern
educators know that, due to the complexity of the problems schools must solve, solutions rarely emerge
from or within any single organization (Malin & Hackmann, 2019). Partnership activities and cross-sector
collaborations have become the norm in education, government, public management, and any other
institution that works as a steward of societal change. As Russell and Flynn (2000b) noted, “the rationale
for [this norm] is that in today’s world the problems we are facing are so complex that solutions can no
longer be generated and successfully implemented in a vacuum” (p. 2). Simply, “many problems exceed
the capability of any single firm to control” (Gray, 1985, p. 913). These messy “wicked problems” should
be solved through collaboration because “the aim [in solving the problems] is not to find the truth, but to
improve some characteristics of the world where people live” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 166). Thus,
interorganizational collaborative efforts are necessary to address the weighty challenges facing schools,
students, and communities today, and to improve the education system.

For interorganizational collaboration to yield results, all members must maintain solid
relationships and a clear vision (Huxham, 1996). During this current era of school reform, educators who
wish to enact change and solve problems through interorganizational collaborations need to examine the
web-like elaborateness of such associations. By understanding the intricacies of collaboration, in general,
K-12 educators might maximize opportunities to build strong relationships within and among organizations. These relationships provide the sturdy foundation for systemic growth. As Meirink et al. (2010) learned, a high correlation exists between collaborative school cultures and schools able to adapt to changes.

To solve complicated problems and to ensure students grow to become contributing members of a global society, educators need to seek assistance outside their organizations through collaboration. However, simply occupying space and time with well-intentioned individuals who also wish to improve student achievement does not constitute collaboration. For successful collaboration to occur, all members must recognize that their specific contributions—how they behave, allot their time, or structure their meetings, for example—significantly influence the outcome of the collaborative effort. This issue requires educators to identify factors that promote effective collaboration, and, since collaboration requires socialization, to reflect in order to determine how well they relate to others. Additionally, educators might consider how best to nurture and sustain collaborations with organizations that can advance their agendas. By investigating reliable research to inform their work as related to collaboration, and then reflecting actively on their own behavior while collaborating considering the research, educators can develop professional identities that invite collaboration, and therefore spur progress.

**Problem Statement**

When we hear the term *collaboration*, we think of individuals working together in some manner; however, collaboration as applicable to this study cannot be defined as simply. As researchers have discovered, collaboration is so complex a phenomenon that to articulate a precise definition of the term is nearly impossible. Schruijer (2020) professed, “Collaboration is a complex endeavor, considering the often-wicked nature of the issues at hand, the multiple interdependencies, the number of parties and their differences, and the underorganized nature of the setting” (p. 2). The actions one researcher deems collaboration might not reflect another’s understanding of the process. The body one individual describes as a collaboration might not meet the criteria to qualify as a collaboration according to another.
Investigating the subject formally generates conflicting conclusions, thus illustrating the complexity of the phenomenon.

To study a phenomenon so obscure and intricate is always a challenge for researchers. Collaboration presents so differently across contexts that researchers struggle to understand its inherent nature. While comprehending the workings of collaboration may help K-12 educators transfer their conceptual understanding to solve complex problems on the job, they need to remain mindful of an issue relevant to research: Findings from one study may not always be generalized to another context.

Nevertheless, researching an abstract subject like collaboration is beneficial for K-12 educators who wish to improve their students’ achievement and make necessary change. After all, “collaboration is a process that gets people to work together in new ways…[and] becomes a continuing phenomenon with a wide range of results that empower people in systems to change” (Winer & Ray, 1994, p. ix). If K-12 educators are expected to enact systemic change (Diaz-Gibson et al., 2017) and if collaboration empowers people in systems to change, then educators would benefit from learning what successful collaboration looks and sounds like. Moreover, researching interorganizational collaboration is particularly critical because of the frequency with which educators reach outside their boundaries for assistance. As interorganizational collaboration has proven essential for solving the problems plaguing today’s schools, learning ways to collaborate more effectively across organizational boundaries is imperative. Zuckerman (2020) declared that the development of school-community partnerships was supported by active district leadership. Hence, K-12 educators will benefit from knowing how to maximize their opportunities to collaborate with others outside their districts.

This study serves to elucidate the abstract nature of collaboration more concretely and to present findings in a manner that will invite educators who collaborate to analyze their own contributions to collaborative efforts accordingly. Specifically, the researcher will present interorganizational collaboration through the personal experiences and perspectives of respondents, who comprise an interorganizational team and engage in the process of collaborating across their professional, organizational, and sectoral lines. By recognizing how respondents perceive their respective behavior and
roles, educators who review the study might be influenced to consider the phenomenon from their own perspectives as well. The more educators learn about behavior that positively affects interorganizational collaboration, the better they can model the attributes, traits, and characteristics of interorganizational collaborators who solve problems, make change, and improve student achievement.

**Purpose of the Study**

Grounded primarily in the field of the social sciences, the purpose of this study was to elucidate collaboration from the perspectives of educators, who hail from various school districts located throughout a region in Southwestern Pennsylvania and who collaborate frequently to solve local school districts’ “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Studying collaboration through this lens is critical for two reasons. First, as explained in detail throughout Chapter 2, educators know that interorganizational collaboration is essential because organizations rarely can accomplish lofty goals by working independently (Littlefield et al., 2013). Since organizations are far more likely to generate solutions to social problems by sharing information and resources with others whose visions align, studying collaboration is prudent. Next, comparing the attitudes and actions perceived as contributing to a specific interorganizational collaboration’s success with those that experts deem most important for a collaboration’s success may help educators foster more purposeful collaborations.

Simply, if K-12 educators know which attributes, traits, and characteristics lend themselves to worthwhile interorganizational collaboration resulting in improved student achievement, then they might reflect upon their own behavior as applicable and alter their approach to collaboration accordingly. Additionally, those training and preparing educators may approach the topic of collaboration and the factors that lead to successful collaboration with greater insight. Presently, “[leaders] must attempt to apply leadership theories and behaviors developed primarily for leading within one organization or group to leading collaborations of multiple organizations and stakeholders” (Kramer et al., 2019, p. 397). In this way, the proposed research will greatly contribute to the existing body of knowledge. The following research questions were carefully crafted to frame a study that will achieve these purposes.
Research Questions

As an abstract phenomenon, collaboration is difficult to study because it presents differently across contexts. Since the success of a collaborative effort is largely situational, the researcher studied the phenomenon as it manifested among members of an interorganizational collaboration striving to improve students’ achievement and thusly students’ contributions to the workforce. This study is timely and personal because: (1) Researchers have learned that the complex problems, which modern school leaders face, can be tackled only through the collective efforts of many (Diaz-Gibson et al., 2017; Zuckerman 2020); and (2) The researcher is a school leader wishing to learn ways to promote and sustain fruitful collaboration to solve problems plaguing the school district for which he works.

The comprehensive review of current, empirical literature outlined in Chapter 2, as well as the researcher’s intentions, culminated in the framing of three research questions to guide this study of interorganizational collaboration:

Research Question 1: Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?

Research Question 2: How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?

Research Question 3: Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?

The aforementioned research questions framed this study of collaboration as applicable to a specific context by narrowing the focus to a particular interorganizational collaboration, to the perceptions of specific stakeholders within the interorganizational collaboration, and to purposefully selected factors driving the interactions of those stakeholders. Using the questions identified on an interview guide (Appendix A), the researcher invited respondents to describe their lived experiences as members of an interorganizational collaboration comprised of individuals with a common goal. Since members’ vision is collective, the researcher studied the nuances among ways they worked to achieve their goal and
determined how those nuances contributed to the interorganizational collaboration’s success or failure in context.

The research questions provided the framework for this study of interorganizational collaboration. However, important to note is the researcher’s recognition that these questions alone do not allow for all aspects of collaboration to be studied because the phenomenon manifests differently in various contexts. The next section of this chapter outlines the theoretical framework that served as the foundation for the research.

**Theoretical Framework**

To determine a theoretical framework appropriate to this study, the researcher looked to the field of sociology since collaboration requires socialization. Within the field are various theories applicable to the study; however, the researcher identified Negotiated Order Theory (NOT) as a theoretical perspective under the general theory of collaboration as a most fitting support. By examining collaboration through the lens of NOT, he was able to emphasize the process of collaboration over the product (the outcome of the work or the collaborative body itself). The process of coming together, communicating expectations, building trust, and using a sense of trust as momentum for progress is imperative for successful collaboration. Dall and Caswell (2017) recognized, “A central feature of both studies of institutional interaction and the negotiated order perspective is the actors’ continuing adjustment and production of social order through their specific situated interaction” (p. 495). Consequently, examining collaboration as it manifests socially and collectively among members requires an understanding of how the process is negotiated.

Simply stated, NOT describes how social order is initially arranged and continues to evolve among individuals who collaborate (Day & Day, 1977; Gillen et al. 2021; Strauss, 1978). The way social order is negotiated stems from group members’ communications. “In Strauss’ conceptualization the social order is a negotiated one, achieved and maintained by people working together to do so” (Dall & Caswell, 2017, p. 484). Strauss (1978) learned that, through their communications, individuals normalize some type of order within all social situations. Thus, according to Strauss, one cannot study a social process
like collaboration without simultaneously studying the social order negotiated among those who collaborate.

If members of an interorganizational collaboration communicate with one another to move their work forward through constructed socialization, then knowing the factors that promote the success of the collaboration is critical. Linking directly to the research questions framing this study, the dynamic interactions among members informed which attributes, traits, and characteristics that they perceived as most relevant for the success of the collaboration. The emergent socialization processes among members also apprised how they perceived the levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified as relevant for the interorganizational collaboration’s success. Lastly, members detailed the extent to which they have experienced success by examining which factors they perceived as relevant for their collective success along with how they perceived Forum members’ levels of proficiency for the identified factors. Upon reflection, members of the interorganizational collaboration were able to determine which attributes, traits, and characteristics to collectively build upon and improve as they progress and pursue success through their continuously evolving interactions, discussions, and negotiations.

**Significance of the Study**

The problems that modern educators are tasked to solve manifest with such enormity that researchers have identified them as “wicked” (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Stewart, 1996; Winer & Ray, 1994). As Connolly and James (2006) asserted, “These ‘wicked issues’ are so complex and interconnected that they require the energy of a number of organizations to resolve them and hence can only be tackled through organizations working together” (p. 69). Educators fully recognize their primary responsibility: to improve student achievement. A casual review of school districts’ published mission statements indicates that educators, nationwide, have consciously accepted improving student achievement as their mission. Rationally, educators realize that “to ensure all students learn to their full potential and become productive global citizens”—a summary of American schools’ standard intentions—they need a considerable amount of help. Understanding the subtleties of effective
collaboration, as well as the nuances that prove counterproductive to progress, is of practical importance because educators’ stakes are high.

Since organizations, in general, are far more likely to generate solutions to “wicked” problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Stewart, 1996; Winer & Ray, 1994) by sharing information and resources with others whose visions align (Emmens, 2016; Malin & Hackmann, 2019), studying collaboration is prudent for educators who wish to solve complex problems. To date, researchers have investigated numerous examples of collaboration as a phenomenon. Unfortunately, due to the complexity of the process as a complicated social interaction, researchers largely have been unable to define or describe collaboration universally. At best, they have advanced the body of knowledge by identifying personal characteristics and structural elements that invite productive collaboration.

Drawing upon these findings, this study examined interorganizational collaboration from public educators’ perspectives as it manifested in a specific setting and applies to their primary goal: to improve student achievement. Although the findings of this study may not be generalizable to a broader context, the researcher wished to compare his findings with experts’ more generalized findings as a means of encouraging more purposeful collaboration among respondents. If the educators who served as respondents know the factors that contribute collectively to their group’s profitable work resulting in improved student achievement, then they might reflect upon their respective behavior as applicable. Moreover, if respondents adjust their behavior, then their actions may help to improve student achievement in Southwestern Pennsylvania, the region in which the researcher is employed as an educator. Hence, this study is of intrinsic importance to both respondents and the researcher, who may benefit from learning the findings applicable to their work as practitioners.

Definitions of Key Terminology

For this study, collaboration is defined as both a body and a process. As a tangible body—a thing—a collaboration is a formal group based upon mutually beneficial relationships among individuals from organizations with shared or overlapping objectives. Moreover, a collaboration in this sense is well-
defined, structured, and durable with the collective recognition among those who comprise the collaboration that the goals they wish to achieve by collaborating could not be achieved individually.

As a process, collaboration is defined as *actions of stakeholders who engage with each other to achieve goals they could not otherwise achieve if they did not collaborate.* What the collaborative process looks like, exactly, is largely situational and therefore purposefully not defined concretely. For example, stakeholders who recognize the mutual benefits of collaborating might officially combine resources to plan, make decisions, create, and solve complex, “wicked problems”; however, the nuances of how they engage in these specific activities are subjected to multiple variables (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Nevertheless, at the root of the body or process is one defining factor: *relationships.* Social relationships guide the collaborative processes that facilitate the identification and definition of the shared goals and the agreed upon actions to achieve them (Zuckerman, 2020). Individuals who collaborate and/or form a collaboration understand collectively that they could not achieve their goals without the assistance of others; thus, they agree to enter a mutually beneficial union. Table 2 in Chapter 2 presents specific studies used to determine how collaboration is defined for the purpose of this study.

Another term operationalized for the purposes of this study is *successful collaboration.* Because the researcher wishes to discover factors that promote successful collaboration among respondents, he defined the term in a manner representative of the information he wishes to seek. Throughout the subsequent chapters, *successful collaboration*—also noted as fruitful, worthwhile, productive, lucrative, or advantageous collaboration—*is representative of progress regarding the accomplishment of previously identified goals.* Davis et al. (2018) commented that collaboration as they understand the phenomenon is “the intentional process and common purpose of individuals” (p. 1). Respondents for this study joined in collaboration for the common purpose of improving student achievement across the region. Their work is intentional, and the specific short- and long-term goals they have identified as targets are personal to the collaboration and aligned with the overarching mission. According to the researcher, the steps respondents take to achieve their goals constitute progress, and the factors they identify as those inviting progress are ones leading to successful collaboration as previously defined.
The next section of this chapter presents assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The researcher’s assumptions are based on the information detailed in the review of related literature and his predictions regarding respondents’ identification of factors that promote successful collaboration. Table 1 lists the studies linked to the researcher’s assumptions; these studies are described in detail throughout Chapter 2.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Intending to identify factors that respondents believe are instrumental in allowing them to achieve their goals through collaborative efforts, the researcher held the following assumptions:

1. The way group members communicate significantly impacts their ability to achieve goals.
2. Respondents will identify trust among members as critical for successful collaboration.
3. When group members’ personal interests align with the collaboration’s common interest, work is more meaningful.

The assumptions initiated from the researcher’s review of current literature about successful collaboration, as well as his previous involvement in the group under study. First, numerous researchers to date have discovered that open communication and trust among group members is critical for a collaboration’s success (Bryson et al., 2006, 2015; Bstieler et al., 2017; Emerson et al. 2012; Mador et al., 2019; Sedgwick, 2019; Thomson & Perry 2006). Thus, the researcher expected that his study would yield similar findings. Furthermore, because the researcher served as a member of the group under study from 2015 to 2018, he recalled the dynamics of members’ interactions and how they worked to accomplish their goals at the time. Although, over the years, membership has changed and therefore affected the group’s dynamics, the researcher assumed the respondents would identify some of the same factors he believes contributed to the group’s successful collaboration at the time of his involvement.

For example, the researcher assumed that respondents would identify mutual respect, understanding, and trust among each other as one of the factors promoting successful collaboration. According to Straus (2002), trust forms when members of collaborations listen to each other in an encouraging and supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing their needs and
expectations. Seaton et al. (2018) recognized that open communication promoted trust among members engaged in collaboration. When members share their intentions, they become predictable and dependable. As Morris (2013) explained, “The ability to depend on partners and predict their actions creates trustworthiness” (p. 54). As the researcher reflected upon his work with some of the same individuals who acted as respondents for this study, he remembered how the trusting relationships among colleagues prompted open communication and understanding that moved the group’s agenda forward. To feel confident announcing to your group mates, “I think we’re heading in the wrong direction and might benefit from re-thinking our plans,” requires a collective sense of trust: The individual offering the suggestion trusts that his partners will entertain his ideas without harsh criticism, and the partners trust that his suggestion stems from the group’s collective agency, not self-interest. “Consequently, perceptions of reciprocal communication should contribute to mutual trust building over time” (Bstieler et al., 2017, p. 49). Since the researcher remembered how fluently members of the group under study communicated with each other in a trusting environment, he expected respondents to acknowledge the importance of mutual respect, understanding, and trust as a factor sustaining their progress. As Mador et al. (2019) recognized, “While it may seem obvious, making a deliberate effort to establish regular communication and create opportunities for relationship building really matters” (p. 614).

Personal interests that are aligned with the common interest of the collaboration are helpful to the cause if the members openly communicate their motives (Winer & Ray, 1994). In fact, for collaboration to succeed, stakeholders must be aware of their own interests as well as those of other members (Wood & Gray, 1991). Various interests should be considered and negotiated for members to be satisfied and truly dedicated to the collaboration’s vision. Each organization and member in a collaboration stands to gain something, so accepting this can help build trust among members, thus strengthening the collaboration and increasing the likelihood of success (Winer & Ray, 1994). Noted in Table 1 are major studies that contributed to the researcher’s formation of the assumptions. The second research question is purposefully absent from Table 1 because it applies only to this study.
Table 1

*Findings, Relevant Research Questions, and Assumptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings from Research</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Relevant Research Question</th>
<th>Researcher’s Personal Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both internal and external factors contribute to an interorganizational collaboration’s success (or failure).</td>
<td>Bryson et al. (2006) Bryson et al. (2015) Crosby and Bryson (2010) Huxham and Vangen (2000a) Mattessich and Johnson (2018)</td>
<td>Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success (or failure) when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?</td>
<td>Respondents will report that the primary factors contributing to their interorganizational collaboration’s success (or failure) is perceived levels of open communication and mutual respect, understanding, and trust, along with aligned/overlapping interests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above research, along with the information he learned via personal experience as a member of the group under study, shaped the researcher’s assumptions about the factors that promote successful collaboration. He predicted that respondents would cite these same factors as essential. However, the researcher understood that to frame a study around assumptions is limiting. While he accepted the
assumptions as sincere, he simultaneously distinguished them from the data he obtained through his research. Consequently, he prevented his assumptions from limiting the study.

Nevertheless, the study is limited. First, collaboration, a complex phenomenon, was studied in one specific context. As reported by Pettersson and Hrelja (2020), “collaboration is clearly influenced by contextual factors” (p. 4). Thus, findings gleaned from this research provided a rich description of a contextualized human experience, not the human experience, per se. Since collaboration manifests according to situations, the researcher may not generalize findings beyond the context studied. Inferences drawn are specific to the selected population identified, and therefore do not necessarily apply to broader conditions. This limits the scope of the research.

Additionally, due to the nature of qualitative research, the researcher is unable to isolate variables that might impact the respondents’ experiences and perspectives on experiences as related to this study. Respondents’ perspectives on collaboration as studied may have been impacted by previous, unrelated experiences. An individual’s past positive or negative experiences while collaborating might affect their approach to current collaborative efforts and may have influenced their responses to interview questions posed. For example, if a respondent’s prior experiences were positive, then she may approach collaborating with a more favorable attitude than a respondent who regarded his previous experiences while collaborating as negative. In this case, verifying each respondent’s report (of the studied collaborative experience) for accuracy and objectivity is virtually impossible. The open-ended nature of such qualitative research gives respondents ultimate control over the content and quality of data collected, thus potentially limiting the study’s validity.

Finally, the researcher’s limited experience may have impacted this study. Since the quality of qualitative research is largely dependent upon the researcher’s skills—and since the researcher is a novice—a reader might conceive that this study will not translate as thoroughly as a study conducted by a veteran researcher. Furthermore, a reader might naturally assume that the researcher’s personal idiosyncrasies and biases will impact, and thus limit, this study of collaboration.
Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

In addition to addressing obvious gaps in current empirical literature, this study further positions interorganizational collaboration within the context of education, specifically. As noted above and explained in detail in Chapter 2, collaboration—as a body or process—is situational; collaboration manifests differently in different contexts (Davis et al., 2018). Thus, to study factors that contribute to a specific interorganizational collaboration’s successes (and/or failures) translates to identifying elements that fundamentally impact student achievement within the region where the collaboration works. Since respondents are K-12 educators interested in improving student achievement, we might suppose that their work directly affects the students they serve. If we begin to perceive an interconnection between educators’ specific contributions to collaboration and their impact on student achievement, then we might identify yet another reason why collaboration is worth these stakeholders’ efforts.

Next, this study provides for an additional opportunity to describe collaboration in great detail. Though collaboration as a term is not defined universally, every description of collaboration within a particular context leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, in general. As more researchers study collaboration across disciplines and situations, the body of literature will include increasingly more robust examples of conditions that either promote or hinder collaboration. Essentially, in recognizing how, when, and why individuals’ contributions to collaborative efforts might result in the accomplishment of collective goals, we might teach collaborators to bolster positive, profitable interactions with others. For K-12 educators who wish to collaborate, identifying approaches to collaborating—which demonstrate as effective in particular settings—might assist them in developing action plans to guide their future collaborative efforts.

Third, this study invited respondents to think deeply about their respective practices as professionals interested in reforming education and solving problems. Interviewed respondents were asked questions thoughtfully drafted to elicit reactions, explanations, and acknowledgements of Forum for Workforce Development (Forum) members’ contributions as they might have benefited or impeded an interorganizational collaboration’s progress. According to Serra (2015), the process of active reflection
“supports the development and maintenance of professional expertise” (p. 1). Recalling, considering, and evaluating their respective experiences regarding a broader purpose gives respondents—all active members of the interorganizational collaboration studied—the chance to continue their current and future work in a more productive manner.

Lastly, this study allowed the researcher to contemplate his own engagement in collaborations from the mindset of an educator and sociologist. As a professional who formerly served as a member of the interorganizational collaboration studied and as a school leader who routinely represents his district as a member of committees, consortiums, and boards, the researcher deems this study especially relevant to his service. Personal reflection accompanied the researcher’s careful analysis of data because he continually finds himself thinking about his own participation as a member of various collaborations while studying the phenomenon. As participants respond to the questions posed, the researcher considered his own answers to questions from both an educator’s and sociologist’s viewpoint. As Fennema (2017) explained:

Critical reflection helps us to see and understand multiple perspectives, make new connections between our ideas, experiences, and thoughts, find flaws or strengths in our solutions to problems, think about alternative outcomes, consider new or additional applications, and gain meaning from an experience. (p. 1)

Studying collaboration invited the researcher to use respondents’ perspectives as a means of enlightening his own.

The next chapter of this document offers a thorough synthesis and analysis of literature related to this study. Chapter 2 also presents theories and concepts used to substantiate the framework for the study and methodology employed. The research questions and methodology are explored in detail in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the findings and results of the study. Chapter 5 consists of a summary of findings from the research, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Members of the Forum served as respondents for the study. The purpose of this study was to investigate the collaboration among members of this regional consortium in their efforts to better align business with K-12 and postsecondary education to improve workforce development and the economic outlook of the county and surrounding area. The problem addressed by the proposed research was to encourage and strengthen the attributes, characteristics, and traits that inspire successful interorganizational collaborative efforts, particularly among educators, so that they can model the attributes, traits, and characteristics of interorganizational collaborators who solve problems, make change, and improve student achievement. This chapter reviews recent empirical evidence to answer the following questions:

1. How is collaboration described in the literature?
2. Why is interorganizational collaboration critical for quality school reform?
3. What factors are known to promote successful collaboration as defined for the purpose of this study?

Additionally, the chapter lays the foundation for a qualitative, phenomenological study that attempts to discover the factors that a selected group of collaborators deem critical for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. This chapter presents a review of current and relevant literature that was used to guide the study.

A systematic search using computer databases was undertaken to research and analyze literature related to interorganizational collaboration. Search terms and relevant key words within the scope and sequence of the problem studied such as business education collaboration, collaboration in education, and interorganizational collaboration were typed into databases, identified below. An online thesaurus was also used to locate comparable keywords and other relevant descriptors such as partnership and
**alliance** to search and locate related literature within the databases. Additional searches were conducted based on keywords from recent, relevant articles.

Searches were administered using various computer databases and online reference systems such as the catalogue (CAT) through the Penn State University Libraries website, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and Journal Storage (JSTOR). Additionally, the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), an online digital library, was searched to provide literature relevant to interorganizational collaboration. Google Scholar was also used to search key terms. A systematic search was executed by focusing on full-text copies available on the databases. Scholarly and peer-reviewed journal articles were given priority, followed by books, conference papers, magazine articles, and dissertations. In some cases, if full-text copies of books were not available through databases or online reference systems, a hard copy of the book was purchased from Amazon.

A staged review was then performed to analyze the literature. At the outset, abstracts were examined to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant sources. Then, literature deemed relevant after the initial review were read in their entirety, which totaled over 250 sources. Of the 250 plus pieces, 143 were found to be relevant sources related to the topic and were utilized for the study. First, an attempt to locate the most recent literature pertaining to interorganizational collaboration was made. Next, references from recent sources, as well as links to related articles, were also investigated. Hence, references listed in initial relevant sources were then used to locate and review additional sources. In addition, researchers who were found to have written multiple articles or books about collaboration were thoroughly vetted to examine their work to determine if other literature they authored was applicable to the current study. Ultimately, some of the completed readings were not used as references because it was determined that they did not contribute to the study.

Relevant literature was coordinated, organized into related topics, and summarized. Major topics, ideas, and themes were identified to develop a taxonomy to classify the literature. The review of the literature was organized according to the following themes: (a) definitions and descriptions of collaboration, (b) hallmarks of productive collaboration, (c) members’ direct influence on collaboration,
(d) factors sustaining collaboration, (e) factors hindering collaboration, and (f) collaboration in education. As research continued, several subthemes became evident as well. These themes shaped the organization of this chapter and the drafting of research questions presented in Chapter 3.

**Collaboration as Described in Literature**

The Latin root of the term collaboration, *collaboratus*, simply means “to work together” (Himmelman, 1996). However, to define the term *collaboration* briefly and universally is nearly impossible for two reasons. First, the word itself connotes a phenomenon that is simultaneously tangible and intangible. For example, *a collaboration* might refer to a group of individuals interacting within the same physical space—something real and observable. Concurrently, the word might reference a less perceptible process that occurs when a group of individuals works to accomplish a common goal. The sentence, “The collaboration has engaged in collaboration,” illustrates the point.

Second, researchers have not been able to determine what, exactly, constitutes a *collaboration* in either case. The term’s ambiguous nature presents as a challenge for anyone who wishes to study either a body or the process. Moreover, few researchers to date have formally cited the tangible and intangible aspects of collaboration as separate facets of the phenomenon. What results in reporting is an intertwining of process and product: The process impacts the product or outcome, while the product or outcome simultaneously informs the process. For example, the specific interactions among group members create a collaboration’s culture; synchronously, the collaboration’s culture influences the way group members interact as a body. Thus, it is difficult to separate individual collaborators from their contributions to the collaboration. Nevertheless, throughout the following subsections, the researcher ventured to dissect the phenomenon of collaboration by recognizing commonalities among definitions and descriptions presented in the literature, delineating between the tangible and intangible, and using this information to inform the study.

**Collaboration as a Tangible, Physical Body**

For the researcher, the first step towards understanding collaboration as a phenomenon was to study the collaborative body separately from the collaborative process. As no universal definition of
either exists, the researcher needs to consider commonalities among definitions and descriptions to make sense of the vast body of literature. Although some researchers define a collaborative body narrowly, other researchers use the term to describe hugely different entities. Considering the literature, a collaboration might consist of two colleagues working in the same physical space for several consecutive days to co-author a manuscript or 1,000 professionals from across the country who gather once annually for a workshop. Both identified specifically as collaborations, these working bodies contrast significantly regarding their physical composition.

Some researchers use words they deem synonymous with collaboration reciprocally, while others delineate among the terms by describing each uniquely. According to Armistead and Pettigrew (2008), “Terms such as networking, partnerships, alliances, cooperation, collaboration, and collaborative advantage are often used interchangeably and without clear distinction” (p. 21). Conversely, some researchers purposefully denote each term differently as they perceive each as a representation of a specific type of body. In 1996, Himmelman attempted a detailed taxonomy indicating successively more sophisticated degrees of engagement and commitment between partnerships and collaborations, for example. However, throughout Nissan and Burlingame’s (2003) writing, they used partnership and collaboration as synonyms. As researchers have summarized, confusion exists about what the word collaboration even means.

In addition to the uncertainty resulting from researchers’ lack of consensus regarding whether terms like partnership, network, alliance, and collaboration can be used synonymously, additional inconsistencies stem from researchers’ varied conceptions of the terms even when they acknowledge distinctions. For instance, Judge and Ryman (2001) defined a strategic alliance as “two or more organizations that contractually pool resources to achieve a long-term strategic purpose that is not possible for a single organization” (p. 71). Similarly, Armistead and Pettigrew (2004) described a partnership as “a cross-organizational group working together towards common goals which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve if tackled alone” (p. 571).
alliance and partnership present similarly even though the researchers used different terms to describe the bodies. Huxham (2003) explained the reason for the ambiguity:

A characteristic of research in inter-organizational collaboration is the wide variety of disciplines, research paradigms, theoretical perspectives and sectoral focuses from which the subject is tackled. Even the most basic terminology is subject to varied interpretations and there seems to be little agreement over usage of terms such as ‘partnership’, ‘alliance’, ‘collaboration’, ‘network’ or ‘inter-organizational relations.’ (p. 402)

Therefore, researchers sometimes describe bodies similarly yet term the entities differently, and groups might deem themselves collaborations regardless of the number of members, intensity of their focus, or depth of their work.

Perhaps most confusing, definitions and descriptions become even muddier when scholars purposefully distinguish among terms, yet laymen use the terms as synonyms in common parlance. Although researchers may differentiate among meanings of key terms, those like public-private partnership and business partner have found their way into the everyday vocabulary of managers, politicians, educators, and other professionals who interact in ways differently than those specifically described in literature. Bryson et al. (2015) reported that non-experts tend to use the term collaboration interchangeably with partnership because the latter term has prevailed throughout time and literature. Acknowledging this, they clarified the importance of distinguishing between terminology in both research and practice as the researcher has done by operationalizing the definition of collaboration (presented in Chapter 1). Next, collaboration as a process is detailed, which also presents as a challenge to describe for similar reasons.

**Collaboration as an Abstract Process**

Collaboration, a phenomenon, may manifest as either a physical, material body or a fluid, abstract process. Concerning the more concrete, palpable form of the phenomenon, various groups call themselves collaborations regardless of the number of members or nature of their work. Likewise, the less tangible aspects of collaborative processes can take numerous forms. The process one researcher might regard as cooperation can mirror another researcher’s description of coordination, perhaps purposefully defined by said researcher as distinct from collaboration. A third researcher might use the terms cooperation and
coordination interchangeably to describe a process that evinces entirely differently from any other researcher’s description of the processes they term cooperation, coordination, and/or collaboration. For example, Winer and Ray (1994) described cooperation as an interaction during which individuals gather only to share information about a particular subject while retaining their autonomy. Conversely, Emmens (2016) perceives cooperation as the product of a far more sustainable, deep relationship among individuals whose sovereignty lessens as they work together for a common purpose. These researchers separate cooperation as they perceive the action from the process they deem collaboration, yet numerous other researchers use all terms identified as synonyms (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2008; Patterson, 2014; Winer & Ray, 1994). Huxham noted as early as 1996 that “there is a great deal of variety—and hence confusion—in understandings of the meaning of [collaboration]” (p. 7).

Furthermore, the comprehensive process of cooperating, coordinating, partnering, aligning, networking, and collaborating is as varied as the terms used to describe the action represented by the terms. Davis et al. (2018) clarified the point with an example:

Some collaborative work is done in coordination with others, with a single individual responsible for some piece of the collective work and focused on accomplishing her part toward the mutual goal. Other collaborative work is done continuously, with two or more individuals working together to accomplish an objective. (p. 1)

Similarly, Anderson (2019) reported how, when collaborating, a diverse group of people may be responsible for achieving a desired outcome; however, members of the group may not work concurrently. As illustrated, the process of collaboration manifests differently from group to group, thus creating a challenge for those attempting to describe the phenomenon laconically and clearly.

Accounting for the aforementioned points, the researcher determined that the most manageable way to study collaboration as a phenomenon involves first searching for commonalities among researchers’ definitions and descriptions, followed by identifying very clearly how collaboration will be defined and described for the purposes of this research. Despite the vagueness, researchers do concede that, at its core, “collaboration is a process that gets people to work together” (Winer & Ray, 1994, p. ix). Commonalities like this, as well as operational definitions, are presented below.
Commonalities Among Definitions and Descriptions of Collaboration as a Phenomenon

Regardless of the term they use to define the phenomenon or the way they describe the actions occurring, researchers report two critical components of collaboration: (a) the involvement of more than one individual and (b) the working together of these individuals in some capacity. Furthermore, many researchers have clarified that collaboration involves individuals working together to accomplish tasks or solve problems they could not accomplish or solve alone. For example, Huxham (1996) reported, “In common parlance, ‘collaboration’ is often used when individuals work together towards some common aim” (p. 1). Over 20 years later, Davis et al. (2018) concurred that collaboration is “the process of building toward a specific outcome through the interactions, input, and support of multiple people” (p. 1). Rubin (2009) succinctly stated, “Collaboration is a means of aligning people’s actions to get something done” (p. 16). And Anderson (2019) explained that the foundation of any collaboration is “to drive more innovative solutions to problems” (p. xv). Hence, researchers agree that, at its most basic level, collaboration can be described as more than one individual working towards accomplishing a common goal. Table 2 presents prominent researchers’ definitions and descriptions of collaboration, as well as commonalities among them.

Table 2
Prominent Researchers’ Definitions of Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher(s)</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Definition/Description of Collaboration</th>
<th>More than One Person?</th>
<th>Common Goal?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anderson</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>“where a diverse group of people are responsible for an outcome...a way to drive more innovative solutions to problems” (xiv-xv).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bainer</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>“a relational system in which individuals in a group share mutual aspirations and a common conceptual framework” (144).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barfield</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>“deciding goals together with others, sharing responsibilities, and working together to achieve more than could be achieved by an individual on their own” (222).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher(s)</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Definition/Description of Collaboration</td>
<td>More than One Person?</td>
<td>Common Goal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryson et al.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>“the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by...two or more...to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by...one...separately” (648).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis et al.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>“the intentional process and common purpose of individuals” (1).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>“a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (5).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grover and Lynn</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>“a purposeful relationship in which all parties strategically choose to cooperate in order to accomplish a shared outcome” (6).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huxham</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>“when individuals work together towards some common aim” (1).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linden</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>“when people from different organizations produce something together through joint effort, resources, and decision making, and share ownership of the final product...” (7).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Littlefield et al.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>“when two or more organizations join to share information and resources in an effort to create solutions to social problems that could not be achieved by organizations working independently” (27).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straus</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>“the process people employ when working together in a group, organization, or community to plan, create, solve problems, and make decisions” (5).</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 2, the consensus is that collaboration involves individuals working together to solve a collective problem or achieve a shared goal. Additionally, many researchers note another element linked to collaboration as a phenomenon: the building and sustaining of relationships around the work. In every case, whether the formation of relationships is a by-product of or catalyst for collaboration appears to depend upon the way the phenomenon manifests. Nevertheless, relationships
build and change through the vehicle of collaboration. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) concluded that “Collaboration connotes a more durable, pervasive relationship” among individuals who unify with commitment. And Winer and Ray (1994) built upon this assertion as they explained, “Collaboration becomes a continuing phenomenon with a wide range of results that empower people in systems to change” (p. ix).

Relationships among individuals change with collaboration. Via a hierarchy, researchers have attempted to interpret those relationships by organizing their formation and manifestation according to levels of depth. Decades apart, Winer and Ray (1994) and Emmens (2016) acknowledged that any changes resulting from systemic collaboration can be described along a continuum of increasing intensity for building and sustaining relationships. Bainer (1997) defined collaboration as a “relational system” (p. 144); Grover and Lynn (2012) also included the word relationship in their definition of collaboration as a “purposeful relationship” (p. 6). Although the subject-specific terminology may have changed over the years, one point holds constant among the research: “A collaboration mind-set supplants the them versus us perspective with a we together perspective” (Austin et al., 2000, p. 176).

We cannot force individuals to become friends. Yet, when expected to interact for a concerted reason and subsequently to connect for the purposes of accomplishing their goal, people ultimately form relationships—a hallmark of collaboration. Essentially, they reframe their mindset from one focused on competition to one concentrated on cooperation (Austin et al., 2000). Throughout the remainder of this comprehensive review of literature, interactions between and among individuals and organizations are discussed as the point is applicable to: the researcher’s operational definition of collaboration (presented in Chapter 1), the type of collaboration the researcher wishes to study (discussed in the following section), and the researcher’s assumption that respondents will name interpersonal factors as contributing to their interorganizational collaboration’s success.

Interorganizational Collaboration

As explained above, collaboration, which can manifest differently in various contexts, is challenging to describe; however, commonalities among descriptions exist. Drawing upon similar
descriptions of interorganizational collaborations, as well as collaborations in general, researchers acknowledge the need for individuals to cross organizational and sectoral boundaries as they journey towards a positive end through meaningful interaction and well-defined structure (Bryson et al., 2015, 2006; Lasker et al., 2001; Malin & Hackmann, 2019; O’Leary et al., 2010). Specifically, Bryson et al. (2015) define interorganizational or cross-sectoral collaboration as “the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately” (p. 648). This definition reflects the operational definition of collaboration drafted for the purpose of this study and further situates interorganizational collaboration as the model of interaction formalized for stakeholders who wish to solve the “wicked problems” (Rittel & Weber, 1973) plaguing education.

Today’s educators, as stewards of change, work in territory that requires collaboration (O’Leary et al., 2010). As individuals are tasked with determining viable solutions to major social problems impacting their communities, they frequently reach across professional, personal, and ideological boundaries by networking, partnering, or collaborating with others who might offer unique perspectives or provide tangible resources (Grover & Lynn, 2012). “The intensification of cross-sector collaboration phenomena has occurred in multiple fields of action. Organizations in the private, public, and social sectors are working together to tackle society’s most wicked problems” (Trujillo, 2018, p. 425). To govern organizations, groups, and segments of society—to respond efficiently and effectively to society’s ever-growing needs and “wicked problems” (Rittel & Weber, 1973)—individuals have no option but to operate in accordance with increased interdependence.

Thirty years ago, few social issues fell outside an organization’s domain (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). Nowadays, researchers struggle to name even one major issue that an organization might address in isolation (Kramer et al., 2019; Ungureanu et al., 2020). “Because of the interdependencies, interorganizational collaboration is essential, yet working across organizational boundaries is far from simple” (Schruijer, 2020, p. 1). Beyond the scope of any one agency to handle, these wicked issues (Rittel & Webber, 1973) are steeped in controversy (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Stewart, 1996; Winer & Ray,
1994). “Wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) have no obvious solutions, cause disagreement amongst stakeholders, and invite moral dilemmas. Inescapably political by nature, they appeal to stakeholders’ values and sense of ethics. The wilder and more wicked the issue, the more tentacles stretch from the primary problem to clench and envelope potential, additional problems—some of which are equally as dense, perplexing, and diversified. As Coleman (2011) interpreted, by seeking to work as a collective whole via interorganizational collaboration, we might develop a more thorough understanding of our “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) and, consequently, have a better chance of addressing them.

A staple of public management, cross-sector collaborations, which have proliferated in recent years to tame the “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Stewart, 1996; Winer & Ray, 1994), are becoming increasingly more popular as long-term, social goals are clarified (Rubin, 2009) and organizations’ overarching visions for social reform are solidified (Gray, 2008). Frequently leading social reform efforts are educators, who must seek purposeful, fruitful partnerships with businesses, post-secondary institutions, and governmental agencies if they wish to fulfill their responsibilities of graduating high-achieving students. The following section of this chapter discusses interorganizational collaboration as applicable to educators and their partners with a shared vision.

Interorganizational Collaboration in Education

Educators are in the business of increasing student achievement, and they collaborate outside their school districts’ boundaries to affect the kind of systemic change that leads to students’ improved academic performance. This is because the significant problems, which educators need to solve, are so wide-scale and multifarious—so wicked (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Stewart, 1996; Winer & Ray, 1994)—that they frequently have no choice but to seek assistance beyond their immediate organizational boundaries. Higham and Yeomans (2010) recognized the need for interorganizational collaboration in education: “Partnership working between institutions and organisations is currently commonly seen as providing solutions to meeting multiple, interrelated needs in areas of social policy including health, social welfare and education” (p. 379).
Moreover, educators find that community and regional stakeholders often hold interest in assisting schools, particularly when they also are directly affected by the students who graduate and enter the surrounding workforce. Since *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published, interorganizational collaborations have become more attractive to those whose work is tied directly to students’ achievement: educators and business leaders. When students graduate, most enter the workforce—either immediately or after graduating from a post-secondary institution. If educators are to reach their goal of preparing young adults for the workforce, then they need to be aware of the skills required by businesses. If business leaders are to recruit and hire highly qualified, skilled individuals, then they might want to take the opportunity to inform educators’ professional practice. According to Diaz-Gibson et al. (2017), “Scholars stress the need of specific networked leadership to facilitate interaction, coordination, and collaboration among members, maintain sustainability and drive program effectiveness” (p. 1044). By joining forces, educators and business leaders might develop especially innovative and practical ways to bolster students’ achievement and to strengthen their essential skills—if the collaborative efforts are successful (Smith, 1994).

Interorganizational collaboration often proves challenging, especially for educators who may not recognize or embody the factors that promote successful collaboration. According to Porterfield and Carnes (2014), “School administrators today must speak the language of community collaboration, partnership, and engagement” (p. 44). However, they identify a disconnect between educators’ understanding of the need to seek assistance in solving problems and engaging in a process that results in solutions. Despite the fact that educators fully grasp the importance of reaching outside their organizational boundaries to solve complex social problems, they may not always know how best to communicate with their partners nor how to establish the kinds of guidelines and routines that tend to promote successful collaboration. Citing a specific partnership between educators and parents, for example, Porterfield and Carnes (2014) further explicate, “What we see is a gap between knowing and doing, a gap filled with well-intentioned efforts to court parent and community participation that merely dance around the edges of genuine collaboration” (p. 41). Since the success of an interorganizational
collaboration depends upon the collaborators’ ability to build and maintain relationships (Grover & Lynn, 2012), identifying factors to close the gap proves a relevant and timely exercise. The following sections describe factors known to promote successful collaboration in interorganizational partnerships between educators and others with stakes in student achievement.

Factors That Promote Successful Collaboration Among Educators and Their Partners

The literature is filled with researchers’ findings regarding factors that promote successful collaboration—so much so that to narrow down and identify the most important factor is impossible. Because successful collaboration is situational and manifests differently based on context—and because the term collaboration itself connotes both a process and product—to describe the exact workings of fruitful collaboration across settings is futile. Most findings are not generalizable. Thus, the closest researchers come to identifying factors that definitively promote successful collaboration is to study how the phenomenon displays in varying contexts, which enables recognizing commonalities: patterns inherent in the process and characteristics possessed by members of purposeful collaborations. This was illustrated by Seaton et al. (2018) when they reported, “Similar to previous reviews, several key factors contributed to interorganizational collaborative success, including a shared vision, leadership, member characteristics, organizational commitment, available resources, clear roles/responsibilities, trusting relationships, and engaging members of the target population” (pp. 1106-1107).

As researchers, Persaud and Murphy (2019) grasped the importance of studying how interorganizational collaborations manifest in contexts involving educators who act as school leaders; they reported:

The management and leadership skills required of individuals who are increasingly being tasked with moving out of traditionally hierarchical structures to spearhead and manage cross-sector collaborations are complex. Focusing on the skill set and competencies that school leaders have for discharging their responsibilities is a critical element in providing effective school leadership. (pp. 25-26)

Regarding management skills as competencies, educators who seek assistance outside their organizations might want to structure their collaborative environments in a manner that fosters collegiality and invites shared ownership of responsibilities. Furthermore, through their use of constitutional elements like clear
agendas and the delineation of specific time and space allotted for the collaborative process, they can manage the complexities of interpersonal interactions more tangibly. In terms of exercising leadership skills while working as members of a team, educators might reflect actively on their own behavior to ensure they nurture a spirit of collaboration through their demonstration of visible and favorable personal characteristics. Specific structural elements and personal characteristics known to inspire successful collaboration are discussed in the following sections.

The Process of Building Interorganizational Collaborative Relationships

One common aspect of collaboration presented in the literature is the fact that, when collaborating, people are working together. Whether a body or process, a collaboration involves more than one person. This key point is inherent in most rudimentary definitions of the term. According to Davis et al. (2018), “Collaboration is the process of building towards a specific outcome through the interactions, input, and support of multiple people” (p. 1). More specifically, that interaction might result from a formalized partnership (Kowalski, 2010; Levitt, 2020); joint effort towards accomplishing a shared goal (Linden, 2002); the pooling of tangible resources (Gray, 1985); or the recognition that a problem cannot be solved without interaction. No matter the reason for the interaction, the interaction itself constitutes collaboration to a discernible degree.

Yet, it is the building and sustaining of relationships that make collaboration a phenomenon worth exploring. Like any form of collaboration, interorganizational collaboration manifests through the union of individuals—ultimately, to achieve a common goal. By nature of the interactions among collaborators, relationships build. To separate the working together aspect of collaboration from the building relationships element is impossible, for some type of symbiotic relationship will develop either directly or indirectly simply by nature of the concurrence. These complex, multifaceted relationships extend as a network between and among both individuals and the organizations they represent. A collaborator representing one organization might relate to another organization while simultaneously bonding to varying degrees with individual members of the organization. This webbed association speaks to the complicated nature of collaboration.
According to Gajda (2004), “Collaboration depends upon positive personal relations and effective emotional connections between partners” (p. 6). To engage the collaborative process, those working together must build trusting relationships (Levitt, 2020). However, trust is developed only when time, effort, and energy are channeled to determine an accessible, functional system for communicating. Paradoxically, trust grows through positive communication as relationships flourish, yet positive relationships flourish only when trust grows because of open communication. After all, “Without a basis for trust and healthy interpersonal connections between people, strategic alliances will not have a solid foundation on which to stand” (Gajda, 2004, p. 69). To acknowledge the importance of trust when identifying commonalities among research and operationalizing definitions is prudent; thus, the role of trust in collaboration is explored in detail below. As Levitt (2020) recently explained, “[Collaboration] is an ongoing process for both asserting ideas and building trusting relationships to express those ideas with all parties’ interests in mind” (p. 5). Bstieler et al. (2017) purported, “Examining how trust develops over the duration of inter-organizational relationships is of critical concern” (p. 47).

Educators who wish to improve student achievement in a way that positively impacts society at large understand fully that collaborating with business and community leaders is indispensable. Synchronously, business and community leaders know that if they want educators to teach the kinds of essential skills required in the workforce, they need to offer their assistance to those responsible for graduating capable, informed students. Hence, these kinds of interorganizational collaborations center around a shared vision or common goal that can be achieved only through partnerships, strategic alliances, and the building of relationships. According to Mador et al. (2019), “Developing a shared vision for a partnership is an important process for fostering a strong and productive working relationship” (p. 610). In this case, collaboration as defined is fundamental for the continued growth of communities and effectiveness of stakeholders’ work (Rubin, 2009).

Repeatedly, researchers recognize that, together, individuals and organizations can achieve more than they otherwise would if working in solitude (Bryson et al., 2006; Emmens, 2016; Gajda, 2004; Gray, 1985; Judge & Ryman, 2001; Levitt, 2020; and Littlefield et al., 2013). A correlate of improved practice
in education (Connolly & James, 2006), interorganizational collaborations have increased steadily since their modest beginnings in the 1980s (Ferguson, 2001). By 1990, 51% of American public-school districts were involved in interorganizational partnerships; by 2000, 69% of school districts sought assistance elsewhere (Hoff, 2002). More recently, Diaz-Gibson et al. (2017) declared, “Educational change and improvement is a complex and challenging task that often involves multiple stakeholders and competing demands” (p. 1040). School districts in America regard education as an inherently collaborative profession and thus reach across agencies to achieve primary goals: improving schools at a systemic level (Connolly & James, 2006); advancing student outcomes through engagement at the classroom level (Weldon, 2011); and preparing young adults for the workforce (Smith, 1994).

Rubin (2009) deems educators who engage in interorganizational collaborations to be “optimists” and “optimizers” (p. 58). As asset-based thinkers, they might “look for what is working and what strengths or assets exist within themselves, their relationships, and in the situations in which they find themselves, and then build on the strengths to accomplish their goals” (Hoy et al., 2012, p. 52). The following subsections identify factors found to be strengths inherent in those who partner successfully.

The Work of Mattessich and Johnson

Acknowledging that productive collaboration results in favorable outcomes for all parties involved, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) strived to focus the phenomenon inside a tangible lens by situating 22 factors influencing a collaboration’s success under six overarching categories, each with a common theme. The categorization served two purposes. First, categories presented as envelopes to hold factors similar enough to assort, yet distinct enough to delineate. Next, the categories helped the researchers to distinguish between factors that members of a collaboration can control and those outside their control. For example, the three factors situated under the umbrella category of “Environment” are beyond direct control; although group members might be able to influence or affect them, they cannot control them. Table 3 presents Mattessich and Johnson’s 22 factors classified according to six categories.
### Table 3

*The Twenty-Two Success Factors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>History of collaboration or cooperation in the community</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed in communities where previous efforts have succeeded and are encouraged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group members can influence or affect, but they cannot control)</td>
<td>Collaborative group seen as a legitimate leader in the community</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed in communities where the group is regarded as reliable and competent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favorable political and social climate</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed in communities where political leaders, policy makers, those who control the resources, and the public support the group’s collaborative mission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Membership</strong></td>
<td>Mutual respect, understanding, and trust</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members share an understanding and respect for one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group members can control)</td>
<td>Appropriate cross-section of members</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when they include representatives from each segment of the community that will be affected by their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members see collaboration as in their self-interest</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members believe they will benefit from their involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to compromise</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members are able and willing to compromise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process and Structure</strong></td>
<td>Members share a stake in both process and outcome</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members feel a sense of ownership of the process and product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group members can control)</td>
<td>Multiple layers of participation</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members represent the various levels of hierarchies within organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members remain open to change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of clear roles and policy guidelines</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members collectively develop a set of principles governing their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Factor</td>
<td>Descriptor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adaptability to changing conditions</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members can freely adjust.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate pace of development</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when they develop at a pace that is conducive to the work without being overwhelming to the members.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation and continuous learning</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members continually measure the effectiveness of their work and make changes accordingly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Open and frequent communication</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members interact often and without reservation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group members can control)</td>
<td>Established informal relationships and communication links</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members establish personal connections to each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Concrete, attainable goals and objectives</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when goals are clear and achievable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group members can control)</td>
<td>Shared vision</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members agree upon the group’s overarching mission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unique purpose</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when the group’s collective goals differ from any one contributing organization’s specific agenda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when they have the resources they need to do their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Group members can control)</td>
<td>Skilled leadership</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when those providing leadership possess a high degree of interpersonal intelligence and executive functioning skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged stakeholders</td>
<td>Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members foster connections with people who their collaborative efforts affect.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While some overlapping exists among factors and categories just by nature of the hazy phenomenon under study, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) characterized elements of successful collaboration in a concrete, sensible way reflective of other researchers’ work. Below, each category, as well as the factors within, are discussed.

**Category 1: Environment**

The first overarching category that Mattessich and Johnson (2018) identified to provide context to factors affecting the success of a collaboration is the environment. Environmental characteristics include features of the geographic location and social context in which a collaboration’s work transpires. Mattessich and Johnson acknowledged that although a collaboration might be able to influence or affect environmental characteristics, members cannot control them entirely. This aspect of environment as an umbrella category differs from the central tenet of the other five categories, comprised of controllable factors. Three environmental characteristics beyond members’ direct control are: (a) the history of collaboration in the community, (b) whether the collaborative body is perceived as a leader in the community, and (c) the community’s political and social climate.

**Factor 1: History of Collaboration or Cooperation in the Community**

According to Mattessich and Johnson (2018), collaborations are more likely to succeed in communities where previous efforts have prevailed and are encouraged. Logically, this makes sense on a basic level. However, while a collaboration cannot change history, members can certainly influence how collaborative efforts are perceived by the community presently and in the future.

To help a community develop a more favorable opinion or maintain a positive attitude toward interorganizational collaborations, in general, members might begin by investigating the history of collaboration in the community and considering factors that might have contributed to former collaborations’ successes or failures. Members might uncover specific actions, behaviors, or incidences that shaped the community’s collective opinion of collaborative efforts. Essentially, before moving forward with their specific work, members of a collaboration might want to conduct an informal study to
determine how their community feels about the work of interorganizational collaborations and why. Armed with this information, they can proceed accordingly.

One way members of an interorganizational collaboration might proceed to mold a community’s attitude toward their work is by recruiting the right people as group mates (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). As a collective descriptor, the right people connote a different combination of individuals in each community. Yet, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) offer suggestions for ensuring the right people gather for a common purpose. For example, an organizer might want to invite participation from individuals who engaged in collaboration previously. Whether the individuals participated in unproductive collaborations and learned from their mistakes or they participated in fruitful collaborations that led to positive outcomes, they will possess wisdom gained from their experiences. Assuming they remain reflective and forthcoming, they can guide the collaborative process by offering suggestions and welcoming their group mates to share their thoughts. Ideally, these more experienced members will garner respect from others, who come to trust their insight—particularly as it relates to their recognition of the type of collective action community members commend.

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) also suggest that, when identifying their goals, members of an interorganizational alliance consider how collaboration has been perceived historically in the community; They asserted, “When planning a collaborative effort, goals should be set according to the level of development, understanding, and acceptance of collaboration within the community” (p. 14). For example, members who hail from communities where previous collaborative efforts have failed might set less lofty, short-term goals, which can be attainable through small, incremental steps, in lieu of abstract, long-term goals, which can be difficult to obtain. Rowe and Devanney (2003) also noted the importance of appraising the views of local communities when determining a collaborative agenda; They explained:

If a major new collaborative approach seems worthwhile, even though a community has little or no history of collaboration, environmental factors should be addressed before starting the work. Approaches for building an environment more conducive to collaboration include educating potential collaborators regarding the benefits and processes of collaboration, and developing small, cooperative projects with quick wins to demonstrate the value of working together. (p. 380)
By researching a community’s history, values, and perception of alliances, organizers of interorganizational collaborations can encourage participation from members who the community trusts and pace the development of their work at a rate that will yield positive results. If members of an interorganizational collaboration are respected by the community and if the collaboration’s work is perceived as productive, then the group will likely be regarded as a leader in the community—another factor deemed critical for a collaboration’s success.

**Factor 2: Collaborative Group Seen as a Legitimate Leader in the Community**

Collaborative groups wishing to steward systemic change “must be perceived as suitable leaders by the communities they intend to influence” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 15). If the group is deemed reliable and competent—if the right people, who represent their organizations and constituencies with credibility as experts in their respective fields, are on board—then the community will likely distinguish the group as a leadership body (Rubin, 2009). Researchers have determined that, for an interorganizational collaboration to achieve success, members must maintain a positive image both individually and collectively (Winer & Ray, 1994).

While knowing how a community has perceived interorganizational collaborative efforts historically is prudent, ensuring that members of the group are qualified and admired is critical. Members’ levels of professional expertise matter; however, “Community-wide projects require broad legitimacy in the eyes of a narrower group” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 15). To broaden a group’s legitimacy beyond that secured by the culmination of members’ expertise, interorganizational collaborations might prioritize diversity among members.

As Rubin (2009) explained, “Collaborations that don’t reflect the diversity of their constituencies in the context of America’s sweeping demographic transformation will run the immediate and fatal task of being illegitimate, unresponsive, or worse” (p. 64). When the stakes are high, organizing a group reflective of a broader constituency “keeps parties at the table” (Linden, 2002, p. 143). As a concept, diversity translates to a characteristic of social grouping, reflective of the degree to which objective or subjective differences among group members exist (Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Although, as they
work to mesh their ideas, group members themselves might not necessarily remain cognizant of the differences, the community will probably consider the interorganizational collaboration’s efforts more inclusive and justifiable if members represent all stakeholder groups in a manner the community finds meaningful. Straus (2002) stated, “When a full range of differing interests and points of view is involved in solving a problem or making a decision, the solution is likely to be much more comprehensive and creative than if a small group of like-minded individuals acted on its own” (p. 39). Furthermore, the inclusion of diverse members invites a wider foundation of support for the solution and its practical implementation (Gray, 1985). Ultimately, educators who wish to solve complex problems extend beyond their organizational boundaries in search of allies who can share their unique ideas and resources. Rubin (2009) cautioned, “Remember that we are recruiting collaborative partners to strengthen us, not replicate us” (p. 68). Though this orchestra of partners with companionate approaches to solving problems performs the same song, everyone remains instrumental by bringing distinction.

Another way to broaden an interorganizational collaboration’s legitimacy, thus heartening stakeholders to the work, is to market the group’s intentions, focus, and planning (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014; Winer & Ray, 1994). One of collaborative leaders’ primary roles is to communicate with the public via effective, prompt, and comprehensive dialogue so that the community recognizes the scope and implications of the work (Rubin, 2009). Porterfield and Carnes (2014) remarked that, when sharing information, “clarity, consistency, and courtesy count” (p. 117). They also recommended that interorganizational collaborations build positive relationships with members of the local media, who can market and report information fairly and accurately. Intrinsically comparable, marketing, like diverse membership, positivity and productivity helps an interorganizational collaboration rise to the rank of community leader. Also effective for securing a foundation for an interorganizational collaboration’s success is group members’ careful assessment of the community’s social and political climate prior to beginning their work. This fundamental factor is explored below.
**Factor 3: Favorable Political and Social Climate**

As a third environmental characteristic influencing an interorganizational collaboration’s success, the community’s social and political climates matter because those who lead politics and hold the opinions often control the resources (Cornforth et al., 2015; Emerson et al., 2012; Emmens, 2016; Mattessich & Johnson, 2018; Siddiki et al., 2011). Bryson et al. (2006) linked a collaboration’s productivity to the group’s establishment of solid relationships with public officials, and Arganoff (2006) argued that a collaboration’s sustained success stems from value added specifically from the public’s positive perception of the group and its work. By evaluating a community’s social and political climates, members of interorganizational collaborations can identify and capitalize on points of leverage.

For example, as Porterfield and Carnes (2014) summarized, “Before you go public with any initiative, you must be sure that it is the right one in the right place at the right time” (p. 97). As stated above, inviting the right people to join the group might warm the public to its efforts, in general (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). However, to catch the attention of those with influence, the group might want to launch their work strategically by first gauging environmental conditions that might impact the results of their efforts, timing their subsequent performance accordingly (Rubin, 2009). Researchers have learned that when the stakes of collaboration are especially high—as they are when organizations merge to solve complex social problems—people are watching.

Appraising the community’s social and political climate helps members of an interorganizational collaboration ascertain exactly who is watching and why. Remaining mindful of this information allows members to determine the most appropriate ways to market and advocate for their efforts. Austin et al. (2000) reported that when a collaboration is purposeful and “progressing into the organizational integration stage” (p. 181), proud internal and external promotion of the work helps to create a climate conducive to productivity. Simply, the public likes to know what is going on for a variety of reasons, ranging from self-interest to a genuine concern for the advancement of the community. Anderson (2019) explained this aspect of the phenomenon poignantly:
On the outside are onlookers who are watching your collaboration even if they haven’t been invited to participate. This may be because they are inspired by the effort, fearful of being left out, or simply bored and looking for a distraction. While it can be tempting to ignore these folks, it’s useful to make sure you are communicating to this audience so they don’t become active detractors. (p. 23)

Essentially, “Collaboration can’t be open and inclusive if it is invisible to the larger organization or a community” (Straus, 2002, p. 51). Since the driving forces within a community often either directly or indirectly impact an interorganizational collaboration’s success, launching the work in the most favorable conditions and heeding obvious obstacles may help group members to navigate through turbulence (Bryson et al., 2006; Crosby & Bryson, 2010). Via a careful consideration of environmental characteristics, collaborators can better understand the context in which problems have developed and how the existing political and social systems might be maneuvered to generate viable solutions.

**Category 2: Membership Characteristics**

Unlike environmental characteristics, which can be influenced but not controlled, interorganizational collaborations retain control over membership characteristics by inviting the right people to join the team. According to Mattessich and Johnson (2018), “Membership characteristics consist of the skills, attitudes, and opinions of individuals in a collective group, as well as the culture and capacity of the organizations that form the collaborative group” (p. 10). Thus, individuals who demonstrate the types of competencies and behaviors that invite and sustain collaboration make the best members (Emmens, 2016)—so much so that researchers have purported that recruiting the right, results-driven individuals with a high degree of interpersonal intelligence is tantamount to an interorganizational collaboration’s success (Bryson et al., 2015; Collins, 2001; Mattessich & Johnson, 2018; Winer & Ray, 1994). The following four sections outline the membership characteristics considered most necessary for fruitful, productive collaboration.

**Factor 4: Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust**

Members of interorganizational collaborations must share an understanding and respect for one another, as well as each other’s organizations (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Essentially, members must trust that their operations, cultural norms, beliefs, limitations, and expectations will be recognized and
valued (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Bstieler et al. (2017) stated, “Trust is a key factor for explaining variation in the outcomes of inter-organizational relationships” (p. 47). In his review of literature, Dirks (1999) discovered that, by definition, trust is a belief about dependability and integrity, and researchers have examined trust accordingly. Joseph and Winston (2005) linked trust to a level of confidence one individual maintains in another’s abilities, and Schoorman et al. (2007) perceived the act of trusting as taking a risk to put faith in another. By 2008, Armistead and Pettigrew asserted that trust encompasses the idea of remaining vulnerable to another party. Thus, respect, understanding, and trust are inseparable elements of collaborative relationships.

Working to build trust among members of an interorganizational collaboration is critical because the assurance yields deeper levels of engagement and greater productivity. Mador et al. (2019) asserted, “In our experience, fostering trust and respect from the very first team meeting is critical” (p. 615). Since the absence of trust inhibits the exchange of information, which is vital to a collaboration’s progress (Hasel & Grover, 2017), researchers have stated that trust is a necessary precondition for collaboration (Cropper, 1996; Huxham, 2003; Rubin, 2009). Yet, members rarely respect, understand, and trust each other immediately upon partnering; often, the beginning of a collaborative endeavor inspires more suspicion than trust (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Huxham, 2003). Hence, members are presented with a paradox: While the sharing of space and time alone does not invite trust among members, members might want to afford each other the courtesy of respect and understanding simply because they come together to work.

To trust without definitive proof of trustworthiness constitutes taking a risk, though trusting might be more about clarifying expectations than assessing actions without first formulating a plan (Huxham & Vangen, 2004). To trust is to be vulnerable (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998), so if members of an interorganizational collaboration mutually understand that they need to respect each other upon uniting, they can synergize to strengthen the trust once they begin the collaborative process. As Kannan-Narasimhan and Lawrence (2012) explained, “Trust is the key to the relationship between behavioral integrity and outcomes” (p. 167). With this mindset, members essentially trust that they will build trust
over time. Bstieler et al. (2017) reported, “As people experience working with one another, trust grows through mutual behaviors and perceptions, particularly through two-way communication” (p. 49).

Demanding a concerted effort to build a culture of mutual trust and open communication, members of a collaboration typically are willing to afford each other a small degree of trust in aspiration of the trust growing and strengthening consistently with the group’s work (Rubin, 2009; Vangen & Huxham, 2003b). Mattessich and Johnson (2018) suggested that the work begins with members purposefully “devoting energy to learning about each other” (p. 16). They noted that spending time to build relationships between and among members of a collaboration during the beginning stages of the work pays dividends later—particularly when members are expected to take risks, communicate honestly, and extend beyond their own self-interests. According to Bstieler et al. (2017), “Trust cannot be mandated, but is an outcome of consistent efforts and perceptions over time” (p. 48). In sum, strong, trusting relationships lead to the type of openness, integrity, and reciprocity (among members) necessary for collaborations to make change (Emmens, 2016; Porterfield & Carnes, 2014).

**Factor 5: Appropriate Cross-Section of Members**

One way to invite trust among members of an interorganizational collaboration is to ensure that all segments of the collaborative community are represented through membership (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018) and that membership reflects the complexity of the group’s task (Gray, 1985). Researchers asserted that a diverse group of stakeholders—including representatives from vastly different organizations working to make change, as well as individuals directly affected by change—is essential for solving problems creatively, mitigating risks, and creating a balanced culture of trust (Anderson, 2019; Archer & Cameron, 2013; Livermore, 2016; Porterfield & Carnes, 2014; Rubin, 2009; Straus, 2002). According to Crosby and Bryson (2010), interorganizational collaborations are more likely to succeed if they are arranged carefully and include responsive stakeholders, who might be identified even in advance of the group’s formal agenda. By selecting members prior to designing the collaborative scenario, the group’s targeted work might be prescribed with members’ specific needs, goals, and personality characteristics in mind (Straus, 2002). This practice invites synergy: Members can create something new and valuable
together because their individual perspectives, resources, and skills are predicted to mesh (Lasker et al., 2001).

In addition to ensuring that an appropriate cross-section of members joins an interorganizational collaboration, a group may want to review and potentially renew the constituency routinely. As the value of a collaboration might decline over time, a regular review of membership can help to sustain an overall positive culture (Austin et al., 2000). Sometimes, the original members of a collaboration might not gel if the group’s focus shifts or if social dynamics among members change. Therefore, evaluating and possibly changing membership either intermittently or as a recurrent practice often sustains the group and its work overall (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018).

Lastly, researchers caution against inviting too many members to join an interorganizational collaborative effort. While gathering a cross-section of flexible, adaptable stakeholders together is prudent for the aforementioned reasons, “the cross section of members cannot be so broad or the number of collaborative members so great that the process of collaboration becomes unmanageable” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 17). Researchers have found that to build trust among large numbers of people is quite challenging because to gain consensus among numerous individuals proves extremely difficult (Vangen & Huxham, 2003b). Furthermore, when multiple people are involved in collaboration, they tend to complicate issues. Since complicated collaborations maintain a higher risk of failure, researchers recommend that team builders seek only necessary stakeholders (Emmens, 2016).

**Factor 6: Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest**

Members of a collaboration, both at the organizational level and at the individual level, must view their membership in the collaboration as being beneficial (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). By joining a collaboration, an organization usually embarks upon short-term risks in the hope of long-term benefits (Lowndes et al., 1997). As noted by Connolly and James (2006), “The interests served by the collaboration between organizations do not necessarily determine the interests of the key players” (p. 81). In other words, the benefits for members representing their organizations must outweigh the costs associated with membership in the collaboration (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). In addition to benefiting
the community, members must also perceive that their own separate self-interests are being adequately addressed (Winer & Ray, 1994). The perceived value of the collaboration is the ultimate factor in determining whether the potential members will partake in the venture (Austin et al., 2000). Hence, successful collaboration is only possible if all the stakeholders have the potential to receive some benefit (Wood & Gray, 1991).

“It should be very clear what member organizations stand to gain from the collaboration, and those expectations should be built into the goals, so they remain visible throughout the life of the collaborative effort” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 17). Members should disclose their self-interests and how they wish to benefit from membership in the collaboration on an individual level. Honesty and transparency are important when sharing this information with the group so that individual goals can be built into the goals of the collaboration. “A simple question, ‘Why are you here?’ answered by each member from both a personal and organizational perspective goes a long way toward establishing trust” (Winer & Ray, 1994, 58). The individual self-interests should align with the overarching goals of the collaborative group. If they do not align with the goals of the group, the member may want to rethink being a part of the collaborative group. As Winer and Ray (1994) wrote, “Self-interest is always present, so we must recognize and acknowledge it. If we don’t, we lose our way on the collaborative journey” (p. 30). Each organization and individual member have something to gain from being a member of the collaboration. Embracing this can help to build mutual respect, honesty, and trust among members (Winer & Ray, 1994).

Once self-interests have been disclosed by all members, “Incentives for individual organizations to get involved and stay involved should be built into the collaborative effort, and those incentives should be reviewed to see if they continue to motivate members” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 17). Thus, it is necessary for members to review, evaluate, and reflect often to ensure members’ interests are considered and addressed throughout the life of the collaboration.

The varying member interests must be integrated into the collaboration, hopefully adding to the potential for collaborative advantage. According to Grover and Lynn (2012), integrative negotiating is
aimed at seeking value for all members. Members communicate their interpretation of the collaboration’s goals and their base organization’s goals (Eden & Huxham, 2001). Grover and Lynn (2012) referred to the consideration of individual interests as value claiming and the inclusion of all members’ needs as value expansion. Individual views should be respected by the group (Huxham & Vangen, 2000a).

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) postulated, “The benefits of membership need not be the same for all members. Instead, the collaborative group should be certain it understands the unique benefits sought by each member” (p. 17). All members of a collaboration will not have identical goals. Members and their organizations will have different reasons for involvement in the collaboration. Often, their desired outcomes are different than the goals of the collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 2004). The process of negotiating interests can strengthen group identity. Individual goals can become incorporated into group goals (Eden & Huxham, 2001). For a collaborative group to positively affect social change, any potential differences must be bridged so that members better understand how the collaboration’s goals mesh and overlap with individual and organizational goals (Stroh, 2015).

Negotiating and incorporating individual interests and goals into the interests and goals of the collaboration requires some level of compromise on the part of members. This ties into the next factor for a successful collaboration and will be examined closer below.

**Factor 7: Ability to Compromise**

Members of a collaboration must be able to compromise with one another if they want to realize success (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). The decisions, actions, and goals of the collaborative body cannot possibly replicate the precise interests and goals of every organization and member in the group (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). There must be a level of give and take for a collaboration to be successful. McCann (1983) declared that “complete consensus is not necessary, but ends must sufficiently accommodate the diverse interests of stakeholders” (p. 180). Crosby and Bryson (2005) added that researchers of collaboration underscore the importance of achieving agreement from all or at least most members of the group. According to Straus (2002), agreement does not merely just happen, but instead, agreement must be constructed by the members.
Reaching consensus, yet still expressing a diverse range of views from members, can be difficult for the group to accomplish (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Despite the difficulties associated with consensus, agreement among members is vital for the success of a collaboration (Emmens, 2016). Bryson et al. (2006) identified the importance of establishing common ground as a key aspect of a collaborative venture. Stroh (2015) echoed this sentiment when he noted that shared commonalities should be accentuated to assist with the process. Even with overlapping interests and goals among members, conflict between members is part of the process. “Collaborative members must know when to seek compromise or common ground and how to amicably negotiate major decisions in situations where members do not initially share the same opinions” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 18). Dall and Caswell (2017) added, “Negotiation is not just a matter of reaching agreement between differing professional perspectives on the case at hand; it is also a matter of fulfilling and giving shape to institutional goals” (p. 484).

To realize success, members of successful collaborations must have the capacity to manage tensions and difficult circumstances that will inevitably arise (Eden & Huxham, 2001). As Pettersson and Hrelja (2020) noted, “The need to deal with conflicts is thus an inherent characteristic of collaboration” (p. 3). Bryson et al. (2015) highlighted members’ capacity to resolve singular issues and to hold regular meetings for consistent and clear communication as reasonable techniques to manage conflict. Ultimately, for consensus to occur, members must be willing to be open, to share, and to be flexible in the decision-making that takes place throughout the life of a collaboration (Barfield, 2016). Eden and Huxham (2001) declared that there is plenty of opportunity for a collaboration to be derailed due to misunderstandings and suspicion among members without routine open, honest communication.

For negotiation and consensus to materialize, “Participating organizations must give their representatives some latitude in working out agreements among partners” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 18). Members serving organizations need to have some level of authority in the decision-making that takes place within the collaboration. Members should have permission on behalf of their organizations to negotiate and make decisions without checking back with the organization so as not to delay the group’s
progress. Gray (1985) declared that the legitimacy of a collaborative’s work is dependent upon members having some level of permission to advance. Ideally, members from various organizations will have some autonomy to be flexible and adapt when compromising with other members of the collaboration. If members must take the time to check in with their organizations during group negotiations, it can slow the entire process. This could lead to a decline in members’ energy and enthusiasm for the collaborative effort and ultimately an insufficient and unsuccessful collaborative effort.

With that stated, “Collaborative members should allow time to act deliberately and patiently when reaching decisions” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 18). While the process of a collaborative effort needs to steadily progress, it is also important to take time to allow members to express their points of view. It is equally important for members to actively listen and clarify others’ perspectives as necessary. Careful consideration of viewpoints and opinions must be taken before acting. This is all a part of the process of negotiation and compromise that takes place among members to reach group consensus. Straus (2002) accepted that the process of negotiation and consensus building takes time due to the size and diversity of membership in a collaboration. Straus (2002) also recognized that this process usually ends up providing higher quality ideas and actions since several members have a guiding force in the decision-making.

Category 3: Process and Structure

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) indicated that “process and structure refer to the management, decision-making, and operational systems of a collaborative effort” (p. 11). Further, Winer and Ray (1994) asserted that process and planning is the foundation for everything that takes place in a collaboration, while Littlefield et al. (2013) maintained that process is a vehicle to guide and provide direction to members and is necessary to build culture. Morris et al. (2013) asserted that structure helps define the operations, functions, and objectives of the group. Further, structure also helps keep members focused on the goals of a collaboration. Without structure, members could easily lose sight of the goals (Anderson, 2019). If members know the collaboration’s structure, then they can understand how to optimize their time and effort to successfully achieve the goals of the collaboration. Rowe and Devanney
Factor 8: Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome

It is important that members feel a sense of ownership in not only the end results of a collaborative effort, but also how the group goes about achieving the results. Members want to have an integral role in the process and the product (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). In large part, membership in an interorganizational collaboration is voluntary; thus, stakeholder buy-in is an important factor in the process (Morris et al., 2013). If members are fully invested and have a sense of shared commitment, they are likely to apply their energy, skills, and resources for the greater good of the collaboration (Avery, 1999). When this takes place, the chances of successfully accomplishing the goals of the collaboration are enhanced. Without a feeling of shared responsibility among members, commitment to the collaboration may diminish. As Connolly and James (2006) reported, “Collaboration will be influenced by the capability and motivation of those involved and the availability of opportunities for collaboration” (p. 79).

“The operating principles and procedures of a collaborative group must promote among members a feeling of ownership and investment in decisions and outcomes” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 19). Members need to feel they have ownership in decision-making and outcomes. Member buy-in is amplified through a sense of ownership. If members are involved and dedicated to the process, then they share a sense of responsibility based on successful outcomes of the collaboration (Faulconer, 2010). On the other hand, if most members perceive that the process is determined by only one or a few members and that the ensuing outcomes are predetermined, they may believe that their participation is unnecessary and leave the collaboration (Linden, 2002).

It takes a significant amount of time and resources for members to develop feelings of ownership in a collaboration. Thusly, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) surmised, “Adequate time and resources must be devoted to developing ownership among all participants in a collaborative effort—every partner should feel that the collaboration belongs to them and that they belong to the collaborative group” (p. 19). One approach is to allow for the relationships among and between members to build the social structure
(Morris et al., 2013). This is when congruent self-interests and individual agendas of members can be meshed with the overarching goals of the collaboration (Eden & Huxham, 2001). A small step, such as accepting other members’ perspectives, leads to an increase in social capital among members (Huxham, 2003). It is important that time be spent to increase trust among members which will ultimately benefit the collaboration in the long run (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004). Conversely, not spending an appropriate amount of time to develop the process could be detrimental to the fundamental success of the collaboration. To this point, Rubin (2009) succinctly stated, “If we don’t pay attention to the functional dynamics of the group…then the collaboration will fail” (p. 83).

As reported by Mattessich and Johnson (2018), “Members’ perceptions of ownership of a collaborative group need to be continuously observed, and needed changes should occur in process or structure to ensure that the feeling of ownership is sustained” (p. 19). Constant, active monitoring of members is necessary to ensure feelings of ownership persist so that member commitment is sustained. Members need to feel a sense of inclusion in the process and outcomes throughout the life of the collaboration to maximize the chances of success. One way to maintain buy-in is for members to take on various leadership roles within the collaboration. Viewed as a reward itself, leadership opportunities and responsibilities increase buy-in. Awarding leadership roles allows for meeting the requirements of a reward for a collaborative organization because it does not involve capital nor forced obligation. The leadership role becomes a personalized reward when the position is in connection to a specific member’s personal stake in a matter or when the position allows a member’s individual strengths to be utilized and demonstrated. Done equitably, “The parceling out of formal leadership positions has implications for the level of buy-in among the collaborating partners” (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 47). Compounding the potential reward for a base organization with the reward of individualized leadership tasks has the inherent capacity of increasing buy-in from the members of a collaboration through incentivization and perception of shared responsibility. Leadership roles within a collaboration can occur at various levels in a multitude of ways.
Factor 9: Multiple Layers of Participation

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members represent various levels of hierarchies within organizations (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Austin et al. (2000) reported that the sustainability of a collaboration is achieved by the diffusion of involvement and responsibility throughout collaborative organizations, thus effectively institutionalizing the collaboration. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) also recognized the necessity of multilayered participation:

Every level (upper management, middle management, front line) within each partner organization has involvement in the collaborative initiative. Each layer brings different assets to the collaboration and may need to be involved to different degrees and at different stages of the development. (p. 11)

Although unequal roles will certainly exist, it is important to involve all members. While the influence and responsibilities may not be equal, every member’s commitment to the collaborative efforts has merit (Vangen & Huxham, 2003b). Integral members should be included in the collaboration from the start, and a system should also be in place to assure that various levels of membership from organizations necessary for the success of the collaboration are involved at appropriate stages throughout the process.

“Successful collaborative groups recognize the multiple layers of staff in each organization and create mechanisms to involve them” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 19). Thus, systems should be developed to assure inclusion of necessary members from each organization. For this to occur, various layers and resources that each member can bring to the collaboration must be identified. Additionally, the means to involve pertinent members must be created and established. Simply inviting the leaders of each organization to become members of the collaboration may not be satisfactory to sustain the collaboration (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). While it is important to have leaders at the table, it is not enough to ensure successful outcomes. Participation at all levels will strengthen the chances of success.

Lastly, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) recognized, “It is important that talented, key people in an organization be assigned to work on the collaborative project and that they have an interest in its success” (p. 20). Hence, for a collaboration to obtain successful outcomes, it is important to not only have talented
members, but the members also need to be vested in the goals and outcomes of the collaboration so that they are wholeheartedly involved.

**Factor 10: Flexibility**

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members remain open to change (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Lasker et al. (2001) expressed that unlike bureaucracies, independent people and organizations working together who desire synergy among members need to implement flexible approaches that encourage and support the members. Similarly, Crosby and Bryson (2010) espoused those members should “ensure that the structure of collaboration is flexible and adaptive enough to deal with system shifts and accomplish strategic purposes” (p. 224). Mattessich and Johnson (2018) viewed members as being flexible when “the collaborative group remains open to varied ways of organizing itself, shifting its internal structure, and performing activities to accomplish its work” (p. 11).

As reported by Pettigrew (2003), a collaborative process will be fluid and uncertain in nature. Crosby and Bryson (2010) had also maintained that even though interorganizational collaborations needed to plan with purpose, members should be cognizant that there will be times during the life of a collaboration that plans will change. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) added, “Collaborative groups need to be flexible in both their structure and in their methods” (p. 20). Similarly, Anderson (2019) touted, “Collaboration that drives new solutions means being open to different ideas and perspectives, but that openness requires structure to keep it from getting messy and going off the rails” (p. 59). In other words, structure is necessary to keep members focused, yet should not necessarily be too rigid, or it could have the opposite effect.

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) presented that the importance of collaborative members being and remaining flexible throughout the life of the collaboration should be clearly communicated to members at the outset of a collaborative venture. Flexibility allows members to negotiate, which, in turn, fosters focus and investment on the group’s shared outcomes and goals. This is particularly important since members are often concerned with complex problems.
Not only should flexibility be addressed at the outset, but members should remain flexible in their structure and processes throughout the entire collaboration. This will help to ensure that the group’s thinking remains innovative, rather than becoming rigid and stale as they progress toward shared, desired outcomes and goals. The structure of the collaborative group should remain flexible, rather than becoming fixed and uncompromising, particularly since the dynamics of the environment and group change. Members need to be able to adapt to these changes to stay focused on the goals of the group. Kanter (1994) recognized that strong collaborations continually negotiate their overarching purpose and objectives, as well as shifts in members’ actions according to the collaboration’s goals.

Although collaborative members need to be flexible, that does not mean that they should have an unstructured, “anything goes” mentality either. There is a need for clear guidelines and roles to be in place for group members.

**Factor 11: Development of Clear Roles and Policy Guidelines**

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members collectively develop a set of principles governing their work (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). As Olson et al. (2011) divulged, policies and procedures installed by collaborative members are key factors for their success. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) added, members should clearly understand their roles and responsibilities within the collaboration and be fully committed to executing them. Anderson (2019) reiterated this when he stated, “Assigning roles and getting people to stay in them is key to keeping people aligned and coordinated” (p. 32). As Huxham and Vangen (2000a) reported, if members feel uncertain about their roles as applicable to the work, they may not feel accountable or productive. Anderson (2019) noted that via the careful defining of roles, collaborations establish a perspective for the whole team and help individual members focus and channel their energy. When all members of the team feel like they are contributing and using their expertise to move the agenda forward, mutual respect and trust build more readily. Clearly defining members’ respective roles proves proactive by keeping confusion from interrupting the flow of progress (Straus, 2002). Clarity of expectations is critical (Austin et al., 2000), with particular attention paid to
roles within the collaboration. Lack of clarity in these areas can make genuine progress difficult (Potapchuk, 1999). Thus, establishing routines is critical to create a culture of trust and productivity.

Since members of a collaboration interact repeatedly, establishing basic routines for sharing ideas is prudent. For instance, as a simple tool, an agenda invites productivity (Straus, 2002) as members are more apt to attend to tasks when an agenda clearly identifies the amount of work they should accomplish within an allotted timeframe. Members’ intense collective focus will likely encourage the kind of sharing that sparks productivity and success. Likewise, identifying specific times for members to share their comments and questions allows everyone to feel more comfortable interacting during a time when contributions are most welcome. Small gestures of openness and encouragement like this reinforce the building of a sharing and caring environment where both personal and collective growth is valued. When we consider one another’s views, a culture of mutual respect grows (Emmens, 2016). Through the establishment of routines, productive interactions are noticed and rewarded, thus contributing to the overall positive culture and the strengthening of trust among members. Hence, routine efforts will help the team avoid ambiguous, confusing terms and situations that may negatively impact trust among members (Winer & Ray, 1994). Members are more likely to stay committed if procedures are established, agreed upon, and clearly communicated early in the life of the collaboration. Clarifying expectations relative to the overall process is critical for these individuals, whose time is valuable. They may appreciate knowing in advance how much time they might need to commit to the process and how to achieve results in the most efficient manner so that they can prioritize all responsibilities in a manner that makes sense to them. Hence, to achieve success, members’ understanding of processes, policies, and their roles within the collaboration is paramount (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014).

Collaborating partners need to address conflicts resulting from the competition between demands placed on them as employees of the organization they represent and demands they face as members of a collaborative team. Participating organizations may need to adjust policies and procedures to reduce this conflict in roles. (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 21)

Every member of the collaboration must balance the demands of their own organization with the demands of the collaboration. As Weiss et al. (2002) reminded us, to collaborate on a given project may not be a
member’s primary responsibility—particularly when considering the myriad of responsibilities many adult professionals maintain. Thus, in many instances, the collaboration must be effective to be worthwhile. If a collaboration lacks clear roles and policy guidelines, members could simply continue the collaboration through a sense of duty, but may become inactive or unwilling participants (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2008). With that being stated, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) reminded us, “Role definitions should not be so rigid that they inhibit flexibility. For some collaborative groups, an effective approach may entail the assignment of responsibilities on a situation-specific basis” (p. 21). For instance, members may require opportunities to work both unilaterally and in consultation to remain productive members of the group, depending on their particular situations at various points in time (Winer & Ray, 1994).

Lastly, “Members’ true interests and strengths should be considered when making assignments. Ultimately, people will gravitate toward their interests” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 21). Therefore, it is crucial for members to have a say in the roles they take on in the collaboration. Collaboration should aim to optimize the involvement of its members (Lasker et al., 2001). Involvement builds trust, and trust, in turn, builds synergy (Weis et al., 2002). This should eventually foster successful outcomes for the group.

**Factor 12: Adaptability**

Much like flexibility, adaptability is a factor that can promote collaborative success. Collaborative efforts are more likely to succeed when members can freely adjust to their ever-changing circumstances (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). If members are adaptable, “the collaborative group has the ability to make changes—even to major goals, members, etc.—in order to deal with changing conditions in the external environment” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 11). As previously mentioned, effective collaborations are well-planned; however, members also need to be able to quickly adjust to the changing conditions and evolving goals and objectives while simultaneously maintaining a level of trust among members (Johnston, 2009). Over thirty years ago, Hosking (1988) revealed that members of a social order must be adaptable for transformation to occur if it is to have any degree of permanence. Along those lines, Huxham and Vangen (2000a) pointed out that collaborations are not static, but rather a series of dynamic
responses to changing demands and expectations. External factors, as well as internal aims and goals, change over time. As they change, the structure of the collaboration should adapt as well (Bennett et al., 2004). Thus, in addition to internal decisions made by group members, circumstances outside of members’ control may force adaptive thinking and responses for collaborative members (Cropper, 1996). Menzies (2010) summed this up by declaring that members of successful collaborations can quickly adapt to changing landscapes, while still maintaining their focus.

“A collaborative group should stay informed of community trends, other changes in the environment, and the directions pursued by its members. It should adapt itself to these developments” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 21). Members need to have a general awareness of both changing internal situations and external circumstances and have the ability to adapt to both. Successful collaborations do change and develop as members move through various phases throughout a collaboration’s life (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Bryson et al. (2006) reiterated this when they reported, “Collaborative structure is likely to change over time because of ambiguity of membership and complexity in local environments” (p. 49). Members must be responsive to the continual changing needs of internal members and external conditions in order to be successful. Huxham and Vangen (2000a) noted that environmental situations that created the need for the collaboration might evolve or devolve, thus requiring the collaboration to adapt accordingly. Hence, members of structured collaborations recognize the need for adaptability; therefore, they adjust over time due to changes in membership or environments where collaboration takes place (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). So, the goals and purpose of a collaboration are dynamic and may change over time (Bennett et al., 2004). Members of a collaboration must constantly monitor, evaluate, and change their goals as appropriate.

“Since members’ goals and outcomes change, collaborative goals and outcomes need to keep pace by continually incorporating changes as necessary” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 21). Furthermore, Huxham (2003) exclaimed, “All organizations are dynamic to the extent that they will gradually transform. However, collaborations are sensitive to the transformations in each of the partner organizations and therefore may change very quickly” (pp. 412-413). Policy changes and shifting base
organizational goals might impact the collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 2004). As research shows, effective collaborations have deliberate constraints, yet they remain adaptive and responsive to situations, such as policy changes or the shifting of base organizational goals, that arise throughout collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015). As noted above, changes in membership result in changes to the collaboration’s culture and may even shift the overall focus of the collaboration. No matter the reason, if continual changes are made in the collaboration, then membership and members’ needs must adapt to the changes accordingly.

**Factor 13: Appropriate Pace of Development**

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when they develop at a pace that is conducive to the work without being overwhelming to the members (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). For this to occur, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) cited, “The structure, resources, and activities of the collaborative group change over time to meet the needs of the group, without overwhelming its capacity, at each point throughout the initiative” (p. 11). The efficient use of time corresponds with developing at an appropriate pace. In 1994, Winer and Ray stated, “Successful collaborations organize themselves as efficiently as possible” (p. 82). Efficiency is the degree to which a collaboration optimizes the use of resources, time, and finances (Weiss et al., 2002). If time for collaboration is not used efficiently, members and key stakeholders may decide to leave the collaboration (Rubin, 2009). Change, especially systemic change, takes time (Straus, 2002). Most quick fixes have unintended consequences, do not work, or make things worse. Yet, people are almost addicted to the quick fix. This impatience leads people to fail to appreciate the power of deeper insights. Members must be aware of people’s infatuation with the speedy repair and attempt to plan around it to develop an appropriate pace (Stroh, 2015).

One way to combat impatience and perceptions of a slow pace is to set and attain short-term goals. These goals should also be acknowledged and celebrated by members. As Mattessich and Johnson (2018) declared, “Attainment of small, short-term goals can help to cement trust and build relationships during the early stages of collaborative work. The collaborative group can then pursue more ambitious goals in the context of a stable, well-established collaborative arrangement” (p. 22). Sometimes, starting
small is best because small successes will be noticed and appreciated (Winer & Ray, 1994). Emmens (2016) pointed out that acknowledging progress and achievement will strengthen members’ buy-in and foster a sense of belonging to the collaboration. It is prudent for members to start with meaningful, achievable goals that are both readily visible and pointedly connected with individual members’ self-interests. This tactic will satisfy members so that the collaboration is able to progress to more intricate, time consuming intermediate and long-term goals (Rubin, 2009). Conscious collaboration requires stamina and patience (Emmens, 2016). Rushing jeopardizes authentic alignment of vision and goals (Rubin, 2009). As a collaboration begins, it is wise to keep ideas and figures simple, with gradual increases (Emmens, 2016). Investment in time in the beginning builds trust, language, and vision (Rubin, 2009). Patience and perseverance are often key to turning a small beginning into a significant collaboration (Austin et al., 2000). Productivity normally inspires members’ trust in the collaborative process. Trust, in turn, tends to promote an upward spiral of greater productivity, and so on.

Since “experienced collaborative groups may have better capacity than newly established groups to handle the complexities of large-scale collaborative ventures” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 22), members with collaborative experience can help guide and handle the complexities that inherently occur in collaborative ventures. While funds and supplies are critical, an often-forgotten resource is the ability to collaborate. While this may seem obvious and easy to prepare for, it does not happen naturally. Experienced members with knowledge of methods to bring things together are needed to minimize pushback (Anderson, 2019).

Collaboration is usually more time consuming than independent work because most people have never learned how to engage in it (Rubin, 2009). Collaborative efforts need to be learned and have even been called an art form (Straus, 2002). As previously noted, progress and achievement are important rituals that can build allies and persuade members of the collaboration’s value. It can be encouraging to mark milestones and small victories achieved (Emmens, 2016). Experienced collaborators start with meaningful, achievable goals early in the formation of a collaboration. Eventually, they will move into more complex, transformational goals (Rubin, 2009).
Membership of a collaboration should always remain feasible to accomplish the intended outcomes and goals. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) espoused:

The number and diversity of collaborating partners should not be more than the collaboration requires or can support at any given time. The elimination of formerly needed partners, or the incorporation of new partners who would not have previously been appropriate, may sometimes be necessary. (p. 22)

If membership grows too fast, too soon, the collaboration is likely to become unworkable, thus bound to fail. Naturally, this is important at the startup of a collaboration, but it also needs monitored throughout the various stages of a collaboration as well. As collaborations adapt to internal and external circumstances and situations, sometimes there is a need to eliminate some members whose interests no longer align with the broader goals of the collaborative effort. Concurrent with this, new members may need to be added as the needs and goals of the collaboration shift. Linden (2002) noted, as new members are added, it would be prudent to allow time for them to find a role to help facilitate moving the collaborative effort forward.

“Collaboration often requires different resources at different times. Sufficient funding and staff time may be especially important during the start-up and implementation phases of a project” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 22). In fact, evidence shows that entering into a collaboration imposes giant demands on its members, and this should be considered (Vangen & Huxham, 2003a). In addition to the start-up and implementation phases, it would also behoove members to constantly think about the abilities and assets they hold to take advantage of what each member brings to the table throughout the life of a collaboration. Littlefield et al. (2013) agreed that members should be aware of the specific resources and attributes that each member provides for the greater good. This would allow for the maximization of existing assets to be instituted at appropriate phases of the collaboration (Rubin, 2009). There will be times when members do not possess the resources that are required to achieve successful outcomes. Should this occur, as Linden (2002) stated, “If the collaborative effort is a priority and requires new resources, the parties need to step up and seek funding” (p. 194). Without appropriate resources, a collaboration’s chances of success are limited.
**Factor 14: Evaluation and Continuous Learning**

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members continually measure the effectiveness of their work and make changes accordingly (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Thus, it is valuable that “the collaborative group has an established process for measuring its activities and effectiveness; collaborating partners review these measurements, learn from them, and use them to guide improvement” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 11). A system of accountability is critical for members of collaborations, particularly since they are so complex in nature. According to Littlefield et al. (2013), interorganizational collaborative accountability systems should track data, processes, and results. Tracking the efforts can also include a management system built to examine the results of the relationships, both politically and professionally (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). The members and organizations, therefore, should not only be accountable for their performance, but for their ability to understand the risks, benefits, and impacts.

These collaborations are more likely to be successful with a system that makes expectations clear (Bryson et al., 2006).

Winer and Ray (1994) espoused, “Evaluation is a discovery, and it should be a positive experience” (p. 106). Measuring a collaboration’s effectiveness provides an indication of the process (Morris et al., 2013). Through this evaluation, the members can analyze and gauge whether they are achieving the community benefits and self-interests that created the desire for a collaboration in the first place. Evaluation is integral at the individual, as well as the overall, level (Winer & Ray, 1994).

A collaboration’s success can largely depend on its ability to generate and assimilate feedback on the overall performance of the collaboration (Emmens, 2016). Collaborations should constantly seek this feedback by listening everywhere and continually assessing their efforts according to their roles and policy guidelines (Winer & Ray, 1994). Feedback should include the collaborative behaviors of members as well as the ongoing validity of the vision (Emmens, 2016). Based on the results, members can evaluate their success or failure and where and how things should progress. “Feedback encourages individuals to capitalize on their strengths and to develop their weaknesses, which in turn produces high-performance teams and organizations” (Roebuck, 2012, p. 71).
Feedback that members obtain can help them learn from the information, therefore improving their joint work in the collaboration (Winer & Ray, 1994). As previously mentioned, collaboration should be viewed as dynamic. While analysis and planning are desirable, the collaboration’s development cannot completely be planned or predicted; thus, learning is an important end in and of itself (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Collaborations also function as learning laboratories, which help cultivate innovation (Austin et al., 2000). While not necessarily the primary outcome, continuous improvement should not be ignored (Winer & Ray, 1994). Successful collaborators often cite learning outcomes as one of the best experiences of being a part of a collaborative group (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004). Accordingly, members’ capacity for introspection and education is certainly an important component of collaboration (Emmens, 2016). Members’ awareness of their approaches is not only imperative for a collaboration’s success, but awareness also facilitates the establishment of mutual respect, understanding, and trust to solidify and strengthen relationships among and between members (Straus, 2002). Evidence has demonstrated that ongoing learning is a valuable feature that occurs in successful collaboration (Bryson et al., 2015).

Collaborative members will need to discuss and agree upon process and outcome measures early in the collaborative project. Depending upon their experiences, they might add, change, or delete some outcome measures; nonetheless, having measures in place as soon as possible is important. (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 23)

To achieve desired outcomes and goals, members must accept the validity of information, even when it shows that they are part of the problem (Winer & Ray, 1994). It is important, therefore, for collaborative members to select not only an evaluation method and process that fits, but one that is also honest about their progress (Emmens, 2016). An evaluative instrument should measure and compare performance with expectations (Winer & Ray, 1994). Most successful collaborations institute performance measures to track their effectiveness (Littlefield et al., 2013). Although the process of evaluation can be intense and intimidating (Kreuter et al., 2000), successful interorganizational collaborations’ members tend to employ assessment and continual, regular reassessment (Bryson et al., 2015).
Category 4: Communication

In accordance with Mattessich and Johnson (2018), “Communication refers to the channels used by collaborative partners to send and receive information, keep one another informed, and convey opinions to influence the group’s actions” (p. 11). Clear, consistent, and open two-way communication is indispensable for interorganizational collaboration to occur. Selsky and Parker (2005) concluded that poor communication will unquestionably cause a collaboration to fail.

Factor 15: Open and Frequent Communication

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members interact often and without reservation (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). As proclaimed by Mattessich and Johnson (2018), in collaborations that succeed, “Collaborative group members interact often, update one another, discuss issues openly, foster transparency, and convey all necessary information to one another and to stakeholders outside of the group” (p. 11). Thus, keys to successful collaborative communication include frequent updates, openness, transparency, and comprehensiveness among members of the collaboration and to stakeholders outside of the group. Anderson (2019) agreed that ample communication is mandatory to build relationships and a shared awareness among members. Communication between and among members must not only be extensive, but be conclusive as well. Autry (2004) reported the importance of two-way communication, which comprises active participation by both those disseminating the information and by those listening to the information. Active listening offers the opportunity to learn each member’s language and terminology (Winer & Ray, 994). Skoglund (2020) noted, “Language is important for understanding both why and how other organizations are functioning” (p. 14). It is important to understand members’ from various types of organizations way of thinking when delving into dialogue and negotiations. Rubin (2009) commented on the importance of open, honest communication to build consensus among members. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) advocated for members to “maintain optimal transparency. Avoid selective distribution of oral and written communication, except, when necessary, since this might splinter the group” (p. 24). Emmens (2016) similarly maintained that honest dialogue among group members will generate honest feedback as well.
A comprehensive system of communication should be established from the outset of a collaboration. Doing so will assist with pinpointing responsibilities and obligations each member has regarding communication, which will lead to bolstered efforts and better odds of the group’s overall success (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). McNae et al. (2017) also reported that the establishment of early, open communication between members will enhance the chances of realizing desired outcomes and group goals. To increase the likelihood of quality communication occurring from the outset and continuing throughout the life of the collaboration, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) suggested implementing incentives to encourage effective communication within and among organizations while also discouraging ineffective means of communicating. For this to occur with fidelity, “communications strategies must be planned to reflect the diverse communication styles of the members of the collaborative group” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 24). According to Bambacas and Patrickson (2008), various means and types of communication include, but are not limited to, sending messages, listening, providing feedback, goal setting, leading, persuading, running meetings, clarifying expectations, resolving conflicts, and empowering members.

While communicating to members throughout a collaborative effort, “collaborators need to acknowledge that problems will occur and that they will need to identify and resolve them. Conflict is often good, and there will be topics on which collaborators may ‘agree to disagree’” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 24). In fact, according to Emmens (2016), some of the most successful collaborations have been born from conflict over different views. However, the creation of joint definitions, terms, and perspectives can assist with mitigating conflict that will occur (Winer & Ray, 1994). Thus, having a common language is vital. Members need to be able to communicate effectively to solve their common problems and tackle issues that affect them all (Straus, 2002). Solid, quality communication can help produce a successful collaboration (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). As reported by Austin et al. (2000), quality communication is fundamental for trust among members.

As previously stated, conflict should be anticipated and addressed by members of the group (Rowe & Devanney, 2003). Time needs to be invested into understanding and managing
conflicts. Through this, clarity and skills can be acquired by group members (Winer & Ray, 1994). Conflict can foster synergy if the differences are used to enhance dialogue and stimulate innovative ideas (Lasker et al., 2001). To handle conflict, members should directly address it (Winer & Ray, 1994). By resolving conflict, a tremendous connection can be created among members. Kanter (1994) concluded that if members feel valued and respected through openness, they will work to understand the collaboration as a whole and each another as individuals.

In a new collaboration, try setting a goal of complete transparency—sharing all information with all partners—from budgets to board minutes. Creating a culture of transparency from the outset lays the foundation for integrity in the process, provides mutual understanding for open and frequent communication, and promotes accountability. (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 24)

Rubin (2009) summed it up when he stated, “Within the collaboration, all communication must be purposeful, reciprocal, accessible, honest, and succinct” (p. 71).

**Factor 16: Establishing Informal Relationships and Communication Links**

Mador et al. (2019) declared, “Communicating through both formal and informal channels is essential” (p. 613). Additionally, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) surmised that collaborations are more likely to succeed when members establish personal connections to each other. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) stated, “in addition to formal channels of communication, members establish personal connections—producing a better, more informed, and cohesive group” (p. 12). Kaats et al. (2014) referred to collaboration as “people work.” Mattessich and Johnson (2018) added, “Collaboration builds stronger relationships, which can then provide a foundation for further collaboration, addressing even more difficult issues” (p. 3).

Stability in membership enhances the chances of developing powerful personal connections among members. If membership is too transient, it will be difficult for substantial links to develop within the collaboration (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). “Commitment and continuity—commitment to the partnership and consistent participation among members leads to norms of reciprocity” (Morris et al., 2013, p. 54). Rubin (2009) reported that creating and maintaining quality relationships helps promote
confidence, increase engagement, and enhance support among members. Quality informal relationships, in turn, can improve the chances of achieving success for the entire collaborative group.

“Communication efforts such as meetings, trainings, and interagency workgroups should promote understanding, cooperation, and transfer of information” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 24). Such efforts help foster informal relationships among members. Additionally, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) reported, “Setting aside purely social time might be helpful for members of a collaborative group” (p. 25). The more chances members have to communicate openly in a relaxed setting, the better their odds of developing strong bonds. Members should have mutual respect (Emmens, 2016). Simply being heard by other members promotes feelings of inclusion for members. As reported by Morris et al. (2013), “Respecting and listening to the viewpoints of all partners facilitates mutual understanding, thus laying the foundation for trust and social capital” (p. 54). Regularly reviewing a collaboration’s systems and procedures can improve and bolster communication between and among members (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018).

**Category 5: Purpose**

While examining goals, vision, and purpose, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) reported the following definition:

*Purpose* refers to the reasons for the development of a collaborative effort, the result or vision the collaborative group seeks, and the specific tasks or projects the collaborative group defines as necessary to accomplish. It is driven by a need, crisis, or opportunity. (p. 12)

**Factor 17: Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives**

The goals and objectives of the collaboration must be understood by members and be able to be feasibly reached by the group to maximize the chances for success (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Winer and Ray (1994) reported that objectives should be short-term, concrete, attainable, and measurable, and goals should be as specific as possible. Contrarily, Babiak and Thibault (2009) proclaimed that if goals are not concerted or expressed properly, difficulties and complications would be likely to develop. Anderson (2019) added, without clear objectives for the group, individual egos can begin to appear. If this occurs, the group may begin to splinter. Even though members may realize clear goals are necessary,
often consensus on the goals is not easily reached. Thus, if the goals set by members are unclear or not attainable, members’ interest and energy are likely to dwindle. Conversely, as previously cited, clear, attainable goals can enhance members’ enthusiasm (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018).

Both short-term and long-term goals should be jointly developed by the group. “Collaborative groups must experience a progression of ‘successes’ during the collaborative process in order to be sustained. Defining success too narrowly and distantly—only by accomplishing the collaboration’s ultimate goals—can be discouraging” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 25). Members need to experience small accomplishments along the way to their overarching goals. The achievement of short-term goals should be noted and celebrated by members. This could sustain members’ devotion and passion to realize long-term success.

**Factor 18: Shared Vision**

Kouzes and Posner (1996) defined vision as “an image of what the people of the enterprise aspire for it to be or become” (p. 16). Mattessich and Johnson (2018) surmised that collaborations are more likely to succeed when members agree upon the group’s overarching mission. Olson et al. (2011) agreed, “A commonly identified success factor is having a shared purpose that is clear and well aligned with the mission, strategies, and values of each of the partners” (p. S10). “The ability to look out to the future and work back to the present, to anticipate what’s next, and determine a path forward, is critical” (Patterson, 2014, p. 136). In addition, Kantabutra (2008) reported that scholars agree that vision is important for a group’s strategy and planning about the future and that vision encourages members to act toward their common goal by providing a sense of direction. Marquardt (2011) added that a “shared vision provides the focus and energy for learning” (p. 62).

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) noted that “the shared vision may exist at the outset of collaboration, or the partners may develop a vision as they work together” (p. 12). Either way, the vision should be collectively formulated by the group early in the life of the collaboration. As early as 1996, Cropper learned that once group members uncover beliefs and values they share, they feel a sense of inclusion, predictability, and dependability, which drives their work. Schwahn and Spady (2010)
proclaimed that members have greater ownership for the vision when they actively engage in shaping it. This can lead to greater enthusiasm for members of the collaboration. A high level of enthusiasm and excitement, in turn, can lead to greater productivity and increase the chances of a collaboration’s success. Thus, for Schwahn and Spady (2010), “ownership reflects the emotional and motivational investment personnel make to fully implementing the organization’s vision and accomplishing its purpose. And it comes about in one key way: involving everyone in the purpose-defining and vision-framing process” (p. 52).

“The shared vision may motivate collaborating partners to resolve conflicts and work persistently toward common goals” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 26). Shared expectations and open decision-making heighten the level of trust among members (Winer & Ray, 1994). The more trust members encounter, the more they are typically willing to go beyond self-interests (De Cremer et al., 2005). A shared vision can enhance members’ abilities to weather adversity or disagreements they will face throughout the life of the collaboration.

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) pointed out that while building a shared vision, members will inevitably develop common language and actions as well. Straus (2002) acknowledged that having a shared language is critical for effective communication since members have a multitude of backgrounds from various sectors within their own organizations. To discover their shared vision, members communicate the values and principles guiding their individual thoughts and actions; then they either determine commonalities among them or decide together which to adopt. Shared language aids members to structure their activities so that they can clearly understand what they are trying to accomplish (Anderson, 2019). Moreover, when individual members of a collaboration communicate their beliefs and values to build an overarching culture, they draw upon their individuality to create a new culture for the entire group. Thus, members feel as if they are part of something bigger than themselves while simultaneously retaining a semblance of individuality.

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) also upheld that “outside facilitation may be useful to establish the common vision” (p. 26). Besides collaborative members, skilled consultants can be included in the
process (Winer & Ray, 1994). While aiming to maximize time and efficiency, they can help to bridge any divides between members (Adams, 2007). This includes any real or perceived imbalances of power among members. Their impartiality makes them viable candidates to manage a collaboration on behalf of all the members (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Collaboration means working with every member and organization that can contribute to the overall vision. However, typically, the contributions will not be equal (Winer & Ray, 1994). This is a fragile balancing act; even if some members or organizations are significantly more powerful than others, they still should not hold formal authority over others. That would certainly damage any goodwill that had been generated (Huxham, 1996). Organization and structure should, therefore, be performed in interrelated social processes that reflect and create interdependence, while still allowing for inequalities of influence and production (Hosking, 1988). Power always shifts over the duration of a collaboration (Huxham, 2003). Therefore, one of the challenges of collaboration is the ability of members to accept issues of power and remain balanced as a situation alters, and power does shift (Pettigrew, 2003). Remember, collaborations are formed to unite members’ powers (Winer & Ray, 1994). Ultimately, the collaboration will benefit if power is disbursed among numerous members rather than just a few (Gray, 1985).

**Factor 19: Unique Purpose**

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when the group’s collective goals differ from any one contributing organization’s specific agenda (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Mattessich and Johnson (2018) argued that the group’s mission, goals, approaches, and actions can certainly overlap with any individual member’s organization, but should not be identical with them. Winer and Ray (1994) had also reported that decisions should be made based on how they will affect all members, rather than solely from the viewpoint of a single member. This is especially true if there has been a history of competition among members (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Thus, “The vision statement must differ from the missions of member organizations” (Winer & Ray, 1994, p. 61). When collaborating, members need to shift their mindsets from a single lens to a wide-angle focus (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004). Emmens (2016) defended this viewpoint when he stated, “True collaboration, especially that which sets out to solve an
‘unsolvable’ problem or a gigantic and complex challenge, requires us to create new paths” (p. 90). To successfully create a unique purpose that incorporates individual members’ goals, “The mission and goals of collaborative members need to be known by all involved” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 26). This process should help unify members for them to achieve success.

**Category 6: Resources**

The final category that Mattessich and Johnson (2018) identified is resources of the collaborative group. “Resources include financial and human ‘input’ necessary to develop and sustain a collaborative group” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 26). Other factors associated with resources include skilled leadership and engaged stakeholders (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018).

**Factor 20: Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, and Time**

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) contended that collaborations are more likely to succeed when they have the resources they need to do their work. This transpires when “the collaborative group has an adequate, consistent financial base, along with the staff and materials needed to support its operations. It allows sufficient time for the activities necessary to achieve its goals and includes time to nurture the collaboration” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 12).

Back in 1987, Weiss declared that collaboration involves an enormous sacrifice of resources including time, energy, thought, control, and money. “Staff time and skills are essential to collaborative success. Partner organizations must commit sufficient staff hours to the collaboration” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 27). Along those lines, Huxham (1996) reported that collaboration is innately more time-consuming than non-collaborative activities. Hence, collaborations also consume more resources and are inevitably costlier. Because of this, members of collaborations must closely monitor details, finances, and deadlines so that the benefits of membership outweigh the costs of it (Rubin, 2009). Strategic collaborations are high-maintenance efforts that require focused, constant attention (Austin et al., 2000). The process will consume resources and be painful at times (Huxham, 2003). Essentially, the task-oriented nature of collaborations demands considerable nurturing and maintenance for them to survive and prosper. Quite simply, resources are often scarce (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2008). Therefore, seeking
collaborative advantage is a resource consuming activity that should only be considered when the stakes are worth pursuing and when there is not a better alternative available (Huxham & Vangen, 2005).

According to Huxham and Vangen (2003), evidence shows that entering a collaboration imposes giant demands on its members. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) elaborated, particularly, “Collaborative work can be time consuming and expensive in the start-up phase. A collaborative group should make certain that adequate resources exist for start-up, even if the group has not yet obtained sufficient resources for the entire project” (p. 27). All members will be expected to invest their time and resources, and this can be demanding (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004). The commitment of valuable time will place extra strain on the levels of trust among members in a collaboration (Vangen & Huxham, 2003b). On the other hand, when members are willing and able to commit extra time to a collaboration, it solidifies and strengthens trust levels among members (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004). “Devoting time, tact, and talent through thoughtful and clear communication promote a positive, trusting environment in which partnerships thrive and grow” (Plowfield et al., 2005, p. 220).

In addition to time, “adequate revenue must be a priority in order to sustain a collaborative group” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 27). Members must properly strategize and plan for maximizing resources and acquiring necessary support (Winer & Ray, 1994). Even if members of a collaboration can move past the potential lack of clarity and confusion, there are still precious materials missing. The obvious necessary resources are funds and supplies. When these are insufficient or missing, the collaboration may never really materialize at all (Emmens, 2016). Mattessich and Johnson (2018) argued that collaboration is expedited by flexible sources of funding, which will allow for the resources necessary to maximize the chances of addressing the group’s shared problems. “In-kind support can usually substitute for some, but not all, of the financial resources required” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 27).

Collaboration requires relationships, procedures, and structures that are different than what most of the people have experienced. Thus, building an effective collaboration will indeed be time consuming (Lasker et al., 2001). It will require countless hours and flexibility from members (Shive & Rogus,
The stakes are high: when people dedicate lots of time and energy to a project, it will affect their and the community’s opinions of the collaboration and the concept of collaborative efforts in general (Mayo, 1997). Therefore, the nurturing process of the collaboration should be thorough, yet also indefinite (Huxham & Vangen, 2000a). Members must realize that “most quick fixes have unintended consequences. They make no difference or make matters worse in the long run” (Stroh, 2015, p. 15). Conversely, when a relationship extends over time, there is greater potential for mutual gains (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2008). Thus, “projects that involve very short timelines are not always well suited to collaboration” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 27).

**Factor 21: Skilled Leadership**

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) advanced the idea that collaborations are more likely to succeed when those providing leadership possess a high degree of interpersonal intelligence and executive functioning skills. As expressed by Brinia et al. (2014), “emotionally intelligent leaders know when to be cooperative and when to be visionary, when to listen and when to order” (p. 32). “A leader with high emotional management skills looks out for the needs of others over his or her personal needs” (Mathew & Gupta, 2015, p. 77).

“The management and leadership skills required of individuals who are increasingly being tasked with moving out of traditionally hierarchal structures to spearhead and manage cross-sector collaborations are complex” (Persaud & Murphy, 2019, p. 25). Rubin (2009) claimed, “the most elemental skill required of collaborative leaders is the interpersonal skill and empathy needed to make and sustain strong linkages between people” (p. 80). In fact, Ivany (2019) was convinced that, “the cornerstone of leadership is the ability to relate to people” (p. 24). Therefore, successful collaboration requires relationship building skills. One such skill that collaborative leaders must possess is the ability to develop an atmosphere engrained with honest and productive communication among members (Rubin, 2009). Mador et al. (2019) agreed, “Whether it’s the group leader or a member of the team, there needs to be a ‘champion’ for this kind of purposeful effort; effective communication will not happen on its own” (p. 614). Bambacas and
Patrickson (2008) alleged that collaborative leaders’ interpersonal communication skills are indispensable to achieve success.

Another important aspect of interpersonal intelligence is the ability to identify, coordinate, and employ each member’s skills and assets to accomplish the goals of the collaboration (Rubin, 2009). Schwahn and Spady (2010) echoed the sentiment when they reported that relational leaders can build a positive culture that involves members and promotes change. Skilled leaders compel members to strive to give their best efforts by making sure they feel fully vested in the collaboration (Brinia et al., 2014). Trust builds among members when they perceive caring, reliable, ethical leadership within the collaboration (Liden et al., 2008). According to Rubin (2009), “effective leaders exude a special type of charisma that attracts and sustains the emotional desire of others to work with them” (p. 65). Thusly, skilled leaders “focus on building trust, increasing visibility, communicating and influencing others effectively, and delivering something of value so that others succeed” (Patterson, 2014, p. 119). When individual members of the collaboration succeed, the outcomes and goals of the collaboration have a considerable chance of being realized.

“In selecting collaborative group leaders, care must be taken to find people who have process skills, a good reputation, and knowledge of the subject area” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 27). Holmes and Parker (2017) believed that members of a collaboration judge leaders by their competence, integrity, and consideration. Leroy et al. (2012) identified behavioral integrity to be significantly related to member commitment. They also reported that behavioral integrity is fundamentally related to authentic leadership. Authentic leaders with high levels of behavioral integrity generally also possess high levels of credibility among members.

“Credibility reflect the degree to which followers perceive their leader is worthy of trust, and how well followers perceive their leader as competent, meaning they have the necessary expertise and skills to do the job” (Williams et al., 2018, p. 517). Trust advances when members observe leadership facing and solving problems (Patterson, 2014). Greater trust normally will lead to greater commitment among members. Williams et al. (2018) also reported that credible leaders use their skills to address challenges
that arise when collaborative efforts are underway. Rubin (2009) argued that skilled leaders “see assets to be aligned where others see disjointed resources and players” (p. 58). Mattessich and Johnson (2018) asserted, “a leader should be skilled at maintaining a balance between process and task activities, and a leader should enable all members to maintain their roles within the collaborative group” (pp. 27-28). “Accordingly, leadership is critical to achieving mutual understanding and commitment to ICs” (Kramer et al., 2019, p. 399).

“Leaders of collaborative groups must give serious attention and care to their roles” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 27). Planning for a collaboration takes a lot of time, therefore leaders will have to invest a considerable amount of time and energy to plan for a collaboration correctly (Emmens, 2016). Leading a collaborative effort is a major commitment that holds considerable responsibility. Constant, prudent care taking of the collaboration and its members is needed throughout the life of the collaboration (McNae et al., 2017). Rubin (2009) accepted that heavy commitment to plan, manage, and develop the collaboration rested with the leadership of a collaborative group. The success or failure of the effort are often attributed to the way a collaboration was managed (Austin et al., 2000). In sum, “the effective collaborative leader is a strategic, logical, and systemic thinker who understands the steps that must be taken to make things happen and who can engage collaborative partners in a productive and efficient planning process” (Rubin, 2009, p. 56). Accordingly, it can be easy for members, especially leaders, to feel frustration over time, energy, and complexities of coordination (Huxham, 1996).

Bryson et al. (2015) concluded that collaborations prove more effective if their control changes hands frequently and deliberately—when the passing of control from one member to another becomes part of the collaboration’s cultural structure. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) concurred, “the grooming of new leaders in planning for transitions in leadership should be well thought out to avoid costly power struggles and loss of forward momentum” (p. 27). When collaborations outline rules for the purposeful dissemination of control, no one member takes charge in an untrustworthy manner that negatively impacts the group’s culture. To encourage a positive culture, members might determine in advance who shall lead the group and how, so that when leadership changes hands, a routine is already customized. A
collaboration free to focus on the work in lieu of the dynamics and effects of leadership is typically more productive. Moreover, when the assumption of leadership related responsibilities is distributed among members, each can trust that no one will lead for long enough to impact the collective culture negatively. Ultimately, “Key individuals serving as brokers of partnership among organizations are important for collaborative success” (Gillen et al., 2021, p. 558).

**Factor 22: Engaged Stakeholders**

Collaborations are more likely to succeed when members foster connections with people who their collaborative efforts affect (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Straus (2002) contended that the involvement of relevant stakeholders is fundamental to collaboration. “Connections with stakeholders in the collaborative group’s operating environment ensure the back-and-forth flow of information necessary to plan and implement effective activities. These connections offer perspectives that might not otherwise be available.” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 28). Two-way communication opens fruitful dialogue so members can gain and understand the perspectives of those who the collaboration will affect and also fosters relationships that ultimately support collaborative success (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). This communication between internal members and external stakeholders is fundamental for members to accomplish the shared goals of the collaboration. “Such connections improve the ‘buy-in’ crucial for establishing a supportive environment for the work of the collaborative” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 28).

Rubin (2009) upheld, “communications of this type routinely elevate the vision and goals at the heart of the collaboration” (p. 78). “Participation by end users is essential because they know best what they need, and their involvement helps ensure their long-term ownership of the results” (Winer & Ray, 1994, p. 49). Gray (1985) declared, “from an informational standpoint, the more stakeholders who participate in problem solving, the more effective the collaboration will be” (p. 919). Olson et al. (2011) espoused, “to be successful, collaborations must provide valuable benefits to both the member organizations and the major stakeholders they serve” (p. S11). For this to occur, stakeholders must be heavily vested and engaged in the collaboration.
Theoretical Framework

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) identified 22 factors impacting the fruitfulness of collaboration. These factors might be examined from multiple perspectives: in isolation, in conjunction, and theoretically, for example. The following information details the researcher’s perspective as he situates the selected factors he wishes to consider for the purposes of this study within the context of a theoretical framework. The framework begins broadly with a contemplation of social constructionism as a paradigm of focus, and then narrows to pinpoint Negotiated Order Theory (NOT) as the specific theoretical perspective driving the study.

Social Constructionism

Since collaboration as a process is social, to study the phenomenon from a sociological perspective makes sense. Within the field of sociology are numerous theoretical frameworks that can situate collaboration in a specific context. For the purposes of this investigation, the researcher has identified social constructionism as the theoretical framework most suitable for studying collaboration as described in Chapter 3. As the term, social constructionism, implies, a sense of realism might be constructed through socialization. Advocates believe that society as a construct is created through human interactions, such as discussions, negotiations, and agreements. According to Crotty (1998), social constructionism is “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). With this perspective, people freely construct their social reality—their society—with little to no external constraints. They interact with their world and each other, and the outcome of those interactions becomes their reality. As collaboration requires social interaction and a consideration of how interactions lead to tangible outcomes, members of a collaboration construct their reality through socialization.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism falls under the umbrella of social constructionism. To study humans’ perceptions of collaboration requires an acknowledgement that people must socialize to collaborate.
Moreover, how members of collaborations perceive their interactions with others stems largely from engaging in the work over time, and comprehending *symbols* as signals. According to Carter and Fuller (2016), “symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective in sociology that addresses the manner in which society is created and maintained through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions among individuals” (p. 1). Although the origins of symbolic interactionism can be traced to early research, conducted at the University of Chicago where Herbert Blumer coined the term in 1937, researchers have repeatedly used the perspective to contextualize interactions and communications grounded in words, gestures, and symbols (Sanderson, 1996). Generally, people think before they act; therefore, they behave according to how they interpret and perceive situations. When members of a collaboration socialize, they make meaning of their work through interactions with each other and establish views about those interactions as related to their work. For example, as summarized previously under the *Factor 15: Open and Frequent Communication* section of this chapter, members of a collaboration often use common language specific to their work and interactions so that the mere mention of a specific word conjures communal memories, ideas, and understandings (Schein, 2017; Straus, 2002; Winer & Ray, 1994). Inherent in the word itself is deep meaning gleaned through social interaction. In sum, the word is a symbol for the interrelationship among individuals and the collective efforts of their work.

**Ethnomethodology**

Another theoretical perspective used to frame this study stems from the work of Harold Garfinkel, who contended that people actively create, construct, and define their world. As the founder of ethnomethodology, Garfinkel believed that social order is subjective and “lies in people’s definition of reality and the agreements they make with one another to support and perpetuate these definitions” (Sanderson, 1996, p. 57). According to ethnomethodologists, people actively define and create their reality through interaction so to avoid being passively affected by external influences (Sanderson, 1996). Since collaboration as a process is purposeful, members of a collaboration mutually and actively determine the social norms, timelines, and directions governing their work. Per the process of collaboration, they create the paradigm providing order to their collective efforts, thus subjugating outside
influences that might detract from or undermine their progression as a collaborative body. Resolutely, they navigate their reality in unison to achieve a common goal and, consequently, proceed as Garfinkel acknowledged. Thus, respondents’ perceptions are shaped through their interaction with one another.

**Collaboration Theory**

To study collaboration in detail without recognizing collaboration theory as a driving force behind the research would be careless. This theory accounts for collaboration as a process whereby a group (or groups) of individuals learn from each other by working together to solve a problem, complete a task, create a product, or share thoughts. Like researchers who situated social interactions within a constructionist framework, Gray (1985) formulated this comprehensive, constructionist theory to frame the phenomenon of collaboration according to governing principals. Through her articulation of the following five principles of collaboration, Gajda (2004) emphasized the central tenets of collaboration theory.

**Principle 1: Collaboration is an Imperative**

The first of Gajda’s (2004) principles presents collaboration as critical and perhaps even required in some cases. She argued that collaboration is imperative, particularly when individuals are tasked to solve extremely complex problems. Gajda (2004) asserted that, per this principle, “there is an ever-increasing need for individuals, educational authorities, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, community networks, and business groups to come together to address the complex issues that confront our society today” (p. 67). Amidst society’s complexities, collaboration is imperative when the problems to solve are indelibly multifaceted, when resources are especially scarce, or when one organization’s needs overlap another’s. In this regard, collaboration becomes central not only to organizations’ forward movement but also to societal change. Throughout the last 20 years, social problems have become so complex that the popularity of collaboration has risen. As society changes rapidly, one entity’s work likely affects another’s; therefore, economic, environmental, legal, political, and social issues can transcend organizational, community, and even national boundaries. Organizations often recognize their problems as common, so representatives collaborate with the understanding that the probability of
reaching goals increases if they pool resources and share ideas (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). As Mattessich and Johnson (2018) explained, “The complexity and interdependence of our modern world means that no tiny community, no large society, and no group in between exists in isolation” (p. 73). By collaborating, individual entities can share resources to achieve a collective vision. For this reason, Mattessich and Johnson (2018) claim that to learn how to build a thriving collaboration is just as important as the process itself.

**Principle 2: Collaboration is Known by Many Names**

Gajda (2004) recognized that both researchers and laymen use a plethora of terms to connote collaboration. She explained, “The terminology used to describe collaboration is extensive. These terms include: joint ventures, consolidations, networks, partnerships, coalitions, collaboratives, alliances, consortiums, associations, conglomerates, councils, task forces, and groups. And this list is not exhaustive” (Gajda, 2004, p. 68). As explained in detail earlier in this chapter, this principle may present as a challenge for modern researchers who attempt to elucidate the phenomenon as applicable to a specific situation or case. Whereas some researchers differentiate among the meaning of terms in the literature, others may use the terms synonymously. This indistinctness makes studying the phenomenon especially taxing for anyone trying to describe collaboration definitively. At a most basic level, Gajda’s (2004) identification of this point as a central tenet of collaboration indicates that to define the term conclusively is nearly impossible.

**Principle 3: Collaboration is a Journey, Not a Destination**

Despite researchers’ usage of various terms to describe the process of collaboration, Gajda (2004) noted that collaboration is, indeed, a process. While the outcome of collaboration might look different depending upon the reason for collaborating and the way individuals engage the process, the process constitutes a journey. As explained previously in the chapter, individuals who comprise a collaboration need to communicate and work jointly to establish protocol and structure and build a culture conductive to the achievement of collective goals. Gajda (2004) perceives the level of integration among collaborators as “determined by the intensity of the alliance’s process, structure, and purpose” (p. 68).
Likewise, Winer and Ray (1994) and Emmens (2016) observed collaboration as the final leg of a journey or the last destination along a continuum of increasing intensity of involvement among stakeholders. Table 4 details the distinctive aspects of each level of intensity along the researchers’ continuums. No matter the nuances, many researchers like Winer and Ray (1994) and Emmens (2016) view collaboration as an intense journey even if they are unable to determine an exact definition or path to engagement.

**Table 4**

*Levels of Intensity of Relationships Along a Continuum*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>When individuals or organizations cooperate, they form informal, short-term relationships uninspired by a clearly defined mission. For example, “Cooperative partners [may] share information only about the subject at hand” while each entity retains its own authority and resources so as to avoid risk (22).</td>
<td>Co-existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Intensity</td>
<td>Summary Explanation in Content</td>
<td>Level of Intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coordination</strong></td>
<td>When individuals or organizations coordinate, they focus their interaction around a specific effort or program. Interaction is typically longer-term, and relationships between or among coordinators turn more formal as parties develop an understanding of the coordinative effort. “While authority still rests with individual organizations, everyone’s risk increases. Resources are made available to participants and rewards are shared” (22).</td>
<td><strong>Coordination</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>When individuals or organizations collaborate, they develop “a more durable and pervasive relationship” as “participants bring separate organizations into a new structure with full commitment to a common mission.” As relationships are structured and defined and as communication channels open accordingly, partners share the results, rewards, and risks (22).</td>
<td><strong>Co-operation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Intensity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Summary Explanation in Content</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>When individuals or organizations collaborate, they consciously recognize a shared goal, and fully acknowledge that they likely could not reach the goal without collaborating. “Conscious collaboration is typically characterized by equitable participation and requires high trust and a high level of inter-accountability. Values, systems and processes are ideally co-designed and co-created by the partners” per the collaborative process (179).</td>
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**Principle 4: With Collaboration, the Personal is as Important as the Procedural**

Gajda’s (2004) fourth principle stems from researchers’ well-documented finding that, without trust among individuals, collaborative endeavors typically fail (Austin et al., 2000; Bennett et al., 2004; Emmens, 2016; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Johnston, 2009; Linden, 2002; Ring et al., 1994). Trust is critical, for “without a basis for trust and healthy inter-personal connections between people, strategic alliances will not have a solid foundation on which to stand” (Gajda, 2004, p. 69). Collaboration depends upon positive relationships between and among individuals, and emotional connections spur those fruitful relationships. To create a culture of trust takes time (Anderson, 2019; Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004; Austin et al., 2000; Emmens, 2016; Russell & Flynn, 2000a); establishing a sense of trust is part of the journey from simply grouping to collaborating. As Gajda (2004) clarified, “Trust is developed between partners only when there is time, effort, and energy put into the development of an accessible and functioning system of communication” (p. 69). Moreover, to ensure an effective system of
communication, “intra- and inter-personal needs of individuals have to be addressed if alliances are going to successfully perform” (Gajda, 2004, p. 69).

**Principle 5: Collaboration Develops in Stages**

Lastly, Gajda (2004) acknowledged that collaboration, as a process, occurs in stages along a continuum. For example, Gray’s (1985) three-phase framework involves problem-setting, direction-setting, and implementation—consequential actions, which stakeholders must take to engage the process in full. For Gray, the process develops in stages based upon individual members’ identification, distribution, and commitment to the work. Building upon Gray’s point, Himmelman (1996) noted that, once members act deliberately in stages to develop as a collaborative body, the work itself might evolve through stages, ranging from simply bettering to transforming the community through empowerment. As parties interact over time, a process-based description of collaboration emerges (Thomson & Perry, 2006).

**Applying Collaboration Theory at the Interorganizational Level**

Following her development of collaboration theory, Gray (1985) examined how the central tenets might apply to interorganizational collaboration. Her postulation of interorganizational collaboration theory, described below, heavily influenced this investigation of Forum members’ collaborative efforts.

Drawing upon her understanding of how collaboration manifests within a single organization, Gray (1985, 1989) considered the act of collaborating from an interorganizational domain. By learning how individuals’ vested interest in solving a problem together leads to constructed interdependence, she built upon fellow researchers’ work. For example, Gray strongly considered McCann’s (1983) position that collaboration occurs through three phases—problem-setting, direction-setting, and structuring—and discovered how the phases emanate through an interorganizational lens.

During the problem-setting phase of collaboration, stakeholders are identified (McCann, 1983). As a first step, one asks, *Who might serve as a member of this specific collaborative body, formed to solve a problem within the organization?* When problem-setting interorganizationally, the first step becomes more complex. Not only do the right stakeholders need to be identified, they also must collectively agree that their merger is beneficial—that their interdependence is imperative for solving the exact problem
they unite to solve. As Gray noted (1985), “Through the problem-setting process, then, stakeholders negotiate issues of legitimacy and come to appreciate the interdependence which exists among themselves” (p. 917). Extending beyond the simple identification of stakeholders, the problem-setting phase of interorganizational collaboration calls for the establishment of preliminary expectations, defining of boundaries, and recognition that the problem could not be solved via any other means. “Unless these conditions are established during problem-setting, subsequent efforts to set directions for and to structure the [interorganizational] domain will be hampered” (Gray, 1985, p. 924).

Throughout the direction-setting phase, “stakeholders articulate the values which guide their individual pursuits and begin to identify and appreciate a sense of common purpose” (Gray, 1985, p. 917). Stakeholders identify their values, determine how they might integrate their values as they pursue a common goal, and ascertain whether their goal is attainable. For stakeholders tied to specific organizations, articulating values is of particular importance as they “generate a system for sustaining coincident values and establishing order within the domain” (Gray, 1985, p. 918).

“Structuring,” as McCann (1983) termed the third phase, occurs if stakeholders uphold the need to collaborate. A structure is built through the negotiated setting of goals, identification of tasks, and assigning of roles, thus allowing stakeholders to understand how and why power will be distributed and regulated. For individuals within one organization, the need to collaborate might be more apparent; hence, structuring might occur more naturally if roles are previously defined and if leaders are already acknowledged. When stakeholders from multiple organizations come together to work, they may need to negotiate more actively by finding commonalities among their differences. For example, as an outcome of structuring, stakeholders “agree upon the allocation of power within the domain,” (Gray, 1985, p. 930) thus bolstering the probability that interorganizational relationships are developed and sustained. When Gajda (2004) recognized this point, she asserted, “The development and assessment of intentional, interorganizational collaboratives (strategic alliances) can be greatly enhanced by utilizing collaboration theory” (p. 66).
As explained, members within an organization might collaborate, and individuals across organizations might collaborate. The more complex the problem to solve, the more likely collaboration will occur at the interorganizational level (Connolly & James, 2006; Eden & Huxham, 2001; Emmens, 2016; Hanf & O’Toole, 1992; Linden et al., 2002; Littlefield et al., 2013). No matter how many organizations are involved in a collaborative endeavor, the same organizational theories can be applied to contextualize research. Since 1991, researchers like Gray and Wood have applied organizational level theories to understand the workings of single organizations, as well as multiple organizations. With a simple shift in focus from individual organizations to the interorganizational domain level, researchers can situate interorganizational collaboration in a context to explore.

Accordingly, domains represent a set of individuals united by a common problem or interest (Gray, 1985). At the organizational level, one domain—one organization—is measured for research. Conversely, at the interorganizational level, multiple domains are considered. At either level, individuals’ interactions are observed and assessed. Thus, collaboration—interorganizational or otherwise—is “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray, 1989, p. 5).

Current researchers apply organizational level theories to the interorganizational realm due to the efforts of earlier researchers, who sought to develop a more comprehensive theory of collaboration by broadening organizational level theories to the interorganizational level. If the interorganizational domain is represented by multiple organizations that collaborate to solve a common problem, then investigating the mechanisms of this domain in light of organizational theories proved logical. To expand organizational level theories to the interorganizational level, Gray and Wood (1991) examined six organizational level theoretical perspectives with the potential to contribute to a general theory of collaboration: (a) resource dependence theory; (b) corporate social performance/institutional economic theory; (c) strategic management theory/social ecology theory; (d) microeconomics theory; (e) institutional theory/negotiated order theory; and (f) political theory. Gray and Wood (1991) selected the
six theories based upon their informed belief that the theories’ central tenets are generalizable to collaboration as a phenomenon. For each, they posed a question as a bridge between the perspective and collaboration, specifically. This information is presented below.

**Resource Dependency Theory**

Gray and Wood (1991) believed that, although initially applied to individual organizational behavior, resource dependence exhibits immense potential for expounding upon interorganizational domain-level experiences. Within the work of Gray and Wood (1991), a fundamental question of resource dependence at the organizational level was posed: “How can we achieve stability and reduce uncertainty with respect to the environment without increasing our dependency on other organizations?” (p. 7). Thus, the organization focused on remaining autonomous by staying independent from other organizations with an awareness that relationships with other organizations are necessary to amass resources.

The shift of focus to interorganizational collaboration deals with the allocation of resources among all involved. Thus, pivotal questions at the domain-level evolve: “What are the circumstances in which stakeholders will adopt collaborative alliances? and What are the patterns of interdependencies that result from resource exchanges?” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 7). As such, “The focus changes from a single organization’s resource configuration to the overall allocation of resources in the interorganizational field, among all players in the domain” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 7). Hence, resource dependency theory can assist to explain why organizations wish to strengthen the collective interests of the collaborative group despite the appearance of benefiting from remaining autonomous to preserve self-interests.

**Corporate Social Performance Theory/Institutional Economics**

Advocates of this perspective postulate that business organizations and society are intertwined; thus, business organizations should uphold societal assumptions and norms. Considering human nature in light of this perspective, members of collaborating organizations attempt to negotiate between their own self-interests and the interests of society (Gray & Wood, 1991). Gray and Wood (1991) listed key organizational-level questions as “How does a firm control and respond to its own stakeholder network to
achieve organizational goals and social legitimacy? and What is the firm’s role and responsibility in solving social problems and issues?” (p. 9).

The domain level question for this perspective is “What is the role of business as a social institution?” (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 141). Other domain-level questions related to institutional economics include the following: “How are social and institutional legitimacy defined and achieved? and How do collaborative alliances mediate between the interests of their participant organizations and those of the larger environment?” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 9).

**Strategic Management Theory/Social Ecology Theory**

Gray and Wood (1991) surmised that strategic management also concentrated on the organizational level. This is reflective of the question, “How can organizations reduce threats and capitalize on opportunities in their environment?” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 9). Therefore, the organization is the focal point of strategic management theory.

Attempting to pivot from the organizational level to the interorganizational domain level, Gray and Wood (1991) noted a shift from strategic management theory to social ecology theory. At the domain level, social ecology theory highlights the potential benefits of collaboration regarding solving common problems. By asking, “How do partners in an alliance regulate their behaviors so that collective gains are achieved?” (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 141), members of an interorganizational collaboration may accentuate the advantages of a shared, collective approach when organizations encounter mutual problems (Gray & Wood, 1991).

**Microeconomics Theory**

According to Wood and Gray (1991), the domain level question for microeconomics theory is “How can collectivities overcome impediments to efficiency in their transactions?” (p. 141). Thus, “the focus is on achieving efficiency within each of an organization’s relationships with other organizations, without considering the dynamics of those external organizations’ relationships among themselves or the overall efficiency of the social system within which the organizations operate” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 10).
As reported by Gray and Wood (1991), “From a domain perspective, the questions shift to concerns about the efficiency of an overall set of transactions” (p. 10). To illustrate this, domain-level questions include the following: “How can organizational collectivities overcome free rider effects and other impediments to efficiency in their transactions?...and How does the collaborative alliance affect the overall efficiency of resource use within the entire interorganizational network included in the problem domain?” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 10).

**Institutional Theory/ Negotiated Order Theory**

The primary assertion of institutional theory revolves around organizations seeking to attain legitimacy by adapting their structure to institutional pressures (Gray & Wood, 1991). One way organizations can achieve this is by conforming to institutional norms. “Thus institutional theory provides answers to organization-level questions such as, Why do organizations adopt certain structural configurations? and How do organizations achieve legitimacy with institutional actors?” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 10).

When focusing on the interorganizational domain-level, legitimacy and the means of allocating it are examined as components of the larger social system. The main questions at the domain-level are “How do alliances interact with institutional environments?” (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 141) and “Are alliances shaped by institutional environments or vice versa?” (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 141).

“A slightly different application of institutional theory builds on negotiated order theory and is readily adaptable to collaborative alliances” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 10). Gillen et al. (2021) affirmed, “The theoretical work in interorganizational collaboration (e.g., Gray, 1989) is based partly on negotiated order theory, which emphasizes the interactions among the actors in a dynamic organization system (Day & Day, 1977)” (p. 557). Negotiated order theory, as follows, “focuses on the symbolic and perceptual aspects of interorganizational relationships, particularly on the evolution of shared understandings among stakeholders of the domain’s structures and processes, limits and possibilities” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 10).
**Political Theory**

Gray and Wood (1991) stated that political theory spotlights private interests and conflict. The questions could be asked and are applicable at both an organizational and interorganizational level. For the researcher’s purpose, the questions featured are viewed from the domain-level.

The domain-level questions for political theory are “Who has access to power and resources that affect the domain?” (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 141) and “Who does and does not benefit from the distribution of power and resources within the domain?” (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 141). Thus, the related issues at the interorganizational level are the power dynamics and the allocation of benefits (Gray & Wood, 1991).

All six theoretical perspectives, each with corresponding organizational-level and domain-level questions, appear in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Research Questions at the Organization and Domain Levels*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspective</th>
<th>Organization-Level Questions</th>
<th>Domain-Level Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resource Dependence</td>
<td>How can an environmental uncertainty be reduced without increasing dependence?</td>
<td>When do stakeholders adopt collaborative alliances?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Social Performance Theory</td>
<td>How does a firm control and respond to its stakeholders?</td>
<td>What is the role of business as a social institution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Social Performance Theory</td>
<td>What is the firm’s role in solving social problems and issues?</td>
<td>How are responsibilities for solving social problems allocated among actors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Social Performance Theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Management Theory/Social</td>
<td>How can firms reduce threats and capitalize on opportunities within their environment?</td>
<td>How do partners in an alliance regulate their behaviors so that collective gains are achieved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecology Theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microeconomics Theory</td>
<td>How can an organization achieve efficiency in its transactions with other organizations?</td>
<td>How can collectivities overcome impediments to efficiency in their transactions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Perspective</td>
<td>Organization-Level Questions</td>
<td>Domain-Level Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional Theory/</td>
<td>Why do organizations adopt certain structural configurations?</td>
<td>How do alliances interact with institutional environments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiated Order Theory</td>
<td>How do organizations achieve legitimacy with institutional actors?</td>
<td>Are alliances shaped by institutional environments or vice versa?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Theory</td>
<td>Who has access to power and resources that affect the organization?</td>
<td>Who has access to power and resources that affect the domain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who does and does not benefit from the distribution of power and resources that affect the</td>
<td>Who does and does not benefit from the distribution of power and resources within the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>organization?</td>
<td>domain?</td>
</tr>
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As illustrated, Wood and Gray (1991) developed research questions at the interorganizational domain-level for each of the six theoretical perspectives that had previously been used at the organizational level. While examining nine articles that represent the six theoretical perspectives, Gray and Wood (1991) identified three overarching issues to understand interorganizational collaboration as a phenomenon more comprehensively: (a) the preconditions that motivate stakeholders to participate, making collaboration feasible; (b) collaborative processes; and (c) the outcomes of collaboration.

Preconditions of Collaboration

According to Gray and Wood’s (1991) analysis of nine articles, all six theoretical perspectives address something about the preconditions of collaboration. From a resource dependence perspective, researchers view high stakes combined with a high level of interdependence between organizations as essential prerequisites for interorganizational collaboration to occur. The composition of societal forces inspires interorganizational collaboration from the institutional economics theoretical perspective. Strategic management theorists posit that the desire to collaborate stems from seeking to gain strategic advantage. However, the perceived threat of sharing core ideologies makes interorganizational collaboration rare according to this perspective. Interorganizational collaboration is motivated by the desire of each individual organization involved to maximize its own efficiency while reducing costs from the microeconomics perspective. Competitive and institutional environmental forces drive
interorganizational collaboration from the institutional theory viewpoint. Advocates of negotiated order theory believe interorganizational collaboration is cultivated through a mutual awareness among organizational members that it is necessary to have a shared understanding of the problem as well as a collective response to solve it. From the political perspective, researchers claimed that organizations need to share at least one common interest to produce change. For example, an organization’s self-interest must link to a community interest for interorganizational collaboration to take place (Gray & Wood, 1991).

The preconditions of the formation of the Forum best align with negotiated order theory. The Forum was originally established to discuss ways that would provide a better understanding of regional quality workforce needs of business and industry. In parallel the Forum strove to consider how improved communication and collaboration can be cultivated and developed between education and business entities to address the needs of the new economy. Thus, along with business representatives, stakeholders from K-12 schools, post-secondary schools, and nonprofit organizations united to have a shared understanding of the problem and collective response to solve it. There was a core belief of the business-education leaders that the Forum would enrich the connections among education, workforce quality, and economic development throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania. The preconditions of the Forum’s creation lend themselves to the viewpoint of negotiated order theorists.

**Collaborative Process**

Gray and Wood (1991) determined that only three of the six theoretical perspectives offered explanations regarding the process of collaboration. The perspectives of resource dependence, strategic management/social ecology, and microeconomics do not provide commentary about the process of interaction among collaborative members. Thus, only institutional economics, institutional/negotiated order theory, and political theoretical perspectives attempt to account for the process of collaboration. According to Gray and Wood (1991), institutional economists focus on institutionalizing structure and instilling the fundamentals of shared responsibility among collaborative members. This approach views collaborative process from the lens of application of policy rather than from the perspective of individual members participating in interactions. From the institutional perspective, researchers are concerned with
how members adjust to internal and external changes so that the collaboration remains aligned with the external environment as it progresses. Institutional theorists posit that if adjustments are not made accordingly, the collaboration will not succeed or endure. Negotiated order theorists, such as Nathan and Mitroff (1991), “propose that mapping the level of negotiated order within a domain serves as a useful means of stimulating collaboration by increasing stakeholders’ collective awareness of their interdependence” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 15). Political process spotlights “the need for a bridging organization to build constituency support and to maintain legitimacy in its bridging role” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 18).

The researcher’s focus on collaborative process aimed at the interactions that take place among members of the Forum. These micro-level interactions of Forum members shape not only which of the 22 factors that members believe to be most important for their collaborative success, but also how well the factors that influence collaborative success being studied are perceived as strengths to build upon or weaknesses to address by the members. This approach clearly aligns with the negotiated order theory approach. The predominant concern of the researcher and of negotiated order theory is collaborative process.

Outcomes

Each of the six theoretical perspectives provide information pertaining to outcomes, but the outcomes emphasized vary by perspective. “Some consider whether the problems were solved; some examine whose problems were solved; some question whether shared norms were achieved; some focus on survival of the alliance itself” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 18). From the negotiated order theoretical perspective, successful outcomes are calculated based on the magnitude of members’ abilities to arrive at a common understanding of the problem and how to go about solving it as reported by Gray and Wood (1991).

With that stated, the researcher’s attention is not aimed directly at outcomes, per se. The focus of the study is rooted in collaborative process as related to the 22 factors that influence success. However, the outcomes considered by negotiated order theory as reported by Gray and Wood (1991), such as
collaborative members’ common understandings through interaction, closely align with the researcher’s study. The other five theoretical perspectives focus on different types of outcomes. Table 6 illustrates which theoretical perspectives address the preconditions, process, and outcomes of collaboration.

Table 6

Matrix of Six Theoretical Perspectives Mapped Against Three Collaborative Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspective/Collaborative Issue</th>
<th>Preconditions</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resource Dependence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Social Performance/Institutional Economics</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Management/Social Ecology</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microeconomics</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional/Negotiated Order</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Through their analysis, Gray and Wood (1991) derived that, “none of the theories offers a comprehensive model of collaboration” (p. 19). Although none, unaccompanied, provide an inclusive model, each perspective adds to a general theory of collaboration. Collectively, the perspectives encompass preconditions, processes, and outcomes, thus providing a general foundation upon which a connection between collaboration and interorganizational collaboration as processes might be constructed. Ultimately, Wood and Gray (1991) deduced that applying the theoretical perspectives to interorganizational collaboration supplied a limited means for a general theory of collaboration (p. 161). “Furthermore, different theories focus on different kinds of outcomes, whereas a comprehensive theory should be able to account for them all” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 19). In sum, no single theoretical perspective can illuminate the phenomenon of collaboration clearly, yet, together, the aforementioned perspectives provide a solid foundation for grounding collaboration in a context appropriate for study.
The above information, beginning with the presentation of social constructionism, narrows to bring the discussion to a point about the theory providing a solid foundation for this study. The following section details how negotiated order theory, as a construct, validates the research as described in Chapter 3.

**Negotiated Order Theory as Applicable to This Study**

As previously stated, one of the organizational theories that Gray and Wood (1991) examined was NOT. Formalized in the 1960s and 1970s by Strauss and his colleagues, the theory was presented to describe how social order is achieved (Day & Day, 1977). To determine that people constantly adapt to the structural settings in which they are entrenched, Strauss (1978) examined the collaborative processes engaged by individuals employed by multiple hospitals. As he studied individuals’ interactions with each other—and within and among various organizations—he learned that agreements are temporary and that social order is not everlasting. Specifically, he found that previously established rules and norms remain open to negotiation—that they might be altered to align more closely with the interests of individuals in a particular situation (Day & Day, 1977). Thusly, “Strauss’ concept of negotiated order called attention to the ways in which members of an organization negotiate meaning and the practical enactment of the formal guidelines and rules of the organization” (Dall & Caswell, 2017, p. 484). “Always subject to change” (Day & Day, 1977, p. 131), the existence of these negotiated agreements underscores that society—manifesting as a collection of assumptions and norms—is an emergent product stemming from human interaction. If individuals’ interactions remain dynamic, so does the propensity for social change. In this regard, NOT echoes symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology because, per the schools of thought, social construction results from negotiation.

Strauss (1978) posited that negotiation took place in the social situations he studied and that all social situations showed some type of negotiated order. Strauss (1978) simply stated, “Social order was negotiated order” (p. 5). Therefore, an analysis of social processes should include analysis of the negotiated order because, according to Strauss, the two are inseparable. Some orders are conveyed formally, while others are advanced via informal processes. Regardless, as members of a collaboration
develop, construct, and reconstruct the negotiated order, the processes they engage, as well as the resulting social order that arises, greatly contribute to the overall functioning of the collaborative system.

Day and Day (1977) expressed that NOT allows researchers to consider how individuals decide to employ processes, in general. According to Wood and Gray (1991), NOT provided insight into the preconditions, processes, and outcomes of interorganizational collaboration. As determining the preconditions, understanding the processes, and addressing outcomes are imperative for developing a complete picture of collaboration, NOT provides a framework for examining and analyzing the procedures born of the ongoing relationships among members of an interorganizational collaboration (Gray, 1989; Strauss, 1978).

Collectively, organizations negotiate with one another to govern the interactions of the interorganizational collaboration in which they are members. Considerable negotiation must take place between the member organizations to achieve an agreement acceptable to all parties involved. There must be a consensus as to the necessity to collaborate to define the problem, to address the problem, and to devise the means by which the collaboration will occur before actually beginning to focus on the problem itself. So, after consensus is achieved, members jointly formulate strategies leading to action to combat the problem through constant, dynamic negotiation and renegotiation. Simultaneously, social learning occurs throughout negotiations.

Nathan and Mitroff (1991) also applied NOT to the interorganizational domain. They contended that multiple negotiated orders should be anticipated at the interorganizational level. Nathan and Mitroff (1991) examined negotiated orders from the three topics discussed by Wood and Gray (1991): preconditions, processes, and outcomes.

According to Wood and Gray (1991), the preconditions of collaboration were viewed as the “need for organizations to achieve a shared understanding of and response to the problem” (p. 144). Similarly, Pasquero (1991) reported that “negotiated order theories use approaches that involve processes of interactions, through which stakeholders gradually come to shared definitions of the situations they collectively face” (p. 40). Collaborators can achieve a shared understanding of and response to the
problem they are addressing early in the life of a collaboration during a problem setting phase. Collaborators can create the precondition for a new negotiated order by communicating their individual viewpoints and potential ways of addressing the problem with one another and formulating a shared understanding.

In Nathan and Mitroff’s (1991) study, processes revolved around negotiating a common goal for the members of the collaboration as a whole and striving for consensus. There are formal negotiations, such as defining the roles of members, as well as informal negotiations that take place between members during the processes in the negotiated order. Nathan and Mitroff (1991) stressed that members needed to be committed to the mutual benefit of the group, as opposed to solely focusing on individual goals, or the collaboration is not likely to succeed.

Although outcomes were implied, Nathan and Mitroff (1991) did not directly address NOT to analyze outcomes. This is consistent with Gray and Wood’s (1991) findings that NOT does not adequately address the outcomes of interorganizational collaboration.

Proponents of NOT have been criticized because: (a) NOT does not provide a complete explanation of social order and (b) for the disregard to structural features such as rules and roles (Day & Day, 1977). These are unfair criticisms. Strauss (1978) deliberately addressed both concerns. He clearly mentioned that NOT is not a complete theory of social order. According to Strauss (1978), negotiation is interwoven with other processes (e.g., manipulation and/or coercion), and these processes, including negotiation, should be examined together. Strauss (1978) also specifically recognized that negotiation is influenced by structural factors (Cornforth & Macmillan, 2016, p. 952). In fact, Strauss (1978) had three concentric components to his negotiation model: the negotiation itself, the negotiation context, and the structural context. Negotiation is the interactions and strategies of members. Negotiation context includes the conditions of the negotiation such as the numbers of members, their setting, frequency of interactions, etc. According to Strauss (1978), the structural context includes the enveloping conditions that weigh on both negotiation and negotiation context. Examples of the structural context that affect the other two dimensions could include organizational, economic, and political conditions. Thus, structural features and
external constraints are addressed. Advocates of NOT clearly understand that negotiation does not take place in a vacuum.

As previously noted, researchers such as Gray and Wood (1991) affirmed that none of the six theoretical perspectives offers an all-inclusive model of collaboration on its own; however, each perspective contributes to a general theory of collaboration. Of the six major theoretical perspectives that have serious potential to help explain interorganizational collaboration, the one that the researcher deemed most applicable to this study considering the reviewed literature is NOT. Wood and Gray (1991) determined that NOT provided insight into the preconditions, processes, and outcomes of interorganizational collaboration even though it does not completely address the outcomes. NOT has applicability to the Forum’s preconditions, processes, and outcomes. NOT, thus, is a workable perspective for this study.

To begin with, NOT aligns with the preconditions of the formation of the Forum. Initially, Forum members decided to engage in regional collaboration with one another in the pursuit of establishing their mission of connecting business and education to coordinate opportunities for students that would ultimately improve workforce quality and economic development. There was an expectation to explore a shared need of multiple stakeholders that was compelling enough to foster combining efforts and resources to work collaboratively towards resolution of the problem common to the members. Thus, stakeholders united to have a shared understanding of the problem and collective response to solve it. According to NOT, interorganizational collaboration is advanced through a mutual awareness among members that it is necessary to have a shared understanding of the problem as well as a collective response to solve it. Thusly, the preconditions of the Forum align with the viewpoint of negotiated order theorists.

Next, the focus of this study is concerned with the collaborative process between and among Forum members. The members’ interactions with one another help form and bring about a mutual awareness of their interconnectedness through discussion, negotiation, and agreement. Members’ recognition of their interdependence not only encourages collaboration, but also enables Forum members
to socially construct potential solutions to their shared problems. Advocates of NOT posit that members of a collaboration achieve a temporary social order through ongoing interaction and negotiation, which leads to social change. Hence, a prevalent concern for the researcher and champions of NOT is the collaborative process.

Lastly, although the researcher’s primary concern does not directly target outcomes, successful outcomes from the NOT perspective are derived from the members’ capacity to negotiate and come to a consensus of a joint acceptance of both the problem itself as well as potential outcomes. In this manner, collaboration requires social interaction and attention to how these interactions lead to tangible outcomes. Members of a collaboration construct their reality through socialization. Thus, Forum members’ shared understandings through communication and interaction align with the NOT viewpoint. Hence, the researcher began with a broad theoretical perspective and ultimately narrowed the focus down to NOT. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this process.

![Inverted Triangle of Theoretical Perspectives](image)

*Figure 1. Inverted Triangle of Theoretical Perspectives*
When examining the 22 factors that Mattessich and Johnson (2018) identified as contributing to the success of collaboration, some lay outside members’ immediate control: (a) history of collaboration in the community; (b) collaborative group seen as a legitimate leader in the community; and (c) favorable political and social climates. These factors are examples of constraints that operate on members’ constructions. Although the factors are important for successful collaboration, these external constraints demonstrate that collaboration does occur within a definite set of constraints external to the direct interaction and construction of reality through socialization among members.

Notably, some of the 22 factors are categorically related to the collaborative process and interactions that take place among members of the Forum. Those relative to membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, and purpose expressly shape the way members of the Forum interact with each other. Essentially, through their active, repeated interactions and dialogue, members construct which of the 22 factors they believe to be most important for their collaboration’s success. Additionally, they determine which factors are perceived as strengths to build upon and which are deemed weaknesses worth addressing through a collaborative approach.

**Summary of the Literature**

This chapter presents a review of current and relevant literature that was used to guide the study. The purpose of this study was to investigate collaboration among the members of the Forum, an interorganizational consortium whose members attempted to better align business with K-12 and postsecondary education in the hopes of improving workforce development and, in turn, the economic outlook of a region. The problem addressed by the research was the existence of the need to encourage and strengthen the attributes, characteristics, and traits that inspire successful interorganizational collaborative efforts, particularly among K-12 educators.

The literature first informed the study by examining how collaboration has been described by researchers. Collaboration could be viewed as a tangible body, yet also as an abstract process. Although the term *collaboration* was found to be rather ambiguous, as no universal definition of either the tangible
body or the abstract process was found, commonalities among definitions and descriptions of both were analyzed to identify exactly how the term will be defined and described for this specific study.

For this study, collaboration, as a body, is defined as *a formal group based upon mutually beneficial relationships among individuals from organizations with shared or overlapping objectives*. As a process, collaboration is defined as *actions of stakeholders who engage with each other to achieve goals they could not otherwise achieve if they did not collaborate* for this study.

Next, the literature demonstrated that interorganizational collaboration is often necessary to help solve societal problems that plague organizations, including educational institutions. These problems can no longer be addressed in isolation as they are beyond the scope of a single organization. Today’s educators must reach out across organizational boundaries to others with a common vision to have any chance of improving student achievement and properly preparing students for today’s workforce. However, even though educators acknowledge the need to reach outside of their boundaries to solve the complex problems, often they do not know how to be successful in their endeavors. Hence, the factors that promote successful collaboration were explored in the literature in detail.

Successful collaboration is significant, thus, attributes, characteristics, and traits that inspire successful interorganizational collaborative efforts, in general, were examined. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) situated 22 factors under six categories that were identified to contribute to the success of collaboration through their examination of 74 valid and relevant studies. Additional researchers also validated the factors as well. Based on the literature, these 22 factors were situated within a theoretical framework for this study.

The phenomenon of collaboration is social; thus, it was viewed from a sociological perspective. Social constructionists view all knowledge arising from socialization such as discussion, negotiation, and agreement. Since collaboration requires social interaction and a consideration of how interactions lead to tangible outcomes, leaning on this theoretical perspective under the umbrella of sociology makes sense. Further, these outcomes are due in no small part to the common language developed through collaboration as purported by symbolic interactionists. Symbolic interactionism falls under the
perspective of social constructionism. Correspondingly, collaboration theorists postulate that members of a collaboration work together to solve problems and produce viable outcomes by sharing thoughts and ideas as they learn from one another throughout the process. As societal problems increase in complexity, the need for these outcomes causes collaboration to cease to be just an option, but instead a precept. Gajda (2004) succinctly corroborates this by identifying central tenants of collaboration theory, such as collaboration is an imperative; she further characterizes the collaborative process as a gradient on which risk increases as a collaboration intensifies and integrates. A willingness to absorb said risk occurs when trust-building leads to effective communication. As delineated within Gajda’s (2004) fifth principle, the level of trust can evolve alongside the collaborative process since the collaborative body develops in stages. Collaboration theory can be applied at both the organizational level and at the interorganizational level. To expand organizational level theories to the interorganizational level, Gray and Wood (1991) examined six organizational level theoretical perspectives with the potential to contribute to a general theory of collaboration: (a) resource dependence theory; (b) corporate social performance/institutional economic theory; (c) strategic management theory/social ecology theory; (d) microeconomics theory; (e) institutional theory/negotiated order theory; and (f) political theory. Of the six, the researcher identified negotiated order theory (NOT) as most applicable to this study. NOT, in the tradition of social constructionism, views knowledge as an emergent product that stems from human interaction and negotiation. Further, NOT provides insight into the preconditions, processes, and outcomes of interorganizational collaboration. The focus of this study, however, is concerned with the collaborative process between and among Forum members. Members’ interactions with one another through discussion, negotiation, and agreement enable them to socially construct potential solutions to their shared problems. This directly coincides with NOT.

Lastly, the chapter lays the foundation for a qualitative, phenomenological study that attempts to discover the factors that a selected group of collaborators deem critical for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. Comparing and contrasting the factors’ perceived relevance, along with Forum members’ perceived level of attainment of those factors, as contributing to a specific interorganizational
collaboration’s success with those experts deem most important may help educators and business representatives foster more purposeful collaborations to solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) through their ongoing discussions, negotiations, and agreements. Thus, identifying and working on factors that promote collaborations organized to solve such problems makes sense.
Chapter 3

METHOD

This chapter introduces the research methodology employed for this qualitative, phenomenological study regarding the identification of Forum for Workforce Development (Forum) members’ perceptions of selected factors that research has demonstrated are important for successful collaboration (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). The study also intended to determine the extent to which respondents have experienced success in the interorganizational collaboration under study.

Specifically, this study served to present perceptions of interorganizational collaboration through the personal experiences and perspectives of respondents who comprise an interorganizational group and engage in the process of collaborating across their professional, organizational, and sectoral lines. By recognizing how respondents perceive their group’s strengths and weaknesses and the importance of the factors deemed critical for successful collaboration, K-12 educators who review the study might be influenced to consider the phenomenon from their own perspectives as well. The more educators learn about factors that positively affect interorganizational collaboration, the better they can model the attributes, traits, and characteristics of interorganizational collaborators who solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) plaguing their organizations.

The primary components of this chapter include: (a) research purpose, (b) research questions, (c) research methodology, (d) research design, (e) population and selection screening, (f) instruments, (g) validity, (h) reliability, (i) data collection and management, (j) data analysis method, (k) ethical considerations, (l) limitations and delimitations, and (m) summary.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify Forum members’ perceptions of the factors they consider to be important for successful collaboration and to compare them with the factors that research has demonstrated are important for successful collaboration. According to Mattessich and Johnson (2018), “twenty-two factors appear to strongly influence the success of collaboration” (p. 74).
Additionally, the current study intended to identify respondents’ perceptions of the perceived level of Forum members’ proficiency for each factor regarded as critical for successful collaboration. Finally, this study aimed to determine the extent to which respondents have experienced success when involved in the Forum.

Grounded in the fields of social sciences, this study served to elucidate collaboration from the perspectives of K-12 educators, who hail from various school districts and organizations located throughout Westmoreland County and who collaborate frequently to solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) related to local school districts and the regional workforce. Studying collaboration through this lens is critical for two reasons. First, as explained in detail throughout Chapter 2, educational and business leaders know that collaboration is essential because organizations rarely can accomplish lofty goals by working independently (Littlefield et al., 2013). Since organizations are far more likely to generate solutions to social problems by sharing information and resources with others whose visions align, studying collaboration in this vein makes sense. Next, comparing members’ perceptions of factors’ relevance to their perceptions of whether they attained those factors will invite a more thorough understanding of why members might regard their work as either successful or unsuccessful. Lastly, assessing members’ perceptions of their work against the factors experts deem critical for success may help educators and business representatives foster more purposeful collaborations to solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Simply, if K-12 educators know which traits, qualities, and characteristics lend themselves to purposeful, worthwhile interorganizational collaboration that results in student achievement and economic development, then they might reflect upon their own behavior as applicable and alter their approaches to collaboration accordingly. Expectedly, some factors contributing to an interorganizational collaboration’s success remain beyond a leader’s control. However, many factors are controllable. By comparing the factors that local educators believe to be relevant in contributing to the success of an interorganizational collaboration with the ones experts deem most important as a result of their research (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018), the researcher may better understand the way educators might partake in
successful interorganizational collaboration to solve the “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) they face.

If educators learn how they might inspire and sustain collaborative efforts to solve the “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) plaguing America’s public schools, workforce, and economies, then identifying and considering ways to control factors that promote successful collaboration is prudent. Although the researcher may not be able to define collaboration concretely as a result of this study, he may be able to identify behaviors, situations, or contexts that impact collaborative efforts both positively and negatively.

**Research Questions**

This study was framed around three research questions: (a) Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success? (b) How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified? and (c) Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study? The research questions were formulated based on the respondents’ specific social context and findings gleaned from an extensive review of literature, including literature about methodological approaches.

The study was envisioned through a social constructionist lens. The researcher attempted to gain understanding through reconstructions of respondents’ shared experiences by proxy since meaning was constructed through Forum members’ interactions with each other (Sechelski & Onwueguzie, 2019). The researcher studied the attributes, traits, and characteristics Forum members perceived to be most relevant, and their perceptions constructed the narrative. Furthermore, the researcher studied Forum members’ perceived levels of proficiency of each factor and the extent to which they perceived to have achieved success based upon their levels of proficiency. By learning the multiple meanings of lived experiences and how members’ perspectives were socially constructed through communication and
negotiation (Motulsky, 2021), the researcher came to understand the connection between specific factors and the Forum’s success as determined by members.

According to Urcia (2021), the choice of an appropriate methodology that aligns with the researcher’s belief about reality is critical when embarking on rigorous qualitative research. The research questions were developed from information derived from a comprehensive review of literature and the researcher’s understanding of collaboration, in general, as applicable to the Forum’s work with which he was previously associated. More specifically, a qualitative, phenomenological approach (PA) was used to answer the research questions since the lived, interactive experiences of the respondents collaborating with other Forum members shaped their answers to the questions. Using a PA allows one to acquire powerful insights about a phenomenon (Urcia, 2021). This aligns with Kalu’s (2019) assessment of qualitative inquiry since members’ actual work influenced their experiences of the phenomenon and informed their interpretation of their shared experiences.

**Research Methodology**

This section will review the set of methods and procedures that determined the direction of the study. The methodology chosen was based on several factors, including, but not limited to, the: research topic, purpose of the study, in-depth literature review, research questions, intended outcome of the study, and researcher’s philosophical beliefs and underlying assumptions (Urcia, 2021).

The aim of the study was to interpret and analyze respondents’ reports of collaboration as they experienced the phenomenon, formulated through their interactions with other members of the Forum. As such, the researcher sought to gain an understanding of whether respondents regarded their collaboration as successful, and, if so, which factors were most relevant in contributing to the success. The researcher also wished to learn how respondents perceived Forum members’ levels of proficiency of those factors—how all members interacted and how their interactions either contributed to or hindered their accomplishment of goals.

The researcher conducted a qualitative study through the lens of social constructionism. As Mohajan (2018) expressed, “Qualitative research is a form of social action that stresses on the way of
people interpret, and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals” (p. 2). Similarly, Hammarberg et al. (2016) reported, “‘qualitative’ methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant” (p. 499). Qualitative methodology was selected because the researcher sought to investigate people’s beliefs, perspectives, and experiences about their interorganizational collaboration and thus their interpretation of social interaction (Mohajan, 2018). The qualitative genre also allows for the researcher to gather rich, detailed data about respondents’ perspectives of social constructs and then to understand the phenomenon under study from various perspectives within a context. The work of the Forum provided the context, and the open-ended nature of the qualitative research invited respondents to share their thoughts more authentically and personally.

Mohajan (2018) also stated, “Phenomenology attempts to understand how participants make sense of their experiences” (p. 8). Hence, a PA was also used to conduct the study so that the researcher might examine how participants made sense of their shared experiences resulting from their interorganizational collaboration. Dodgson (2017) espoused, “the goal of phenomenological research is to understand the meaning that the particular topic of the study has for the study participant” (p. 357). Further, Neubauer et al. (2019) added that the PA “seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (p. 91). With these experts’ assertions in mind, respondents were interviewed to obtain their perspectives about what transpired during the process of collaboration as they understood the actions taking place.

According to Flood (2010), “Phenomenology is an interpretive, qualitative form of research that seeks to study phenomena that are perceived or experienced. It offers a means by which to identify the essences of the experience” (p. 13). Phenomenology is a research method, but it is deeply rooted in philosophy (Dowling, 2007). Phenomenology is both descriptive and inductive. Norlyk and Harder (2010) reported that 18 schools of phenomenology have been identified, and there are considerable differences between them. Although there are many different schools of phenomenology, according to Flood (2010), there are two major phenomenological approaches: descriptive and interpretive.
First, Edmund Husserl is credited with founding a descriptive method and an a priori philosophical science derived from the method (Dowling, 2007; Pula, 2021). Thus, Norlyk and Harder (2010) stated that Husserl focused on the description of the meaning of phenomena. Flood (2010) noted:

Husserl’s (1970) philosophical ideas gave rise to the descriptive phenomenological approach to enquiry. Husserl believed that subjective information should be important to scientists seeking to understand human motivation because human actions are influenced by what they perceive to be real. Thus, to bring out the essential components of the lived experiences specific to a group of people, a scientific approach is needed. (pp. 8-9)

“For Husserl, the aim of phenomenology is the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear in order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). Husserl used the term epoché. Moustakas (1994) reported that epoché is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgement. Pula (2021) likened epoché to phenomenological reduction. “The use of the term ‘reduction’ quite literally means that the person ‘reduces the world as it is considered in the natural attitude to a world of pure phenomena’” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132).

The second major phenomenological approach, hermeneutics, is interpretive. “Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation of texts to obtain a valid and common understanding of their meaning” (Flood, 2010, p. 12). It is a phenomenological school associated with Martin Heidegger, a former student of Husserl (Pula, 2021). Hermeneutics is also interested in the lived human experience but does have notable differences from Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology. For example, “Heidegger agrees with Husserl’s declaration ‘to the things themselves,’ but does not agree with Husserl’s view of the importance of description rather than understanding” (Dowling, 2007, p. 133). Additionally, Heidegger rejects intentionality and the epoché.

The founder of hermeneutics, Heidegger, believed that the lived experience should be the focal point (Flood, 2010). Flood (2010) divulged that “Heidegger used the term ‘lifeworld’ to express the idea that individuals’ realities are invariably influenced by the world in which they live” (p. 9). Heidegger postulated that people’s subjective experiences are inevitably linked to social and cultural contexts; thus, autonomy is not absolute (Flood, 2010).
Heidegger also introduced co-constitutionality, “in which the meanings arrived at in interpretive research comprise a blend of those articulated by participants and researcher” (Flood, 2010, p. 10). Heidegger thought that personal knowledge is beneficial for phenomenological research (Flood, 2010). Thus, phenomenology “focuses on interpretation of meaning in which preconceptions are integrated into the research findings” (Norlyk & Harder, 2010, p. 428). Pula (2021) reported, “Heidegger’s philosophy has been most influential in fields of social and cultural theory” (p. 419).

The researcher approached this study with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. More specifically, the researcher exercised Ricoeur’s interpretation theory, which included three major steps when conducting research. First, the researcher read the text to comprehend its meaning. This is referred to as naïve reading/understanding (Flood, 2010). Next, the researcher identified and presented themes that expressed the meanings of participants’ experiences in the Forum and were prominent in the text. Ricoeur called this step structural analysis (Flood, 2010). The third step of Ricoeur’s interpretation theory is gaining a comprehensive understanding. During this step, the researcher summarized and reflected on all themes in relation to the research questions. The results are ultimately presented in laymen’s terms to interpret the participants’ lived experiences as accurately as possible (Flood, 2010).

While true that phenomenological research is strong by understanding the philosophy behind it (Norlyk & Harder, 2010), it is also of the utmost importance to remember that “the guidelines of scientific practice should be followed” (Giorgi, 2000, P. 11). Giorgi (2000) argued that “Philosophical scholarly style almost exclusively depends upon the philosopher’s own experience, but scientists usually get their data from the world or from others” (p. 15). As Pula (2021) noted, “Phenomenology has played an important role in the development of sociological theory” (p. 411).

To gather valuable information, the researcher began by conducting interviews (The specific interview process used is discussed in detail below.). “Qualitative research interviews are preferable when the researcher strives to understand the interviewee’s subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than generating generalizable understandings of large groups of people” (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1002). According to Mohajan (2018), it makes sense that a social phenomenon can best be understood from the
perspective of the actors involved instead of attempting to explain it using an outsider’s perspective. “Interviews are used to gain insights into a person’s subjective experiences, opinions and motivations” (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 3). Thus, interviewing respondents will allow for multiple views of Forum members’ shared reality, constructed through their social interaction and interpreted through the researcher’s constructionist lens (Dodgson, 2017).

In this vein, the study is grounded in respondents’ interpretations of the processes engaged throughout their collaborative interactions, as well as how they constructed meaning of their socializations. Hermeneutic in nature, the framework for this study allows the researcher to “interpret experiences and phenomena via the individual’s lifeworld” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 94). Hermeneutic phenomenology speaks to the service of the mythological god Hermes, who accurately delivered messages to and from his fellow gods (Gioia, 2021). Likewise, the researcher considered the processes of interaction among members of the Forum and attempted to deliver an authentic portrayal of respondents’ interpretations of the interactions that transpired during their interorganizational collaboration.

A PA was deliberately adopted for the study rather than a grounded theory (GT) approach. When using GT, a researcher’s primary purpose is to generate theory (Dodgson, 2017). As reported by Urcia (2021), “In contrast to GT, PA is not used to conceptualize or generate theories but an ideal methodology to deeply understand the lived experiences of people” (p. 4). This study was not primarily conducted to generate theory; rather, the researcher intended to understand how the respondents conceptualized their interactions, communications, and negotiations with other members of the Forum specific to their interorganizational collaboration. Respectively, the researcher desired to ascertain which attributes, traits, and characteristics respondents perceived as most relevant for their success, how they perceived Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each, and the extent to which they experienced success due to the factors they identified. Through a comprehensive review of current literature and in advance of the study, theories and prior research relative to interorganizational collaboration were vetted. The data gleaned from respondents’ perceptions of factors identified as most important for successful collaboration were compared to findings from existing research. While theories may be generated because of this study,
giving rise to theory was not the researcher’s main objective. Instead, existing theories were supported via the researcher’s findings.

The researcher used a PA since he attempted to comprehend the subjective perspective of the participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Flood, 2010). As communicated by Norlyk and Harder (2010), “the aim in a phenomenological study is to understand a phenomenon more deeply through adequate exposure to the qualities of the phenomenon that are described by those experiencing the phenomenon” (p. 427). An underlying assumption of phenomenologists is that the meanings are constructed as people participate in the activities with others that they are interpreting (Flood, 2010). This is a prime example of social constructionism; thus, the PA complemented the researcher’s theoretical framework. “A theoretical perspective supports the philosophical stance underpinning a methodology, and provides a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria” (Flood, 2010, p. 8).

Similar to the PA, in the GT approach to research “the focus initially is on unraveling the elements of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 4). Unlike the PA, Moustakas (1994) continued, GT’s ultimate purpose is to construct a theory. Wimpenny and Gass (2000) echoed this intention: “Grounded theory, through a process of constant comparison and reduction, aims to establish tight, well-integrated theory built from well-defined concepts arising directly from the empirical research in hand” (p. 1486). The researcher’s primary purpose of conducting the study was to better understand the phenomenon based from participants’ descriptions rather than constructing a new theory. Additionally, interviews are often driven by emerging theory when using a GT approach (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000), and the researcher stayed consistent in his questioning of participants during interviews. GT often links interviews with participant observation as well (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). The researcher did not have the opportunity to partake in participant observation, thus another reason for choosing the PA. Wimpenny and Gass (2000) revealed:

The phenomenologist remains centered on eliciting the experience of respondents so that the phenomenon can be revealed. The grounded theorist, after an initial phenomenological approach,
is then seeking to develop the emerging theory and may move on to other data collection methods, or structured interviews, to saturate emerging categories. (p. 1491)

**Research Design**

To proceed with a qualitative, phenomenological study is reasonable when seeking to gain insight into the personal experiences and perspectives of members of an interorganizational group. First, a qualitative approach was preferable for this study since the researcher sought information related to how a specific context influenced Forum members and experiences (Kalu, 2019). Next, the PA was preferable to other qualitative approaches as the study sought to understand respondents’ perceptions of factors they viewed as important for successful collaboration, as well as their perceptions of their levels of proficiency in regards to implementing or acknowledging the factors in practice. Additionally, the study intended to determine the extent to which respondents have experienced success in the Forum—both in general and in light of the factors. The factors important for successful collaboration are displayed during the interaction, negotiation, and compromise among and between members as they collaborate to advance toward achieving their collective goals. As noted by Dodgson (2017), “A high-quality phenomenological study can be very powerful and open a window to a deeper understanding of another’s reality” (p. 357). Therefore, taking a PA is best for answering questions about the importance of factors and the contexts that lend themselves to a collaboration’s success.

Although taking an ethnographical approach might have yielded comprehensive data, this action was not feasible because the researcher could not physically be present while members interacted and collaborated. According to Hammersley (2018), ethnographies occur in natural settings and typically rely on participant observation. Similarly, the researcher’s inability to observe firsthand also prevented the use of a case study approach. Morgan et al. (2017) noted, “observation data are positioned as the central component of the [case study] design” (p. 1060). Without observing members’ intentions directly, the researcher was unable to conduct a case study by definition. Further, since the chief purpose of the study was not to generate theory or theoretical explanations, using a grounded theory approach would have been inappropriate (Dodgson, 2017). Unlike grounded theory, the PA is not primarily used to generate theory,
but rather to comprehend the contextual experiences of others (Urcia, 2021). Hence, the researcher determined that a PA was best suited for this study. Since the researcher could not observe the phenomenon of collaboration between and among Forum members, he determined that interviewing members was an appropriate method for gathering data. Via the PA, the researcher addressed the research questions by directly asking Forum members about how they experienced the phenomenon of collaboration through their work (Neubauer et al., 2019). Traditionally, interviews have been utilized by qualitative researchers as a primary instrument in research design (Alshenqeeti, 2014). To observe non-verbal cues and maximize participants’ comfort levels, the interviews were conducted face-to-face (Saarijarvi et al., 2021). Specifically, the interviews were semi-structured in nature: Interview guides were drafted to invite respondents’ thoughts about their direct involvement as collaborators without funneling the conversation towards a pre-determined end (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In addition to asking the guiding questions, formulated for the semi-structured interviews, prompts and follow-up questions were utilized to gain additional details and insights when respondents either strayed far from the focus or approached a topic worth further explanation (See Appendix A) (Alshenqeeti, 2014; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Use of prompts and follow-up questions allowed the researcher to examine how Forum members made sense of their shared experiences. Using participants’ answers, the researcher attempted to depict the collaboration among Forum members accurately and in context.

In addition to conducting interviews, the researcher examined existing documents governing, derived from, and/or about the Forum’s work, which included, but were not limited to, the following records: meeting agendas, meeting minutes, monthly updates, newsletters, reports, notes, articles and news releases, responses and results containing data, flyers containing event information, event invitations and programs, an email between members, a charter declaration, bylaws, a goal worksheet, and a proposal presentation. These documents helped him to develop a better understanding of the collaboration that took place among Forum members. The information contained within the existing Forum documents was compared with the data obtained from the interviews. For example, if a respondent
commented that he perceived that the interactions that took place during collaboration in the Forum demonstrated an inequity in power among members, yet a document read that each member had an equal say, the researcher might deduce that bylaws were written to safeguard against inequities; however, in practice some members attempted to dominate and steer the collaboration, which resulted in the perception of varying levels of power among members and the existence of inequity.

Many view researchers, themselves, as the main instrument in qualitative studies (McGrath et al., 2019; Mohajan, 2018). As a former Forum member with a sociological background, the researcher maintained an understanding of contextual factors contributing to the Forum’s work. While advantageous for guiding the study (Neubauer et al., 2019), the researcher needed to remain aware of and control his own perceptions, opinions, and underlying assumptions as they could lead to bias (Cypress, 2017). Using semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to balance his subjectivity with the objectivity desired in research, for the questions guided conversations with respondents without shaping them.

**Population and Selection Screening**

Gentles et al. (2015) defined sampling as applicable to qualitative research as follows: “the selection of specific data sources from which data are collected to address the research objectives” (p. 1775). Specific to phenomenology, Cohen et al. (2000) referred to sampling as simply “choosing informants” (p. 45). However, many phenomenologists, such as van Manen (2014), posit that sampling is not even related to phenomenology. For instance, van Manen (2014) declared, “the term sample should not refer to an empirical sample as a subset of a population. This use of the notion of sampling presupposes that one aims at empirical generalization, and that is impossible within a phenomenological methodology” (p. 352). Since generalizations cannot be made from the specific contextual life experiences of the participants to others, the researcher ultimately decided to avoid using the terms *sample* or *sampling*. This will also avoid unnecessary confusion for readers.

All respondents are current members of the Forum and K-12 educators. The Forum is a collaborative body, comprised of members from school districts, businesses, colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations with a vested interest in improving students’ achievement, and, consequently, the
overall capabilities of individuals entering the workforce after graduating from high school or post-secondary schooling. Concerned with the economic development of the region in Southwestern Pennsylvania they represent, members of the Forum meet regularly and make a concerted effort to address the region’s needs as related to education and the workforce. Since members interact routinely per the reason for the Forum’s formation, a purposive selection screening technique was utilized for the study. As Gill (2020) noted, when applying purposive selection screening techniques, “The researcher intentionally selects participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied” (p. 580). By the nature of their work, members are knowledgeable about collaboration and can speak to their perceptions of the phenomenon under study.

The Forum also meets the researcher’s operational definition of a collaborative body: a formal group based upon mutually beneficial relationships among individuals from organizations with shared or overlapping objectives. In this regard, the Forum’s overarching objective is to ensure that school districts within the region prepare graduates to enter the workforce by teaching them the skills necessary for workforce development. Meeting this objective benefits all members who maintain a stake in students’ achievement. For example, an educator’s primary responsibility is to teach students the skills necessary for engaging as productive citizens in an ever-changing, global society. Learning which skills business leaders expect their workers to possess is strategic; subsequently, educators can draft curricula accordingly to ensure their districts graduate top-achieving students who have mastered essential skills. Symbiotically, business leaders, who hire high school graduates, actively seek effective workers with a particular skill set. Assisting educators with their planning for deliberate instruction allows business leaders to ensure that school districts graduate potential workers with essential skills. Concurrently, members of the non-profit organizations involved hold a stake in the region’s overall economic development and prosperity. All members share the same vision and cooperate to achieve it; therefore, the Forum is, indeed, a collaborative body by definition.

Furthermore, the nature of the Forum’s work meets the researcher’s operational definition of collaboration as a process: actions of stakeholders who engage with each other to achieve goals they
could not otherwise achieve if they did not collaborate. For example, educators might not accurately predict which work-related skills to teach their students without the assistance of business leaders, who share with educators concrete ways their students utilize essential skills when they enter the workforce. Coactively, leaders of local businesses, who hire graduates, are more likely to recruit from school districts, colleges, and universities that earn their confidence based upon the high achievement of their students. For members of non-profit organizations, goals include helping individuals obtain the skills needed for today’s workforce, and assisting local employers with hiring, training, and retaining skilled workers to boost the local economy. Members likely could not achieve their goals in isolation; thus, their integrated work meets the definition of collaboration as a process.

Lastly, access to participants was conveniently and purposefully secured through the researcher’s previous membership in the Forum and the relationships he established while acting as a member. The coordinator of the Forum served as the gatekeeper who granted permission for the researcher to conduct the study. Having worked with the coordinator, the researcher recognized his critical role in the study and communicated with him about its framework. As Hatch (2002) explained, “Of particular importance is the identification of gatekeepers, who formally or informally control access to the settings of interest” (p. 45). These gatekeepers are in key positions to offer names of potential respondents, as well as to articulate how to acquire permission to participate in the study. Through his communication with the coordinator, the researcher identified a path forward.

Efficiently, the researcher also continues to foster collegial relationships with individuals who served as respondents. His previous position as the coordinator of college and career pathways afforded him the opportunity to work alongside some members who ultimately served as respondents. Thus, to study this population is both purposive and convenient. According to Gill (2020), “The qualitative researcher identifies participants who can provide information (data) to answer the research question” (p. 579). Knowing and having worked with some members of the population under study made the respondents more easily accessible to the researcher.
Members of the Forum adequately, purposefully, and readily represented the experiences as related to the phenomenon under study. At the general level, verbal permission to interview members was granted after speaking with the coordinator of the Forum. Thereafter, permission was realized at the individual level through informed consent forms signed by all respondents who agreed to be interviewed (See Appendix B).

While using random selection may be preferred for the purpose of yielding unbiased findings, using random selection was not feasible for this study because K-12 Forum members are not selected at random. Consequently, the researcher selected participants to meet the purpose of the research by using a list of characteristics: (a) participants must be active members of the Forum, a collaborative body that meets the researcher’s operational definition of collaboration as a body; (b) participants’ current work in the Forum meets the researcher’s operational definition of collaboration as a process; (c) participants must be knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied; (d) participants must be K-12 educators; and (e) participants are viewed as leaders. The researcher used his judgement and prior knowledge to select respondents who met all the required characteristics and thus could provide valuable information for the study. Most qualitative studies apply deliberate, purposive selection rather than random selection because researchers predetermine the relevant participants based on their review of literature and previous experience (Busetto et al., 2020). Creswell and Poth (2018, as cited in Urcia, 2021) stated, “Purposive sampling is used in PA to recruit participants with rich and diverse experiences of a phenomenon under study” (p. 6).

Most participants are K-12 educators who were either considered original steering committee members or who have a lengthy, engaged tenure in the Forum. In general, these participants have both the longest tenure and some of the most integral roles. The participants consisted of eight superintendents, one director, one assistant superintendent, and two principals. There were nine males and three females who participated. They were selected as potentially rich sources of information, who likely would provide data relevant to the research.
Though the 12 respondents could provide a detailed description of the phenomenon under study, the number of participants is small. However, in this case, the number of participants selected is appropriate because, as Gill (2020) explained, “Generalizability, important for quantitative research, is not a goal of qualitative research; therefore sample sizes are much smaller than those needed for quantitative designs” (p. 579). Since statistical representativeness is not the goal of qualitative research, the researcher chose enough participants to attain the detailed data necessary for understanding Forum members’ experiences as collaborators (as pertinent to the study) (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Gill, 2020; Hennink et al., 2017). For qualitative research, reaching a degree of saturation among data—no matter the number of participants—is more important than engaging with a large number of participants, in general (Gill, 2020; Hennink et al., 2017). Saturation is actualized when no new thematic information is collected from participants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Both the researcher and a second coder, Farhan Sadique, determined that saturation was reached after 12 interviews were conducted and coded. More specifically, the second coder believed that saturation was reached after the sixth interview was conducted because he found codes repetitive henceforth.

Although expert qualitative researchers recommend that their fellow qualitative researchers continue collecting data only until saturation is reached—and despite the second coder’s identification that saturation had been reached after he had analyzed the sixth interview—the researcher decided to continue gathering additional data after no new themes had emerged through analysis. Specifically, the researcher conducted, transcribed, and analyzed an additional six interviews after saturation was reached. First, as a novice, the researcher wanted to ensure that he exhausted all opportunities to gather data in the event that he uncovered additional themes throughout the process of analysis. New to both data collection and interpretation, he became increasingly more adept at analysis as he continued to dive deeper into participants’ responses to interview questions. More data meant increased chances to analyze and hone his skills, so he wanted to take advantage of all available opportunities to practice the art of researching qualitatively. Additionally, by the time he learned that saturation had been reached, the researcher had already arranged to interview six additional participants who willingly agreed to volunteer their time to
this study. This line of thinking is supported in research. As Gentles et al. (2015) reported, “excluding participants after they have volunteered is potentially unethical because it may offend volunteers...producing negative associations with research participation” (p. 1785). Respecting participants’ time and contributions to the field of education, he appreciated learning from the school leaders who collaborated as Forum members. In the interest of working together for the betterment of the students they serve, the researcher looked forward to every opportunity to sit down with seasoned educators in order to discuss the art of collaboration. Lastly, the researcher’s first seven interviews were with male respondents, while three of the last five respondents were female. The researcher wished to compare the data obtained through interviews with females to the data obtained through interviewing male respondents. Upon examination, there were no recognizable distinctions between the data collected from males and females.

Researchers using a PA might realize saturation after only a few participants share their thoughts if they provide quality data to reveal the process of a phenomenon (Urcia, 2021). “In other words: qualitative data collection finds its end point not a priori, but when the research team determines that saturation has been reached” (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 7). In sum, 12 participants provided extremely thorough, saturated information.

**Instruments**

In this section, the researcher identifies and describes the instruments used to collect data, including himself. In qualitative research, the researcher is considered a fundamental instrument for both data collection and analysis (McGrath et al., 2018; Mohajan, 2018). Since the researcher is often the primary instrument in qualitative studies, bias is frequently viewed as a methodological concern (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). Thus, researchers must declare personal information that may have significance regarding the study (Dodgson, 2017).

At the time of the study, the researcher was a middle-aged, upper-middle class white male, employed by the Norwin School District—one of 17 districts in Westmoreland County. He worked as the assistant principal at Norwin Middle School and simultaneously served as the Chief STEM/STEAM
officer for the district. He also held the secondary titles of coordinator of college and career pathways and cyber coordinator. Prior to working at Norwin, the researcher worked as the principal at Central Westmoreland Career and Technology Center (CWCTC) for two years. Before that employment, the researcher held several titles spanning over an eight-year period, including assistant administrator/principal at Lenape Technical School. By the time the study was conducted, he accrued over 18 years’ worth of experience as a secondary educator and served over 11 of those years as an administrator. He has obtained the following degrees and certifications to date: BA Sociology; MA Sociology; Superintendent’s Letter of Eligibility; Principal, K-12; Vocational Administrative Director; Instructional II – Social Studies; and Instructional II – English Language Arts.

Except for the years during which he attended undergraduate and graduate school, the researcher has resided in Westmoreland County; hence, he maintains a vested interest in the region. His experiences as a leader of two CTCs ignited a passion for topics pertaining to workforce development. His tenure at CWCTC invited an association with nine of 17 superintendents and affiliated district administrators across Westmoreland County.

The researcher’s background in sociology spurred an interest in the dynamics of human interaction derived from a sociological perspective and, therefore, the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study. Examining the study from a micro level via the lens of social constructionism, he recognizes that his prior knowledge and experiences, as well as his culture, shape his interpretation of information (Creswell, 2014). To mitigate bias, the researcher journaled throughout the study to capture reflections regarding any predispositions. For instance, after conducting a few interviews, he noted his personal affinity for face-to-face interviews and meetings because some participants spoke about the impact of COVID-19 affecting the replacement of face-to-face meetings by virtual ones. Journaling helped him to monitor and control biases through a greater sense of self-awareness gained by reading his own words (Cypress, 2017).

Auspiciously, McGrath et al. (2019) expressed:
In the qualitative research interview, we argue that the interviewer should not be viewed as someone contaminating or biasing the data, but rather as a co-creator of data together with the interviewee, where the interviewer’s previous knowledge may play an important part in understanding of the context or the experiences of the interviewee. (p. 1004)

Although the researcher is a former member of the Forum’s Steering Committee and had participated in the interorganizational collaboration under study, constraints precluded him from observing collaboration in action once the study had commenced. This limitation resulted in his decision to gather data via interviews guided by his background knowledge and the Forum’s workings.

Interviews were used as another instrument for collecting data. As an element of research design, interviews have been a staple in social science research for a long time (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Interviews with Forum members were paramount to answer the research questions driving the study. It was essential that the guiding interview questions generated data that, when interpreted and analyzed as described below, provided answers to the overarching research questions. Since the researcher formerly served as a Forum member, he drew upon his past experiences when drafting guiding questions. Synthesizing knowledge of current literature, the central tenants of social sciences as a field of study, a constructionist’s perspective, and past experiences, he deliberately mapped a path of inquiry that linked his understanding of a phenomenon with respondents’ realities. Table 7 illustrates these links by presenting the connections between the researcher’s understanding and experts’ findings.

### Table 7

**Guiding Interview Questions Connected to Research Questions**

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<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Related Literature</th>
<th>Guiding Interview Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>Related Literature</td>
<td>Guiding Interview Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Of all the factors, traits, attributes, characteristics, etc. that make someone an expert collaborator, which do you regard as the most important? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why was the Forum’s collaboration successful (or unsuccessful)?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Think of a Forum member who you regard as an expert collaborator. Describe him/her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think of a Forum member who you regard as a weak collaborator. Describe him/her.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe your personal collaboration style.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What else can you tell me about your experience collaborating as a member of the Forum?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Given your explanation of what it means to collaborate, describe a time when you have observed collaboration among Forum members or engaged in collaboration as a Forum member.</td>
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</table>
The researcher chose a semi-structured approach to interviewing to obtain respondents’ thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives without guiding the discussion to a desired end. Per Belotto (2018), semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to extract the same core information from each respondent, while providing for a degree of flexibility to delve deeper into the rich descriptions of members’ shared experiences. Similarly, DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) disclosed, “The overall purpose of using semistructured interviews for data collection is to gather information from key informants who have personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs related to the topic of interest” (p. 2). DeJonckheere and Vaughn’s (2019) assertion clearly informed the approach because their prescribed purpose for using semi-structured interviewing as a means of data collection aligned precisely with the type of data the researcher desired to obtain.

To maximize the use of semi-structured interviewing as a means of gathering data, participants were interviewed in person. Advantages to conducting face-to-face interviews included the following factors: being able to observe facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues; having direct interaction with participants without having to consider the possibility of technical issues; and increasing the likelihood of conducting the interview in an environment that is comfortable and safe for the participant (Saarijarvi et al., 2021). For this study, 10 participants were interviewed in their offices, and the other two requested to be interviewed in the researcher’s office. Conversely, conducting interviews in
person can be disadvantageous if they are lengthy and/or costly (Saarijarvi et al., 2021). For example, travel to and from in-person interviews requires the researcher to spend a greater amount of time and money than he would otherwise spend. Fortunately, the costs associated with travel were viewed as minimal since all respondents worked in the same county as the researcher. Overall, the benefits of face-to-face interviews far outweighed the costs associated with them.

Prior to conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with current Forum members, the researcher formulated guiding interview questions that would allow him to elicit answers to the overarching research questions from the perspectives of those collaborating (See Appendix A). As noted by McGrath et al. (2019), “Successful interviews start with careful planning that considers the focus and scope of the research question” (p. 1003). The topics and themes that shaped the questions were derived from the researcher’s former experience as a member of the Forum and his review of literature (Busetto et al., 2020). Although he asked questions in the same order during each interview, the researcher reserved the right to prompt and ask follow-up questions to gain additional insights into the interactions, communication, and negotiations that materialized during the interorganizational collaboration. As DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) proclaimed, “Prompts encourage people to continue talking and they can elicit more details needed to understand the topic” (p. 6). Additionally, since interviews are profoundly interactive, asking follow-up and probing questions dependent upon the participants’ responses to initial questions often occurs organically (Alshenqeeti, 2014; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). For example, if respondents approached a subject requiring clarification, the researcher might prompt, “Please expand upon that point,” to gain a more thorough understanding. Realizing that unanticipated topics or themes could surface due to the nature of semi-structured interviews (Busetto et al., 2020), he reserved the right to ensure he understood respondents’ perceptions as thoroughly as possible in the moment by probing for additional information as applicable. All questions were formulated to develop a scope of understanding about the collaboration among Forum members from the respondents’ points-of-view. Specifically, the researcher desired to gain an in-depth understanding of
exactly how the identified factors shaped the Forum’s success per the respondents’ perspectives and to what extent.

Upon drafting the guiding questions, though in advance of conducting interviews with respondents, the researcher asked two retired superintendents and former Forum members to review the guiding interview questions to check for clarity. He invited the former members to determine how likely the drafted questions were to obtain answers to the research questions and to offer any other suggestions for interviewing. He also conducted a pilot interview with a third retired superintendent and former member to identify other potential concerns and to gauge the timing of interviews. All former Forum members believed the questions were suitable for the study and would lead the researcher to obtain the type of information he sought. These preliminary steps also confirmed that the length of the interviews would be appropriate for the scope of the study.

Lastly, existing documentation was reviewed as a means of obtaining data. Documents examined included, but were not limited to, the following: meeting agendas, meeting minutes, monthly updates, newsletters, reports, notes, articles and news releases, responses and results containing data, flyers containing event information, event invitations and programs, an email between members, a charter declaration, bylaws, a goal worksheet, and a proposal presentation. A log (Appendix C) was created to keep records of the documents collected for analysis.

Documents served to authenticate and strengthen evidence obtained from the interviews, for they contain qualitative data and, therefore, give meaning to the phenomenon under study. As follows, information extracted from documents, in conjunction with data obtained from interviews, was recorded, analyzed, organized, and interpreted to answer the research questions. Creswell (2014) cited advantages of analyzing documents, including their accessibility, unobtrusiveness, and tangible representation of participants’ experiences. In this case, the documents were used to help the researcher gain a more complete understanding of the workings of the interorganizational collaboration studied.
Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research

Some researchers believe that the terms reliability and validity are applicable to both quantitative and qualitative studies. For example, Cypress (2017) stated, “Reliability and validity are 2 key aspects of all research….Meticulous attention to the reliability and validity of research studies is particularly vital in qualitative work” (p. 254). Contrastingly, Krefting (1991) professed that reliability and validity are quantitative labels, thus should not be applied or used in qualitative research. Additionally, Rose and Johnson (2020) challenged that “validity is a contested term and is derived from a traditional quantitative construct, placing it in a tenuous position for qualitative researchers, regardless of their ontological or paradigmatic affiliations” (p. 436). Similarly, several qualitative researchers choose not to use the term validity (Hayashi et al., 2019) because they argue that other terms, such as quality, rigor, and trustworthiness, are more agreeable and contributory to the nature of qualitative research (Cypress, 2017).

Debates among researchers continue to persist about why some qualitative researchers use the concepts of reliability and validity in their studies, yet others do not (Cypress, 2017). Regarding the use of reliability and validity in qualitative studies, Morse (1999) proclaimed:

I agree, they have been operationalized very rigidly in quantitative texts, and these instructions are not pertinent to qualitative inquiry. But this does not mean that they should not be used and certainly should not stop them from being operationalized to meet the conditions and circumstances of qualitative inquiry….To state that reliability and validity are not pertinent to qualitative inquiry places qualitative research in the realm of being not reliable and not valid. (p. 717)

The researcher agrees with Morse’s (1999) viewpoint, thus applies reliability and validity to his qualitative, phenomenological study accordingly. Many other researchers also use the terms reliability and validity in qualitative studies. Several examples are mentioned in the next two sections.

Reliability in Qualitative Research

The term reliability could be construed as confusing or even problematic when used in qualitative, phenomenological studies since contextual studies cannot be replicated with the same results. However, if reliability is operationalized for qualitative studies rather than as traditionally applied to quantitative studies, it is applicable. As defined by Rose and Johnson (2020), “Reliability refers to the
soundness of the research, particularly in relation to the appropriate methods chosen, and the ways in which those methods were applied and implemented in a qualitative research study” (p. 435). Similarly, Elliot (2018) considered reliability to be “consistency over time with the same researcher” (p. 2858). “Consistency refers to using the same technique or analysis strategy throughout the process” (Hoffding et al., 2021, p. 47). Researchers can demonstrate consistency by ensuring that their practices, analysis, and conclusions are visible to respondents and readers (Cypress, 2017). Consistency of the research process, therefore, can be demonstrated through transparency of research for the duration of the study.

Jones and Donmoyer (2021), however, touted that findings are unlikely to be consistent in qualitative research since the knowledge of respondents is socially constructed. Nonetheless, to bolster consistency, the same guiding questions were asked of all respondents in the same order. Yet, it is improbable that results of future studies will be consistent even when the researcher included competent descriptions of the procedures and outlined conditions of the research. To this end, Hoffding et al. (2021) proclaimed, “Even if an interview internally makes sense as its own unit, it must be connected to the wider net of scientific theories” (p. 48). To link qualitative data to a broader theory requires a researcher to construct meaning, and different researchers are likely to construct findings differently depending upon their understanding, perspectives, biases, and assumptions.

Although difficult to illustrate reliability in qualitative research, it is important that the researcher remains transparent throughout the study by chronicling the shaping of all decisions (Busetto et al., 2020) and presenting the reasons behind his methodological choices (Hoffding et al., 2021, p. 47). Thus, to display clearly how concepts and themes advance, the process and procedures used to answer the research questions should be presented in a systematic, transparent way (Elliot, 2018). For this study, the researcher audio recorded interviews and transcribed them verbatim as a means of assuring a level of transparency and procedural trustworthiness (Coleman, 2021). He also journaled throughout the research process to note his thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns for future reference. Additionally, the researcher described interview data in detail so that readers might make informed decisions about whether the conclusions he drew matched their own understanding and prior experiences (Hoffding et al., 2021).
Finally, triangulation is a well-known way for qualitative researchers to achieve reliability. “Essentially, triangulation compares results from two or more different methods of data collection and/or two or more data sources; researchers looking for patterns of convergence which enable them to formulate or corroborate an overall interpretation of the findings” (Coleman, 2021, p. 2043) carry an onus to triangulate. According to Hayashi et al. (2019), “Triangulation consists of the interrelationship between the information obtained from the data that was collected from different sources to increase the understanding of the study in question, thus improving the reliability of the results” (p. 101). For example, a qualitative researcher might obtain data from various sources beyond interviews to support the reliability of a study’s findings (Coleman, 2021). For the purposes of this study, the researcher collected data from documents created by and/or referring to the Forum so that he could triangulate data. The data gleaned from an interpretation of documents corresponded to the data amassed from interviews; thus, the researcher deemed the study reliable to an acceptable degree.

Validity in Qualitative Research

Like reliability, validity is traditionally more conducive to quantitative studies than qualitative ones. Cypress (2017) declared, “To validate means to investigate, to question, and to theorize, which are all activities to ensure rigor in a qualitative inquiry” (p. 257). Thus, a first step towards ensuring validity of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of collaboration, in general, and then question those who have experienced the phenomenon. The respondents were strategically selected for this study, for 75% hold the top positions at their base organizations; five of 12 were original members of the Steering Committee. As such, they actively participate in the Forum’s organization and immerse themselves in the work. All were selected based upon their abilities to offer valuable insights into members’ interactions as collaborators.

Cosgrove (2018) noted that pursuing validation is a valuable part of the qualitative research process. More specifically, Hayashi et al. (2019) argued, “the focus on ensuring validity and transparency of qualitative research is not specific to any single stage of the research; instead, it should be part of all research stages” (pp. 98-99). With this information in mind, researchers should build validity into their
studies by securing the legitimacy and accuracy of the findings throughout the entirety of their work. To strengthen the study’s validity, the researcher conducted an exhaustive review of current, empirical literature; sought the advice and assistance of field experts; invited suggestions from former Forum members; and conducted a pilot interview before collecting data.

Another reason for building validity into a study is that the process ensures a level of consistency and transparency so the study might be reproduced. Further, Hoffding et al. (2021) reported:

One could understand validity in terms of consistency—whether the method consistently applies the same methodological steps or tools and arrives at somewhat reproducible conclusions—and transparency—whether the method discloses all its steps and presents the reasons for these steps, also such that it could potentially be reproduced. (p. 35)

To ensure consistency during interviews, the same guiding questions were asked in the same order. Although respondents might have interpreted the questions slightly differently depending upon their prior knowledge and lived experiences, asking the same questions in the same order ensured that the overall focus did not deviate from interview to interview.

To make the work transparent as Hoffding et al. (2021) suggested, a copy of the guiding questions was made available to the readers; aforementioned questions appear in the Interview Guide (Appendix A). Thus, anyone wanting to reproduce the study could ask members of another interorganizational collaboration the same guiding questions. Furthermore, to maintain transparency throughout the study, an explanation of the researcher’s overall intention and a description of the methodology employed was presented both in writing and verbally to respondents. Consequently, another researcher wishing to replicate the study will be able to access information about its framework easily. Even as findings from this study are contextual and ungeneralizable, the study itself might be repeated to identify correlations between findings and contexts.

Although the researcher cannot generalize results from this study to other environments, he can share key findings related to the Forum’s development, management, and progress with participants and school leaders. Sharing findings with respondents and other interested parties allows for a level of transparency; respondents, specifically, will know how their responses to questions are framed in context
for a larger audience. For the K-12 educators who act as members, as well as for those across organizational boundaries who collaborate with them, knowing the factors that led to their successful collaboration may increase the likelihood that their continued and future endeavors will prove productive. Because these individuals tackle complex social problems associated with workforce development, learning of the findings may actuate conversations about ways to reorganize the collaborative body or interact differently for the betterment of the students they serve and, consequently, the region from which they hail. Essentially, K-12 educators arranging to collaborate with leaders across organizations might draw upon the information gleaned from this study as a foundation for building a strong, functional collaborative body.

Despite the researcher’s ingraining of validity within the study, a degree of bias is unavoidable due to the interpretive nature of qualitative research. As a constructionist, the researcher’s aim is to analyze data in a way that gives meaning to respondents’ lived experiences. To analyze data requires the researcher to interpret respondents’ words in light of his prior experiences and background knowledge. As such, some subjectivity in interpretation is inevitable. Cypress (2017) clarified, “Researcher bias tends to result from selective observation and selective recording of information and from allowing one’s personal views and perspectives to affect how data are interpreted and how the research is conducted” (p. 259).

Nevertheless, the researcher, who worked within a constructionist paradigm, engaged in critical self-reflection and practiced reflexivity to guard against bias. Dodgson (2017) declared, “It is the researcher’s responsibility to describe clearly and specifically the process used to interview participants; transcribe the audio data, ensuring accuracy; and systematically analyze the data” (p. 356). “This includes what is called reflexivity…including how contact was established and maintained, or the background and experience of the researcher(s) involved in data collection and analysis” (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 6). Rose and Johnson (2020) defined reflexivity as “the ongoing process of incorporating personal reflections concerning our subjectivities within the context of theoretical and paradigmatic considerations across the research project, from design to dissemination” (p. 439). Since the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative studies, reflexivity, as well as the subjective nature of qualitative research, make it highly
unlikely that different researchers would arrive at the same conclusions. However, this point aligns with the central tenants of social constructionism and is also viewed as a strength of qualitative research (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

**Rigor**

As noted previously, many researchers do not use reliability and validity in qualitative studies; rather, they use the term *rigor*. As Cypress (2017) explained, “Rigor is simply defined as the quality or state of being very exact, careful, or with strict precision or the quality of being thorough and accurate” (p. 254). Qualitative studies must be rigorous since subjectivity can affect the way data is interpreted. As some quantitative researchers heavily scrutinize qualitative data, framing a rigorous qualitative study is advisable.

This study was rigorous because a method of data saturation was employed. As reported by Hayashi et al. (2019), “Data saturation is exemplified by the number of interviews that are conducted until there is no additional useful information due to saturation” (p. 101). Participants were interviewed continually until the data became redundant—until no new data (responses to the specific questions asked) was amassed through and during interviews. Forum members were interviewed until both the researcher and second interviewer agreed that saturation had been reached. The second coder, Farhan Sadique, agreed with the researcher that saturation, indeed, had been reached. The second coder believed saturation had been reached by the sixth interview; the researcher was confident that saturation had been reached by the twelfth. There were various reasons for this. The researcher is a novice and was unsure if saturation had been reached with so few interviews; thus, he wanted to ensure that all opportunities to gather data were exhausted in the event that additional themes throughout the process of analysis might have been uncovered. More data allowed the researcher to continue to sharpen his skills. Also, the researcher initially asked 15 potential participants who met the selection screening criteria to participate in the study. He did not anticipate the response rate was going to be so high, particularly since the interviews were conducted over the summer. Most initial requests were asked through email and/or voicemails, so the researcher did not initially know how many would be interested in participating in the
As it turned out, 12 of 15 (80%) potential participants who were contacted responded favorably. Out of respect for respondents’ contributions to the field of education and the interorganizational collaboration under study, the researcher did not deny any respondents the opportunity to partake in his study. In fact, the researcher relished the opportunity to interview local leaders in K-12 education to discuss collaboration. Finally, the researcher ultimately interviewed nine males and three females. The first seven interviews were conducted with males. The researcher was interested to compare the data from females with the data from male respondents. There did not end up being any tangible differences between male and female respondents.

Correspondingly, all data was coded through multiple passes of analysis until no new interpretations were made. For example, the researcher read data once to obtain a general understanding. Then, he coded data to identify overarching themes that emerged. Next, he coded to determine whether information offered by respondents fell under one or more emergent themes as categories and to recognize any anomalies or outliers. Conducting several passes until no new patterns surfaced contributed to establishing an extremely sophisticated understanding of the data. A rigorous study yields clear findings, and clear findings stem from the researcher’s exhaustive interpretation and analysis of data.

To assure a rigorous study, the researcher embedded interrater reliability into the methodology employed. Many authors endorse the use of an independent coder to help establish confidence and trust in how data is coded (Belotto, 2018; Creswell, 2014). Using this best practice, the researcher shared transcripts with an experienced qualitative researcher who autonomously coded them. Thereafter, the researcher and the second coder met in-person for approximately four hours to compare their work and resolve any disparity or confusion through deliberative discourse (Campbell et al., 2013). Despite differences in background and fields of study, the researcher and independent coder analyzed the data similarly. While they may have used different terminology to identify patterns inherent in the data, they conversed about semantics and learned that, despite the differences in wording, they interpreted the data similarly. For instance, the researcher referenced a “cross-section of members,” while the second coder termed this same aspect of the phenomenon “diversity of membership.” No matter the terminology, both
identified respondents’ acknowledgement that a successful collaboration is comprised of members with various affiliations and perspectives. “The evaluation of intercoder reliability and agreement should be part of the development of coding schemes for qualitative data in order to satisfy people that the data are sound” (Campbell et al., 2013, p. 301). The high rate of agreement between the researcher and independent coder lent credence to the study.

Combined with quality and rigor, trustworthiness as a concept relative to qualitative research links to validity. There are various qualitative research models that address rigor and trustworthiness. One example of a well-known model was proposed by Lincoln and Guba in their book *Naturalistic Inquiry* in 1985. Lincoln and Guba introduced four components of trustworthiness relevant to qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Credibility in qualitative research is comparable to internal validity in quantitative research. According to Thomas and Magilvy (2011) credibility “is the element that allows others to recognize the experiences contained within the study through the interpretation of participants’ experiences” (p. 152). Krefting (1991) detailed that “a qualitative study is considered credible when it presents an accurate description or interpretation of human experience that people who also share the same experience would immediately recognize” (p. 218). Reflexivity and member checking were two strategies the researcher used to establish credibility. Transferability in qualitative studies can be viewed in a similar light to external validity in quantitative studies. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) described transferability as “the ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another” (p. 153). The third component of trustworthiness is dependability. “Dependability, related to reliability in quantitative terms, occurs when another researcher can follow the decision trail used by the researcher” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). The researcher provided a decision trail by detailing the study. For instance, the researcher conveyed the purpose of the study, the participant selection process, details of data collection and analysis, and the presentation of findings. Lastly, the researcher practiced reflexivity to garner confirmability, the fourth component of trustworthiness. Confirmability occurs when the other three components of trustworthiness have been established by the researcher (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).
Cypress (2017) noted that trustworthiness is used to assess rigor, and member checking serves as one way to garner trust between respondents and the researcher, as well as between the researcher and his readers. According to Motulsky (2021), “Member checking, also known as respondent or participant validation, is the process of soliciting feedback from one’s participants or stakeholders about one’s data or interpretations” (p. 389). “Member checking, or participant feedback, has become so widely and consistently recommended as a validity or trustworthiness check that it almost seems to have become a requirement for rigorous qualitative research” (Motulsky, 2021, p. 389). After transcribing each interview within four days, the researcher sent the transcripts, as well as his notes and analytic memos, to participants for review. He asked each respondent to clarify information and validate the accuracy of the transcript so that they would feel confident that the message they conveyed—the message of record—communicated their actual perspective (Busetto et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2019). Ten respondents communicated that the transcription was accurate; two respondents made minor edits unrelated to content. This practice of member checking allowed participants to verify the veracity of the information they shared, thereby safeguarding accuracy and lending to the credibility of the study while the experience of interviewing remained fresh in their minds.

Obtaining respondents’ feedback in the manner described above is also known as confirmability (Hayashi et al., 2019). This activity should confirm the accuracy of participants’ responses, thereby serving to verify whether the phenomenon under study is accurately represented (Coleman, 2021; Hayashi et al., 2019). The accuracy of understanding participants’ responses was confirmed since ten participants did not request any changes. The minor edits suggested by the other two participants were unrelated to content, but rather wording and grammar. Since respondents confirmed that their understanding of the phenomenon under study was accurately represented, the researcher concluded that the study is valid.

In sum, “Qualitative researchers must therefore demonstrate carefully considered application of appropriate tools to evidence the validity and reliability of their work. Arguably, the absence of such evidence in many instances has perpetuated the view that qualitative studies are ‘less scientific’” (Coleman, 2021, p. 2044). By safeguarding the study, the researcher made certain that the findings he
presented accurately detail how selected factors influence the Forum’s productivity according to its members. Table 8 features common issues related to the reliability, validity, and rigor as applicable to qualitative studies, and it highlights ways the researcher addressed the issues to ensure the reliability, validity, and rigor of his work.

Table 8

Problems and Solutions Relative to Reliability, Validity, and Rigor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Related Literature</th>
<th>Ways to Address Issue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Dodgson (2017)</td>
<td>Copy of the guiding interview questions was made available</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hayashi et al. (2019)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hoffding et al. (2021)</td>
<td>Chronicling the shaping of all decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Methodology disclosed from start to finish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Busetto et al. (2020)</td>
<td>Transcribed interviews verbatim</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cypress (2017)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elliot (2018)</td>
<td>Same guiding interview questions asked of all respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hoffding et al. (2021)</td>
<td>Visibility of practices, analysis, and conclusions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Competent descriptions of procedures and outlined conditions of the research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rigor</td>
<td>Coleman (2021)</td>
<td>Data saturation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cypress (2017)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hayashi et al. (2019)</td>
<td>Multiple passes of coding</td>
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<td>Triangulation</td>
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<td>Second coder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Related Literature</td>
<td>Ways to Address Issue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Busetto et al. (2020)</td>
<td>Member checking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coleman (2021)</td>
<td>Journaling</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cypress (2017)</td>
<td>No authority over participants</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hayashi et al. (2019)</td>
<td>No respondent employed with researcher’s district</td>
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<td>McGrath et al. (2019)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Motulsky (2021)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Researcher Bias</td>
<td>Busetto et al. (2020)</td>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coleman (2021)</td>
<td>Journaling</td>
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<td>Notes and memos</td>
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<td>Rose and Johnson (2020)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant Bias</td>
<td>Alshenqeeti (2014)</td>
<td>Conversational tone during the interviews</td>
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<td>Comfortable setting and time of respondents’ convenience for interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Researcher Inexperience</td>
<td>Belotto (2018)</td>
<td>Interrater/Intercoder Reliability (Independent Coder)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Campbell et al. (2013)</td>
<td>Intercoder Agreement</td>
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**Data Collection and Management**

Semi-structured interview questions were drafted based upon the themes that emerged from a comprehensive review of current literature. Before respondents engaged in interviews, questions were
vetted by two former members of the Forum. Additionally, a pilot interview was conducted with another former Forum member to ensure that the interview questions covered the full range of factors selected as focal points. Thus, the researcher commenced with confidence, knowing that his questions invited respondents to speak to the exact topic under study.

**Pilot Sessions**

Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews with the selected population described above, the researcher asked two former members of the Forum’s Steering Committee to review the interview guide and provide input. He also conducted a pilot interview with a third member. Those who participated in the pilot study had relinquished their membership within the Forum due to retirement; however, they still retained a high level of familiarity with the interorganizational group. These activities helped the researcher to evaluate feasibility and improve the quality of the interview questions prior to commencing the study.

The researcher met with former members in-person at a neutral location (a local restaurant) to discuss the interview questions. With their input, he learned that several questions needed to be reworded for clarity. For example, the questions asking about the impact of certain factors needed to be tweaked to identify whether the impact applied to specific subgroups within the Forum or the interorganizational collaboration as a whole. Extraneous wording was removed from questions, and inaccurate, awkward, or leading words were replaced with precise words. Further, it was discussed whether or not a question about COVID-19’s impact on the Forum’s work should be formulated and asked. After deliberating, it was decided that a question about the virus’s potential influence would lead respondents to speak of an issue they otherwise might not address and that if a respondent mentioned COVID-19 of his/her own volition, the researcher could follow-up with questions or prompts as necessary.

Once questions were drafted, the researcher conducted a pilot interview to gain a sense of timing and learn how the questioning would flow. As a result of conducting the pilot interview, the researcher learned to lengthen wait time after asking questions in order to invite the most thorough responses from participants (Extending the wait time paid dividends during many interviews.) Finally, the researcher was
able to practice prompting participants to offer more information and asking them follow-up questions as well.

**Purposive Selection and Obtaining Consent**

After gaining the coordinator’s authorization to conduct the study and interview Forum members, the researcher obtained valuable input from former Forum members via a pilot session and adjusted the guiding interview questions accordingly. Next, the researcher examined a comprehensive list of current members and identified those he deemed most equipped to answer the interview questions. This purposive list of potential respondents consisted of members who served on the Steering Committee since its inception and/or actively participated due to an established tenure in the interorganizational collaboration. In full, a subgroup of K-12 Forum members with a lengthy and/or engaged tenure—many who served as members of the Steering Committee—were selected based upon their capacity to offer valuable insights germane to the research questions. Then, the researcher attempted to contact 15 potential respondents and arrange for in-person interviews at times and places convenient to them. The 15 potential participants were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study (Appendix D) and were phoned. Eventually, 12 of the 15 Forum members responded to the correspondence and volunteered to participate in the study.

During all initial correspondences, the researcher summarized the nature of the project and the reason for the study. The coordinator and potential respondents were informed of pertinent foundational information: (a) the researcher’s status as a graduate student, (b) the reason for the study, (c) who is eligible to participate in the study, (d) how the study will be conducted, (e) the approximate amount of time expected for interviews, and (f) participants’ rights and responsibilities (Appendix E). After disclosing the information, the researcher requested Forum members’ voluntary participation. Those who participated were also given a consent form to read thoroughly and sign prior to engaging in interviews (See Appendix B for a copy of the consent form).
Interviews

After each respondent consented, the researcher conducted a semi-structured, in-depth interview to understand his/her lived experience as a member of the Forum. Interviews averaged approximately 28 minutes in length; they ranged from 19 to 39 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Together, the transcriptions consisted of over 55 pages of single-spaced text derived from close to six hours’ worth of recorded conversations between the researcher and 12 Forum members representing 10 different base organizations (e.g., districts, CTCs).

The semi-structured interviews generated an abundance of information representing respondents’ perspectives of collaboration. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), “In an interview relationship, the interviewee is the expert and should be treated as such—you are relying on the interviewee to enhance your understanding and add to your research” (p. 5). As experts, the respondents offered rich descriptions of collaboration. Wimpenny and Gass (2000) noted that, for this reason, interviews are typically regarded as the preeminent method of data collection.

The researcher’s former involvement in the Forum made him familiar to respondents; this familiarity invited respondents to share their thoughts openly and honestly. As reported by McGrath et al. (2019), “If you already know your respondents, then it may be easier to build rapport” (p. 1003). For instance, friendly banter between the researcher and the participants took place both before and after all 12 interviews. Simultaneously, McGrath et al. (2019) explained, “the interviewer needs to be reflexive, conscious, and aware about how his or her role might impact the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee” (p. 1004). To exhibit transparency and to demonstrate that respondents were not coerced to participate in the study, no one currently employed with the researcher’s base organization was invited to engage. Moreover, the researcher held no authority over any of the participants. In fact, all of the participants hold higher titles than the researcher.

So that he followed standard procedures throughout the duration of the study, the researcher emailed an official invitation containing information from the Draft Summary of Research (Appendix E) to inform respondents of the reason for the study, basic protocols, and approximate length of the
interview. He also created an interview guide, which contained an introductory script and listed the pertinent, open-ended questions he intended to ask (See Appendix A). By using the guide throughout interviews, he stayed focused and steered respondents back to the focus when their thoughts veered to topics vastly unrelated to the study. At the same time, he remained cognizant of the importance of wording questions carefully to permit respondents to contribute new discourse from their perspectives.

While the researcher scripted the introduction, guiding questions, and prompts in advance of interviews, he purposefully did not script follow-up questions. Instead, he posed follow-up questions spontaneously as needed when he required clarification to respondents’ initial responses or wanted additional, more detailed information to answer a question. This practice permitted him a degree of flexibility, and the flexibility helped respondents to feel comfortable providing accurate, detail-oriented descriptions of the interactions and negotiations that transpired during collaboration (Hoffding et al., 2021). In sum, the researcher intended to draw from participants a complete description of their interactions during interorganizational collaboration, and his focused, yet flexible, interviewing yielded thorough results (Wimpenney & Gass, 2000).

At a time and location each respondent regarded as comfortable and convenient, the researcher began the interview by asking simple, nonthreatening questions to reduce any tension in respondents (Monette et al., 1994). McGrath et al. (2019) recommended this practice to help respondents feel comfortable in settings they find nondisruptive. Ten of the interviews were conducted in participants’ offices; two interviews were completed in the researcher’s office at the behest of the participants. Since respondents felt comfortable in their surroundings, they were more likely to participate in interviews fully and actively. “Because the interview is a social encounter, it is important that the interviewer establish a good rapport with the respondent” (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005, p. 189). Permitting respondents to choose a comfortable setting for interviews helped the researcher to develop a rapport beyond the one already established due to their general familiarity with each other. The researcher and participants also took the time to hold conversations before and after the interviews, thereby strengthening the rapport between them.
Twelve interviews were conducted until all questions were answered thoroughly and saturation occurred. Both the researcher and independent coder agreed that saturation had been reached. As Hennink et al. (2017) explained, saturation “refers to the point in data collection when no additional issues or insights emerge from data and all relevant conceptual categories have been identified, explored, and exhausted” (p. 592). Hence, any further data collection would be redundant. Therefore, “The process ends when saturation is achieved, i.e. when no relevant new information can be found” (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 2). To achieve saturation, the researcher analyzed data concurrently with the collection and management of data.

All interviews were audio recorded using primary and backup equipment. Recordings were transcribed verbatim after the completion of each interview. The first four interviews were typed by the researcher using a traditional keyboard, and the last eight interviews were transcribed via Google voice typing. Member checking was used as a strategy when copies of the transcribed interviews were given to the participants within four days of the interview. Members were asked to review transcripts, notes, and memos to suggest corrections, clarify thoughts, and/or elaborate on the information they offered so that they could convey information in a most accurate way. Consequently, only two participants suggested changes; however, the changes were related to mechanical and conventional errors and not relative to the content.

All information gathered from the interviews was anonymous and confidential, including the names of members and their base organizations. Additionally, the participants were informed of the results of the research when it was concluded. The data management procedures assured that the data gathered was protected. Hard copies with identifying information, along with the universal serial bus (USB) drive containing the interview recordings, were stored in a combination safe that only the researcher could open. Additionally, all hard copies with identifying information will be shredded after three years. The recordings of the interviews will also be deleted after three years.
Review of Existing Documents

Data was also collected by reviewing existing documents related to the Forum. The researcher obtained access to some documents while serving as a member of the Forum, and the coordinator of the Forum supplied more recent ones. Documents examined for the study included, but were not limited to, the following: meeting agendas, meeting minutes, monthly updates, newsletters, reports, notes, articles and news releases, responses and results containing data, flyers containing event information, event invitations and programs, an email between members, a charter declaration, bylaws, a goal worksheet, and a proposal presentation. This additional means of collecting and analyzing data gave the researcher an opportunity to triangulate data captured from interviews (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019).

Data Analysis Method

The researcher collected and analyzed data simultaneously (Gill, 2020). Sechelski and Onwuegbuzie (2019) proclaimed, “The analysis of data represents the most important and difficult step in the qualitative research process” (p. 795). As Busetto et al. (2020) posited, “Good qualitative research is iterative in nature, i.e. it goes back and forth between data collection and analysis, revising and improving the approach where necessary” (p. 7). Thus, the researcher reflected on both the process of interviewing and content relayed during each interview in a timely fashion. One advantage to early analysis of data is that emerging categories and codes start to unearth quickly (McGrath et al., 2019). “The researcher will take notes, modify the data collection procedures and write reflective memos throughout the data collection process” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 7). This process also facilitated the determination of when saturation had been reached.

Upon the completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the interview verbatim. Verbatim transcription, which produces an exact, word-for-word replication of the interview from an audio recording, is the most used form of transcription for qualitative interviews (McGrath et al., 2019). Although a rather burdensome and time-consuming practice, the researcher decided to transcribe the interviews himself. Interviews were transcribed promptly upon completion to facilitate the identification of analytical structures and to compare data from various participants (McGrath et al., 2019). As such, the
researcher analyzed data obtained from interviews while the experience of interviewing respondents was fresh in his mind. By transcribing each interview within four days, he gained an opportunity to familiarize himself with the data, increase his understanding, and thereby advance the analysis of data thereafter (Lester et al., 2020).

According to Lester et al. (2020), “As researchers review their data, it can be helpful to generate memos that describe initial reflections about the data, as well as any emergent interpretations” (pp. 99-100). The researcher wrote memos in the margins of interview guides to note the emergence of potential themes. For example, after conducting only a few interviews, he noticed that big ideas like “power” and “equity” began to surface. Similarly, after transcribing a few interviews verbatim, the researcher began to interpret the data by noting impressions and understandings based on the information participants provided about their experiences as Forum members. Along with indicating potential emergent codes, the notes and memos also revealed potential bias (Lester et al., 2020). For instance, the researcher recognized that, in some cases, he tended to perceive comparable data from only one perspective. After reviewing these notes, he made a concerted effort to consider the data from other perspectives to avoid interpreting information through a biased lens. Throughout his work, the researcher highlighted participants’ statements in the form of quotations, so he knew definitively which information was provided directly by members and which was derived from his interpretation of data. Considered to be directly relevant and of significant value to the study, members’ direct quotes provided insight into their experiences as collaborators (Lester et al., 2020; Urcia, 2021).

The researcher coded interviews in three rounds by hand in lieu of using qualitative coding software to develop a personal relationship with the data. “A code is simply a short, descriptive word or phrase that assigns meaning to the data related to the researcher’s analytic interests” (Lester et al., 2020, p. 100). Once coded, the data was then condensed and categorized to look for key ideas, patterns, emergent themes, and material realized from the review of literature (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Mohajan, 2018).
“The value of structuring data analysis in phases is that it creates a transparent process for both the qualitative researcher and (ultimately) the reader of a given research report” (Lester et al., 2020, p. 98). As expected, analyzing data (coding) to draw conclusions about the interactions and negotiations among Forum members while collaborating took a great deal of time (Hoffding et al., 2021). To analyze data regarding collaboration and the factors that are important to the success of the Forum, sections of the transcribed interviews were assigned descriptive words or phrases. Coding made the data more easily sortable and thus contributed to the researcher’s understanding of the data. Based upon the meaning of these terms, themes emerged (Busetto et al., 2020; Stonehouse, 2019). Essentially, the data was transformed into codes, and then the codes were converted into themes that, consequently, reduced the data to a manageable amount of information (Elliot, 2018).

Once the transcribed interviews were coded by the researcher, an independent coder also analyzed the information in one pass. After coding, the two met, face-to-face, for approximately four hours to compare the two sets of coded transcripts as a means of strengthening reliability. The two coded the transcripts similarly with the main differences stemming from their use of dissimilar terminology to describe the same aspects of the phenomenon.

According to Elliot (2018), “Coding is an almost universal process in qualitative research; it is a fundamental aspect of the analytical process and the ways in which researchers break down their data to make something new” (p. 2850). Hence, the coding process for this study actually began when the researcher reviewed current literature and identified commonalities among experts’ findings, which he acknowledged as themes. According to Lester et al. (2020), “Themes are generally aligned with the conceptual or analytic goals of the study and therefore are designed in response to the study’s primary research questions or focus” (p. 101). To perform thematic analysis properly, then, the researcher must figure out how the codes either relate to or differ from one another (Lester et al., 2020). This is how a complex problem is bound to a finite number of variables (Mohajan, 2018). Thus, thematic content analysis was used to analyze the collected data as and after transcripts were coded.
For this study, prespecified codes were formulated based on the review of literature prior to the collection of data. Some researchers refer to the use of prespecified codes as “indexing” (Elliot, 2018). More specifically, as applicable to this study, Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) 22 factors that contribute to the success of a collaboration were used for coding. These factors were developed through a systematic review of empirical studies of collaboration and grouped into six categories: (a) environment, (b) membership characteristics, (c) process and structure, (d) communication, (e) purpose, and (f) resources (See Table 9). Using the 22 factors as codes was efficient because each consists of only a few words or short phrases (Elliot, 2018). In addition, the researcher’s use of the factors as codes aligned with the study’s overarching research questions asked to examine the specific collaboration that took place among Forum members.

When coding, the researcher needs to understand that the number of occurrences does not necessarily equate to importance (Elliot, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Counts can be used to identify patterns and maintain integrity during analysis when coding (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019), yet relying upon counts as a sole means of analysis often leads a researcher to disregard significant data that may not repeat (Elliot, 2018). For instance, participants mentioned only twice that, in their opinion, students should have more of a stake in the Forum’s membership, but their statements served as markers for additional inquiry.

Throughout the process, the researcher remained open to any codes leading to themes or narratives not identified by Mattessich and Johnson (2019) as one of the factors contributing to a collaboration’s success. As Campbell et al. (2013) noted when referring to a priori and emergent codes, it is possible to identify and use new code themes that were not previously anticipated. Elliot (2018) reiterated this duality: “The most pragmatic researchers will typically use both in the course of a single research project” (p. 2855). Hence, throughout the coding process, the researcher engaged in building, refining, and improving coded data as he developed a greater understanding of the codes over time (Elliot, 2018). Table 9 illustrates the 22 factors that contribute to the success of a collaboration developed through
a systematic review of empirical studies of collaboration and grouped into six categories by Mattessich and Johnson (2018). The researcher used these categories and factors for coding.

Table 9

*The Twenty-Two Success Factors by Category*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>History of Collaboration in Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative Group Seen as a Legitimate Leader in Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favorable Political and Social Climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Appropriate Cross-Section of Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to Compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process and Structure</td>
<td>Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple Layers of Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of Clear Roles and Policy Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate Pace of Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation and Continuous Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established Informal Relationships and Communication Links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unique Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


To capture the phenomenon under study, the researcher also analyzed Forum documents and compared their contents against the information presented in transcripts. Mohajan (2018) reported, analyzing the content of documents “is used by sociologists to analyze social life by interpreting words
and images from documents, books, newspapers, films, arts, music, and other cultural products and media” (p. 16). The data contained within the documents was analyzed in a similar fashion to the transcribed interviews. Namely, memos and initial impressions of the text were authored; this practice invited a more thorough understanding of the contents of documents, which was necessary for coding data. As with data derived from interviews, the first round of content analysis of the documents produced an abundance of codes. After the initial coding, the process of condensing the data into categories and themes was used to make the abundance of data more manageable.

Cross-checking the data from interviews with the data from documents helped to verify the themes identified (Candela, 2019). Comparing and contrasting the documents with the interview transcriptions assisted in formulating a more trustworthy and valid interpretation of findings. The consistency of findings between the two sources of data bolster confidence in the researcher’s conclusions by increasing the overall understanding of the phenomenon studied, thereby improving the study’s reliability (Hayashi et al., 2019). The steps that the researcher followed in the process of data analysis can be found in Appendix F.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical implications of this study were considered since human subjects were involved. Though the Office for Research Protections determined that this study does not require formal review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) because it met the criteria for exempt research (Appendix G), the researcher took care to ensure that respondents’ privacy was respected and data were secured. Prior to conducting the research, he formulated a comprehensive plan to protect subjects. The plan included requesting informed consent from all respondents to exhibit that they willingly volunteered to participate in this study. This was accomplished through the obtainment of signed informed consent forms prior to interviews. “When asked to define informed consent, researchers identified three key components: information disclosure; understanding; and a decision made voluntarily” (Xu et al., 2020, p. 4). To further their understanding, participants were formally notified of the study’s purpose when they were invited to participate voluntarily (Request for participation was sent via email). DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019)
noted, “it is important to describe why you are conducting the research and how [respondents’] participation is meaningful” (p. 5). Hence, when the researcher explained the purpose of the study and advocated for members’ participation in writing, he noted: (a) his status as a graduate student, (b) the reason for the study, (c) who is eligible to partake in the study, (d) how the study will be conducted, (e) the approximate length of time for the interview, and (f) participants’ rights and responsibilities (Appendix E). This adheres to the recommendation of McGrath et al. (2019): Researchers should draft a summary of the research project and send the information to prospective participants prior to conducting interviews so that they are aware of the importance of the topic, as well as the expectations during the interviews.

Forum members who accepted the invitation to participate in the study were asked to confirm by signing the consent form (Appendix B) prior to the start of the interview. Additionally, participants were apprised that they could have refused to respond to any questions during the interview and even withdraw their participation at any time (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Participants were also informed that the researcher planned to audio record interviews so that he could give his full attention to interviewing in lieu of taking copious notes. All participants consented to being recorded.

To demonstrate respect, sensitivity, and tact towards participants throughout the process of interviewing (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019), the researcher carefully drafted innocuous questions. The questions were not embarrassing, threatening, or risky in any way. Furthermore, participants were also protected from any harm or wrongdoing throughout the study because the researcher respected confidentiality. He masked the names of individuals during and after the study to ensure privacy and anonymity, and never directly identified individual participants. Additionally, the disclosure of data did not place participants at risk for liability. Participation did not place participants at risk in regards to their financial status, employability, reputation, or membership in the Forum. No one was placed in a position of compromise as a result. Thus, there was minimal risk to organizations or individual participants.

Finally, the data gathered by the researcher was protected as well. Any hard copies were stored in a safe that only the researcher could open with a combination he did not share. All hard copies were
shredded after three years. Interview recordings, temporarily stored on a USB drive, were also locked in the safe and deleted after three years.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This research is limited. First, the study was conducted with members of a single interorganizational collaboration. Thus, findings that stemmed from the research are limited to providing a thick, rich description of the contextualized human experience of only Forum members’ interorganizational collaboration. Further, the data presented is limited to the information provided by 12 K-12 educators after saturation was reached. Since the phenomenon of collaboration as studied was constructed among members’ interactions and negotiations with each other, generalizing findings to a broader context is impossible. Rather than to generalize findings to a more extensive context, the researcher’s desire was for participants and their fellow Forum members to capitalize on the findings for success. By juxtaposing his findings with those of previous researchers who studied collaboration, Forum members might consider ways to ensure their interactions are productive. The limitations of the selection screening used in this study restrict the generalizability of the study’s conclusions; however, Forum members may gain momentum while collaborating if they acknowledge the researcher’s findings.

Another limitation stemmed from the use of interviews as the primary data collection tool. Because participants’ answers to questions were refined through their vantage points, they are subjective in nature. This means that the data originates from personal feelings rather than facts. One respondent’s feelings could have been vastly different than another’s. Additionally, respondents’ perspectives on the collaboration in which they participated with fellow Forum members could have been impacted by their involvement in past collaborative endeavors. Although any prior collaborative experiences are unrelated to respondents’ work with the Forum, their perceptions of these experiences—whether positive or negative—could have affected the way they responded to the researcher’s questions. For example, if one respondent experienced positive interactions in previous collaborations, that Forum member could have easily recalled those memories and approached the Forum’s work from a positive perspective. The opposite is also true: A respondent’s former negative experiences might have jaded his/her attitude
towards the Forum’s work. In either case, respondents’ perceptions about their collaboration with fellow Forum members could have been strongly affected by their past experiences as collaborators, thus shaping their perspectives while interviewing and, consequently, influencing the data they shared. As Alshenqeeti (2014) argued, “both interviewer and interviewee may have incomplete knowledge or even faulty memory” (p. 43) when recalling past experiences. People focus their attention on phenomena differently, and it will affect what they remember. This frequent occurrence in qualitative research is a limitation beyond the researcher’s control; nevertheless, he was cognizant of this constraint and did his best to keep respondents focused on the collaboration that transpired within the Forum, specifically.

Furthermore, the researcher’s presence may have inadvertently invited biased responses from participants. For instance, participants could have offered responses they believed to be more socially acceptable or agreeable because they know the researcher and may not have felt comfortable sharing thoughts they perceived as adversarial or controversial. The researcher attempted to mitigate this by interviewing respondents who did not work in the same district as he. Also, the researcher’s inherent bias must be considered. He brought to this research beliefs and underlying premises, derived from his background and personal experiences. For example, his background in both sociology and career and technical education shapes his interpretation of information. Although he journaled continually to document reflections relating to potential bias, he can interpret data only through a point-of-view he understands.

Lastly, the researcher’s inexperience as a researcher could have limited the study. If he failed to notice variations in wording from one interview to the next, for instance, this might have adversely affected the study’s reliability and validity. Also, there is always a risk of diminishing the complexity of collaboration if, due to his inexperience, he failed to code data as completely as possible. To safeguard against his inexperience, he enlisted the service of an experienced, independent coder to assess his coding through the utilization of interrater reliability and agreement.
Summary

This chapter presented the research methodology employed to conduct this qualitative, phenomenological study of Forum members’ perceptions of the factors they deemed most important for the success of their interorganizational collaboration. Participants were K-12 members of the Forum, an interorganizational collaboration whose members desired to solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) plaguing local school districts and the workforce and best prepare high school graduates to contribute to the development of the region.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the collaboration among members of this regional consortium. By interpreting and analyzing respondents’ reports of collaboration as they experience the phenomenon while interacting with other Forum members, the researcher can suggest ways to encourage and strengthen the attributes, characteristics, and traits that inspire successful interorganizational collaborative efforts, particularly among educators. If educators know which factors lend themselves to purposeful, worthwhile interorganizational collaboration that results in student achievement and economic development, then they might reflect upon their own behavior as applicable and alter their approaches to collaboration—ideally, to achieve greater success as collaborators. By comparing the factors that respondents believe to be relevant in contributing to the success of their interorganizational collaboration with the ones experts deem most important as a result of their research (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018), the researcher may better understand the way educators might partake in successful interorganizational collaboration to solve the “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) they face.

Three research questions were formulated for this qualitative, phenomenological study to help address the problem:

RQ 1: Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?

RQ 2: How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?

RQ 3: Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have
respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?

The research questions contain elements of the phenomenon of collaboration; thus, the questions correspond with a qualitative study design (Kalu, 2019). The specific context of Forum members’ work influenced their experiences of the phenomenon and informed their interpretation of their shared experiences. The questions asked and the methods used to answer the questions align (Busetto et al., 2020) as expected when considering the design of a qualitative study. What follows in Chapter 4 is a report of the researcher’s findings and his analysis of the data gleaned from semi-structured interviews with 12 respondents as well as a thorough review of documentation relating to the Forum’s work.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the collaboration among members of the Forum, a consortium comprised of leaders from school districts, businesses, post-secondary, and non-profit organizations who collaborate to improve education, workforce development, and the economic outlook of the specific region they serve. By interpreting and analyzing respondents’ reports of collaboration as they experience the phenomenon while interacting with other Forum members, the researcher learned which attributes, characteristics, and traits lend to most fruitful collaboration and, therefore, the Forum’s progress.

Three research questions were formulated to guide this qualitative, phenomenological study:

RQ 1: Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?

RQ 2: How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?

RQ 3: Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?

Below is a summary of the methodology employed coupled with a presentation and analysis of findings as compared with experts’ findings detailed throughout Chapter 2.

Review of Research Design, Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Participants

This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to identify participants’ perceptions of the factors they believed to be most important for the success of their interorganizational collaboration; their levels of proficiency in regards to acknowledging, remaining aware of, or using each factor while
collaborating; and the amount of success their collaboration experienced. Using a PA enabled the researcher to investigate the phenomenon of collaboration as experienced by the collaborators.

**Data Collection**

The researcher collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews with 12 Forum members and by reviewing documents related to the Forum’s work. The Forum’s coordinator served as a gatekeeper who provided the names and contact information of current Forum members, who he believed after learning of the study’s purpose, could act as respondents. Upon contacting 15 Forum members as potential respondents, the researcher interviewed 12 who consented to serve as participants in the study.

Participants were interviewed at a time and location convenient to them. Prior to interviewing, the researcher explained the study’s purpose and methodology thoroughly, and he answered any questions that arose. Once they felt comfortable with the protocol, the researcher asked respondents to consent to participate in writing and agree to be audio recorded. The researcher drafted an interview guide to ensure participants spoke to specific questions; however, he framed them in a manner that invited open-ended responses without leading the conversation to a desired end. He also used prompts and follow-up questions to elicit additional information if participants either did not respond to a question in full or shared information worth further exploration. Interviews averaged approximately 28 minutes in length.

Using Google’s voice typing feature (in eight of 12 instances), the researcher transcribed all interviews to review the data exhaustively and begin the process of analysis as soon as possible. Within four days of the interview, he emailed each participant a copy of the transcript with notes and memos and asked him/her to review the document for clarity. Ten participants approved of the piece as written, and two participants made minor grammatical edits unrelated to the interview’s content.

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher reviewed approximately 117 documents relating to the Forum’s organization or work. He reviewed documents to learn information about how collaboration takes place among members of this interorganizational collaboration and whether participant’s responses to interview questions aligned with the information contained within documents.
Data Analysis

As he transcribed interviews, the researcher analyzed data while simultaneously collecting additional data by continuing to interview more participants. He coded data by hand to identify key ideas and patterns, as well as outliers and anomalies. As he analyzed, themes consistent with experts’ findings (presented in Chapter 2) emerged. In short, he converted data from interviews into codes, and then he transformed codes into themes. An experienced second coder, Farhan Sadique, verified that the themes and frequency of their identified occurrences were accurate to provide inter-rated reliability.

The researcher analyzed documents similarly. He read all documentation thoroughly and coded the information to note patterns consistent with those inherent in data obtained from interviews. He also recognized inconsistencies, which led him to consider implications for further study.

Participants

All participants in this study are current members of the Forum and K-12 educators, two criteria in the selection screening process. A purposive, convenient selection screening technique was utilized to identify respondents per the coordinator’s suggestion. Purposive, convenient selection screening proved a satisfactory technique for the study since members of the Forum are knowledgeable about collaboration and can adequately, purposefully, and readily speak to their perceptions of their experiences as related to the phenomenon under study. The researcher used a list of characteristics, his judgement, and prior knowledge to select respondents who could provide valuable information for the study. Candidate screening and selection involved mindfulness of relevant characteristics: (a) participants had to be active members of the Forum, a collaborative body that meets the researcher’s operational definition of collaboration as a body, (b) participants’ current work in the Forum meets the researcher’s operational definition of collaboration as a process, (c) participants must be knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied, (d) participants must be K-12 educators, and (e) participants are viewed as leaders. All participants met all the criteria, demonstrating their qualifications to be representative of the study. Ultimately, the participants consisted of eight superintendents, one director, one assistant superintendent, and two principals. Nine participants were males, and three were females.
Findings From Interviews

Participants’ Explanations of Collaboration

The researcher believed that it was essential to elicit participants’ understandings and perceptions of what they believed it meant to collaborate based upon their personal experiences. Thus, the researcher’s initial interview question asked participants what it means to collaborate based upon their past knowledge and experiences. Table 10 features participants’ responses. Almost all participants either directly stated or at least implied that collaboration involves more than one individual. This aligns with how prominent researchers defined collaboration. Having more than one person involved is an integral element of collaboration. The other critical piece of collaboration reported by researchers was that the people involved in a collaboration work together to accomplish a common goal. This was also mentioned by several participants. At its foundational level, collaboration can be expressed as more than one person attempting to achieve a common goal. Participants appeared to grasp this based on their responses. There were many commonalities between participants’ explanations and researchers’ definitions of collaboration. For example, Participant 06 replied, “My definition of collaboration would be a group of people working together to achieve an outcome or stated goal.” This is comparable to Huxham’s (1996) definition of collaboration: “When individuals work together towards some common aim” (p.1). Thus, participants’ explanations of what it means to collaborate aligned with prominent researchers’ definitions and descriptions of collaboration.

Table 10

Participants’ Explanations of What it Means to Collaborate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Explanation of Collaboration Based on Response to IQ 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 01</td>
<td>Really collaboration is when a group of people come together with a common mission, vision, values, and goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 02</td>
<td>Collaboration...to collaborate is to share ideas, share resources, and in the world of education what it ultimately means is...or what it means to me is making effort to gather expertise and opportunity on behalf of kids, and that’s our priority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Explanation of Collaboration Based on Response to IQ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 03</td>
<td>It’s the opportunity to sit down with other people, regardless of what the subject is. I know this is a workforce development piece, but to sit down and share ideas, work closely with one another, to do research together, to try to get to whatever goal it is, to try to find a common goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 04</td>
<td>Collaboration is something that is ongoing. It’s mutual; it’s something where both parties or multiple parties are trying to find win-win scenarios.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 05</td>
<td>The whole notion of collaboration is to talk about what each or all of the parties have in common and can bring to the table to solve a certain issue, or concern, or make progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 06</td>
<td>My definition of collaboration would be a group of people working together to achieve an outcome or stated goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 07</td>
<td>I think that collaboration is when people come together with a goal in mind and use their collective energies to bring about that goal or change they were seeking from the get-go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 08</td>
<td>Working together for the benefit of a group of people, an organization, students, administrators. So, it’s the ability to work together, to listen, and to hear one another, and then to problem-solve based on what those collaborations are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 09</td>
<td>So, when I think of collaboration in an educational setting, I think of bringing strengths to a particular topic of interest, sharing those strengths, and also trying to build off of the strengths of others in the work environment. I also think it’s the sharing of ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>To me, collaboration is a three-pronged approach: first, listen; second, learn; and then third would be lead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>Collaboration, to me, means having a common goal and working with others who may bring different skills, talents, and abilities to the table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12</td>
<td>For me, collaboration is about coming to the table being ready to think through the benefits from every angle to make sure that... I don’t want to say a win-win situation for all because sometimes that is not achieved, but I feel like we need to approach the table with the idea of providing equity across the system for whatever we offer and whatever collaboration we’re trying to develop or collective partnerships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question One**

The first question was drafted to investigate which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. Research
Question 1 inspired the drafting of Interview Questions 6, 7, 8, and 11. This section details the findings relative to the corresponding interview questions.

**Interview Question #6**

Interview Question 6 asked participants how Forum members’ behaviors impacted the Forum’s progress. Participants were also asked to provide examples of such behaviors to substantiate their responses to the question. Four notable factors emerged across their responses: *sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; skilled leadership; engaged stakeholders; and members share a stake in both process and outcome*. The first three of the four factors fell under the category of *resources* as noted in the literature (Mattessich & Johnson, 2019).

Regarding *sufficient funds, staff, materials, time*, Participant 01 replied:

One of our challenges at times were when you get people who were already busy in local schools, busy at work…you look at the HR people, they are busy people in companies. And for them to take two hours, once a month, and go to a meeting, that’s travel to and from as well, and then tell them when they leave that meeting, they’re going to have more to do back at work…sometimes that creates a natural level of resistance from people because they’re feeling overwhelmed.

Participant 02 reported:

So, it just kind of trickled down where they were busy and there was less participation on the part of the higher ups within some of the school districts, and some of the employers, and post-secondary partners as time wore on.

Participant 04 stated, “Something could’ve happened at a home district that put them in a different position or leadership changed in that district that may have limited the involvement and that could pull people away.” Participant 12 made several comments regarding *sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time*. For instance, Participant 12 recalled, “To start because everybody has their 40 hour a week job. So, everybody has their own job.” Participant 12 also said, “They don’t have the stamina or the resources to move the organization forward.”

These participants acknowledged the importance of resources like time, staff, and money. While collaborators might have intended to complete the work with fidelity, an absence of time and resources reportedly precluded some from being able to contribute to the Forum’s work as intended. Their acknowledgement of the importance of safeguarding sufficient funding, staff, time, and materials for
interorganizational collaboration points to a need for organizers to secure such resources in advance of establishing a collaborative body. As Participant 12 stated:

We need somebody to lead this because we all have jobs…That's when we shifted how we operated by hiring someone to then carry that load. Because for the first few years, first couple of years, we didn't have anybody who was carrying the load.

Essentially, if leaders plan for the inevitable challenges stemming from a general lack of resources—or, ideally, obtain necessary resources in advance—the chances of a collaboration’s success may increase.

Participants spoke of “leadership” as another attention-worthy aspect of collaboration.

Referencing skilled leadership, specifically, Participant 01 commented, “But, through persistence…through people of leadership, as well as other people who believed in the mission, vision, values, and goals of what we were trying to do, were able to overcome [a challenge].” Participant 03 replied, “I think there are some that lead you to whatever they want to get to and there are others that truly want you to help them get there.” Participant 11 stated, “I think the behaviors of those who were willing to take a lead, regardless of their title,” were instrumental in helping the collaboration achieve success. Finally, Participant 12 described a skilled leader as “someone who has great vision and great drive.”

Verifying “skilled leadership” as an essential aspect of successful collaboration, respondents noted that a leader of an interorganizational collaboration—irrespective of his/her title—needs to maintain a strong vision and a willingness to drive the work to completion. According to Participant 08:

The characteristics that your leader takes on determines the direction of the program and the results that the program produces. And when I think about the people that have been the leaders over time, the stronger, more passionate personalities have produced the more concrete results of the program.

Similar to Participant 08’s sentiments, Forum members conveyed to the researcher their appreciation of their fellow members’ inclination to advance the group’s agenda through skilled leadership.

With leadership comes engagement, for members of an interorganizational collaboration are more inclined to engage fully if led to fulfill a shared mission (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). Expectedly, the opposite also holds true. Regarding the factor of engaged stakeholders, Participant 02 shared:
I also witnessed circumstance whereas the Forum went on, some of the school districts, their interest level, their, what they saw as the outcomes of the Forum… it didn’t warrant much effort on their part, so as the Forum went from year two to year three to year four, you would see less superintendent participation and even less director and higher level post-secondary partners, things like that. You would see less participation on their part and more participation from their subordinates.

Participant 03 commented:

[Writing thoughts down and sharing] got everybody involved right from the get-go…it’s involvement, but it’s pseudo involvement…you’re not truly involved, you already have that sense that, ‘I know where this is going.’ I could sense that this already has a given set direction of where it’s going to end up.

Contributing to the findings, Participant 04 reported:

A lot of the behaviors at those meetings of being emotionally engaged with the mission and vision of the Forum, was often times attached to what was happening at their home district, whether it was leadership turnover, position changes that created maybe more engagement or less engagement from the individual.

According to participants, their membership alone is not enough to sustain their focus on accomplishing the Forum’s overarching goal to develop the region’s workforce. When members attend to their individual agendas—perhaps if a clear, collective vision is not established or if the vision changes with leadership—the work is less fruitful overall. Likewise, if members are not fully engaged, the plan fails. Participant 11 surmised, “Collaboration is not successful if everyone in the group is kind of inactive.”

Four participants spoke to members’ engagement as resulting from sharing a stake in both process and outcome. Participant 01 stated, “But, through persistence…through people of leadership, as well as other people who believed in the mission, vision, values, and goals of what we were trying to do, were able to overcome [obstacles].” Participant 03 recalled, “Everybody would actually write something down and actually share them with [the leader].” Participant 07 declared, “I think that there have been times that discussions have been hindered because one member of the group may want a little more credit than the other members of the group.” Participant 10 said, “We have not had multiple occasions where someone micromanages the conversation and no one has the chance to talk. It’s truly a vested interest.”
Although participants reported different experiences, the information they presented links to Rubin’s (2009) assertion that a skilled leader invites engagement if he/she shares the collaboration’s success with all involved. In sum, the researcher learned that resources such as sufficient funds, staff, materials, time and skilled leadership are important to Forum members and that the respondents value members who recognize their role as collaborators in lieu of individuals with personal agendas.

**Interview Question #7**

Interview Question 7 asked participants how members’ personal characteristics impacted the Forum’s progress. Participants were prompted to offer specific examples. Two factors arose to the forefront: *multiple layers of participation* and *skilled leadership*.

Five of 12 participants referenced *multiple layers of participation* in their responses to Question 7. Participant 01 responded:

> So, I think that you have a wide array of people involved. And so, if you look at a school counselor who’s looking at the entire student, probably 360-degree perspective: social, emotional, cognitive development, readiness skills, mental health; as well as people from a school systems standpoint looking at how can we make this happen? How can we reallocate our resources within our existing school systems to support the work?...and so you have a lot of systems thinkers…to those people who view the world through a political scope and how can they go out and gain support in communities for the work...to the people in business who said, “listen, you can teach Algebra all you want, but it’s not really what kids need when they walk in the door for us.”

Participant 02 recalled, “You know, there were multiple committees…there was an executive committee that provided oversight.” Participant 04 stated, “It was almost once a year that the counselors were at the table, unless the district made it a point to bring their counselor to the table.”

The aforementioned comments indicate that *multiple layers of participation* is a factor that significantly impacts an interorganizational collaboration’s work. Although participation from various stakeholder groups is necessary for the achievement of goals, participation without a sense of unity among stakeholders might prove disadvantageous. With *multiple layers of participation* comes multiple perspectives, and reconciling numerous perspectives presents as a challenge when members assess “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) differently per their respective roles and agendas (Eden & Huxham, 2001). Participant 01 acknowledged that “hav[ing] a lot of system thinkers” leads to varying
opinions about the resources needed for workforce development and the best ways to allocate them.

Participant 02 referenced another issue impacting a collaboration’s success: Sometimes, the layers of participation are unequal. Winer and Ray (1994) argued, “Admittedly, the contributions of a variety of groups may be uneven—power is never equal” (p. 50). Participants’ comments illustrate this point.

Conversely, layering participation in interorganizational collaboration can be advantageous if those involved respect each other’s expertise and points-of-view. Participant 10 discussed his experience regarding collaborating with individuals who bring differing perspectives to the work:

There were three points of contact. One of whom was from a college-level, and the other two were from two different districts. One was a superintendent and the other, I believe, was a director of something. But all three of them really worked well together.

Participant 11 spoke of how others’ perspectives bring value:

So, I’m attending as a superintendent, and I have others attending as school counselors. And maybe they cannot leverage the same resources that I can, but we’re all at the same table having a conversation about what the needs are and then able to identify what can and cannot be done.

As Winer and Ray (1994) posited, multiple layers of participation can be vital to a collaboration’s success. The findings from this study indicate that members from various layers each bring different types of resources to the collaborative effort, and that should be openly acknowledged and valued.

Another factor to which participants alluded by answering Question 7 is skilled leadership, which they collectively regard as imperative for an interorganizational collaboration’s success. To participants, leadership alone is not enough, for they spoke of skilled leaders as those able to fuse individual’s ideas in a manner reflective of the group’s overarching vision. For example, Participant 07 described skilled leadership by referencing the opposite, which he experienced as a Forum member: “You need to have a strong director in place,” and “I think the fact that we have so many voices in the room, and maybe a director that isn’t able to bring those voices together, hinders the progress of the Forum.” Commenting on an experience with a leader he regarded as unskilled, Participant 06 stated, “I think some of the bravado from some of the leadership was off-putting to me.” These participants found sharing their experiences with leaders they deemed unskilled simpler than describing their interactions with skilled
leaders. Huxham and Vangen (2000b) argued that skilled leadership is often absent from collaboration. These participants’ responses to Question 7 align with Huxham and Vangen’s (2000b) findings.

Nonetheless, some participants spoke specifically about the contributions skilled leaders make to interorganizational collaboration, and how leaders, in general, impact a group’s progress. Participant 03 declared:

Realizing that we didn’t have all of the answers ourselves, we needed to get somebody in to assist; we needed to hire somebody maybe from the outside, get some fresh looks, get somebody to carry out the actions of the committee, of the Forum.

Participant 12 also recognized how leaders with vision help a collaboration achieve the desired results:

That team of people, then, I think, took on the life and the vision that the chairman had and started to move it forward. And one of their number one characteristics is not to give up... perseverance, determination, the belief that this needs to occur, the desire to build our community, to impact the county.

These participants’ more general statements point to the universal understanding among sociologists that effective leaders possess the ability to communicate effectively, motivate individuals, listen to feedback, and maintain a degree of flexibility (Emmens, 2016; Littlefield et al., 2013; Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). For those who engage in the interorganizational study, working alongside a capable leader helps them to examine situations from multiple perspectives, maintain a sense of purpose, and consequently, realize their goals—all hallmarks of fruitful collaboration (Crosby & Bryson, 2010).

**Interview Question #8**

Participants were asked how the Forum’s structure impacted the Forum’s progress and urged to give examples. Two factors surfaced throughout their responses to Question 8: sufficient funds, staff, materials, time, and appropriate pace of development.

Participant 01 acknowledged the importance of carving out time to collaborate:

It was a little bit chaotic trying to get 10 people focused…and busy people, 10 busy people…to keep the level of focus at the level it needed to be done to really get into the productivity phase of the Forum.
Participant 01 added, “I think that the structure now, where we have an executive director, an assistant executive director who’s providing support, and they’re working at this full time, I think that’s helped tremendously.”

To Participant 01, finding time to engage in the work is critical for success as time to work invites members’ more intense focus, which leads to increased productivity. Participant 01 regards “time” as an element of structure—something that needs to be built or, in this case, set aside deliberately. This participant’s responses link to Anderson’s (2019) findings. According to Anderson (2019), “What’s key is structuring activities to understand what you’re trying to solve for, giving the team time to explore, being disciplined about choosing what to pursue, and trying it out” (p. 63). As aforementioned, the researcher discovered that Forum members perceive time as an aspect of structure. Participant 04 identified a ramification of not prescribing an amount of time necessary for productive collaboration:

We didn't have time to get back together as a whole committee to massage [our work]…I don't know if it was a time thing, but it just never felt like that everyone on that committee was fully engaged in the work of that committee.

Participant 08 recalled, “I haven't had time to focus” and spoke of the challenge leaders face when the amount of work they need to complete is far greater than the amount of time they have at their disposal:

I would love to say as a leader that I have the time and effort to do that, but in a place like my district where you don't have extra help, you don't have extra time doing that and actually following through with that… not because you don't want to, but because there's no time to do it… it becomes a little more challenging.

Anderson (2019) reported the importance of structuring interorganizational collaboration by ensuring that collaborators spend time immersed in the work. Regarding the Forum’s structure, participants recognized how changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic proved positive regarding their ability to find time to collaborate. Participant 09 reported:

I think one thing that we learned from COVID is that we don't necessarily need to do [meetings] face-to-face. I know sometimes now the travel and time out of the office impacts [the amount of time we spend on Forum-related work].

Regarding virtual meetings, Participant 05 commented, “that structure…it’s an effective use of time.” No matter the way members meet—either virtually or in person—they understand the importance of finding
time to collaborate and prefer to identify specific time to complete the work as an element of their group’s structure. As Babiak and Thibault (2009) discovered, if collaborators fail to find time for all members to interact, their work is largely unproductive.

When responding to Question 8, participants also commented on the pace of development. *Pace of development* refers to the breaking of long-term goals into smaller, more manageable goals that members can accomplish to demonstrate productivity and to the structuring of collaboration so that all members who need to be present are fully engaged (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Participant 03 recalled, “I sort of lost my in-house team for a while because they didn’t see what value they had because of the [slower than desired] pace.” For some members, the slow pace of the work deterred them from contributing actively. Further, when members choose not to commit fully to the work, they ultimately disturb the pace of development. Participant 04 explained how his team responded despite some team members’ inactivity: “They were *made to get an event done versus maybe having everybody involved completely*. A lot of time it was on *deadlines*. We have to have something to show.”

Participants’ responses to Question 8 correspond to the literature, which notes that time to collaborate at a pace group members prefer given their work helps interorganizational collaboration achieve success (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Embedding these elements of structure, along with securing sufficient resources and providing direction from skilled leaders, strengthens a collaboration’s chances for productivity.

**Interview Question #11**

Interview Question 11 asked participants to identify the key factors, traits, attributes, or characteristics expert collaborators possess. Their responses highlighted two factors that Mattessich and Johnson (2018) also identified as crucial: *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* and *open and frequent communication*.

Eight of 12 participants commented that adept collaborators show *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* when interacting with colleagues. Participant 01 described how *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* are shown in his experience: “[Expert collaborators are] *able to hear everyone’s perspective.*
And then they know when to interject…to synthesize everyone’s perspective and get to a common ground…when to interject that in a way that validates everyone’s thoughts but provides a path forward.”

To Participant 01, listening to and validating group members’ thoughts demonstrates that a fellow collaborator is respectful of others’ ideas. In Porterfield and Carnes’ (2014) study, they confirmed that group members who listen actively to others’ input are perceived as respectful, trustworthy individuals. In similar fashion, Austin et al. (2000) documented that group members tend to trust individuals they respect. If “developing a trust requires us to listen for understanding and be willing to…see things through a new lens” (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p. 41), then Participant 01 recognized this aspect of collaboration as evidenced by his reply to Question 11.

Similarly, Participant 03 perceives respect, understanding, and trust as linked. He approached the subject by describing the value he places on relationship building:

[Skilled collaborators] can instantaneously build a relationship with the group they’re with and open up doors that really become a powerful area for collaboration. If you can’t open that door and you have all of the other skills but you’re not making a connection with people and you can’t get people to connect with you, I think regardless of where you go, you might feel like you’ve had a really collaborative and open and productive environment, but unless you can connect with people, I don’t think you truly ever have that.

For Participant 03, trust and respect stems from connection. Emmens (2016) reported that trust is established through the building of relationships. Whereas researchers argue that relationships and trust are built over time (Anderson, 2019; Austin et al., 2000; Russell & Flynn 2000a), Participant 03 recalled working with collaborators who build relationships “instantaneously.” Although this participant’s experience challenges researchers’ assertions about slowly building solid relationships, his point aligns with researchers’ findings that relationship-building, in general, is a hallmark of productive collaboration.

Participant 08 spoke repeatedly of the importance of establishing a sense of mutual respect and trust by maintaining strong relationships with group members:

The ability to develop good relationships. That’s probably the most important [aspect of a successful collaboration]. Your ability to develop good relationships…Because people come behind a good cause because you’ve developed the relationship, and they want to be there, and they want to do what’s right. Those relationships are what takes things to the next level…People find value in each other, and an expert collaborator knows how to capitalize on that.
Participant 09 corroborated Participant 08’s assertions:

When working in a group setting, such as that, there's a lot of compromise that needs to happen, and you need to be able to understand other people's vantage points. And as I always say to our students, ‘Can we just stop for a second and put ourselves in someone else's shoes for like two minutes so we can understand where they're coming from?’

Intertwined among participants’ responses to Question 11 are references to mutual respect, understanding, and trust, which, to them, is a critical aspect of collaboration that comes to fruition through the building and nurturing of relationships with groupmates. The likelihood of a collaborator fostering relationships with colleagues is directly proportional to his/her ability to “relate to other people in a comfortable manner” (Participant 11, June 30, 2022) and to show a “genuine interest in what you or anyone within the group or organization has to say” (Participant 10, personal communication, June 28, 2022). These findings mirror researchers’ findings that trust stands on foundations of personal connections (Anderson, 2019; Emmens, 2016; Mattessich & Johnson, 2018).

As mutual respect, understanding, and trust are essential for a collaboration’s success, so is open and frequent communication. Being another key factor, open and frequent communication influences nearly all other aspects of communication (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Consequently, participants spoke of open, honest communication when they acknowledged the importance of showing mutual respect and understanding to develop a sense of trust among colleagues. When asked what drives successful collaboration, Participant 04 responded, “Communication and attitude…communication because, like I said, the individual that I regard as a great member just never stops communicating.” As part of the response, Participant 02 described superior collaborative communication:

Being able to, not just being able to, but really wanting to, having the desire to listen to other people’s ideas and process their ideas relative to their ideas and find common ground for the purpose of moving that initiative forward.

Participant 03 noted, “Before you enter down the road of true open, productive collaboration, you’ve got to connect with somebody.” Participant 06 expanded his description of effective communication:

Those attributes allow them to be present in the moment. And even if they say something that you may not like or disagree with, you have confidence that they have assessed what's been said in the room. You know that they have given it weight before responding.
Participant 10 recalled, “They genuinely had an interest in what you or anyone within the group or organization had to say.” Lastly, Participant 11 spoke of “an individual who has people skills…who is able to relate to other people in a comfortable manner.”

Several participants’ answers included components relating to open and frequent communication. For instance, Participant 01 declared, “I think expert collaborators know when to listen.” Participant 02 created a clear connection between speaking and listening:

They’re excellent communicators and they’re excellent listeners. And I know communication includes listening, but I’ll say it that way because, one they’re able to provide insight, provide expertise and verbalize it or document it, however it is that the communication is occurring.

Participant 05 argued that to communicate effectively, one needs to “think before you speak” and listen intently: “You were given two ears and one mouth for a reason. You should listen twice as much as you speak. When you look all around the room, and those individuals seek to understand first, before they engage is good.” Explaining his perspective, Participant 09 concurred, “I think listening and being able to share ideas in a real way with other people is important.”

These rich descriptions align with researchers’ accounts of how open, honest communication manifests through collaboration. According to Porterfield and Carnes (2014), “The ultimate test of any communication is the strength of the relationships it builds” (p. 83). Participants recognize these points as well.

**Themes From Research Question One**

This section presents the overarching themes after analyzing the data from the interview questions corresponding to Research Question 1: Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success? Using the interview data, the researcher identified eight themes relating to the first research question. Table 11 illustrates the identified themes as they pertain to each interview question corresponding to Research Question 1.
Table 11

Themes From Research Question One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?</td>
<td>IQ 6: How have Forum members’ behaviors impacted the progress? Provide examples.</td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, and Time Skilled Leadership</td>
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<td>IQ 7: How have Forum members’ characteristics impacted the progress? Offer specific examples.</td>
<td>Multiple Layers of Participation Skilled Leadership</td>
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<td>IQ 8: How has the Forum’s structure impacted the progress? Give examples.</td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, and Time Appropriate Pace of Development</td>
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<td>IQ 11: Of all the factors, traits, attributes, characteristics, etc. that make someone an expert collaborator, which do you regard as the most important? Why?</td>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust Open and Frequent Communication</td>
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Open and Frequent Communication

Participants described open and frequent communication as both a factor that they perceived as relevant for the Forum’s success and as an important factor that makes someone an expert collaborator. Members who had the ability to actively listen to others, then process what was said before speaking,
were viewed as assets to collaborative efforts. These members had the uncanny ability to share ideas with others by providing appreciated insight and expertise in both verbal and written form.

**Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust**

Just as participants described *open and frequent communication* as both a factor that they perceived as relevant for the Forum’s success and as an important factor that makes someone an expert collaborator, they also described *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* the same way. Listening to others was viewed as a means of validating members’ thoughts and perspectives. Showing respect to other members helped build trust. Trust among members led to personal connections and stronger relationships, which, in turn, was perceived as important for the overall success of the Forum.

**Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time**

Participants of the study reported *sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* as a factor relevant for the Forum’s success. Additionally, participants viewed *sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* as both a behavior of members as well as part of the structure of the Forum that has greatly impacted the interorganizational collaboration’s progress. Several participants expressed how difficult it was for them to consistently dedicate their time and effort to the voluntary interorganizational collaboration. It was not from a lack of want, but more so due to the time constraints placed upon them due to their work at their base organizations. The challenges and demands stemming from the vast amount of time and effort consistently necessary for a collaboration to succeed was addressed in a few ways. First, members hired a coordinator who was able to carry some of the load and support members’ efforts. Second, the members structured their time so that it was maximized. It was important to make full use of the time they spent together, which was allocated to make the Forum successful.

**Engaged Stakeholders**

Participants identified *engaged stakeholders* as a factor that is specific to members’ behaviors that impact the progress of the Forum. It was, therefore, also cited as another factor relevant for the Forum’s success. Participants acknowledged that if members worked towards a truly *shared vision* and mission, the levels of engagement, and therefore the amount of success, would be high. The participants
perceived the establishment of collective goals as paramount to having engaged stakeholders, as opposed to an individual establishing a preconceived direction and trying to lead others to it.

**Skilled Leadership**

Skilled leadership was proclaimed to be a relevant factor for the success of the Forum. Participants cited skilled leadership as a behavior and characteristic of members that has impacted the Forum’s overall progress. Participants perceived skilled leaders among Forum members as not only having a vision for the group’s work, but also demonstrating passion, drive, and persistence toward the vision. This motivated others and fostered teamwork to achieve, thereby inviting a greater level of engagement by Forum members. Members rally around a skilled leader, which leads to success.

**Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome**

Members sharing a stake in both the process and outcome of the Forum was noted as an important behavior impacting the collaboration’s progress and as a factor for the overarching success of the Forum. The last two themes, engaged stakeholders and skilled leadership, are strongly tied to members sharing a stake in the process and outcome of the interorganizational collaboration. Skilled leaders have an ability to invite engagement among members. This enables members to have a truly vested interest in the Forum by having a stake in not only outcomes, but also the process of the collaborative effort.

**Multiple Layers of Participation**

Participants expressed multiple layers of participation as being a characteristic of members that both impacts the Forum’s progress and is also relevant for the success of the Forum. Participants cited the multiple levels of participation that took place in the subcommittees formed within the Forum. There were leaders from various organizations in each subcommittee. Additionally, participants viewed the wide array of members from various levels of base organizations as valuable as well. Members with varying titles and positions from single organizations provided different knowledge bases, viewpoints, and skillsets. Thus, there was a mix of systemic thinkers viewing things from a high level and members in the
trenches who were able to flush out details. This mix was perceived to be advantageous to the Forum’s success.

**Appropriate Pace of Development**

*Appropriate pace of development* was viewed by participants as a part of the Forum’s structure that impacts progress. Participants also communicated that *appropriate pace of development* was relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. Members viewed short-term goals, in addition to long-term ones, as important. Short-term goals were viewed as more manageable, so they helped keep members engaged. Also, short-term goals demonstrated tangible progress, productivity, and results of members’ efforts. This was perceived as being important for the success of the Forum.

**Answers to Research Question One**

The themes relating to the first research question also elucidate the answers to the first research question. In this case, the themes that emerged from data collection are the attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) that respondents perceive as most relevant for the success of their interorganizational collaboration.

**RQ 1:** Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?

**Answers to RQ 1:** *open and frequent communication; mutual respect, understanding, and trust; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; engaged stakeholders; skilled leadership; members share a stake in both process and outcome; multiple layers of participation; and appropriate pace of development*

Table 12 also presents Research Question 1 along with the answers to the question.
Table 12

Answers to Research Question One

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question One</th>
<th>Answers to Research Question One</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?</td>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
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<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
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<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
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<td>Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome</td>
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<td>Multiple Layers of Participation</td>
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<td>Appropriate Pace of Development</td>
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Research Question Two

Research Question 2 explored how respondents perceived Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified as being most relevant for the Forum’s success. This research question was aligned with interview questions 5, 9, 10, 12, and 13.

Interview Question #5

Interview Question 5 asked participants why the interorganizational collaboration in which they engaged was successful or unsuccessful. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect upon their interactions with colleagues and determine how those interactions impacted the Forum’s work. Among the many articulations was a common response, offered by four of 12 participants: Working with an appropriate cross-section of members invites success because, when membership spans sectoral boundaries, no one member or organization involved in interorganizational collaboration becomes too commanding or self-serving to seize control of the agenda.

Reflecting upon the individuals who comprised the Forum, Participant 01 explained, “You had some pretty powerful people in that room that are used to calling the shots…whether that’s business, government, health care, higher education, K-12.” According to Huxham and Vangen (2000b), when leaders who typically make decisions for their organizations join forces with influential leaders from corresponding organizations, they may struggle to relinquish control. However, when leaders across sectors come together to solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973), they can accomplish their
goals (Archer & Cameron, 2013). Participant 05 explained why organizing an *appropriate cross-section of members* can lead to success: “You’re looking at a *variety of individuals with multiple perspectives* to come in. *Everybody has a unique set of experiences that they draw from.*”

Each member’s unique experiences shape his/her perspectives. When members grapple with complex issues while considering a cross-section of perspectives, they have a greater chance of solving the all-encompassing type of problems that require interorganizational solutions (Livermore, 2016). To Participant 10, a collaborative “team” includes “*everyone from multiple school districts, universities, colleges, businesses, [and] organizations.*” Regarding the Forum, nearly all stakeholder groups were reportedly represented via an *appropriate cross-section of members.* Ironically, the only group without representation was the one at the heart of the Forum’s work: the students. When Participant 06 revealed “*I thought that there should have been maybe more student representation* in the room,” he acknowledged the importance of securing representation from all stakeholder groups. While organizing a collaboration with an *appropriate cross-section of members* prompts success (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018), coordinating a collaboration with a cross-section of *all* members provides an opportunity for equal representation (Bryson et al., 2006, 2015).

**Interview Question #9**

Interview Question 9 prompted respondents to describe a Forum member whom they regard as an expert collaborator. Responses varied; nonetheless, embedded in many responses were references to *mutual respect, understanding, and trust; open and frequent communication;* and *skilled leadership.* For example, Participant 02 recounted the respectful actions of an expert collaborator:

*And wanting to be respectful of everybody’s expertise, all participants’ expertise, and irrelevant of what their title is and wanting to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to have an opinion and have their opinion be weighed, measured, and, you know, any determination made by the group without any connection to the title. It doesn’t matter who you are when you’re a part of a conversation that they’re leading, that they’re participating…they’re going to listen to you and consider you an equal* as that’s happening and not have any…what’s the word I’m looking for…individuals that don’t have hidden agendas.*

Although he did not mention *mutual respect* explicitly, Participant 02 described this factor of successful collaboration by explaining that an expert collaborator invites input from all members—
regardless of their titles. Even though some members of the interorganizational collaboration under study hold powerful positions within their respective organizations, the adept collaborators on the team “*don’t put themselves on a pedestal*” (Participant 10, June 28, 2022). Instead, a skillful teammate solicits feedback from classroom teachers as readily as she asks fellow superintendents of schools to share their thoughts. Participant 02 responded to Question 9 in a way that corresponds to Emmen’s (2016) findings that “a *mutually respectful culture* grows, and the result is that at its best, everyone’s ideas and opinions have *equal weight* and *equal airtime* and can be robustly debated” (p. 88).

While the researcher’s findings illustrate that members who feel valued also felt respected, he learned that some members perceive *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* as intertwined. This finding corresponds to Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) recognition that these three central tenets of productive collaboration are difficult to separate. For example, Participant 03 described an expert collaborator as follows:

> One that is an *open, polite, and understanding personality* that makes sure that everybody that is around her… *made sure that everybody that was there felt that they were a critical piece of the puzzle*, made sure that they knew that when they were there, when they were having any discussions, anything that they were putting in, was going to be helpful information.

This participant recognized that, when an expert exhibits an understanding personality, she ensures all teammates’ involvement by helping them to feel integral. When each teammate feels appreciated as a fundamental part of a whole, he/she remains more likely to contribute to the work (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). Participant 03’s awareness of this point authenticates researchers’ assertions that *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* are connected.

Some participants raised awareness of a possible connection among developing a sense of *mutual respect, understanding, and trust*, human-centered design, and their ability to achieve success as a collaborative body. Human-centered design is a problem-solving technique that puts real people at the center of the development process, enabling collaborators to create products and services tailored to the audience’s needs (Bender et al., 2020). To solve “*wicked problems*” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) plaguing students, Forum members should focus their attention entirely on students (Participant 10, June 28, 2022).
According to Participant 10, when fellow members keep students at the center of collaboration, they understand their role and can be trusted because of their demonstrated, sincere interest in fulfilling the Forum’s mission. He explained, “[Skilled collaborators] mention [students] well before they will ever mention themselves or the organization.” To Participant 06, these individuals are “genuine.” “Once someone is genuine, you really pick up on it quickly, and you know that they’re all in. And those are the kind of people that you want to collaborate with” (Participant 06, June 22, 2022). Finally, Participant 11 summarized the consensus succinctly: “Everyone at the table knew that their thoughts were valued, respected, and [the most skilled collaborator] wanted their input.”

Another common response to Question 9 was that a skilled collaborator shows respect to members by communicating openly and honestly. In this regard, participants perceive the factor of open and honest communication as connected to the factor of mutual respect, understanding, and trust. According to six of 12 participants, open and honest communication directly occurs by deliberately using words and body language as a means of communication in the moment or thereafter, by encouraging open communication from colleagues via active listening, and/or by behaving in a manner that inspires others to communicate without hesitation. Participants 03 and 04 recognized the tie between sharing information continually and encouraging a sense of trust. Participant 04 described a particularly skilled Forum member as an “individual [who] never stops communicating…just stays in contact constantly.”

Participant 03 also reflected upon the importance of communicating with colleagues:

The communication occurred there with everybody, and as we left the room, there was follow-up and communication with everybody electronically. There were phone calls and opportunities to get in touch that way. Anytime something was done, that information was shared with the particular group…Everybody in that group was a part of the communication, and I think it just enabled things to be productive and have things get done.

Like experts in the field, most participants identified frequent, open, and honest communication as essential for achieving collective goals (Gray, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). Concerning their work with the Forum, specifically, some participants described in detail exactly what an adept communicator looks and sounds like, in reality, and how skilled communicators advance the work. Participant 04 explained, “So, just through the work, is constantly in communications, which
tells me that she is *constantly engaged with the work* that’s out there that needs to be done to keep people engaged with one another.” To Participant 04, constant communication leads to more active engagement. This coincides with Rubin’s (2009) findings that individuals are more willing to contribute to a collaboration if they feel included, informed, and valued.

If collaborators feel valued, they are more likely to contribute their time and effort to the collective cause (Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). Participant 05 knows that a fellow Forum member values him if he/she “responds to emails or phone calls” and “never seems bothered by a question even if you feel that it’s a little bit ridiculous.” To Participant 11, an excellent communicator who values her cooperation sends emails between meetings to ask, “What can I help with?” or “Where are we at with this?” Further, Participant 07 feels appreciated if someone respects him enough to listen intently to his thoughts before contributing. “You have two ears and one mouth for a reason,” Participant 07 argued.

Woven among the literature about successful, interorganizational collaborations are references to the importance of open and honest communication among group members. For six of 12 participants in this study, open and honest communication by “down-to-earth individuals” (Participant 10, June 28, 2022) makes for successful interactions. Furthermore, according to participants, the frequency of communication impacts their interorganizational collaboration’s success.

Lastly, when responding to Question 9, some participants acknowledged the importance of skilled leaders—those who, essentially, assume responsibility for helping Forum members to trust and communicate with one another. Although these leaders may not be appointed officially, they rise to the ranks of leadership by demonstrating the types of behaviors identified above. Participants elaborated upon the *skilled leadership* within the Forum by further describing their colleagues who help all members navigate the complexities of interorganizational collaboration. When describing the most skilled leader with whom he has worked, Participant 07 disclosed, “This person *tries to bring along other members* and *encourage other members to provide input.* This person doesn’t attempt to take control, but rather *leads by example.*” Offering more detail, Participant 08 enumerated multiple characteristics of a skilled leader:
[A most skilled individual] *can rally people around a topic or initiative.* It is somebody who *shows great passion* for what that initiative is. It is somebody who *knows and understands relationships between people.* It is somebody that *knows group dynamics* and how to put people together in a group. It is somebody that has the *ability to listen*…and not just to listen, but to really, truly hear what’s being said…and somebody who’s able to take what's being said and summarize it back and *offer input, thoughts, or constructive criticism in a way that makes people better.*

Participant 10 answered Question 9 by identifying the four characteristics of a skilled leader within the Forum:

One, they're *open-minded*; two, they're *positive*; three, they're *willing to listen before they talk*; and four, they *maintain open lines of communication* and collaboration with you and the group members on top of them doing an excellent job in their respective profession and with their position.

Common among these participants’ responses to Question 9 is the point that skilled leaders listen actively, communicate frequently and accurately, and build relationships easily. Leaders within the Forum are “*really good at listening, finding out what everyone needs, and then building from that space*” (Participant 12, July 6, 2022). Participants’ responses parallel responses from expert researchers’ subjects, who stated that “collaborative participants should develop active listening skills…so that they are able to make productive decisions as a group and include the perspectives of all collaborative participants” (Littlefield et al., 2013, p. 31). This finding illustrates that, even though the findings from this study are not generalizable to a different or larger context, participants experience collaboration similarly to the way others experience the phenomenon.

**Interview Question #10**

Contrary to Interview Question 9, Interview Question 10 prompted participants to describe a Forum member whom they regard as a weak collaborator. Three factors surfaced among participants’ answers to Interview Question 10: *mutual respect, understanding and trust; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time;* and *engaged stakeholders.*

In relation to *mutual respect, understanding, and trust,* participants found weak collaborators to concern themselves with their personal goals in lieu of the collaboration’s goals. Hence, they deemed individuals who kept their self-interests in mind as those who did not strive to build a sense of *mutual*
respect, understanding, and trust among teammates. Specifically, Participant 06 described such individuals as “self-serving” and stated that they “look out for their district first” without trying to find a solution that would…be mutually beneficial to [all] districts.” Likewise, Participant 03 explained that someone motivated to pursue a personal agenda is one to “push and push and push in a certain direction because this is where they want to go or what they want to do…just driving something exactly where they want to take it.”

Participant 06 also described weak teammates as those who don’t “buy in” to the Forum’s mission and vision and reported that he “can easily see [weak teammates’] intentions and motivations.” When asked Question 10, Participant 08 immediately visualized a teammate who looks as if he is listening, “but never hears” as evidenced by his devaluing of “constructive criticism or opinions other than [his] own.” According to Participant 12, an individual who behaves like this “believes that their thoughts and opinions are the best and that everyone else’s are not that important.” In sum, Participant 09 regards these sorts of colleagues as “arrogant,” and he finds it difficult to respect teammates who hold an exaggerated opinion of their own importance.

Participants’ remarks about weak teammates correspond with descriptions of weak collaborators reported in current literature. For example, Vangen and Huxham (2003b) explained, “Some partners look to the collaboration to help satisfy goals and interests that are relevant only to their organization, and individuals also may be looking to satisfy personal agendas this way. These organizational and individual agendas are frequently ‘hidden’” (p. 18). Vangen and Huxham’s (2003b) findings show that, to garner respect from teammates—and to develop a sense of understanding and trust among teammates—a collaborator needs to understand the point of collaboration: to work together to solve problems he/she otherwise could not solve (Bryson et al., 2015; Littlefield et al., 2013; Straus, 2002). As Porterfield and Carnes (2014) noted, “Nothing destroys relationships faster than the suspicion of deception” (p. 9).

Often noted in participants’ responses to Question 10 were references to sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time. For example, Participant 01 asserted that a weak collaborator does not make time for the work, attends collaboration sessions “inconsistently,” and participates half-heatedly while in
Recalling his work with a specific individual, Participant 01 stated delicately, “They were a little slow to put their hand in, and when we went out to play the game, they might not have been in the game.” Succinctly, Participant 08 expressed, “They don’t show up for meetings.”

Participants’ descriptions of weak teammates correspond with those described in the literature as those who are overly self-interested, have an aversion to risk, or even regularly display dissent (Emmens, 2016). Additionally, a lack of commitment to the collaboration where participants are not held accountable to contribute was viewed as an attribute of weak collaborators (Babiak & Thibault, 2009). Interestingly, some participants made statements that led the researcher to believe they might want to give their weak teammates the benefit of the doubt for not putting forth their best effort as collaborators. For example, Participant 04 surmised that a teammate’s inconsistency might stem from a need to prioritize solving problems at the local level, thus detracting from his/her ability to focus on collaborative endeavors. In like manner, Participant 11 pondered, “Maybe it was because they were in a role that they didn’t have the same authority or ability to contribute resources as another.” These statements illustrate some Forum members’ potential willingness to accept even those they deem “weak” as deserving of trust and mutual respect despite their doubts.

One might infer that arrogant collaborators who expend an inconsistent effort and/or remain focused on their personal agendas are unengaged. Thus, the researcher expected to hear participants’ thoughts relating to the factor of engagement as Mattessich and Johnson (2018) identified. Participant 02 described an unengaged stakeholder as follows:

Somebody that participates in the Forum just on the surface. Just so that they can report back to their board that they’re a part of it, but they don’t believe that the Forum can produce anything that can be of significant benefit to them or their institution, so they’re doing it just for the sake of doing it as opposed to doing it with a mindset that results can be produced that would provide opportunities for kids.

Participant 04 summarized exactly what a lack of engagement looks like regarding a collaborator’s work within the Forum: “Basically, showing up to the meeting, checking in, and checking out when the meeting’s over. You'll see him again a month later… not a lot of follow up with anything.”

The members who fail to “put their whole self in and pull together everyone's ideas” (Participant
11, June 30, 2022) are largely unengaged. Participants’ descriptions of unengaged, weak collaborators correspond to the descriptions of weak teammates published in literature. For instance, unwilling participants who are merely present through a sense of duty were viewed as weak teammates, for they neither sought active involvement nor contributed to the collaborative effort (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2008). Some weak collaborators even have competing and hidden agendas (Eden & Huxham, 2001). Additionally, teammates who cannot foster relationships with others were perceived as weak collaborators by participants. Weak collaborators can be detrimental to the entire collaboration. As Linden (2002) stated, “Poor relationships will kill almost any alliance; without strong relationships there’s no trust, and without trust there will be no collaboration” (p. 94).

**Interview Question #12**

Interview Question 12 asked participants to describe their personal collaboration style. Five respondents referenced *open and frequent communication* in their responses. Participant 02 described how he creates synthesis:

[I] *listen to everybody’s opinions, and then find the common ground, and communicate that common ground* where everybody says, “yeah that’s kind of what I meant, yeah that’s what I meant.” So, I’m good at *taking other people’s information and putting it together and producing an outcome* that everybody’s happy with and feels like their opinion has been heard.

Participant 05 replied, “So, yeah, it's *open communication*, and it's a *two-way street* for sure.” Participant 07 stated, “Steady. *I'm a communicator. I'm a listener*. I don't rush to decisions.” Participant 11 shared, “I take notes, at the end of the meeting *ask who's doing what*.” Participant 12 expressed, “To me, it's the listening. *You have to be a listener* so that then you can help the group of people move forward.”

According to all five participants who referenced communication in their responses to Question 12, listening actively is critical for communicating effectively. Participants believe that, if they listen intently to the messages their colleagues communicate, they are better able to reconcile everyone’s input to determine a plan for progress. The participants recognize this point made in the literature.
**Interview Question #13**

Interview Question 13 asked participants to share any additional information about their experience as collaborating members of the Forum that they deem relevant to this study based upon the researcher’s explanation of his work. Although their responses varied with their experiences, many participants offered information that the researcher connected to one factor: *Members see collaboration as in their self-interest.*

Participant 02 recalled, “I saw *a lot of gain for folks in the career and tech world* in particular because again it created an environment where we were sitting at the same table as the superintendents.”

Participant 02 spoke to the cogent nature of self-interest:

> I believe that one of the most significant impacts that the Forum has had specific to career and tech centers is the fact that *CTC directors are now part of more conversations that has impacts on kids,* and I think that that’s excellent.

This participant’s response to Question 13 leads one to surmise that superintendents of schools either are perceived by “folks in the career and tech world” as superior or regard themselves as superior to CTC directors. Participant 02 believes that if CTC directors have the opportunity to collaborate with educational leaders of K-12, then they—and, consequently, students who attend CTCs—will benefit.

Participant 03 referenced *members see collaboration as in their self-interest* several times when referring to recent plans and actions announced by the Forum’s coordinator. First, Participant 03 proclaimed, “There were some *structures put in place that we could take advantage of* that I did not know were there.” Next, Participant 03 stated, “I think this is something that *could be really beneficial to us.*” Additionally, Participant 03 mentioned, “This is now collaboration I’m *looking forward to on a district end,* but I think this piece of the collaboration can really, probably be the *most impactful to us.*”

Though his reasons for regarding his involvement in the Forum as beneficial are different from other participants’ reasons, Participant 06 reported that membership provided an advantage: collaborating with school districts with which he otherwise would not have connected due to being geographically isolated. Through his membership, he built relationships with school leaders he likely never would have met.
Participant 09 also was able to strengthen relationships as a result of his work with fellow Forum members; however, his involvement in the Forum led to the strengthening of relationships within his home district in lieu of relationships with school leaders from neighboring districts. “I, as a leader, was able to come back and share with our staff and students,” he explained. By sharing information, Participant 09 greatly supported his own school community. As Participant 11 shared, using the information you learn from collaborating with other educational leaders is “critical for the benefit of [your] students and for the benefits of [your] community.”

Researchers reported that members of interorganizational collaborations frequently join and/or continue to collaborate with self-interests in mind (Bryson et al., 2006; Rubin, 2009; Winer & Ray, 1994). Although serving as a member of a collaboration often helps one to advance his/her personal agenda (Rubin, 2009), collaborating for the sole purpose of promoting self-interests can be detrimental to successful collaboration (Emmens, 2016). The participants cited seem to realize this, for they acknowledged their self-interests, yet only after they noted the collaboration’s success as a whole.

**Themes From Research Question Two**

This section presents overarching themes after data from the interview questions corresponding to Research Question 2 were analyzed. Using the interview data, the researcher identified the themes referenced by participants pertaining to the second research question: How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified? There were seven themes identified from Research Question 2. Some of the themes for Research Question 2 are identical to those found for Research Question 1. Table 13 presents high frequency themes as they were identified within each interview question corresponding to Research Question 2.
Table 13

Themes From Research Question Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>High Frequency Theme(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do respondents perceive Forum members' levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?</td>
<td>IQ 5: Why was the collaboration successful (or unsuccessful)?</td>
<td>Appropriate Cross-Section of Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IQ 9: Think of a Forum member who you regard as an expert collaborator. Describe him/her.</td>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IQ 10: Think of a Forum member who you regard as a weak collaborator. Describe him/her.</td>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IQ 12: Describe your personal collaboration style.</td>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IQ 13: What else can you tell me about your experience as a member of the Forum who collaborates often?</td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, and Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Open and Frequent Communication

Participants perceived *open and frequent communication* to be a factor with which Forum members were proficient with. Participants cited *open and frequent communication* when describing a Forum member that they viewed as an expert collaborator. In addition to identifying *open and frequent communication* as a factor of other members, many participants also proclaimed their high proficiency with *open and frequent communication* when describing their own personal collaboration style.
Participants believed expert communicators liaised verbally and nonverbally with great intent. For instance, expert collaborators within the Forum encouraged others to speak and share their ideas by demonstrating that they actively listened when other members spoke. Forum members would often find commonalities among what various members said to gain group consensus. Additionally, expert collaborators’ constant sharing of information with the group, including follow-up correspondence, lead members to gain a greater sense of trust because they felt respected and valued. Participants believed this, in turn, lead to more active engagement among members. Hence, the overall productivity and progress of the interorganizational collaboration are increased.

**Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust**

*Mutual respect, understanding, and trust* was perceived, by participants, as a characteristic in which Forum members have a high level of proficiency. Participants perceived expert collaborators to possess this factor and weak collaborators to lack it. From the viewpoints of participants, *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* was demonstrated by Forum members when they sought input from all members regardless of their title. The equally weighted input gained was helpful and valued, thus creating a sense of appreciation among the group. Participants also noted that members who focused on the collaboration’s goals, as opposed to their own personal ones, demonstrated that they were genuinely there to support the mission and vision of the Forum. This, too, led to *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* among group members.

**Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest**

Participants believed Forum members had a high level of proficiency in their ability to *see collaboration as in their self-interest*. It was a factor cited often when participants described their experiences as a member of the Forum. Participants often referenced self-interest as ultimately benefiting students; thus, self-interest was viewed in a positive manner if self-interest aligned with the Forum’s mission, vision, and goals. For instance, one participant gained a level of prestige as a director of a CTC that may not have been available prior to the Forum by being able to interact with superintendents as an equal. This, in turn, benefits students attending his CTC because he has greater input than ever before.
Other participants spoke of gaining information and knowledge that they could bring back to their respective districts. This was not only viewed as an entry point for their own students and community, but also opened the door for district level administrators and staff members to get involved with the Forum.

**Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time**

*Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* was professed to be a factor with which Forum members have a high level of proficiency. Forum members also frequently mentioned *funds, staff, materials, and time* as lacking by those participants regarded as weak collaborators. Members regarded as weak collaborators were perceived as inconsistent with their allocation of *funds, staff, materials, and time*. To participants, they appeared to be simply going through the motions of membership, but were not truly interested.

**Engaged Stakeholders**

Like the last factor, *engaged stakeholders* was both characterized as a factor with which Forum members have a high level of proficiency and also one that weak collaborators lacked. *Engaged stakeholders* parallels not having sufficient time to dedicate to the collaboration. When referencing a lack of engagement, participants cited members they perceived as being a Forum member by name only. These members were there only because they may have felt obligated to be a Forum member so that they could report back to their base organization. Participants declared that weak collaborators placed their self-interests first, at the expense of collective interests, and put little to no effort into Forum goals.

**Skilled Leadership**

Participants interpreted Forum members as having a high level of proficiency regarding *skilled leadership*. Forum members viewed as expert collaborators were thought to display *skilled leadership* in the Forum. Participants found that skilled leaders within the Forum assumed leadership roles and duties regardless of their title. They are willing to assist other members to successfully navigate the intricacies of interorganizational collaboration. They are able to do so using several of their attributes, traits, and characteristics, including fostering communication by being open-minded and listening actively to gain other members’ input. *Skilled leadership* also includes leading by example so that others follow the
member’s lead and become better in the process. According to participants’ responses, skilled leaders also consistently display a positive attitude. Finally, as reported by participants, Forum members who are skilled in the area of leadership hold a thorough understanding of group dynamics, which enables them to develop relationships with others.

**Appropriate Cross-Section of Members**

Appropriate cross-section of members was perceived to be a factor with which Forum members have a high level of proficiency. Participants also cited having an appropriate cross-section of members as a reason for the Forum’s success. Participants identified that Forum members came from various types of base organizations, including K-12 education, business, industry, post-secondary education, and nonprofit organizations. Thus, participants cited the vast array of unique experiences from which to draw to help solve issues common to interorganizational collaborations like the Forum.

**Answers to Research Question Two**

The emergent themes from Research Questions 1 and 2 help provide the answer to the second research question: How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?

There were eight themes that emerged from respondents’ answers to the interview questions that correspond to Research Question 1. Five of those themes also emerged from the data to the interview questions that correspond to Research Question 2: open and frequent communication; mutual respect, understanding, and trust; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; engaged stakeholders; and skilled leadership. Since the themes emerged from the answers to both research questions, it follows that respondents perceived Forum members’ levels of proficiency to each factor identified to be high. All five themes were found more than ten times in both research questions.

The three other themes that emerged in respondents’ answers to the first research question, but not the second research question, were: members share a stake in both process and outcome, multiple layers of participation, and appropriate pace of development. This signified that the factors were perceived by respondents to be relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success, yet were not
perceived by respondents to be at a high level of proficiency among Forum members. *Appropriate pace of development* was referenced 10 times, *members share a stake in both process and outcome* was referenced nine times, and *multiple layers of participation* was referenced only three times in responses to interview questions that corresponded to Research Question 2. Based on the data, the researcher determined that respondents perceived Forum members’ level of proficiency for both *appropriate pace of development* and *members share a stake in both process and outcome* to be at a medium level (5-10 times). The researcher argued that respondents perceived Forum members’ level of proficiency to be low for *multiple layers of participation* (less than 5 times).

Two themes were prevalent in responses to interview questions that correspond to Research Question 2, but not to respondents’ answers to Research Question 1: *members see collaboration as in their self-interest* and *appropriate cross-section of members*. Based on the data, the researcher determined that respondents perceived Forum members’ levels of proficiency to be high for both factors (greater than 10), but the factors were not perceived by respondents to be as relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success as others. Table 14 demonstrates the findings.

**Table 14**

*Answer to Research Question Two*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question Two</th>
<th>Factors Respondents Identified in Both RQ 1 and RQ 2</th>
<th>Perceived Level Of Proficiency (Number of Times in Responses to RQ 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?</td>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
<td>High (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
<td>High (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
<td>High (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
<td>High (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
<td>High (19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question Three

Research Question 3 examined the extent to which respondents have experienced success when involved in the Forum based on their perceived levels of proficiency for the identified traits, attributes, and characteristics relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. Research Question 3 was aligned with Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Interview Question #1

The first interview question asked participants to explain what it means to collaborate based upon their past knowledge and experiences. Participants’ answers revealed four notable factors: *appropriate cross-section of members, open and frequent communication, concrete attainable goals and objectives,* and *shared vision.*

Participant 01 disclosed, “Myself and another superintendent met with the agencies of what I call the *economic engines in the county* and really talked about different ways in which we could *engage business with higher education, as well as K-12,*” pertaining to an *appropriate cross-section of members.* Participant 01 added, “So, it really was a lot of collaboration, a lot of *recruiting other people* to be part of the endeavor.” In Participant 01’s response, he referenced what experts described as a cross-section of
members (Bryson et al., 2015; Crosby & Bryson, 2010). Like the researchers, Participant 01 recognizes that, to address issues related to public education and business, leaders from both sectors need to work together.

Although Participant 03 understands that individuals from various organizations need to collaborate if the problems to solve span organizations, he believes that the “right people” need to work together. Participant 03 elaborated upon the premise of a merited group of contributors:

You have to get the right people to the table, and you sit down with those particular people, and you have those in-depth discussions that help you get to that plan. And that collaboration could involve a variety of people from a variety of positions and people throughout the community.

According to Collins (2001), “The old adage ‘People are your most important asset’ turns out to be wrong. The right people are” (p.13). Participant 03 did not identify who he deems “right” for the Forum’s work, though he did acknowledge that these individuals need to communicate exhaustively through “in-depth discussions.” His point corresponds to the literature that presents the importance of communication as applicable to collaboration (Anderson, 2019; Maxwell, 2011; Rubin, 2009).

In addition to recognizing the importance of working with others who maintain different perspectives, Participant 11 asserted that the work should lead collaborators to reach a common goal: “Collaboration, to me, means having a common goal and working with others who may bring different skills, talents, and abilities to the table.” To identify a shared vision as an early step of the collaborative process proved imperative for most participants. For example, Participant 03 asserted that consistent goal-setting is a hallmark of collaboration:

I think when you go into a collaborative atmosphere, there’s always a goal that you want to reach so your collaboration, and different strategies and how you collaborate in different ways you collaborate, help lead you to solving whatever that goal is…you’re getting to that common goal.

Similarly, Participants 06 and 07 spoke specifically of “common goals,” and eight participants alluded to their appreciation for collective efforts throughout their responses to Question 1. These participants’ thoughts parallel researchers’ findings about how interorganizational collaborations achieve success. As Armistead et al. (2007) explained succinctly, a collaborative body will crumble if group members persist
to advance their personal agendas without striving to accomplish a joint goal that everyone considers worthy.

Besides providing all members of a collaboration with a collective focus for their work, maintaining a shared vision can actually be fruitful for individuals if crafted with intention. Participant 04 called it a “win-win scenario” when members of an interorganizational collaboration frame an overarching vision with the needs of individual organizations in mind. He explained, “In my mind I see the word collaboration as people, institutions, groups coming together to try to find win-win scenarios to make everybody better in the end for whatever the goal happens to be.” Participant 05 summarized the same point researchers have made regarding shared interests (Davis et al., 2018; Linden, 2002, Littlefield et al., 2013): “The whole notion of collaboration is to talk about what each or all of the parties have in common and can bring to the table to solve a certain issue, or concern, or make progress.”

In sum, participants defined “collaboration” similarly to how the phenomenon is defined in the research. Furthermore, they defined “successful interorganizational collaboration” as experts do: parties working together to fulfill a collective mission framed around common needs of the organizations involved.

**Interview Question #2**

Interview Question 2 asked participants to describe a time when they observed collaboration among Forum members or engaged in collaboration as a Forum member based off their explanation of what it means to collaborate. Within their responses were references to factors identified by Mattessich and Johnson (2018): Members see collaboration as in their self-interest, concrete attainable goals and objectives, and sufficient funds, staff, materials.

Five participants responded to Question 2 in a manner that led the researcher to conclude that members of the Forum regard their work with colleagues as being in their best interest. Participant 01, a superintendent of schools, recalled his alignment with a group of business leaders interested in learning how to support local students as they explored potential careers—a topic that he also wanted to investigate. Although Participant 02 spoke of a different incident, he inadvertently explained why
Participant 01 regarded his work with the business leaders as beneficial for his base organization: “So, *we were able to capitalize* on the circumstance of these individuals already being programmed and scheduled to be in one location.”

Essentially, since leaders from different sectors were expected to work within the same space at the same time, joining forces to solve problems plaguing both sectors made sense. Researchers write about the advantage of working with like-minded individuals who hail from different organizations (Persaud & Murphy, 2019). When leaders’ intentions span organizations, all can work towards achieving a common goal by voicing their unique perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues to explore. Participants 01 and 02 experienced this notion as Forum members. Thereafter, they possessed enough broad knowledge of how various organizations might familiarize students with career options to map an action plan for moving forward with the work (Participant 10, June 28, 2022). Hence, all Forum members worked together towards a mutually agreed upon common goal.

Four participants’ answers to Question 2 also addressed the factor of setting *attainable goals and objectives* despite the intensity of the work to be completed. According to Participant 01, “[The work] was hard but it really created a framework that allowed us to *move into the next phase* where we hired the executive director of the Forum and *had a clear vision* for where we were going.” Participant 08 described the nature of the Forum’s work more concretely:

*So, we work to create pathways* with not only our high schools, but also with colleges and universities to create ways that would help students be guided in their high school career so that when they graduated high school, they had a very specific pathway that they could take moving forward.

By maintaining a clear focus on “career preparation,” all members discovered manageable, realistic ways to engage students (Participant 09, June 28, 2022). For example, “having a *common goal of putting together a Career Fair for middle school students*” (Participant 11, June 30, 2022), directed all members’ concentration to a relevant endeavor. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) explained that when goals and objectives are referenced repeatedly, all members of a collaboration readily recall the agenda and they are more likely to make progress towards accomplishing the goals. Participants’ recollections of their
experiences while working to strengthen students’ awareness of potential careers exemplified Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) point.

Lastly, the factor of sufficient funds, staff, materials, time was referenced in four participants’ responses to Question 2. Participant 01 reported overhearing specific colleagues ask questions like, “How do we do this?” or offer comments such as, “We are a small school district. We don’t have those resources.” Fortunately, other colleagues offered their assistance and/or contributed resources to the Forum. “We all had certain resources that we brought to the table that were so important for being able to plan and implement,” Participant 11 explained, and Participant 12 corroborated. For Forum members in need of resources and materials, working alongside others with the means to fulfill the need allowed them to achieve their goals at both the organizational and interorganizational levels—yet another advantage of interorganizational collaboration (Emmens, 2016; Malin & Hackmann, 2019).

Interview Question #3

The third interview question asked participants to explain how they know whether a collaboration is “successful.” Common responses raised the notion of concrete attainable goals and objectives and evaluation and continuous learning.

Seven of 12 respondents referenced concrete attainable goals and objectives in their replies to Question 3. Participant 01 recalled his experience as a member who worked diligently to raise regional students’ awareness of career options and stated that the Forum’s ultimate success is measured by the number of students who graduate from high school and confidently step forward onto a clear path (e.g. post-secondary schooling, the workforce, or the military). Since the goal of raising students’ awareness of career options proved attainable, knowing that high school graduates chose a viable career illustrated Forum members’ accomplishment of the goal. Participant 02’s responses elaborated upon what constitutes concrete goals:

Positive outcomes for students. Again, that’s the root of what we do at all levels of education and ultimately that was, or that is, the primary goal of the Forum. So, when we see circumstances where a student, for example, gets an apprenticeship or an internship opportunity or a job shadow opportunity at an employer, for example, that historically students from said district
wouldn’t have that opportunity. That’s a prime example of a positive outcome that was directly related to the establishment and the workings of the Forum.

According to Rubin (2009), an interorganizational collaboration achieves success if the group fulfills its mission. Participant 07 summarized this exact finding and his colleagues’ sentiments: “I think that if you are able to meet that goal or continually work toward that goal or that change, then I believe that collaboration is successful.”

As goals are reached, learning occurs. Based on participants’ responses, six of 12 of them believe that, walking away from a collaborative endeavor having learned something of value means the collaboration is “successful” by definition. Participant 09 emphatically declared, “Collaboration is successful when each member of the group gains knowledge and learns from each other, truthfully.”

Reflective by nature, Participant 10 contemplated that the process of collaborating is as important as the product of the collaboration. Throughout the process of working as a member of a successful collaboration, he questioned himself:

What are the things that are learned that went well? What are the things that are learned that didn’t go so well that you can improve upon next time and tweak, or perhaps overhaul, and then build upon the success?

The answers to the questions Participant 10 asked himself while working constituted his learning over time. Instead of looking for answers within, Participants 11 and 12 sought more tangible answers to their questions by gaining students’ and teachers’ insights. “We collected information from the students. And [by] looking at the responses from our participants and from the staff who joined the students at the event in order to see if it was successful,” Participant 11 shared. Participant 12 asserted, “I think you know it’s successful when there are results...evidence. It cannot be I think, I feel, I believe.”

Whether the evidence of learning is concrete or abstract, learning as a factor makes for productive collaboration (Austin et al., 2000). Participants who identified a significant take-away as an outcome of their work with the Forum regarded their experience as successful.
Interview Question #4

Interview Question 4 asked participants to explain whether or not they deem Forum members’ collaboration to be or to have been successful given the information they provided in their answer to the previous question. Participants were also asked to provide examples of interactions among members to substantiate their explanation. Two factors—members see collaboration as in their self-interest and sufficient funds, staff, materials, time—stood out among responses.

Numerous responses indicated that members see collaboration as in their self-interest. For example, Participant 01 proudly announced concrete numbers that prove self-interest formed the basis for his categorization of the collaboration as successful:

I look at my district. Last year our students saved $1.9 million in college tuition costs, and of our 1,000 students, over 300 students earned college credits. My own child will go to school next year with 49 college credits.

Saving money is certainly within someone’s self-interest, and Participant 01 was able to save a significant sum by working towards Forum members’ collective goals.

Participant 02 shared, “We now have three, four, five different deans and professors from Westmoreland County Community College that are participating in our Occupational Advisory Committees, and our Perkins committees, and our local advisory committees that weren’t there before.”

For Participant 02, the value of collaborating was evident when his colleagues at the organizational level became more actively involved in projects to better the organization and, therefore, him. Because his work with the Forum led to improvements for his own organization, Participant 02 invested in the interorganizational collaboration.

Lastly, Participant 03 found success by being an integral part of the action:

I see now that it’s progressing to a point to where it could be very productive, and I want to make sure that we’re a part of that…So, a lot of those successes, I think, just point back directly to us. We’ve successfully partnered with the WIB to get certain grants to help out with school-business partnerships.

Collaborating through partnerships invited progress for the Forum and for Participant 03 personally; thus, he maintained a vested interest in the work.
Understanding that individual organizations can benefit from collaborating with other organizations, Participant 07 expressed, “I think that it can become very easy for the collaborators to start thinking about how the collaboration can benefit them instead of the collective we.” Participant 07 also provided words of caution regarding self-interest:

It's when single members of the Forum branch off and start to use the collaborative efforts for their own personal gain, and when I say personal gain, I mean district gain. When they start running off on their own, taking the ideas from the Forum, and not necessarily trying to bring everybody together at one time, that's when the director needs to step up and pull those folks in.

Participant 10 summarized how interorganizational collaborative work can benefit all:

Make it work for sustainable purposes within what the Forum is looking to do moving their organization forward and us being a part of that organization, and how it can benefit our district along the way, and ultimately, benefit our kids whether our kids are within the district I work or within any district within Westmoreland County and actually expands beyond in various counties with the Forum.

With experience comes insight, and participants’ experiences as Forum members led to their understanding of how collaboration proves successful. As they reflected upon their work, some participants offered suggestions regarding how they might achieve even greater success as collaborators. For example, Participant 07 professed that expanding Forum members’ contacts to include even more school districts might positively impact an even greater number of students across the region.

However, as noted in the literature, expanding the network(s) requires allocating additional time, funds, and resources to the common cause, which is not always feasible (Emmens, 2016). Participant 08 admitted, “I don't have time to go out and make those connections with people.” Additionally, Participant 08 shared a comment about the amount of time people devote to collaboration:

And another thing I have found as the year has gone, people's commitment to it, because of it being virtual, has been more challenging because people are so busy that if you're doing a virtual meeting, people aren't as committed as if you actually have to go there.

Nevertheless, Participant 12 acknowledged that, for her, dedicating ample time to collaborating is worth the expense: “We've all continued to put money in it. We’re in year two of three years of commitment.”
Therefore, the researcher found that participants’ representation of their experiences as collaborators align with the literature. For example, Crosby and Bryson (2005) noted that to collaborate requires a substantial commitment, which participants acknowledged to varying degrees.

**Themes From and Answers to Research Question Three**

This section presents the themes corresponding to Research Question 3 after analyzing the data from the related interview questions. Using the interview data, the researcher identified the most prominent themes referenced by participants as pertaining to the third research question: Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study? There were seven themes identified from Research Question 3. Some of the themes for Research Question 3 overlap those found from Research Question 1 and/or Research Question 2. Table 15 features identified themes as they pertain to each interview question corresponding to Research Question 3.

**Table 15**

*Themes From Research Question Three*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>High Frequency Theme(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?</td>
<td>IQ 1: Explain what it means to collaborate based upon your past knowledge and experiences.</td>
<td>Appropriate Cross-Section of Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>Interview Question</td>
<td>High Frequency Theme(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IQ 2: Given your explanation of what it means to collaborate, describe a time when you have observed collaboration among Forum members or engaged in collaboration as a Forum member.</td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest</td>
<td>Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives, Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, and Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IQ 3: How might you know if collaboration is successful?</td>
<td>Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives</td>
<td>Evaluation and Continuous Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IQ 4: Given this information, explain whether or not you deem Forum members’ collaboration to be (have been) successful. Provide examples of interactions among members to substantiate your explanation.</td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest</td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, and Time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Open and Frequent Communication**

*Open and frequent communication* was perceived as a factor that has helped contribute to and led to the success of the Forum up to this point by participants. Participants also cited *open and frequent communication* as an integral factor for collaboration in general. *Open and frequent communication* was cited to have occurred since the Forum’s inception and has continued to be a major factor contributing to the Forum’s success, according to participants. Participants specifically included in-depth discussions and the sharing of ideas that have taken place in their interorganizational collaboration.
**Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest**

Participants perceived members *seeing collaboration as in their self-interest* to be another factor that led to the ongoing success of the Forum. Participants referenced the factor frequently when explaining their reasoning behind deeming the Forum to be successful. *Seeing collaboration as in their self-interest* was also oft mentioned when participants described a time when they either observed or partook in collaboration while in the Forum. Participants offered plenty of examples of how their involvement in the Forum has been in their self-interest. For instance, many participants have taken initiatives and action plans, such as Career Pathways, formulated and developed through their collaboration in the Forum and applied them at the district level. Delineating instances of benefits to themselves, participants identified making connections with others through their involvement in the interorganizational collaboration to gain various committee members and establish school-business partnerships as well as accessing grants to apply to those partnerships at their base organization. Collaboration in the Forum also affords college tuition savings for students at the individual district level. It is apparent that participants viewed self-interest through the lens of benefiting students within their respective districts and organizations. For example, being a member of the Forum directly led to opportunities for students, such as gaining work-based experiences, that they would not have had access to otherwise. A final example given by a participant was having greater community involvement as a result of the collaboration that took place within the Forum.

**Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time**

*Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* was recognized as a contributing factor to the Forum’s success by participants. Most participants cited the factor when deeming the Forum to be successful. Participants also noted *sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* when they described a time they observed or participated in the Forum’s collaboration. Participants acknowledged that Forum members were bringing in and sharing their resources, along with their knowledge and skills, with the group to help plan and implement Forum initiatives. Examples communicated by participants included funds that each district contributed and nonprofit and business organizations securing grants to fund said initiative,
staffing from districts to collaborate with business partners, and members committing materials and time to the cause. From participants’ perspectives, tasks were divvied up among members with most doing their part. This formula led to successful outcomes in the eyes of participants.

**Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives**

Participants recognized having *concrete, attainable goals and objectives* as contributing to the advancing success of the Forum. *Concrete, attainable goals and objectives* was mentioned by many participants when they explained what it means to collaborate based on their knowledge and experiences. *Concrete, attainable goals and objectives* was also widely acknowledged when participants were asked to describe a time when they observed collaboration among Forum members or participated in collaboration as a member of the Forum. Additionally, participants recognized *concrete, attainable goals and objectives* when they explained how they knew if collaboration was successful. Participants realized the value of having stated, common goals for members to work together to achieve. Several examples were given by participants including the creation of Career Pathways to help guide students; a “Teacher in the Workplace” initiative to help teachers connect learning in the classroom to real-world applications for students; Career Fairs for middle school students to learn more about career clusters and career opportunities; work-based experiences for students such as apprenticeships, internships, and even job shadowing opportunities; and virtual opportunities as well. The Forum’s goals identified by participants all lead to positive outcomes for students.

**Appropriate Cross-Section of Members**

Having an *appropriate cross-section of members* was recognized by participants as a factor contributing to the Forum’s success. Participants recognized having an *appropriate cross-section of members* when sharing the explanations of what it means to collaborate. Participants recalled recruiting members from various entities such as K-12, business and industry, post-secondary education, and nonprofit organizations who had varying skills, talents, and abilities to solve regional issues that the interorganizational collaboration was formed to address.
**Shared Vision**

Participants perceived a *shared vision* as another factor that led to the ongoing success of the Forum. Members having a *shared vision* was voiced when participants explained what it means to collaborate. Participants discussed the importance of progressing towards a common vision to create win-win scenarios for members when collaborating. Participants noted that a *shared vision* would help Forum members challenge each other to become better.

**Evaluation and Continuous Learning**

*Evaluation and continuous learning* was also perceived as a significant factor that contributed to the success that participants have experienced thus far as Forum members. Participants revealed *evaluation and continuous learning* to be an important factor when discussing how they determined a collaboration to be successful or unsuccessful. Participants voiced the importance of collecting data, such as responses from students and staff, to ask and evaluate what went well and what did not go so well in order to learn, improve, and succeed. Participants also perceived members to gain knowledge by learning from each other as well. Ultimately, participants noted that members’ evaluation and learning was related to their experiences with students.

**Answers to Research Question Three**

Research Question 3 posed the following question: Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study? The majority of respondents offered that they had experienced success as a result of being a member of the Forum. Nine of 12 respondents (Participants 01, 02, 05, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, and 12) believed that they had clearly experienced success through their involvement with the Forum. One of the nine (Participant 01) did qualify that more nuanced longitudinal evidence was necessary to determine if the Forum’s efforts are truly successful, but he claimed to have experienced success as a member of the Forum. One member (Participant 03) appeared to lean towards the side of experiencing success, particularly as part of the smaller subcommittees, but did not experience as much success as he would have liked in the larger group. Yet another member (Participant 04) seemingly leaned towards the
side of not experiencing nearly as much success as he would have liked through his involvement in the Forum. He experienced small pockets of success, but did not perceive that he experienced success on a large-scale level. Based on comments, one member (Participant 06) did not believe his involvement in the interorganizational collaboration to have been nearly as successful as it could or should have been from his perspective. While he did not describe the efforts as a total failure, he did not perceive it to be a success overall. Table 16 illustrates the perceptions respondents had regarding experiencing success as a member of the Forum.

Table 16

Answer to Research Question Three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Answer to Research Question 3</th>
<th>Yes/No/?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 01</td>
<td><strong>If we’re really going to measure the success of this endeavor, of this partnership, of this collaborative, we really need to find ways to follow our students throughout time to see where they end up and what they’re doing. Until we do that, we really can’t measure the success. I think the reason that it was successful was... And so, from that standpoint, it was really successful.</strong></td>
<td>?/Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 02</td>
<td>I personally believe that the Forum has had many successes. I believe it was successful for many of the reasons I already stated.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 03</td>
<td>Those working groups, I thought were productive and collaborative, but I think sometime...and listen, I think the big group is more you have to get information out to everybody, so to that end, that was okay. But the smaller groups is more where the production had taken place. It provided a variety of different collaborative opportunities, some that I found productive, some that I found not so productive.</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 04</td>
<td>I’d say the Forum as a whole...I don’t know if I can point to a lot of big successes as a whole. I can point to some specifically with the district in working with other businesses and business partners, but I think that’s probably an area where the Forum hasn’t shared as much of any other successes that are happening. So, that’s where I think there were just pockets of success versus wholesale success with every district that was showing up or with every company that was showing up.</td>
<td>N/Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Answer to Research Question 3</td>
<td>Yes/No/?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 05</td>
<td>So, I would say that it's very successful. Everybody has a unique set of experiences that they draw from and what's nice to see is to identify some commonalities or things, in general, that have been successful so you can learn from other people's mistakes and successes. It's non-competitive, too. It's not as if one person or one organization is trying to outdo the other. It's about collaborating.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 06</td>
<td>No. Not to the degree that which I think of it could have been successful. Yeah, so, I wouldn't call it a complete failure, but I wouldn't call it an absolute success either. I think the success was bringing people together. I think where the lack of success came in was we didn't have the follow-through to move beyond that step to the degree at which I think it needed to happen across the county for memberships.</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 07</td>
<td>So, overall, I would say that the Forum has been a successful collaboration. I think that overall, the Forum's collaboration has been successful because anytime you can get 20 groups of people together and talk, it has been successful.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 08</td>
<td>So, I would say for the most part, the collaboration among Forum members... I would deem it to be successful because there were great things that came out of those meetings. So, I think that that shows that the collaboration was successful. So, I would say that it has been successful.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 09</td>
<td>I do think that it was successful. I would not say at all that it was unsuccessful.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>I believe that Forum member's interactions have been very successful.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>I do deem the collaboration of the Forum to be successful. So, what makes the Forum's collaboration successful is the fact that it's not just educators. I think the Forum's collaboration is successful when we're looking at what are the goals. So, to me, it is successful, but requires the ongoing focus on common goals and giving our time and effort to keep it a priority.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12</td>
<td>Well, the simplest evidence, I would say, of the collaboration's success is that we're still going.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Themes From Research Questions

Thirteen themes emerged stemming from the three overarching research questions. The prominent issues and/or points raised by participants could be linked back to the reviewed literature. Factors that researchers, such as Mattessich and Johnson (2018), identified as appearing to strongly influence the success of collaboration informed the emergent themes arising from participants’ answers to the interview questions that were connected to the study’s three overarching research questions. Table 17 illustrates the number of times each of the factors that emerged as themes were referenced by the 12 participants during interviews.

Table 17

Emergent Themes From Interview Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Factor/Emergent Theme</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
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<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Cross-Section of Members</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared Vision</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<td>Evaluation and Continuous Learning</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other Emergent Themes**

Other themes emerged based off participants’ responses to the interview questions. Unlike the previous 13 themes, these four themes were not directly derived from Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) list of factors they believed affect the success of a collaboration. The four prominent themes that emerged outside of Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) factors from the interview data are power and equity, student-centered, the COVID-19 pandemic, and listening. Each theme was prevalent in both the number of participants who referenced them and in the number of times to which each was referred in the interviews.

**Power/Equity**

Members’ perceptions pertaining to the theme of power and equity was an interesting one. It was referenced by participants 93 times when they responded to the interview questions. Ten of 12 participants alluded to power and/or equity in their responses, but interestingly seven of 12 participants mentioned it only three times or less while the other five participants noted it nine times or more each.
This demonstrates a wide gap in perceptions among participants whether real or perceived. As noted by Vangen and Huxham (2003b), “Individuals often act as if their perceptions of power imbalances are real” (p. 21). Either way, the differences in power need addressed to facilitate a successful interorganizational collaboration. According to Crosby and Bryson (2010), “Cross-sector collaborations are more likely to succeed if leaders build in resources and tactics for dealing with power imbalances” (p. 225). Power and/or equality was alluded to in responses to 12 of 13 questions. Table 18 illustrates these findings.

Table 18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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Power and/or equity was cited most often when participants were asked how Forum members’ behaviors impacted the progress of the Forum. Participant 01 recalled scenarios during the collaboration
when others expressed frustration because they did not believe they had the resources to accomplish some of the goals. Participant 06 described how members’ behaviors impacted the Forum’s progress:

I think there were **some personalities, at times, that dominated discussions**, that wanted to dominate the discussions, because the answers were within them, and they felt perfectly fine **trying to steer something a certain way** whereas…and once again, this goes back to the human dynamics...some people in leadership positions are those that **like to tell you what to do** and others are in positions that like to ask you, “hey, how do we get there?”

Based off his answer, the **power** asserted by certain members controlling and dominating the discussions appeared to be disheartening to Participant 03. Similarly, Participant 07 recognized, “It's at those times when the **dominant personalities have come out** and maybe **some conversations have been stifled or directions may have been changed to benefit the loudest voice in the room.**” Participant 06 also echoed that sentiment when he declared that **“some of the bravado from some of the leadership was off-putting to me.”** In addition, Participant 06 confided, “I think people were aware of various positions that people held in the county that didn't necessarily make it a level playing field for discussion.”

**Power and equity** were also intimated quite a bit when participants were asked to talk more about their experiences collaborating as Forum members. Participant 02 viewed the Forum as a means of closing the gap of perceived **power** between districts and CTCs:

I saw a lot of gain for folks in the career and tech world in particular because again it created an environment where **we were sitting at the same table as the superintendents** and now when the superintendent meet on a weekly basis for the IU through the pandemic or whatever circumstances that are going on whenever the superintendents meet, **we’re now included** in that. That wasn’t the case before. We were looked at differently before. I believe that one of the most significant impacts that the Forum has had specific to career and tech centers is the fact that **CTC directors are now part of more conversations.**

Contrastingly, Participant 06’s perceptions focused on the continued disparity between districts revolving around the physical locations of each district. He shared, “I felt like **we weren't as connected as what some other districts were**… I feel like we weren't as connected as we needed to be.” Finally, regarding the size differential in districts that leads to **inequity** among them, Participant 08 added the following perspective:

[Mine] is a district that kind of sits…I don't want to say that we sit in the background of Westmoreland County because we have a lot to offer…but **we're not the [larger districts], we're not this big, huge district that is out shaking down the trees.** We're a district that does great things
and doesn't need a lot of recognition for doing them. So, *we sit back, and a lot of times a district our size doesn't always get recognized by some of the bigger establishments* in the county.

One issue that the Forum was attempting to address, then, was the perceived disparities in *power* that have historically led to *inequity* among the various districts. As Winer and Ray (1994) purported, “Power is always present and is never equal…we search for *equity*; we acknowledge and value the different types of power each person and organization bring to our joint effort” (p. 33).

**Student-Centered**

The *student-centered* theme emerged from the interview data 49 times and was expressed by nine of 12 participants. Further, the theme appeared in responses to 10 of 13 questions. Table 19 features this data.

**Table 19**

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When explaining what it means to collaborate, Participant 01 spoke of “meeting the needs of all kids.” When Participant 02 described what it means to collaborate, he stated, “Priority number one in education is to create opportunities for our students.” When speaking to his experience collaborating as a member of the Forum, Participant 06 declared, “I always felt that there needed to be more students in the room…I think that would have provided a greater focus for the Forum.” This statement reflects a student-centered mindset. Participant 11 noted that she “firmly believe[s] in the goals of the Forum [and] that’s critical for the benefit of our students,” when describing her experience collaborating as a member of the Forum. A portion of Participant 09’s response, describing his own style of collaboration, surmised, “I think, in education everyone, by and large, is out to do the best for kids in their own way.” Akin to Participant 09, Participant 10 recalled “mov[ing] forward and do[ing] what’s best for kids,” while describing a time when he engaged in collaboration as a Forum member. Explaining why the Forum’s collaboration was successful, Participant 12 commented “that we’re here for the benefit of kids.” All of these responses demonstrate that participants had a student-centered approach when collaborating in the Forum. Persaud and Murphy (2019) argued, “This type of collaborative approach and culture has been linked to gains in school effectiveness and student achievement” (p. 24).

**COVID-19**

*COVID-19* appeared in responses to eight different interview questions. It was referenced by seven of 12 participants 28 different times. Table 20 illustrates this information.

**Table 20**

*COVID-19 Theme by Participant and Question*

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Participants referred to COVID-19 most often when they were asked how the Forum’s structure impacted the progress of the Forum. Mostly, participants viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as a disruptive force. For instance, Participants 02 related the effects of this interference:

*As COVID hit, the structure just completely broke down, and I have no clue where we are at with some of the, some of the major initiatives that were in place as we moved into COVID and stopped meeting regularly... I feel like I’m completely disconnected from the Forum now.*

Participant 08 echoed Participant 02’s thinking: “As the structure became more virtual, I think that the interest, at least on my end as a member of that, has waned a little bit because I haven't had time to focus.” Mostly in agreement, Participant 11 stated, “I think about the in-person versus the online. And I think *in-person was more effective*...not that the online was not, but I’d just say a difference in degree.” However, Participant 09 viewed COVID putting a halt to in-person meetings in a different light: “I think one thing that we learned from COVID is that we *don't necessarily need to do those [meetings] face-to-face.*”

When speaking about personal experiences and a disconnect among members, Participant 04 surmised, “I think that COVID was a big thing...COVID knocked it completely.” Participant 10 was a bit more optimistic regarding the continuous efforts of members to stay engaged. This was demonstrated in
his response detailing his experience collaborating as a member of the Forum during the pandemic:

“people were willing to collaborate, even [during a pandemic], which sometimes doesn't happen because
of the virtual atmosphere of a meeting, or another email to read, or another email attachment within the
email to read.”

Participant 08 summarized the effects of COVID-19 on the interorganizational collaboration
when he explained whether or not he deemed Forum members’ collaboration to be or have been
successful:

I feel like COVID has really been tough on the Westmoreland County Forum just because those
in person interactions have really been so critical and now a lot of things have been virtual over
the course of the last year. I think that has made it more difficult to have those collaborations.
Everybody still tries, but without face-to-face collaboration, it's a lot harder. And I think that’s
one area that when you look at the Forum…COVID kind of hurt those face-to-face
collaborations, which were really critical. And another thing I have found as the year has gone,
people's commitment to it, because of it being virtual, has been more challenging because people
are so busy that if you're doing a virtual meeting, people aren’t as committed as if you actually
have to go there. So, I would say that it has been successful, but as the years have gone it has
become a little more challenging just because of that.

**Listening**

While the researcher understands that listening is a component of communication, the skill and
importance of listening was explicitly mentioned to such an extensive degree that he believed it warranted
being listed as a theme in and of itself. *Listening* was stressed by six participants’ responses to six
different questions a total of 21 times. Table 21 details this information.

**Table 21**

*Listening Theme by Participant and Question*

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A primary reason the researcher deemed *listening* as an emergent theme was that it was often cited in responses given about the most important factor, trait, attribute, or characteristic that makes someone an expert collaborator. For instance, Participant 01 declared, “I think expert collaborators know *when to listen.*” Participant 05 purported, “You were given *two ears and one mouth* for a reason. *You should listen twice as much as you speak,*” as part of his explanation of the most important factor of optimized collaboration. Referencing *listening* skills, Participant 06 stated, "I value people who are *reflective, who can deliberate…they have given [others’ comments] weight before responding.*” Participant 10 believed the most important trait of an expert collaborator was to “*listen with intent.*” Similarly, when highlighting the importance of *active listening* as the most important trait of an expert collaborator, Participant 11 expressed, “someone who is *able to listen.*” According to Emmens (2016), “*Listening to the different voices, and hearing them clearly—especially the quieter voices—is paramount, but doing so requires us to hold back and actively listen* (p. 203).

Based on participants’ responses, they believed the skill of *listening* is clearly important for members to possess when collaborating with others. This aligns with Linden’s (2002) findings: “*When a group meets and discusses goals and strategies, when it looks for win-win opportunities, when it discusses*
what each party hopes to achieve and worries about losing, it’s time to do some very careful listening” (pp. 98-99).

**Document Analysis**

By collecting and analyzing data from existing documents, the researcher had the opportunity to triangulate the data obtained from interviewing participants (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). The researcher collected and analyzed 117 documents including, but not limited to, 28 meeting agendas, 22 monthly updates, 15 meeting minutes, 15 newsletters, five news releases or articles, four documents containing notes from meetings, three results from surveys or responses, three meeting attendance lists, and three flyers containing event information. A list of the documents analyzed can be found in Appendix C.

The vast majority of the documents examined were formulated to communicate information to Forum members and other stakeholders. This aligns with the most oft found theme from the interview data: *open and frequent communication*. Agendas, updates, minutes, newsletters, notes, news releases and articles, etc. were created to keep Forum members and stakeholders informed. The documents contained information about several other themes identified from interview data.

First, the documents delivered an abundance of information about various institutions willing to award grants (e.g., R.K. Mellon Foundation, First Energy Foundation, Grable Foundation, and Westmoreland-Fayette Workforce Investment Board) to help fund assorted Forum initiatives. Additionally, documents, such as the charter declaration, highlighted Forum members’ contributions to the attainment of goals. These communications addressed the theme of *sufficient funds, staff, material, time*. This was the most prevalent theme communicated to Forum members and stakeholders throughout the documents.

*Concrete, attainable goals and objectives* were frequently communicated via Forum documents as well. Tangible outcomes and project goals—various virtual offerings such as virtual pathways, virtual reality tours, virtual career mentorship opportunities, and career snapshots—were highlighted in the documents. These virtual offerings helped the Forum attain some of their goals and objectives of
providing students career opportunities and access to local businesses. Informing Forum members of activities and opportunities coincided with another theme, *members see collaboration as in their self-interest.* The attainment of Forum goals and objectives benefited individual members since they created additional opportunities for their students at local levels. Many of the virtual career offerings serve as artifacts for each districts’ PA Future Ready Index, thus not only benefiting students, but also contributing directly to school progress measures.

There was also communication pertaining to *mutual understanding, respect, and trust* contained in the documents. Forum members were recognized and thanked for their support and patience over the course of the pandemic. The *skilled leadership* provided by some of the Forum members was also acknowledged in the documents. For instance, the *skilled leadership* of two members was recognized as one passed the title of chairperson to the other.

Many of the documents, such as monthly newsletters, also served to keep the stakeholders engaged with Forum activities. The documents also contained information about a LinkedIn page and social media plan, created with the intention of keeping the Forum visible to other stakeholders and organizations. Thus, some communications in the documents were devoted to *engaging stakeholders.*

*Appropriate cross-section of members* was also recognized in existing documents. Information was disseminated to Forum members about how the coordinator of the Forum plans to use contacts gained to set up strategic outreach meetings with local businesses, attempting to have them become part of the Forum. Businesses that have accepted and are participating in the virtual reality career snapshots, as well as those businesses who are targeted for the initiative, were also listed and communicated to Forum members. Additionally, there was information contained within documents that apprized Forum members about plans to target new school districts for the Forum. Current members of the Forum, including 16 regional school districts, three career and technology centers, and five colleges and universities, were also recognized in the documents.

Additional themes were woven throughout the documents as well. For example, the *shared vision* of a highly qualified workforce that meets the needs of the regional economy by bridging the gap between
education and industry was also communicated in documents that were analyzed, such as the charter declaration and various newsletters. Next, documents containing survey results and participant responses demonstrated evaluation and continuous learning. Members were able to analyze the data embedded within these documents to assess what they were doing and adjust as necessary based on the acquired information. Further, agendas and minutes from Forum meetings showcased that members share a stake in both process and outcome through multiple layers of participation. Documents referenced Forum members with various titles sharing their input and contributing their efforts to both procedures and results. One example of where this was found was in documents referring to the three subcommittees contained within the Forum. Appropriate pace of development was also addressed in documents. For instance, regarding the R.K. Mellon grant, the decision to forego a submission deadline and apply through the rolling application window was communicated to members. The pace decided upon allowed for better consultation and gave members more time to better shape the scope of the project.

**Summary of Data Findings**

This chapter detailed the findings of this qualitative, phenomenological study that sought to identify participants’ perceptions of the factors they believed to be most important for the success of the interorganizational collaboration with which they were involved, how proficient members of the collaboration were for each of those factors, and how much success was experienced within the collaboration. Participants were asked 13 guiding interview questions relating to three overarching research questions: (1) Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?; (2) How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?; and (3) Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?

The researcher identified 13 emergent themes regarding the study’s three research questions. Some themes materialized for more than one research question. Eight themes were identified for the first research question: open and frequent communication; mutual respect, understanding, and trust; sufficient
funds, staff, materials, time; engaged stakeholders; skilled leadership; members share a stake in both process and outcome; multiple layers of participation; and appropriate pace of development. Seven themes were identified for Research Question 2: open and frequent communication; mutual respect, understanding, and trust; members see collaboration as in their self-interest; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; engaged stakeholders; skilled leadership; and appropriate cross-section of members. Lastly, seven themes were identified for the third research question: open and frequent communication; members see collaboration as in their self-interest; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; concrete, attainable goals and objectives; appropriate cross-section of members; shared vision; and evaluation and continuous learning. Table 22 illustrates the emergent themes for each research question.

### Table 22

**Emergent Themes for Research Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 1</th>
<th>Research Question 2</th>
<th>Research Question 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
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<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest</td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
<td>Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
<td>Appropriate Cross-Section of Members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome</td>
<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
<td>Shared Vision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple Layers of Participation</td>
<td>Appropriate Cross-Section of Members</td>
<td>Evaluation and Continuous Learning</td>
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<td>Appropriate Pace of Development</td>
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The researcher identified four other themes not directly derived from Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) list of factors they believed affect the success of a collaboration based on the interview data:
power and equity, student-centered, COVID-19, and listening. The first, power and equity, was referenced by 10 of 12 participants 93 times in their responses. The theme of power and equity arose in participants’ responses to 12 of 13 questions. Another theme that emerged from participants’ responses was student-centered. Student-centered was mentioned or referenced by nine of 12 participants on 49 occasions. Information about being student-centered could be found in responses to 10 of the 13 questions. Next, COVID-19 was oft mentioned by participants when responding to the interview questions. The theme of COVID-19 emerged in seven of 12 participants’ responses to eight different interview questions for a total of 28 times during interviews. Lastly, listening, as a specific part of communication, was also voiced by participants a number of times throughout interviews. The importance of listening was stressed by six participants out of 12. Responses asserting the significance of listening for a successful collaboration occurred 21 times over six different questions.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This study served to present perceptions of interorganizational collaboration through the personal experiences and perspectives of respondents who comprise an interorganizational group and engage in the process of collaborating across their professional, organizational, and sectoral lines. This chapter concludes the study with the following components: (a) summary, (b) discussions of key findings, (c) conclusions, (d) recommendations for practice and future research, and (e) final thoughts.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the collaboration among members of a county consortium in their efforts to better align business with K-12 and postsecondary education to improve workforce development and the economic outlook of the county and surrounding area. The more educators learn about behavior that positively affects interorganizational collaboration, the more equipped they may be to solve problems, make change, and improve student achievement by displaying the attributes, traits, and characteristics identified as critical for productive work. Collaboration is an ambiguous term, and others in different fields of study use synonyms for collaboration, such as teamwork, working together, and cooperation, in literature. This can further confuse readers. The following research questions were answered:

Research Question 1: Which attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?

Research Question 2: How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?

Research Question 3: Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?
To prepare for the study, the researcher first reviewed and presented a summary of current literature related to collaboration—in general and specifically applicable to education. Noted throughout the review of literature are indications of and influences on successful collaboration, as well as information about the factors that sustain or hinder collaboration. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 laid the foundation for this qualitative, phenomenological study that attempted to discover the factors that participants deem critical for their interorganizational collaboration’s success.

A phenomenological approach was utilized since the lived, interactive experiences of the respondents collaborating with other Forum members shaped their answers to interview questions. After obtaining informed consent, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 respondents who met his criteria for participating in the study: (a) being actively involved as a member of the Forum, (b) collaborating routinely per involvement in the Forum, (c) serving as K-12 educators, and (d) being perceived as leaders in the field of education.

Information obtained from interviews was the primary source of data for the study, while documents pertaining to the Forum were the secondary data source for the study. The researcher transcribed the interviews and added notes and memos; then he sent transcripts to respondents for review. Essential steps were taken to help assure accuracy. For instance, through member checking, respondents verified accuracy of the information to ensure that the transcript communicated their perspectives exactly. Additionally, to provide inter-rater reliability, an experienced second coder verified that the themes and frequency of their identified occurrence were accurate. The researcher also utilized memo writing and journaling to guard against potential bias. Various key points emerged as answers to each research question. This information is discussed below.

**Discussion of Key Findings**

The researcher was able to answer all three research questions in this study based on the data obtained primarily from interviews. Eight key findings directly related to Research Question 1 emerged, while seven key findings directly related to both Research Questions 2 and 3 emerged, respectively. A total of 13 key findings emerged from the data corresponding to the three overarching research questions;
several were prominent for more than one research question. In addition to the 13 key findings directly associated with factors that researchers such as Mattessich and Johnson (2018) believed affect the success of a collaboration, four additional key findings emerged from the interview data (power and equity, student-centered, the COVID-19 pandemic, and listening). All 17 key findings will be reviewed in subsequent sections of the chapter.

**Discussion of Key Findings for Research Question One**

The first research question was drafted to investigate the attributes, traits, and characteristics (factors) respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success.

Regarding Research Question 1, eight themes emerged as key findings (open and frequent communication; mutual respect, understanding, and trust; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; engaged stakeholders; skilled leadership; members share a stake in both process and outcome; multiple layers of participation; and appropriate pace of development). In this case, the emergent themes directly serve to answer the first research question as they were also the factors that respondents perceive to be most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success.

**Open and Frequent Communication**

Respondents cited *open and frequent communication* as the factor most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. This finding is important to the aim of the study because collaboration, in general, is impossible without communication. “Working together” is a common thread among prominent researchers’ definitions of collaboration (Barfield, 2016; Huxham, 1996; Straus, 2002; Winer & Ray, 1994). To work together requires communication; hence, one might surmise that an interorganizational collaboration’s success hinges largely upon group members’ willingness and ability to interact with each other. Upon learning this finding, Forum members can reflect upon their respective communication skills and attempt to improve them for the betterment of the group. Additionally, Forum members may also want to assess the clarity of their written words. As noted in Chapter 3, data was sourced via an analysis of documents about or developed by Forum members. Valuing *open and frequent communication*, Forum members may wish to audit the documents they draft to ascertain whether their
writing accurately conveys the messages they wish to send to each other and to community members. Often cited as critical to a collaboration’s success (Gray, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Mattessich & Johnson, 2018), open and honest communication, in general, is valued by Forum members and likely others striving to collaborate effectively. Even though the finding is not generalizable, others wishing to organize a collaboration or to nurture increased communication among teammates might note this finding and decide to sharpen their own communication skills as a result.

**Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust**

Respondents referred to *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* as the second most relevant factor for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. This key factor, identified via participants’ responses to interview questions, clearly linked to *open and frequent communication*. Respondents often spoke of how important the skill of *listening* is to understand others’ perspectives. Specifically, they reported feeling respected when they thought others truly heard what they had to say. To respondents, *listening actively* is a hallmark of effective communication and a bridge for building trust. Stronger relationships among members developed because of their frequent communication, and a sense of *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* blossomed accordingly. Respondents perceived that trust in each other was an integral reason for the success they experienced as Forum members. Researchers such as Austin et al. (2000) and Porterfield and Carnes (2014) also noted the importance of this key finding.

**Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time**

*Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* was identified by respondents as another key factor deemed important for the Forum’s success. Many respondents noted the difficulty they experienced while attempting to divvy their time among obligations, including their participation in the Forum. Forum members were able to combat this issue by hiring a full-time coordinator once they perceived a need for someone to fill this position. The coordinator was fully dedicated to the Forum’s efforts, thus easing members’ burdens by helping them to prioritize responsibilities and communicate information. Respondents also reported that the coordinator helped members to structure meetings in a way that maximized their time together. Members’ realization of the need to hire a coordinator to help them
prioritize their work aligns with their recognition that having sufficient time to collaborate is critical for an interorganizational collaboration’s success. Additionally, funding through grants was often highlighted in Forum updates and newsletters—documents analyzed for the study. The multiple references to grants indicate that Forum members regard funding as important for their group’s success. Respondents’ assertions were backed by researchers who also stressed the importance of a collaboration having sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time in order to succeed (Anderson, 2019; Babiak & Thibault, 2009).

**Engaged Stakeholders**

According to respondents, collaborating with engaged stakeholders is a key to success. Respondents identified working together to establish a shared vision and collective goals as important for engagement. They spoke of disengaged colleagues who failed to share thoughts during meetings or willingly assume responsibilities. While such behaviors may come to mind when one thinks of a disengaged colleague (Porterfield and Carnes (2014) echoed this in their research as well.), respondents also referenced another form of disengagement: not listening. According to respondents, an engaged Forum member is one who listens actively so that his/her comments and questions serve to unite members for a common cause. In sum, respondents perceive engaged stakeholders as those who dive deeply into the collective work.

**Skilled Leadership**

Skilled leadership was also named as a factor relevant for the Forum’s success. Respondents reported that the skilled leaders among them have an ability to motivate others to invest in the Forum’s efforts, willingly and fully. Researchers like Emmens (2016) and Littlefield et al. (2013) expressed the importance of having skilled leadership within a collaboration for it to succeed, and respondents concurred.

**Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome**

Respondents identified members share a stake in both process and outcome as a key factor when they answered interview questions pertaining to Research Question 1. Respondents communicated that they felt most engaged when they shared a stake in the work, as well as in the process by which the work
was produced. In this case, being identified as a Forum member—simply to read one’s name among a list of colleagues’ names, for example—did not evoke a feeling of accomplishment. Instead, respondents argued that, to feel productive or successful, they needed to share in the process of working collaboratively. These feelings, in turn, led to a stronger collaborative effort that optimized the chances of the group’s success. This finding links to researchers’ assertions that to separate the collaborative work from the collaborative body proves challenging and a reason why the term “collaboration” can mean a tangible body or an intangible process (Winer & Ray, 1994).

Multiple Layers of Participation

Multiple layers of participation was also cited repeatedly by respondents as a key factor for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. Respondents spoke of multiple layers of participation in a few ways. For instance, respondents referenced leaders from varying organizations within the Forum’s three subcommittees. To them, maintaining a layer of leadership at the lower levels of committee ensured that each part of the Forum contributed to the whole. Respondents also spoke of various Forum members who held different positions and titles in their base organizations. Some members were regarded as leaders by title, while others without titles connoting leadership assumed leadership-related responsibilities more readily due to the nature of their work and/or personal attributes. Respondents believed that the Forum’s success was partly due to having members who led and participated at various levels. Winer and Ray (1994) communicated that having the perspectives of people from multiple levels could be indispensable for a successful collaboration, and respondents found this assertion to be true.

Appropriate Pace of Development

The last key finding respondents perceived as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success was appropriate pace of development. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) revealed that a pace viewed as favorable by members can help lead to a successful collaboration. Respondents’ answers reflected this point when they spoke about how achieving short term goals helped to keep them engaged for the purpose of accomplishing long-term goals. Dr. Mary Margaret Kerr terms this action “closing open circles” (personal communication, March 24, 2022), and reports that individuals who
complete shorter-term, less involved tasks often sustain the stamina to accept long-term, more complex challenges. However, the researcher discovered that, for some respondents, maintaining a balance matters, for they reported feeling disengaged when the work progressed more slowly than they had anticipated. In this regard, an “appropriate pace of development” might ultimately be different for each member.

**Discussion of Key Findings for Research Question Two**

Seven key findings emerged from the data related to the second research question: *open and frequent communication; mutual respect, understanding, and trust; members see collaboration as in their self-interest; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; engaged stakeholders; skilled leadership; and appropriate cross-section of members*. To properly answer Research Question 2 (How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?), the emergent themes had to be cross-referenced with the themes identified in respondents’ answers to the first research question since those were the factors they initially identified. Five of the themes: *open and frequent communication; mutual respect, understanding, and trust; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; engaged stakeholders; and skilled leadership* arose out of respondents’ answers to both research questions, thus the researcher concluded that respondents perceive that Forum members’ have high levels of proficiency for each of the five factors. The remaining two themes that surfaced from the data corresponding to the second research question were *members see collaboration as in their self-interest* and *appropriate cross-section of members*. Based on the data, the researcher determined that respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency to be high for both factors (each appeared more than 10 times), but the respondents did not perceive them to be as relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success as the other five. That leaves three themes: *members share a stake in both process and outcome, multiple layers of participation, and appropriate pace of development* that materialized from the first research question’s data, however, did not emerge from respondents’ answers stemming from the second research question. To the researcher, this signified that the factors were perceived by respondents to be relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success yet,
were not perceived by respondents to be at a high level of proficiency among Forum members. *Appropriate pace of development and members share a stake in both process and outcome* were referenced 10 and 9 times respectively for Research Question 2, hence placed at a medium level (5-10 times). The researcher concluded that respondents perceive Forum members’ level of proficiency to be low for *multiple layers of participation* since it only appeared three times (less than 5 times) in responses to Research Question 2.

**Open and Frequent Communication**

The first key finding that corresponds with Research Question 2 is *open and frequent communication*. Respondents cited *open and frequent communication* to be a factor that Forum members were highly proficient with. This factor was oft mentioned by respondents both when they described expert collaborators within the group and when they described their own style when it came to collaborating. Respondents also perceived *open and frequent communication* to assist with other important factors for a successful collaboration such as *mutual respect, understanding, and trust* and *engaged stakeholders*. So, respondents seemed to agree with researchers in their belief that *open and frequent communication* is crucial to achieve a collaboration’s goals (Gray, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Mattessich & Johnson, 2018).

**Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust**

Respondents also perceived Forum members to be highly proficient when it comes to *mutual respect, understanding, and trust*. Respondents viewed several Forum members as leaders who had the ability to *listen* intently to others’ ideas and view them as contributing members of the Forum. According to respondents, Forum members felt valued and appreciated as a result. Understanding the viewpoint of others leads to respectful interaction and a semblance of trust among members. The information from respondents’ answers embodies Emmens (2016) findings that if members’ opinions hold equal value, it will lead to a culture of respect.
Another key finding emerging from responses to Research Question 2 was that respondents viewed Forum members as having a high level of proficiency regarding *sufficient funds, staff, materials, time*. Forum members who respondents regarded as strong collaborators consistently demonstrated allocating or searching for funding, involving staff from their base organization, and contributing their time and effort to benefit the group. Reviewed Forum documents also exhibited a great deal of effort was put toward searching for grants and other funding to be allocated towards the ongoing progress of the Forum. Researchers have long recognized the amount of time, effort, and commitment it takes for a collaboration to succeed (Emmens, 2016; Rubin, 2009; Weiss, 1987).

**Engaged Stakeholders**

*Engaged stakeholders* was yet another key finding that emanated from respondents’ answers to Research Question 2. Respondents perceived most Forum members to have a high level of proficiency regarding being engaged with the work of the Forum. Respondents did acknowledge the lack of engagement that some members displayed as well. Members were perceived to be engaged if they demonstrated commitment to the work and gave their time to help work to benefit the group. Involving and engaging members for a collaboration to succeed has been reflected in researchers’ findings as well (Persaud & Murphy, 2019; Rubin, 2009; Straus, 2002).

**Skilled Leadership**

Another key finding, *skilled leadership*, was the last to surface in respondents’ replies to questions pertaining to both Research Questions 1 and 2. Thus, respondents believed Forum members to have a high level of proficiency regarding *skilled leadership*. Skilled leaders were identified to be those who *actively listened* to other members, thereby demonstrating understanding and respect for them. This, in turn, validated other members’ place within the Forum and encouraged active engagement. Skilled leaders within the Forum were also reported to exhibit a positive attitude and lead by example. All the attributes, traits, and characteristics of skilled leaders enabled them to develop relationships with others.
Ultimately, this assisted with the success of the Forum. Researchers stressed the importance of having skilled leaders in a collaboration for it to be successful (Emmens, 2019; Patterson, 2015; Rubin, 2009).

**Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest**

Members see collaboration as in their self-interest is another key finding stemming from respondents’ answers to the second research question. Respondents perceived Forum members as being highly proficient of having the ability to understand that the goals of the Forum mesh with their own organization’s interests. The self-interests were viewed in a positive manner as they were viewed to benefit students. Researchers recognized that members of collaborations often work towards a common goal, but keep their self-interests in mind (Bryson et al., 2006; Rubin, 2009; Winer & Ray, 1994). The members of the Forum were no exception.

**Appropriate Cross-Section of Members**

The last key finding stemming from respondents’ answers corresponding to the second research question was appropriate cross-section of members. Respondents noted the varying types of base organizations that Forum came from when explaining the high level of proficiency for this key finding. Members’ distinct backgrounds and experiences helped lead to success since they were able to apply their combined knowledge to help solve issues and accomplish common goals. Bryson et al. (2006) recognized that when members of cross-sector collaborations pull their resources their efforts are more likely to be successful.

**Discussion of Key Findings for Research Question Three**

Seven key findings (open and frequent communication; members see collaboration as in their self-interest; sufficient funds, staff, materials, time; concrete attainable goals and objectives; appropriate cross-section of members; shared vision; and evaluation and continuous learning) emerged from respondents’ answers regarding the third research question (Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?).
Nine of 12 (75%) respondents distinctly perceived that they had experienced success as a result of being a member of the Forum based on their answers to Research Question 3. Regarding the other three respondents: one appeared to convey he experienced success as a member of a smaller subcommittee, but did not experience as much success as he would have liked in the larger group, one leaned towards the side of not experiencing nearly as much success as he would have liked to through his involvement in the Forum, but did experience small pockets of success but not on a large-scale level, and one did not describe the efforts as a total failure, but also did not perceive it to be a success overall.

**Open and Frequent Communication**

When speaking about the levels of success that respondents had experienced as Forum members, *open and frequent communication* was frequently voiced. Respondents said that *open and frequent communication* was a leading factor for the success they had experienced during their involvement with the Forum. Several examples of discussions and negotiations among Forum members were cited in their answers. Like respondents, researchers have also proclaimed the importance of communication regarding the success of collaborative efforts (Anderson, 2019; Maxwell, 2011; Rubin, 2009).

**Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest**

A second key finding emerging from answers geared towards Research Question 3 was that *members see collaboration as in their self-interest*. Respondents regularly mentioned this finding as a factor that led to the amount of success they had experienced as a Forum member up to this point. Several instances were cited as to how their involvement in the Forum has been tied to their self-interests that ultimately benefited students. Researchers, such as Winer and Ray (1994), have reported how members’ self-interests can have positive effects on the success of a collaboration if members are open and honest about them.

**Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time**

Respondents identified the importance of *sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time* to the success they had experienced through their involvement with the Forum. Respondents recalled this key finding when they spoke about their experiences with other members in the Forum. They recognized members’
contributions and various resources each brought as contributing to the Forum’s success. Researchers also recognized the value of working alongside others who contributed resources to achieve results in interorganizational collaborations that may not have otherwise been fulfilled (Emmens, 2016; Malin & Hackmann, 2019).

**Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives**

Another key finding that respondents identified as having assisted them in experiencing success as a Forum member was having *concrete, attainable goals and objectives*. Respondents realized the importance of having tangible, common goals that could be obtained through the combined efforts of members. Respondents referenced this finding when describing their participation as a member of the Forum and when they detailed the successes stemming from the Forum. The *concrete, attainable goals and objectives* identified by respondents coincided with positive student outcomes. Researchers, like the respondents, discussed group members working together to achieve common goals to benefit all involved (Davis et al., 2018; Linden, 2002, Littlefield et al., 2013).

**Appropriate Cross-Section of Members**

Respondents identified having an *appropriate cross-section of members* when speaking of the success they have experienced as a member of the Forum. Respondents identified members from various base organizations, such as K-12 education, business and industry, post-secondary education, nonprofit organizations, as bringing invaluable insights they had gained through their experiences for the benefit of the group’s success. Researchers argued that a diverse group of members from varying organizations is crucial to a collaboration’s success (Anderson, 2019; Porterfield & Carnes, 2014; Rubin, 2009).

**Shared Vision**

Yet another key finding that emerged from respondents’ answers to Research Question 3 was *shared vision*. *Shared vision* was identified as a factor that was integral to respondents’ experiences of success as Forum members. Respondents noted that a *shared vision* allowed Forum members to focus and work towards their common goals. As Marquardt (2011) suggested, a “shared vision provides the focus and energy for learning” (p. 62).
**Evaluation and Continuous Learning**

The final key finding that arose from respondents’ answers to the third researcher question was *evaluation and continuous learning*. Respondents perceived this as a factor that contributed to the success that they had experienced through their involvement with the interorganizational collaboration under study. Respondents stressed the significance of learning through both data collection and each other to improve results and to garner success. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) professed the importance of learning and improving from established processes to measure a group’s effectiveness.

**Discussion of Additional Key Findings**

In addition to the 13 key findings that emerged from the interview data, four others that were not directly related to Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) factors they believe affect the success of a collaboration materialized from the data: *power and equity, student-centered, the COVID-19 pandemic,* and *listening*. These key findings prevalent in answers throughout the interviews are discussed below.

**Power and Equity**

Respondents’ feedback during interviews reflected perceptions of an imbalance of *power* among Forum members. The theme of *power and equity* emerged through the analysis of interview data. The issues of *power and/or equity* were raised a staggering 93 times by respondents. Equally astonishing, only five of 12 respondents accounted for 86 of those references. This aligns with Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) observation that “it is often easier to be aware of power imbalances when you are the party with less power” (p. 50). Most of the allusions or direct remarks about *power and equity* were generated by respondents from smaller districts or organizations that may not have had the same resources as larger member districts. For example, respondents referenced both individual members attempting to dominate discussions and steer the direction of the Forum as well as the disparity in member districts’ resources. Regarding the former, Participant 03 recalled, “I think there were some *personalities, at times, that dominated discussions*” when answering how he perceived Forum members’ behaviors impacted its progress. Concerning the latter, Participant 08 relayed, “*we’re not this big, huge district that is out shaking down the trees*” when speaking of her experiences collaborating as a member of the Forum.
Concurrently, Participant 06’s comment when he was explaining how he knew if the collaboration was successful tied the two together:

*I'm not sure every school district in the room was valued on the same level as others. I think there was a stigma, you know, some of the smaller districts may not have had enough weight behind their voice to make it push. I felt like some of the larger districts may have dominated some of that conversation.*

However, respondents from larger districts with ample resources also acknowledged the perceived presence of *power imbalances* and *inequity* among members. For instance, when explaining whether he deemed Forum members’ collaboration to be successful Participant 07 astutely recognized:

*I think that's probably something we should have worked county-wide with other school districts, not just with the districts maybe that have the same resources that we do. We have more resources than probably two-thirds of the other districts in the Forum.*

Additionally, existing Forum documents that were analyzed, such as the Forum’s bylaws, were written in a manner to attempt to make interactions equitable. Despite this, several respondents did not perceive the practice to align with what was written in the documents.

Mattessich and Johnson (2018) acknowledge *power* imbalances in Chapter 5 of the third edition of *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*. They readily examine navigating the *power* dynamics that are sure to occur whenever collaboration takes place. Mattessich and Johnson (2018) disclosed that “Power dynamics in cross-sector collaboration can affect the way issues are defined and addressed, thereby creating a cascading impact on all of the activities that a collaborative undertakes” (p. 50). There is a plethora of additional research pointing out *power imbalances*, inequality, and *inequity* present in collaborative efforts, along with the importance of recognizing each to maximize success. For example, Winer and Ray (1994) accepted, “Power is rarely equal among members of a collaboration” (p. 25). In addition, Vangen and Huxham (2003b) recognized that “as power differences come into play, participants frequently are left feeling vulnerable and reluctant to trust” (p. 22). Emmens (2016) noted, “Power, especially when unevenly distributed or inappropriately wielded, corrupts collaboration” (p. 88).

The researcher is unsure of why Mattessich and Johnson (2018) did not include the recognition of *power and equity* among the list of success factors for collaborations. The researcher suggests that it is, in
fact, a significant factor regarding the success of a collaboration based off the data from his study. Ways of addressing and combating *power and equity* imbalances should be fully vetted by members of collaborations (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). Winer and Ray (1994) divulged, “If we want our collaboration to be successful, we must openly claim the power we bring; be aware of our own corruptibility; refuse to deny our power; and resolve any conflicts that grow from the use of power” (p. 34). Further, Emmens (2016) declared, “Fundamentally, both generosity and humility have a great deal to do with power, and our individual attitudes toward power determine how we act or behave in a collaborative situation” (p. 78).

**Student-Centered**

Since the researcher interviewed K-12 members of the Forum, it was not surprising that *student-centered* goals were frequently mentioned and/or referenced by the respondents. It was highlighted by nine of 12 respondents and appeared in responses to 10 of 13 questions. This key finding surfaced a total of 49 times in respondents’ answers. Thus, most respondents had a *student-centered* mindset whether at their base organizations or as Forum members. *Student-centered* could fit as a subtheme under *shared vision* since it is often part of a district’s mission and/or vision statements and also a primary focus of the Forum as well.

What was surprising, though, was the lack of student stakeholders. Participant 06 pointed this out when explaining his point of view on whether he perceived the Forum to be successful. Participant 06 expressed, “Again, when you're collaborating with stakeholders, I thought that *there should have been maybe more student representation in the room*, for those kids.” He reiterated his belief when speaking to his experiences of collaborating as a Forum member:

I always felt that *there needed to be more students in the room*. Kids will surprise the daylights out of you when you give them the opportunity to speak in front of adults. I think sometimes they’re dismissed relatively quickly. And maybe that’s just with secondary student experience where they’re capable of making decisions, they're capable of adding input. I think that that would have provided a greater focus for the Forum. Not just a token student here or there, but *where you had actual student leadership involved* in that, where it was meaningful.
If the goals of the Forum are to benefit students, then it would logically follow that students should share a stake in the process and outcomes.

**COVID-19**

To report key findings without mentioning the impact of COVID-19 on Forum members’ work would be negligent considering how the nation’s response to the virus changed the method by which individuals communicated for nearly one year; to collaborate means to communicate. Numerous respondents mentioned COVID-19 when discussing their experiences as collaborators. In sum, COVID-19 was referenced 28 times by seven respondents as they responded to eight interview questions. Most respondents viewed COVID-19 as a negative force and detailed how the pandemic halted face-to-face meetings, thereby causing them to feel disconnected with Forum members they saw in person regularly prior to the pandemic. Additionally, respondents claimed that, due to the changes as a result of navigating life during a pandemic, the Forum’s progress towards fulfilling its mission was halted. Throughout their responses to questions, respondents peppered their explanations of experiences with phrases like, “up until COVID,” “prior to COVID,” or, “until COVID.” What followed respondents’ use of such phrases was a clear delineation between how they attacked their work thereafter, for the pandemic marked a shift in the manner in which they worked, as well as the amount of progress they made. Having to take the time to find creative ways to continue with the work resulted in the work needing to be halted temporarily. For example, all respondents needed to learn how to use technology like Zoom or Google to continue meeting before they were able to meet. And, once they met, they needed to develop some semblance of comfort interacting with colleagues in a virtual setting before they felt secure to share their thoughts with those on screen.

**Listening**

Listening is an important component of communication. Half of the respondents explicitly referenced the importance of listening skills for a total of 21 different times when answering the interview questions. So, while the researcher understands that listening is a component of communication, and thus could have been a subtheme of open and frequent communication, the researcher believed the skill and
importance of *listening* needed to be featured as a standalone key finding based on the responses. The ability to *actively listen* to others was frequently voiced as a primary characteristic of an expert collaborator. Others want to be heard, contribute, and feel valued. *Actively listening* to them, regardless of their title, is a fundamental way for that to occur. This builds positive relationships which, in turn, leads to a culture of respect. This will ultimately lead to greater success in an interorganizational collaboration.

**Conclusions**

The 12 participants who agreed to serve as respondents for this study concur with experts’ findings, for among their responses to interview questions about successful collaborations were allusions to the factors discussed in Chapter 2. The study’s three overarching research questions with key conclusions for each are merged in Table 23.

**Table 23**

*Answers to Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Key Conclusions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1: Which attributes, traits, and characteristics do respondents perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success?</td>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time</td>
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<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
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<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Multiple Layers of Participation</td>
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<td>Appropriate Pace of Development</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Research Question 2: How do respondents perceive Forum members’ levels of proficiency for each attribute, trait, and characteristic they identified?</th>
<th>Factors Respondents Identified in Both RQ 1 and RQ 2</th>
<th>Factors Respondents Identified in RQ 1, but not RQ 2</th>
<th>Factors Respondents Identified in RQ 2, but not RQ 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open and Frequent Communication: High (23)</td>
<td>Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome: High (26)</td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as Being in Their Self-Interest: High (25)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time: High (22)</td>
<td>Multiple Layers of Participation: Low (3)</td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as Being in Their Self-Interest: High (25)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate Pace of Development: Medium (10)</td>
<td>Members See Collaboration as Being in Their Self-Interest: High (25)</td>
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Research Question 3: Based on their perceived levels of proficiency, to what extent have respondents experienced success when involved in the interorganizational collaboration under study?

Participant 01: If we’re really going to measure the success of this endeavor, of this partnership, of this collaborative, we really need to find ways to follow our students throughout time to see where they end up and what they’re doing. Until we do that, we really can’t measure the success. I think the reason that it was successful was... And so, from that standpoint, it was really successful.

Participant 02: I personally believe that the Forum has had many successes. I believe it was successful for many of the reasons I already stated.

Participant 03: Those working groups, I thought were productive and collaborative, but I think sometime...and listen, I think the big group is more you have to get information out to everybody, so to that end, that was okay. But the smaller groups is more where the production had taken place. It provided a variety of different collaborative opportunities, some that I found productive, some that I found not so productive.

Participant 04: I’d say the Forum as a whole...I don’t know if I can point to a lot of big successes as a whole. I can point to some specifically with the district in working with other businesses and business partners, but I think that’s probably an area where the Forum hasn’t shared as much of any other successes that are happening. So, that’s where I think there were just pockets of success versus wholesale success with every district that was showing up or with every company that was showing up.

Participant 05: So, I would say that it’s very successful. Everybody has a unique set of experiences that they draw from and what’s nice to see is to identify some commonalities or things, in general, that have been successful so you can learn from other people’s mistakes and successes. It’s non-competitive too. It’s not as if one person or one
<table>
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<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Key Conclusions</th>
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<tr>
<td>organization is trying to outdo the other. It’s about collaborating.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 06</td>
<td>No. Not to the degree that which I think of it could have been successful. Yeah, so, I wouldn't call it a complete failure, but I wouldn't call it an absolute success either. I think the success was bringing people together. I think where the lack of success came in was we didn't have the follow-through to move beyond that step to the degree at which I think it needed to happen across the county for memberships.</td>
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<td>Participant 07</td>
<td>So, overall, I would say that the Forum has been a successful collaboration. I think that overall, the Forum’s collaboration has been successful because anytime you can get 20 groups of people together and talk, it has been successful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 08</td>
<td>So, I would say for the most part, the collaboration among Forum members... I would deem it to be successful. because there were great things that came out of those meetings. So, I think that that shows that the collaboration was successful. So, I would say that it has been successful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 09</td>
<td>I do think that it was successful. I would not say at all that it was unsuccessful.</td>
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<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>I believe that Forum member’s interactions have been very successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>I do deem the collaboration of the Forum to be successful. So, what makes the Forum’s collaboration successful is the fact that it's not just educators. I think the Forum’s collaboration is successful when we’re looking at what are the goals. So, to me, it is successful, but requires the ongoing focus on common goals and giving our time and effort to keep it a priority.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 12</td>
<td>Well, the simplest evidence, I would say, of the collaboration’s success is that we’re still going.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Subjective interpretation of data is substantiated by the researcher’s participation in the field and subject of the study.
Via an analysis of these findings, the researcher imparts his overarching knowledge of collaboration as a phenomenon and presents suggestions to school leaders who wish to serve as members of interorganizational collaborations that solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) plaguing public education.

**Defining Collaboration**

Upon a careful review of current literature, the researcher learned that collaboration is abstract and cannot be defined universally because the phenomenon is largely situational (Davis et al., 2018). Seemingly, “collaboration” means something unique to each team member. However, for the purposes of this study, the researcher elected to note commonalities more so than disparities.

Several commonalities exist among participants’ definitions of collaboration—perhaps because, as Forum members, they share experiences that shaped their definitions. To those striving to develop a skilled workforce in Westmoreland County and the surrounding region, to collaborate means to work together to accomplish a shared goal with shared resources. The similarities among participants’ definitions of collaboration parallel the similarities among definitions of collaboration reported in the research. Both participants and researchers acknowledge that, regarding solving complex problems, collaboration is critical (Schruijer, 2020). Furthermore, regarding collaborating productively, participants and researchers agree that team members need to approach their interactions deliberately, strategically, and with purpose (Straus, 2002).

**Factors Leading to Successful Collaboration**

Literature about interorganizational collaboration—as well as collaboration, in general—is filled with references to the kinds of interactions among group mates that promote fruitful work. Among the numerous reasons for an interorganizational collaboration’s success are factors, such as (but not limited to):

- Members’ open, honest, and frequent communication to develop a sense of trust among colleagues (Plowfield et al., 2005; Porterfield & Carnes, 2014);
- Members’ motivation to collaborate as related to their self-interests (Rubin, 2009; Winer & Ray, 1994);
• Possessing and expending adequate time, funds, and resources to accomplish established goals (Connolly & James, 2006; Gray, 1985);
• Ensuring that a cross-section of members, who represent all stakeholder groups, comprise the team (Bryson et al., 2015; Crosby & Bryson, 2010);
• A skilled leader’s ability to integrate individual’s ideas to develop a common vision for the team (Barton & Quinn, 2001; Selsky & Parker, 2005); and,
• Members’ encouragement to collaborate as they continue to learn and grow (Austin et al., 2000; Persaud & Murphy, 2019).

During this study, the participants cited each factor—if not specifically, then by sharing enough information to lead the researcher to conclude that they were, indeed, referencing the same factors discussed in literature. Table 24 presents an alignment between the factors for successful collaboration mentioned most often throughout participants’ responses to interview questions and the researchers whose findings support participants’ perspectives.

Table 24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Factors for Successful Collaboration Linked to Research</th>
<th>Researchers Who Supported Participants’ Perspectives</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factors Frequently Cited by Participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Open and Frequent Communication | Anderson (2019)  
|                                  | Maxwell (2011)  
|                                  | Plowfield et al. (2005)  
|                                  | Porterfield and Carnes (2014)  |
| Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Trust | Anderson (2019)  
|                                          | Austin et al. (2000)  
|                                          | Emmens (2016)  
|                                          | Porterfield and Carnes (2014)  |
| Members See Collaboration as in Their Self-Interest | Rubin (2009)  
|                                                    | Vangen and Huxham (2003b)  
|                                                    | Winer and Ray (1994)  |
| Sufficient Funds, Staff, Materials, Time | Anderson (2019)  
|                                                    | Babiak and Thibault (2009)  
|                                                    | Connolly and James (2006)  
<p>|                                                    | Gray (1985)  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Frequently Cited by Participants</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Stakeholders</td>
<td>Armistead and Pettigrew (2008)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Persaud and Murphy (2019)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Porterfield and Carnes (2014)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Straus (2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled Leadership</td>
<td>Crosby and Bryson (2010)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emmens (2016)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Littlefield et al. (2013)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Patterson (2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concrete, Attainable Goals and Objectives</td>
<td>Davis et al. (2018)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Linden (2002)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Littlefield et al. (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malin and Hackmann (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Cross-Section of Members</td>
<td>Anderson (2019)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crosby and Bryson (2010)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bryson et al. (2006 &amp; 2015)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rubin (2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Members Share a Stake in Both Process and Outcome</td>
<td>Avery (1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bryson, et al. (2006)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stroh (2015)</td>
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<td>Shared Vision</td>
<td>Barton and Quinn (2001)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Marquardt (2011)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Selsky and Parker (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation and Continuous Learning</td>
<td>Austin et al. (2000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Persaud and Murphy (2019)</td>
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<td>Rowe and Devanney (2003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple Layers of Participation</td>
<td>Austin et al. (2000)</td>
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<td>Crosby and Bryson (2010)</td>
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<td>Straus (2002)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Winer and Ray (1994)</td>
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<td>Appropriate Pace of Development</td>
<td>Austin et al. (2000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emmens (2016)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rubin (2009)</td>
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<td>Straus (2002)</td>
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Throughout interviews, participants spoke freely about their impressions of fellow Forum members as collaborators, personal contributions to the Forum, challenges and successes as Forum members, and significant learning as a result of engaging in the work. When considered together, the attributes, traits, and characteristics they regard as critical for productive collaboration are indicative of their recognition that to collaborate means to look beyond their own visions. Although participants remain devoted to the school districts they serve, they understand that, to serve their school districts well, they need to demonstrate a sense of loyalty to the Forum. Even those who admittedly struggled to contribute to the collective mission due to a lack of time or resources, for example, ultimately recognize the importance of banding together to affect change. As an accomplished, local school administrator articulated, “Devoting a little time and effort to a common cause pays dividends in the end. If we can’t contribute tangible resources, then we need to advance the agenda by offering our time, ideas, and support to each other” (DeMore Savine, personal communication, August 18, 2022).

Nevertheless, participants were happy to capitalize on opportunities to assist their own school districts specifically via their work with fellow Forum members. When collaborating to improve the achievement of students throughout the region, they stayed tuned for chances to frame the work in a way that would benefit their respective school districts. This finding illustrates that, although most participants likely joined the Forum because they believed in the importance of the group’s mission, they considered their own self-interests as applicable. According to Rubin (2009), “Collaborative partners connect with the collaboration at two levels: The first is at the level of mission. The second is at the level of individual needs” (pp. 80-81). As noted in Chapter 4, the researcher found substantial evidence to support Rubin’s conclusion.

Regardless of the specific reasons for collaborating, the most skilled members of a collaboration understand that the team’s success hinges upon members’ exhibition of behaviors that invite fruitful interactions (Grover & Lynn, 2012). Skilled collaborators often rise to the rank of “leader” no matter their titles, for they model desired behaviors and seek opportunities to learn (Straus, 2002). Each Forum member was regarded by his/her organization as a “leader”; however, when collaborating, not all
members behaved as leaders of the collaborative endeavor. Some participants spoke of Forum members who they believed acted aggressively and solely in self-interest, and others recalled working alongside colleagues who refused to listen actively or respond positively to others’ suggestions. Interestingly, all participants described skilled leaders similarly as those who listen intently, engage productively, and work diligently to synthesize all ideas in accordance with a jointly mapped plan. Although individuals often struggle to reflect accurately upon their own behaviors and others’ responses to those behaviors (Fleenor et al., 2010), they can easily recount in detail behaviors they deem overwhelmingly positive or negative (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). The participants are no exception, for they captured the essence of skilled leadership necessary for successful collaboration by recalling their interactions with the most adept collaborators among them.

In general, participants depicted the skilled leaders among them similarly to how researchers described them in literature—as those who exhibit dependability, maintain integrity, communicate well, and solve problems via flexibility (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004; Porterfield & Carnes, 2014; Rubin, 2009). However, the researcher recognized that, along with his/her description of a skilled leader in action, each participant gave context to the description. When responding to interview questions about the characteristics of skilled collaborators, participants explained the specific task they were attempting to accomplish at the time that a colleague’s leadership ability became evident to them. For example, Participant 03 had a distinct memory at the forefront of his mind while describing a particularly skillful collaborator:

Anytime something was done that information was shared with the particular group, so what that person did was when they first got there, made everybody feel comfortable with being a part of the group, with wanting to be a part of the answer. There was consistent follow-up with that particular group and it collaborated probably on five or six occasions over the course of months and over that course of time, that communication stayed. Everybody in that group was a part of the communication and I think it just enabled things to be productive and have things get done.

Details like those recalled by Participant 03 were common among participants’ accounts of interactions with skilled collaborators. Thus, the researcher wondered if various styles of leadership observable
through collaboration are more obvious and/or conducive in relation to the accomplishment of particular tasks—a topic worth additional consideration.

Participants described “the right people” as easily as they described the wrong people: colleagues who acted primarily in self-interest or avoided listening to others’ ideas and suggestions, for example. Among participants’ responses to the question asking them to describe a “weak collaborator” are references to individuals who failed to offer their time to collaborate or, conversely, put forth a tremendous effort to advance their personal agenda under the guise of collaborating. As early as 1996, Huxham endorsed finding partners who “share risks, responsibilities, resources and rewards in collaborative efforts” (p. 37). Yet, participants recounted their experiences when working with team members who chose not to demonstrate a sense of collegiality by avoiding responsibilities or acting only in self-interest. Interestingly, Huxham (1996) purported that, if team members “take the time to understand each other’s motivations and hoped-for accomplishments” (p. 36), they can establish a sense of trust and mutual respect. Perhaps Forum members did not engage in such conversations either at the group’s inception or when new members joined. Conceivably, if all members stated their intentions openly and honestly, then they might have developed a greater understanding of everyone’s expectations and mapped a realistic plan for creating as many positive personal and collective outcomes as possible.

In the case of some Forum members, their intentions might simply have been to work alongside colleagues they happen to enjoy as individuals. Some seemed more interested in working with colleagues they like than collaborating with others to accomplish the Forum’s goals, per se. According to researchers, a certain degree of comfort among teammates is necessary for members to trust and take risks in front of others so that they feel confident in offering their knowledge and expertise and in participating fully for the greater good (Rubin, 2009; Stroh, 2015). If members feel uncomfortable interacting with certain colleagues, they may shy away from the work and avoid contributing to the overall cause. For example, if a teammate “takes over” by dominating the conversation, an introverted or unsure member may prefer to listen passively rather than contribute actively. This finding elucidates the importance of taking time to build strong, collegial relationships among members prior to beginning the more tangible
work (Littlefield et al., 2013). When members of a collaborative body jump into their specific work without fostering connections with each other, the quality of the work may decline (Huxham, 2003). Relationships are critical for successful collaboration (Maxwell, 2011; Rubin, 2009), and some participants’ reluctance to work with certain Forum members may be the result of the team not taking time to develop relationships upon the group’s initial organization. One might hypothesize that a collaborative body cannot commit to the work until all members commit to each other.

Regarding team members’ devotion to their work, Armistead and Pettigrew (2004) argued that collaborative members should be fully committed to the collaboration’s collective goals. Ideally, when all team members strive to meet a collective mission, they develop a strong sense of trust among them (Plowfield et al., 2005). Since trust flourishes through each individual’s honoring of his/her commitments and willingness to invite open, honest communication and self-reflection (Patterson, 2015; Raffo & Williams, 2018), focusing efforts on a shared outcome might be a catalyst for building trustworthy relationships. Essentially, if all members keep their team’s overall mission at the forefront of conversation, the work—and, consequently, the relationships among members—might become less personal and more about a clear vision and joint practice.

Mathew and Gupta (2015) discovered that team members who maintain transparency as they work collectively towards a common goal positively inspire others. Certainly, participants were able to delineate between colleagues who inspire them and those they deem “weak.” As discussed in Chapter 4, participants described teammates who motivated them by creating a sense of shared responsibility in a safe, productive environment that ultimately strengthened their trust. This finding aligned with numerous researchers’ findings that, by embodying the values of understanding and trust, a teammate can effectively and flexibly combine members’ emotions and personal beliefs to yield a desired result that benefits everyone (Brinia et al., 2014; Morris, 2013; Patterson, 2015; Persaud & Murphy, 2019).

However, one finding from this study was particularly interesting given the vast amount of literature reporting the origins of a sense of trust among group mates. Learning that trust stems from honesty, pure intentions, and open communication (Patterson, 2015; Raffo & Williams, 2018), the
researcher was surprised to discover that some participants trusted even those colleagues they regard as “weak”—at least to a degree worth noting. For example, regarding a team member categorized as a weak collaborator, Participant 04 described how that particular member typically operated in the Forum:

“Basically showing up to the meeting, checking in and checking out when the meeting's over. You'll see him again a month later… not a lot of follow up with anything.” Similarly, Participant 06 described a “weak” collaborator’s behaviors:

And it's just a checkbox to them. A weak collaborator is not all in. People use the words buy-in, which I think is a terrible way to put it. It's like owning a rental property. They don't have ownership. They don't… you know, when you own something, you invest in it. And I think you can determine that pretty quickly of whether they're buying in, or whether they're owning it, or just pretending.

Despite these bleak characterizations, Participant 04 attempted to make allowances for these behaviors: “Something could’ve happened at a home district that put them in a different position or leadership changed in that district that may have limited the involvement and that could pull people away.” Speculating at justifications illustrates some Forum members’ potential willingness to accept even those they deem to be “weak” collaborators as still deserving of trust and mutual respect. By coming to their defense, one might surmise that some participants remain loyal to even those Forum members they know fail to exhibit the behaviors associated with trust and mutual respect.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study was designed to discover the attributes, traits, and characteristics that a selected group of K-12 educators deemed critical for their interorganizational collaboration’s success. The findings from this study can be used to inform Forum members specifically; however, others who may be entering into or already involved with interorganizational collaborations, such as K-12 educators, could reflect upon the findings gleaned from this study and apply some of the information to their specific context. Findings and conclusions from this study support the following four recommendations for practice.

**The Right People**

Given findings from the literature and this study about the importance of having skilled collaborators as members of the team, an organizer of a collaborative endeavor might invite team
members known to demonstrate behaviors identified as positive for the purposes of collaboration and/or for the accomplishment of specific goals. According to Straus (2002), “Well intentioned people can work together to find win-win solutions to challenging issues” (p. 56). Additionally, Morris (2013) reported, “Collaboration scholars argue that assembling the right mix of stakeholders to join a collaborative endeavor is imperative” (p. 44). Poignantly, Rubin (2009) stated a foundational truth regarding membership:

> Nothing shapes the culture, process, and outcomes of a collaborative initiative as much as decisions related to who is asked to join it. One of the biggest challenges facing collaborative leaders is successfully identifying and recruiting the right collaborative partners. (p. 68)

Finally, Armistead and Pettigrew (2004) noted, “Getting the right people at the recruitment stage was seen to be important” (p. 578).

> Based upon these findings, the researcher recommends that educational leaders who wish to collaborate with leaders across organizational boundaries strongly consider inviting or actively recruiting teammates who exhibit the characteristics, attributes, and traits known to support and strengthen productivity.

**Importance of a Strong Leader**

Beyond finding the “right people” to comprise their interorganizational collaboration, the researcher recommends that Forum members either identify a leader upon the collaboration’s inception or frame the group’s work accordingly as a strong leader emerges in time. For example, if one of the “right people” happens to be a skilled leader—someone well-respected and adept at funneling multiple perspectives and ideas into productive outcomes—he/she might be named formally as leader. Conversely, if a qualified leader emerges more informally by working in a manner that his/her colleagues appreciate, then fellow collaborators might appoint him/her as leader. Experts recommend that all members of a collaboration communicate openly about both the process and product of collaboration (Winer & Ray, 1994). This practice ensures equity among teammates (Faulconer, 2010).

> Furthermore, the findings from this study indicate that considering leadership as an aspect of collaboration, specifically, might be a concrete way to ensure equity. A strong leader is able to steer the
collaboration to produce desired results (Rubin, 2009). Via excellent interpersonal skills, he/she likely will prevent any one member from dominating the conversation or using the time for collaboration for personal gain. Researchers highly recommend that all members who collaborate maintain a stake in the process—that everyone’s voice is heard (Emmens, 2016; Porterfield & Carnes, 2014). Participants fully acknowledged that the strong leaders among them invite inclusion. Thus, the researcher endorses the professional practice of having an honest conversation about who might lead the Forum and why.

**Student Members**

Another suggestion for strengthening the Forum as a collaborative body, as well as helping members accomplish their goals, is to invite students to join as members. Ironically, when educators make decisions for and about students, they often fail to consider students’ perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002). Regarding the Forum’s organization and initiatives, the researcher advocates for greater student participation and input to help drive the work. This suggestion complements Participant 12’s description of an expert collaborator:

I think of human-centered design before human-centered design was something or was something people talked about. The inaugural chairman was really good at sharing what his vision was, hearing what ideas other people had, and then building something on that.

Educators expect students to take responsibility for their own education; they repeatedly tell students, “You need to own your learning experiences.” Stewards of change often discuss the importance of “buy-in”: helping individuals accept a change to come by explaining to them the rationale behind the action and how the change will benefit them personally (Austin et al., 2000). If school leaders (and business leaders who collaborate with educators for the purpose of improving students’ achievement) want students to embrace the opportunities afforded them—to own their learning experiences—then they might invite students to partake in collaboration that results in changes to students’ learning experiences. Like Participant 12 and Participant 06, who also believed that students should have input on Forum initiatives, the researcher recommends inviting students as stakeholders to join the group.
Subgroups to Spur Action

The researcher’s final recommendation is for larger groups of collaborators to be broken into smaller groups, when possible. Informing this recommendation, participants reported that smaller groups, or subcommittees, are more action oriented. This report coincides with researchers’ findings about subgroups of collaborations being more participatory and engaged in the work (Winer & Ray, 1994). After all, when members can hide behind others in large groups, more reluctant individuals do not always feel the same pressure to engage as they might otherwise undergo if collaborating with less people. Social scientists have termed this phenomenon the “bystander effect” (Latane & Darley, 1968), and, although they did not use the term, participants described this effect when detailing interactions with weak collaborators. For instance, Participant 01 stated, “They were a little slow to put their hand in and when we went out to play the game, they might not have been in the game.” In another example, Participant 04 described a weak collaborator’s inactions as “basically showing up to the meeting, checking in and checking out when the meeting's over.” Both statements led the researcher to conclude that diffusion of responsibility among members of large groups sometimes leaves members without much responsibility at all. If the most productive collaboration happens as a result of all members’ full engagement (Winer & Ray, 1994), then the researcher recommends designing an environment specifically for engagement by separating members into subgroups once all members cooperate to identify norms and outline overarching agendas.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study represents an initial step in discovering the attributes, traits, and characteristics that a group of K-12 educators deemed critical for their interorganizational collaboration’s success in a specific context. Recommendations for future research were compiled utilizing findings and the interpretation of the findings from this study. Future research recommendations are offered in eight areas. The recommendations are not presented in any particular order, including that of importance. Each recommendation has the potential to become a meaningful study in and of itself.
Various Styles of Leadership

The researcher wondered if various styles of leadership discernible through collaboration are more obvious and/or conducive in relation to the accomplishment of particular tasks—a topic worth additional consideration. According to Huxham and Vangen (2000b), even though there has been a vast amount of research on leadership within organizations, the literature on leadership in collaborations has been sparse.

Although members of interorganizational collaborations come from various organizations and no formal hierarchy exists, several instances of emergent leaders being acknowledged by the collaboration manifested. For example, the Forum has always had a member recognized as the chairperson. The fourth chairperson of the Forum is currently in place. Additionally, respondents recognized emergent leaders who helped facilitate the group’s successes by positively influencing other members. When describing the behavior of one leader, Participant 12 reported, “We rally around our leader, and his behavior is what drove us to understand why this is so important.”

Aside from collaborative leaders displaying relational and facilitative attributes, traits, and characteristics, various leadership styles may be beneficial dependent upon the stage of the collaboration or conducive to accomplishing the task at hand. Huxham and Vangen (2000b) noted, “It is paradoxical that the single-mindedness of leaders appears to be central to collaborative success” (p. 1171). In some instances, then, it could be argued that having the focus often displayed by those with an authoritarian leadership style could benefit the progress of a collaboration. This is merely one example where distinct styles of leadership may be more effective for various situations. Further research on leadership styles in collaborations is a valuable point of analysis and would add an important element in advancing factors leading to successful collaboration.

Trust and Loyalty

Further study to ascertain the connection between trust and loyalty as Forum members understand and experience the concepts could be undertaken. Although trust and loyalty are separate constructs, participants might perceive them as intertwined, in general. Conversely, maybe they regard trust and
loyalty as entangled just because they serve alongside others as members of the same team. Lastly, perhaps they perceive trust and loyalty as symbiotic simply due to the nature of their interactions with colleagues who demonstrate behaviors worth additional research. Regardless of participants’ reasons for affording “weak” collaborators a level of professional courtesy, the finding is noteworthy because it contradicts reports within the specific literature reviewed for the purposes of this study.

Self-Perceptions

Another finding worth further exploration relates to some participants’ perceptions of themselves. While the researcher assured participants that he would keep their names and reports of colleagues by name confidential per the terms of this study, he can present a pertinent finding generally and without breaking confidentiality. Essentially, some participants who regard themselves as expert collaborators were deemed “weak” by their colleagues’ standards. In one instance, a participant spoke about how he remains open to colleagues’ ideas and suggestions by listening intently and finding ways to reconcile everyone’s thoughts when mapping plans. Conversely, other participants termed this same individual “weak” and stated quite passionately that he overrides everyone’s ideas and takes complete control of the agenda despite others’ urging for a different outcome. Likewise, another participant proudly reported that he leads by ensuring that Forum members’ collective vision guides his work, but his colleagues expressed concerns about his self-serving nature and explained that his actions largely promote his self-interests. When a participant construes his actions towards Forum members as meaningful and equitable and when those same members characterize his behaviors as “weak,” unwelcome, and disparaging, one might conclude that he struggles to identify his style of interacting realistically. As social scientists have long proclaimed, human beings are not always cognizant of the way others see them (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Based upon the findings from this study, the researcher wishes to dive deeper into the division between some participants’ perceptions and reality.

COVID-19

As open, honest communication is critical for productive collaboration (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018), the researcher might further investigate the impact of COVID-19 on Forum members’
communication as applicable to collaboration and then compare/contrast the findings with those gleaned from this study.

Another implication that points to the importance of additional research about the impact of COVID-19 on the phenomenon of collaboration as participants experienced it is the allusion that the virus spurred positive effects—evident within the documents the researcher analyzed. For example, COVID-19 caused Forum members to innovate, adapt, and pivot to sustain the interorganizational collaboration. They used technological innovations like virtual reality, video, and means of electronic communications to benefit member districts’ students. Virtual reality (VR) technology was used to continue the Teacher in the Workplace initiative as electronic tours of several work environments were given. Members also used VR to create virtual pathways for students, who toured three CTCs online to learn about the benefits of attending the institutions. Next, students were given a chance to access the Career Journey video series so that they could explore careers by speaking with people in various occupations. The Forum was also able to offer students a virtual career mentoring model to explore careers and build professional relationships. Finally, and maybe most fruitful, the Forum was able to develop and implement virtual career snapshots where students could tour local businesses using VR technology. Based upon this information, the researcher argues that the pandemic facilitated the use of VR technology which, in turn, helped solve one of the problems that several members cited: Geography kept them apart. Students from districts located away from businesses or unable to transport their students to businesses often were shut out from opportunities and access to said businesses. In these instances, VR technology may have helped equalize students’ opportunities. More research might be conducted on this subject under the umbrella of examining the impact of COVID-19 on Forum members’ collaborations with each other.

**Non-K-12 Participants**

Future research could include interviewing members of the Forum from business and industry (or post-secondary or non-profit groups) to be able to compare the data with the data collected and analyzed from K-12 educators. This would enable the researcher to determine any disparities in thought processes, viewpoints, and language. If there were any brought to light, then the researcher would be able to share
them with all Forum members from the various groups to bring greater understanding to all cross-sections of members. This, in turn, could lead to greater success for the Forum since unknown differences could be shared and overcome.

**Complementary Quantitative Study**

The researcher would also like to attend a Forum meeting and gather quantitative data via the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory (WCFI). The researcher would be able to gather data from a larger portion (sample) of Forum membership. He would then be able to compare the quantitative data collected and analyzed with the qualitative data that was analyzed for the current study.

**Different Collaborative Group**

The researcher could also conduct another qualitative study, replicating the steps taken for this study, with a different collaborative group. The information could facilitate a comparison to find commonalities and differences between different contextual situations.

**Use a Grounded Theory Approach**

Further research, whether in this particular context with these participants or in a different context with an entirely different group of collaborative members, could employ grounded theory rather than taking a phenomenological approach. Taking an inductive grounded approach would enable theory to be generated during the research process since the aim of GT is to construct a theory (Moustakas, 1994). If the researcher uses a GT approach, the interviewing process would be less rigid. According to Wimpenny and Gass (2000), “As theory emerges the researcher directs questions which have a focus upon the salient categories within it” (p. 1490). The emerging theory would steer subsequent interviews as the collection of data progresses throughout the study. The researcher could also analyze data from the collection of field notes during participant observation or nonparticipant observation to further support the data from interviews. This would provide the researcher with a greater in-depth understanding of interorganizational collaboration.
Final Thoughts

The researcher added value to the topic of interorganizational collaboration as well as the field of collaboration in general. Similar to Mattessich and Johnson (2018), the researcher desired that others who want to engage in collaboration or are currently collaborating, particularly across boundaries, could either successfully initiate a collaboration or strengthen their existing one. While the researcher understands that the findings from this study cannot be generalized to others, he strove to not only enhance the work of Forum members, but also reach others who may be able to benefit from the experiences of those involved in collaborative efforts. In contrast to Mattessich and Johnson (2018), who were able to exhibit a connection between the identified factors and successful collaboration by examining existing research, the researcher conducted a firsthand study by gathering data from the field and learning directly from members involved in an interorganizational collaboration, rather than analyzing secondary data by virtue of reviewing existing literature. While Mattessich and Johnson’s (2018) research-based approach was quite comprehensive, it was a compilation of existing findings as opposed to an endeavor toward new findings that could heighten a collaboration’s chances of succeeding.

Continued research on this specific interorganizational collaboration would not only be advantageous to Forum members on their continued journey, but would also directly benefit students in the region and indirectly serve the community at large by advancing the economic outlook of the county and surrounding area. Further, although specific contexts are not generalizable to others, additional study of interorganizational collaboration is beneficial for K-12 educators who wish to improve their students’ achievement and make necessary change as well as for others, in general, who wish to engage in collaboration. Educators and others can increase the chances of experiencing success while collaborating through active reflection of their own behaviors.

Further research on interorganizational collaboration and the factors that enhance the chances for successful outcomes is critical because of the regularity with which educators and others must reach outside of their professional boundaries for support. Issues and problems at the societal level continue to
persist; thus, learning how to effectively collaborate with others across agencies to enhance the chances of obtaining successful outcomes is critical.

To research a phenomenon such as interorganizational collaboration will continue to be a challenge for those willing to engage in its advancement due to its intricacy and ambiguous nature. Collaboration from one context cannot be generalized to another; hence, it is difficult to fully comprehend the fundamental nature of it. Even so, the researcher would encourage others to contribute to the body of knowledge since it would benefit K-12 educators and others desiring to solve societal problems, including improving students’ achievement and positively impacting local economies. Learning ways to collaborate more productively across organizational boundaries is undeniably indispensable given the complexity of attempting to solve “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) afflicting schools and other institutions.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introductory Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. I will ask you several questions pertaining to your experiences while collaborating as a member of the Forum for Workforce Development (hereafter referred to as the Forum). You can refrain from answering any questions if you so choose. You may also choose to end the interview at any time. If there are any questions that you need to be repeated or clarified, please ask. Your name will not be identified as part of the study. Please try to refrain from stating names when giving answers, but rather attempt to provide examples of situations. Any names given in your answers will be removed from transcription. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed within seven days. You will be given a copy of the transcribed interview to review with the opportunity to edit or delete any parts of the interview to ensure accuracy.

Guiding Questions:

1. Explain what it means to collaborate based upon your past knowledge and experiences.

2. Given your explanation of what it means to collaborate, describe a time when you have observed collaboration among Forum members or engaged in collaboration as a Forum member.

3. How might you know if collaboration is successful?

4. Given this information, explain whether or not you deem Forum members’ collaboration to be (have been) successful. Provide examples of interactions among members to substantiate your explanation.

5. Why was the collaboration successful (or unsuccessful)?

6. How have Forum members’ behaviors impacted the progress? Provide examples.

7. How have Forum members’ characteristics impacted the progress? Offer specific examples.

8. How has the Forum’s structure impacted the progress? Give examples.

10. Think of a Forum member who you regard as a weak collaborator. Describe him/her.

11. Of all the factors, traits, attributes, characteristics, etc. that make someone an expert collaborator, which do you regard as the most important? Why?

12. Describe your personal collaboration style.

13. What else can you tell me about your experience as a member of the Forum who collaborates often?

Possible Prompts (if opportunity presents itself):

1. Tell me specifically what you mean when you say…

2. Please offer a specific example.

3. Tell me about a time when…

4. In your response, you stated…Tell me more about this.
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: K-12 EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SUCCESSFUL INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Principal Investigator: Troy A. Collier, graduate student at Penn State University (Department of Workforce Education and Development)

Telephone Number: 724.635.0037

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mark Threeton

Faculty Advisor Telephone Number: 814.863.5361

You are being invited to volunteer to participate in a research study. Your participation in the study will consist of one approximately 45-minute-long interview and an opportunity to review the interview, once transcribed, for accuracy within one week of the interview. This summary explains information about this research:

- This study serves to elucidate the abstract nature of collaboration more concretely and to present findings in a manner that will invite educational leaders who collaborate to analyze their own contributions to collaborative efforts accordingly. Specifically, the researcher will present interorganizational collaboration through the personal experiences and perspectives of respondents, who comprise an interorganizational team and engage in the process of collaborating across their professional, organizational, and sectoral lines. By recognizing how respondents perceive their respective behavior and roles, school leaders who review the study might be influenced to consider the phenomenon from their own perspectives as well. The more educators learn about behavior that positively affects interorganizational collaboration, the better they can model the attributes, traits, and characteristics of interorganizational collaborators who solve problems, make change, and improve student achievement.

- Since the researcher could not observe the phenomenon of collaboration between and among Forum members, the best means of collecting data was to interview members of the Forum for Workforce Development (Forum). The interviews will be conducted face-to-face to observe non-verbal cues and maximize each participant’s comfort level. The interviews will be conducted in each participant’s office (or a neutral location of each participant’s choosing). More specifically, semi-structured interviews, using guiding interview questions, will be conducted to collect data from participants with direct personal experience with the phenomenon being investigated. In addition to asking the guiding questions that were formulated for the semi-structured interviews, prompts and follow-up questions may be utilized to gain additional details and insights. All
interviews will be audio recorded using primary and backup equipment. Recordings will be transcribed verbatim after the completion of each interview. Participants will be given a transcription of the interview within one week of the interview so that they can independently review it for accuracy.

- There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if the participant’s information or identity is obtained by someone other than the investigator, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of the electronic data created by the participant or by the researcher will be maintained as required by applicable law and to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

- For this study, it is important that the participants’ confidentiality and privacy will be properly protected. This will be achieved by masking the names of individuals during and after the study to ensure privacy and anonymity. The researcher will not directly identify individual participants. Additionally, the disclosure of data will not place participants at risk for liability. Participation will not place participants at risk regarding financial status, employability, reputation, or membership in the Forum. No one will be placed in a position of compromise as a result. Thus, there will be minimal risk to organizations or individual participants of this study.

The data that will be gathered by the researcher will be protected as well. Any hard copies will be stored in a safe that only the researcher has the combination to open. All hard copies will be shredded after three years. Interview recordings, that will be temporarily stored on an encrypted USB drive, will also be locked in the safe and deleted after three years.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, you should contact Troy A. Collier at 724.635.0037 or Dr. Mark Threeton at 814.863.5361. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject or concerns regarding your privacy, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 814.865.1775.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

**INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH**

**Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent**
Your signature below means that you have explained the research to the subject or subject representative, provided the subject or subject representative an opportunity to discuss and consider whether or not to participate in the research, and have answered any questions about the research.

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<thead>
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<th>Signature of person who explained this research</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Printed Name</th>
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**Signature of Person Giving Informed Consent and Authorization:**
Before making the decision about being in this research, you should have:

- Discussed this research study with the investigator,
- Read the information in this form, and
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.
Your signature below means that you have received this information, you have asked the questions you currently have about the research, and those questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated form to keep for future reference.

**Signature of Subject**
By signing this consent form, you indicate that you voluntarily choose to be in this research and authorize your information to be used and shared as described above.

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## Appendix C

### Log of Existing Documents

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Dinner Interactive Table Discussion Results (September 24, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;200 Business, Education Leaders Attend Inaugural Workforce Program&quot; News Release (October 1, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (October 7, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Steering Committee Meeting Minutes (October 7, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Westmoreland partnership to show students college isn't only route to job&quot; TribLive Article (October 26, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (November 4, 2015)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Steering Committee Meeting Minutes (November 4, 2015)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Steering Committee Meeting Discussion Notes (November 4, 2015)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Charter Declaration Document (November 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (December 2, 2015)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Steering Committee Meeting Minutes (December 2, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;State Workforce Leaders Meet with Westmoreland Forum&quot; News Release (December 18, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development 2016 Steering Committee Meeting Schedule (January 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (January 6, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Steering Committee Meeting Minutes (January 6, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Tally of Signed Charter Declarations Received (January 6, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (February 3, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (March 2, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Attendance List (March 2, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on Technical Education and Career Readiness Testimony (March 18, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Spring Summit Flyer (April 6, 2016)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (April 6, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forum Progress Check - Exit Ticket and Responses (April 6, 2016)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (May 4, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unpacking the Data Workshop Agenda (May 4, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forum Annual Dinner Committee Agenda (July 28, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forum Annual Dinner Committee Meeting Minutes (July 28, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (August 3, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (September 7, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development 2016-2017 Goal Worksheet (September 7, 2016)</td>
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<td>&quot;'Hub' suggested to match students, employers in Westmoreland County&quot; TribLive Article (September 14, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forum for Workforce Development Second Annual Program and Banquet Flyer (September 14, 2016)</td>
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<td>Forum for Workforce Development Second Annual Program and Banquet Pamphlet (September 14, 2016)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (October 5, 2016)</td>
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<td>Career Education and Exploration Subcommittee Notes (October 5, 2016)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (November 9, 2016)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Notes (November 9, 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Steering Committee Meeting Minutes (January 4, 2017)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (February 1, 2017)</td>
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<td>Correspondence Letter from Norwin SD to Forum Chair expressing 4-Year Financial Commitment to Forum (February 21, 2017)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (March 1, 2017)</td>
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<td>Career Education and Exploration Subcommittee Survey Results (March 1, 2017)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (April 5, 2017)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Meeting Agenda (November 7, 2018)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westmoreland County for Workforce Development Director's Report (2018-2019)</td>
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<td>Coordinator's Report (March 2020)</td>
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<td>Workforce Development Update (July 2020)</td>
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<td>Workforce Development Update (August 2020)</td>
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<td>Workforce Development Update (October 2020)</td>
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<td>Workforce Development Update (November 2020)</td>
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<td>The Forum for Workforce Development Newsletter (Fall 2020)</td>
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<td>The Forum for Workforce Development Newsletter (Winter/December 2020)</td>
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<td>The Forum for Workforce Development Newsletter (July 2021)</td>
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<td>Westmoreland County Forum for Workforce Development Bylaws (Redistributed July 2021)</td>
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<td>R.K. Mellon Grant Proposal (Presentation for Superintendents - October 2021)</td>
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<td>Workforce Development Update (November 2021)</td>
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<td>Workforce Development Update (June 2022)</td>
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Appendix D

Official Invitation to Participate in Study Email

My name is Troy Collier, and I am a doctoral student in the Workforce Education and Development program at Penn State University. I am conducting a research study examining the attributes, traits, and characteristics that interorganizational collaborators perceive as most relevant for their interorganizational collaboration’s success and then comparing them with the factors that research has demonstrated are important for successful collaboration. As a current member of the Westmoreland County Forum for Workforce Development, you are invited to participate in the study. If you agree, you are invited to partake in a face-to-face, semi structured interview.

The interview is anticipated to take no longer than 60 minutes. The interview will be audiotaped using primary and backup equipment. Recordings will be transcribed verbatim after the completion of the interview. You will be given a transcription within one week of the interview so that you can review it for accuracy.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study. This will be achieved by masking the names of individuals during and after the study to ensure privacy and anonymity. Individual participants will not be directly identified. Additionally, any names mentioned during the interview will be removed and replaced with pseudonyms.

If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at 724.635.0037.

Thank you for your consideration,

Troy A. Collier
Appendix E
Draft Summary of Research

Researcher’s Status as a Graduate Student:
Principal Investigator: Troy A. Collier, graduate student in the Department of Workforce Education and Development at Penn State University

Reason for the Study:
This study serves to elucidate the abstract nature of collaboration more concretely, and to present findings in a manner that will invite educators who collaborate to analyze their own contributions to collaborative efforts accordingly. Specifically, the researcher will present interorganizational collaboration through the personal experiences and perspectives of respondents, who comprise an interorganizational team and engage in the process of collaborating across their professional, organizational, and sectoral lines. By recognizing how respondents perceive their respective behavior and roles, educators who review the study might be influenced to consider the phenomenon from their own perspectives as well. The more educators learn about behavior that positively affects interorganizational collaboration, the better they can model the attributes, traits, and characteristics of interorganizational collaborators who solve problems, make change, and improve student achievement.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the Forum for Workforce Development (Forum) members’ perceptions of the factors they consider to be important for successful collaboration, and to compare them with the factors that research has demonstrated are important for successful collaboration. Additionally, the current study intends to identify Forum members’ perceptions of the perceived level of members’ proficiency for each factor regarded as critical for successful collaboration. Finally, this study aimed to determine the extent to which respondents have experienced success when involved in the Forum.

Responsibilities of the Researcher:
Prior to conducting the research, the formulation of a comprehensive plan to protect the subjects was strongly deliberated. The plan includes gaining informed consent from all respondents to exhibit that they willingly volunteered to participate in this study. Additionally, participants will be apprized that they can refuse to respond to any questions during the interview or even decide to withdraw from the study or interview at any time. Participants will also be informed that the interview was being audio recorded. Participants will be given the opportunity to refuse to be recorded as well.

Although there were guiding questions that all respondents will be asked, the researcher reserved the right to give prompts and ask follow-up questions to derive additional insights into the interactions, communication, and negotiations that materialized during the interorganizational collaboration to gather rich, detailed data about respondents’ perspectives of their social constructs. Based off participants answers, the researcher will attempt to produce an accurate depiction of the collaboration that took place among Forum members. Thus, the data will be analyzed and interpreted to produce an authentic portrayal of the interorganizational collaboration that occurred among Forum members. After capturing the data, the researcher will code and analyze it to summarize the massive amount collected so that the study’s research questions can be answered based on respondents’ experiences while interacting in an interorganizational collaboration. The researcher will demonstrate respect, sensitivity, and tact towards participants throughout the process.
The researcher will ensure a level of consistency and transparency so the study might be reproduced. To ensure consistency, the same guiding questions will be asked of all respondents. To maintain transparency throughout the study, methodology will be disclosed from the beginning to the end. Consequently, the study might be replicated. Additionally, the researcher will maintain a high level of rigor throughout the study. A rigorous study yields clear findings, and clear findings stem from the researcher’s exhaustive interpretation and analysis of data.

Despite the researcher’s ingraining of validity within the study itself, his bias may threaten validity if he does not carefully consider his inclinations. As a former Forum member with a sociological background, the researcher will be cognizant that he must be aware of and control his own perceptions, opinions, and underlying assumptions as they could lead to research bias which could taint the findings and conclusions of the research. For instance, the researcher will engage in critical self-reflection to guard against bias.

For this study, it is important that the participants’ confidentiality and privacy will be properly protected. This will be achieved by masking the names of individuals during and after the study to ensure privacy and anonymity. The researcher will not directly identify individual participants. Additionally, the disclosure of data will not place participants at risk for liability. Participation will not place participants at risk regarding financial status, employability, reputation, or membership in the Forum. No one will be placed in a position of compromise as a result. Thus, there will be minimal risk to organizations or individual participants of this study.

All information gathered resulting from the interviews was anonymous and confidential, including the names of individuals and their base organizations. Additionally, the participants were informed of the results of the research when it was concluded.

Participants’ Rights and Responsibilities:

The participants will also be protected from any harm or wrongdoing throughout the study through confidentiality. For this study, it is important that the participants’ confidentiality and privacy be properly protected. This will be achieved by masking the names of individuals during and after the study to ensure privacy and anonymity. The researcher will not directly identify individual participants. Additionally, the disclosure of data will not place participants at risk for liability. Participation will not place participants at risk regarding financial status, employability, reputation, or membership in the Forum. No one will be placed in a position of compromise as a result. Thus, there is minimal risk to organizations or individual participants of this study. The data gathered by the researcher will be protected as well. Any hard copies will be stored in a safe that only the researcher has the combination to open. All hard copies will be shredded after three years. Interview recordings, temporarily stored on a USB drive, will also be locked in the safe and deleted after three years.

Participants are responsible to share their thoughts openly and honestly. Respondents will also be responsible to clarify information and validate the accuracy of the transcript, so they feel confident that the message they conveyed—the message of record—communicates their actual perspective. This will allow the participants to verify the veracity and interpretation of the data, thereby safeguarding accuracy and lending to the credibility of the study.

How the Study Will be Conducted:

Since the researcher could not observe the phenomenon of collaboration between and among Forum members, the best means of collecting data was to interview members of the Forum. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face to observe non-verbal cues and maximize participants’ comfort levels. The interviews will be conducted in the participants’ offices (or a neutral location of the participants’ choosing). More specifically, semi-structured interviews, by using guiding interview questions, will be conducted to collect data from participants with direct personal experience with the
phenomenon being investigated. In addition to asking the guiding questions that were formulated for the semi-structured interviews, prompts and follow-up questions will be utilized to gain additional details and insights. All interviews will be audio recorded using primary and backup equipment. Recordings will be transcribed verbatim after the completion of each interview. Participants will be given a transcribed copy of the interview within one week of the interview so they can independently review for accuracy. All data will be coded through multiple passes of analysis until no new interpretations are made.

In addition to conducting interviews, existing Forum documents such as agendas, meeting minutes, surveys, articles and news releases, reports, materials created by Forum members, and emails created by Forum members and sent to other members will be reviewed and examined. These types of existing documents will help develop a better understanding of the collaboration that took place among Forum members. The information contained within the existing Forum documents will be compared with the data obtained from the interviews.

**Approximate Length of Time for the Interview:**
The interview will be less than 45 minutes in length.
Appendix F

Data Analysis Process

1. Transcribed interviews
2. Read transcription (data) from beginning to end
3. Reread transcription while writing notes and reflective memos
4. Sent transcription with notes and memos to respondent to verify accuracy (member checking)
5. Read transcription a third time while highlighting key words, phrases, and/or sentences indicating potential emergent themes and logging them, thereby conducting the first round of coding by hand
6. Read transcription a fourth time while highlighting key words, phrases, and/or sentences indicating potential emergent themes and logging them, thereby conducting the second round of coding by hand
7. Read transcription a fifth time while highlighting key words, phrases, and/or sentences indicating potential emergent themes and logging them, thereby conducting the third round of coding by hand
8. Sections of the transcribed interviews were assigned descriptive words or phrases
9. The data was then condensed, sorted, and categorized to look for key ideas, patterns, emergent themes
10. An independent coder also analyzed the information in one pass (interrater reliability)
11. Themes were created and labeled
12. Connections between themes were evaluated (thematic content analysis)
13. Participants’ direct quotations (previously highlighted) were used to support emerging themes
14. Analyzed existing documents and compared their contents against the information presented in transcripts (cross-checking)
Appendix G

IRB Exemption Determination

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: May 31, 2022
From: Amy Long, IRB Analyst
To: Troy Collier

Type of Submission: Initial Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Study:</th>
<th>K-12 Educators’ Perceptions of the Factors Associated with Successful Interorganizational Collaboration: A Phenomenological Approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal Investigator:</td>
<td>Troy Collier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00020356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00020356</td>
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<td>Funding:</td>
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Documents Approved: * Appendix A - Interview Guide (0.02), Category: Data Collection Instrument * HRP-591 - Protocol for Human Subject Research (0.03), Category: IRB Protocol

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are not required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the HRP-103 - Investigator Manual, which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (http://irb.psu.edu).

Office for Research Protections
The Pennsylvania State University
211 Old Main Building
University Park, PA 16802

officeforresearchprotections@psu.edu
IRB@psu.edu
(814) 865-4774

An Equal Opportunity
VITA

Troy Allan Collier

EDUCATION

*Pennsylvania State University*
- Doctor of Philosophy, Workforce Education and Development  
  December 2022
- Superintendent’s Letter of Eligibility  
  February 2020
- Vocational Administrative Director 7-12  
  May 2012
- Principal Certification K-12  
  May 2010

*Seton Hill University*
- Teaching Certification  
  May 2003
- Secondary Education, Social Studies 7-12
- Secondary Education, English 7-12

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*
- Master of Arts, Sociology  
  December 1998
- Bachelor of Arts, Sociology  
  December 1995

ADMINISTRATIVE/INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

*Norwin Middle School*
- Assistant Principal  
  July 2014 - Present
- Chief STEM/STEAM Office  
  July 2019 - Present
- Coordinator of College & Career Pathways  
  July 2015 - June 2018
- Coordinator of Cyber Education  
  July 2014 - June 2015

*Hillcrest Intermediate School*
- Assistant Principal  
  July 2018 - June 2019

*Central Westmoreland Career and Technology Center*
- Principal  
  August 2012 – June 2014

*Lenape Area Vocational Technical School*
- Assistant Administrator/Principal  
  July 2011 - July 2012
- Dean of Students  
  October 2010 - June 2011
- Classrooms for the Future (CFF) Coach  
  August 2008 - October 2010

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

*Lenape Area Vocational Technical School*
- Full-time Social Studies Instructor  
  August 2004 - October 2010

*Penn State University - Fayette Campus*
- Adjunct Faculty - Introduction to Sociology  
  January 2000 - May 2000