Chapter I: Introduction

Background to the Study

“In times of change, learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to work in a world that no longer exists.” Steve Munby (2006), Chief Executive of the United Kingdom’s National College for School Leadership, repeated Eric Hoffer’s renowned words of caution as he addressed an attentive audience of educators and guests from around the world. Munby explained changes come not only from governmental regulations, but also from global, technological and social elements. He said the challenge is to lead out in planning ahead to make changes that are appropriate, meaningful, and sustainable (Hodgkinson, 2006).

Munby’s counsel mirrored conditions at Ricks College—the largest privately owned junior college in the United States with nationally ranked athletic programs—as faculty, staff, and students gathered for a telecast news conference on June 21, 2000, and heard the following:

The First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Board of Trustees of Ricks College announce that Ricks College will change from its present two-year junior college status to a four-year institution. The new four-year school will be known as Brigham Young University–Idaho, with the name change designed to give the school immediate national and international recognition….

BYU–Idaho will operate on an expanded year-round basis, incorporating innovative calendaring and scheduling while also taking advantage of advancements in technology that will enable the four-year institution to serve more students. In addition, BYU–Idaho will phase out its involvement in intercollegiate athletics and shift its emphasis to a year-round activity program designed to involve and meet the needs of a diverse student body. (Hinckley, 2000)

The complete announcement (see Appendix A: News Release Announcement) consisted of a mere 18 sentences and 425 words, but it redefined the school. Those involved with the ensuing transition learned the truth in Charles DuBos’ statement, “The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become” (Bridges, 2001, p. 35). Things would never be the same on the remote, rural campus.

Challenges of designing new curriculum began simultaneously and instantaneously with those of transforming the institution itself. By comparing the 1999 and 2004 Self Study reports prepared for accreditation review, it was evident that the entire school was restructured. Over 130 Ricks College associate degree programs converted to BYU–Idaho’s 18 associate programs and 49 bachelor’s degree programs. One hundred new faculty
positions were filled. The campus gained four new buildings (the Jacob Spori Building, the Gordon B. Hinckley Building, the Student Health and Counseling Center, and the Thomas E. Ricks Building), an outdoor learning center (Henry's Fork Outdoor Learning Center), and a 156-unit family housing complex (University Village). Significant additions or renovations were also made to the Benson, Austin, Smith, and Romney Buildings and the McKay Library (see Appendix B: BYU–Idaho General History).

Three years later, additional construction and curriculum revisions continued to reshape the campus. Enrollment had jumped from the pre-announcement levels for winter 2000 of 8,840 to 13,259 for winter 2007. Due to year-round three-track scheduling, summer enrollment had risen from 3,349 in 2000 to 9,142 in 2006. Nearly 18,000 students were being served in an academic year (see Appendix C: Enrollment). But there is more to transitions than merely the number of courses added, the changing face of the campus, rising enrollment, or even the status of a new name. What did those at BYU–Idaho learn in the process?

**Purpose of the Study**

This case of Ricks College becoming BYU–Idaho presented itself as a unique opportunity to study an organization dedicated to higher education, which was experiencing rapid and extreme change in its physical, institutional, and human infrastructures. The focus of the study was on the nature of organizational learning (and, hence, individual adult learning) in the context of organizational change.

It has been said “organizations learn only through individuals who learn” (Senge, 1990, p. 140). If we accept Fiol & Lyles’ (1985) definition of organizational learning as whether, how, and under what conditions learning occurs, we are also considering individual adults and whether, how, and under what conditions they learn to facilitate, as well as adapt to, organizational change. Merriam and Cafarella (1999) explain that learning and the work of the organization run parallel; furthermore, “this learning capability improves an organizational capacity to respond quickly and in novel ways, thus increasing its ability to foster innovation and change” (p. 40). Conversely, Johnson (Spencer Johnson Partners, 2006) cautioned “that change often fails to happen because most people simply don’t want to change or they lack the skills to do it effectively.”
While the business world finds synergetic value in evolving through collaborative links (Eisenhardt & Galunic, 2001), “many units within the university stand alone” (Anderson, 2005, p. 39). The ironic problem is “that organizations whose mission is learning have not examined the implications of learning for organizational functioning” (Kezar, 2005b, p. 1).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand and describe the nature of organizational learning during a time of intense organizational transition as a two-year college (Ricks College) became a four-year university (Brigham Young University–Idaho).

Research Questions

This campus-wide study of BYU–Idaho included the integration of individuals, organizations, and the environment. To better understand and describe the organizational learning that followed the announcement and continues through the transition, research questions were developed similar to those presented by Senge (1990):

- What key organizational issues arose during the transition and how were they being addressed?
- What new conditions evolved, and what perspectives changed through the process?
- What organizational steps were being or had been taken to facilitate changes?
- What was the nature of individuals’ skills and commitment, and what enabled them to act expeditiously in regards to the transition process? What impeded their progress?
- How did experiences of individual students and employees contribute to the organizational learning during the season of transition, and how was that learning accelerated?
- How did the school’s mission statement (core values) impact the change?
  - How did the transition impact spiritual growth?
  - What was being learned through changes to academics?
  - How did the transition impact lifelong learning and citizenship?
  - How was organizational learning reflected in changes to physical facilities and the environment?

These questions inductively lead to the grand tour question: “How was organizational learning demonstrated during times of extreme change and the ongoing transition of becoming Brigham Young University–Idaho?”
**Definition of Terms**

To clarify meaning and enhance understanding, the following terms are defined as they relate to the study. While many of these terms may be common knowledge to those engaged in the field of higher education, the definitions will be helpful to others less familiar with that culture:

**Accreditation.** “The process by which a private, non-governmental body evaluates an educational institution or program of study and formally recognizes it as having met certain predetermined criteria or standards. The process involves initial and periodic self-study and evaluation by peers” (NWCCU, n.d.).

**Accreditation Association or Commission.** A voluntary nongovernmental entity of peer reviewers who officially assesses the quality of education and training programs. The reliability of the accreditation is recognized by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The scope of authorization can be institutional or for specialized programs; the geographic outreach can be regional, interregional, or national (NWCCU, n.d.)

**Announcement.** Statement read at a press conference held in Salt Lake City, Utah, on June 21, 2000, when Gordon B. Hinckley, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Chairman of the Board of Trustees, announced that Ricks College would become a bachelor’s-degree-granting university known as Brigham Young University–Idaho (Hinckley, 2000; see Appendix A: News Release Announcement).

**Brigham Young University–Idaho.** Formerly known as Ricks College. BYU–Idaho, located in Rexburg, Idaho. It is one of four institutions of higher education operated within the Church Educational System (CES) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. BYU–Idaho operates on a year-round track system and serves approximately 18,000 students annually from all 50 states and over 60 countries (BYU–Idaho Public Relations). The school was recognized by the Idaho State Affairs Committee (as cited in Crowder, 1997) as the oldest continuously operating private educational institution in the state of Idaho (see Appendix B: BYU–Idaho General History).

**Case study.** The term *case* applies to both the object (Stake, 1995) and the research methodology (Merriam, 1988). As explained by Stake “case study is the study of the
particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi).

**Mission statement.** A statement that encompasses the values and objectives of an organization. Mission statements serve as a basis for objective planning and a reference for evaluations including accreditation review for institutions of higher education.

**Organizational learning.** Whether, how, and under what conditions learning occurs within an organization (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; see Chapter II: Literature).

**Private or independent institution.** “College or university with self-perpetuating, or otherwise not publicly chosen, board, and little, if any, direct tax support” (NWCCU).

**Public college.** “College or university with governing board elected or appointed by elected officials and supported by public funding” (NWCCU).

**Qualitative research.** A study in a natural setting so observations can be made of people doing things together where things are done (Becker, 1986; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) rather than in a laboratory or staged setting (see Chapter III: Design).

**Ricks College.** Founded in 1888 as Bannock Stake Academy, Ricks College was the largest privately-owned junior college in the United States prior to becoming Brigham Young University–Idaho in 2001 (see definition for Brigham Young University–Idaho).

**Self study report.** An institution’s comprehensive “self-analysis of its educational quality and institutional effectiveness in relation to its stated mission and goals” (NWCCU). The report is used by accreditation commissions in their evaluation of an institution.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

**Delimitations**

This case was delimited to the study of a single institution, Ricks College and its transition to become Brigham Young University–Idaho. This study was set at Ricks College/BYU–Idaho in Rexburg, Idaho. The study commenced with the experiences beginning with the announcement in June 2000 that Ricks College would become a bachelor’s-degree-granting university known as Brigham Young University–Idaho and continued through the first five years.

While life may be “each person’s singular version of an old story” (Dominicé, 2000, p. xviii), this study nevertheless was delimited to purposefully selected participants whose
shared insights shaped to a new story of organizational learning during a transition in higher education.

**Limitations**

The intent of this study was not to record what happened in every corner of campus, but rather it sought patterns of what enabled some to act expeditiously (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), what impeded others’ progress, and how their experiences contributed to or detracted from the organizational learning during the season of transition.

Initially there was concern of the researcher that gaining access to information would be a limitation of this study. While ample communication was created during the reformative years of becoming BYU–Idaho, the school had made little attempt to archive a history or timeline. This limitation was comparable to what was found by Mary-Elaine Wszalek Perry (2003) in her case study of institutional change at the College of New Jersey: “Individual faculty and staff members periodically purge their files and don’t generally see the historical significance of their work or the materials in their possession” (p. 16).

Even though public institutions are required by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or their state’s equivalent to give open access to information about their organization, “the FOIA does not apply to private companies; persons who receive federal contracts or grants; tax-exempt organizations; or state or local governments” (The House Committee on Government Operations, Subcommittee on Information, Justice, Transportation, and Agriculture, 1993). Since Ricks College/BYU–Idaho is a private tax-exempt institution, public access to information is more limited than it would be from a public institution.

Because of this limitation, the voice of the participants became even more critical to the study and proved to be a rich source of knowledge. Dominicé (2000) explained that “every adult has experiences of learning that he or she can reflect on” (p. 1). And yet it was impossible to include in this study the perspectives of everyone who experienced changes due to the transition of Ricks College as it became BYU–Idaho. The research represents only the viewpoints of purposefully selected participants as interpreted through the lens of the researcher who happens to be an employee of the university.

Like other qualitative studies, the findings are not intended to be generalized. “Only time- and context-bound working hypotheses (idiographic statements) are possible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). However, the setting and cultural context of the case in the study are
important for determining the usefulness of the findings. The outcomes are valid for the purpose of this study, and any degree of transferability is determined by the reader rather than implied by the researcher.

**Significance of the Study**

According to Yin (2003a) “to date little empirical information has been available on the transformation process” (p. 146) for firms. In other words, there is a lack of research that fits the characteristics Stake (1995) listed for an empirical study: “It is field oriented; its emphasis is on observables, including the observations of informants; it strives to be naturalistic, noninterventionistic; and there is a relative preference for natural language description, sometimes disdaining grand constructs” (p. 47).

Such data on the transitions within higher education is also lacking. In Kezar’s research (2005b), she found a few writers who “have applied organizational learning concepts within the higher education setting, but these writings are remarkably sparse in number, leaving a tremendous need for future research and writing in this area” (p. 14).

In evaluating changes in people, organizations and societies, Senge, P. M., Scharmer, C. O, Jaworski, J, and Flowers, B. S. (2004a) observed,

> “Contemporary theories of change seemed, paradoxically, neither narrow enough nor broad enough. The changes in which we will be called upon to participate in the future will be both deeply personal and inherently systemic. The deeper dimensions of transformational change represent a largely unexplored territory both in current management research and in our understanding of leadership in general.” (p. 2)

Many aspects of higher education are changing. BYU–Idaho’s catalyst for change may be unique, but it came at a time when the higher education community has been challenged to rethink its own priorities while staying abreast of the complex political and societal forces that impact its institutions (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Information technology is changing the nature of higher education (Ten Challenges, 2004). Pleas for greater accountability are being accelerated with a “gentle shove” toward national standardized testing at the collegiate level (Field, 2006). The prospects of federally mandated changes in higher education lurk on the horizon (Spelings, 2006; Paulson, 2006).

The ability to learn how to change organizationally seems essential — some would say to learn, and learn quickly (Kezar, 2005a). And yet as Bauman (2005) states: “While the organizational learning literature is rich in concepts about how learning happens and what
serves as evidence of an organization’s having learned, there is a dearth of empirical studies of how organizational learning happens” (p. 25).

The study helps fill that void. While unique in its nature, this case study should be valuable for organizations experiencing transitions. It can be a resource for educators and administrators in higher education, students and parents, and others who seek greater understanding of the nature of organizational change and transitions in higher education. Even as this study was in its initial proposal stages, institutions were seeking information about BYU–Idaho’s transition. Recently BYU–Idaho had welcomed a dozen educational leaders as they sought information “about the institution’s transition from a two-year junior college to a four-year university” (Dixie, 2006). The study makes such information more accessible by adding to the available literature on organizational learning and transitions in higher education, institutions in the state of Idaho, and BYU–Idaho.

Chapter I Summary

Chapter I is an introduction to the study and sets the premise that changes in higher education are varied but real (Munby, 2006). The challenge is to lead out in planning ahead to make changes that are appropriate, meaningful, and sustainable (Hodgkinson, 2006).

This qualitative case study took advantage of the opportunity to focus on organizational learning during a season of change in higher education as Ricks College became Brigham Young University–Idaho. This case was a unique opportunity to study an organization dedicated to higher education which was experiencing rapid and extreme change in its physical, institutional, and human infrastructure. Research questions inductively lead to the grand tour question: “How was the nature of organizational learning demonstrated during times of extreme change and the ongoing transition of becoming Brigham Young University–Idaho?”

The ability to learn how to change organizationally seems essential. While unique in its nature, this case study should be valuable for organizations experiencing transitions. Chapter I specifies delimitations and limitations for the study, a list of definitions, and the foreseen significance of the study.

Chapter II provides the literature that supports the rationale for this study. Additional literature review was interwoven into the report of the study itself.