Strength in Numbers: An Exploratory Case Study on the Impact of Conflict in Multi-institutional Higher Education Collaborations

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Strength in Numbers: An Exploratory Case Study on the Impact of Conflict in
Multi-institutional Higher Education Collaborations

by

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A Dissertation Presented to the
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences of Nova Southeastern University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Nova Southeastern University
2023

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

This dissertation was submitted by Robyn Dinicola under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Halmos College of Arts and Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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Dedication

"Families are the compass that guides us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and our comfort when we occasionally falter." – Brad Henry

This work is dedicated to my greatest love, my family. To my three daughters, Sydney, Abby, and Emma. You have made me stronger, better, and more fulfilled than I could have imagined. You are my greatest source of pride and joy and I love you endlessly. Always remember, if you want something deeply enough, nothing need stand in your way from obtaining it. To my husband, Andrew, who never wavered in his support as I worked countless late nights and weekends to achieve this goal. Thank you for believing in me.

This work is also dedicated to my parents, Robert and Bonnie, for their endless love, support and encouragement. This is not possible without your example of what it means to have a dream and then work tirelessly to achieve it. You have been pillars of strength, love, and guidance throughout my life and I am here because of you.

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Abstract

The higher education landscape is changing. Students seeking access to college are increasingly diverse, geographically dispersed, socioeconomically challenged, and will require higher education administrators to closely examine their models to ensure they are well-suited to serve the needs of these students. Responding to these shifts will require higher education administrators to shed traditional approaches in favor of innovative, cost-effective, flexible models of education delivery. Many institutions address this challenge through a reliance on higher education consortia and collaborations. In Maryland, one approach to collaboration takes the form of multi-institutional Regional Higher Education Centers (RHEC) like the largest of them, the Universities at Shady Grove (USG). This qualitative exploratory case study was designed to explore, through the lens of Systems Theory, the nature of the conflicts that exist at USG and to gain an enhanced understanding of why they are occurring and what the resulting impact is on collaboration among the institutions. Based on the triangulation of data collected from semi-structured interviews with 17 former and current USG administrators, participant observations, and documentary evidence, five categories of conflict were identified, as were four themes to explain why conflict is occurring. Three key impacts of the conflict on collaboration emerged: 1) inability to garner meaningful commitment and engagement from partners, 2) inequitable levels of partner engagement, and 3) inability to sustain and grow collaboration. In addition, a set of recommendations is offered to assist multi-institutional collaborations to transition from a culture that results in siloed work to one that facilitates collaboration.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

> Collaboration in this new era involves colleges and universities coming together as
> seemingly one institution to change their future direction.
>
> *- Lundy & Ladd, 2020*

Institutions of higher education find themselves at an inflection point, needing to address

the rising tide of student demand for more customized and flexible programs, while

simultaneously maintaining their traditional, historical organizational constructs. A changing

workforce also compels higher education to more quickly and efficiently fill skills gaps and meet

projected industry demands. The students who seek collegiate bona fides have become more

diverse, geographically dispersed, socioeconomically challenged, and require higher education

administrators to closely examine their models to ensure they are well-suited to serve the needs

of these students.

To meet these challenges, higher education administrators are compelled to implement

innovative approaches that will rely heavily on collaboration among institutions, but

collaborations are notoriously challenging, often resulting in high failure rates. One creative and

collaborative approach gaining recognition over the past decade is the formation of Regional

Higher Education Centers (RHEC) like the Universities at Shady Grove (USG). USG is a multi-

institution educational center that offers select degree programs from nine public Maryland

universities at one location in Montgomery County, Maryland. USG is a part of the University

System of Maryland (USM), the state's public higher education system comprised of 12

institutions and three regional higher education centers, of which USG is the largest.

Celebrating its twenty-third year of existence, USG finds itself at an interesting period of

development, both poised for growth and in the midst of implementing its recently crafted ten-

year strategic plan, which has proven to be vulnerable to systemic conflicts that threaten to

impede its plans. Conflicts, some that have been present since the inception of USG and others that have recently emerged, threaten to disrupt the mission this unique collaboration was founded upon and the role it fulfills in the USM educational ecosystem.

The Universities at Shady Grove Regional Higher Education Center

Regional higher education centers are uniquely structured to target the specific workforce needs of the area in which they are located. The Maryland Higher Education Center states that RHECs are designed to provide "baccalaureate and graduate programs in areas of the state in which students do not have access to these programs due to geographical distance, commute time or the limited capacity of local 4-year institutions" (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2007). While they are constructed differently across the country, in Maryland they are required to be operated by a state public higher education institution, consist of an array of programs from higher education institutions, and offer multiple degree levels. (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2007)

According to Maryland House of Delegates Bill 1446,

An RHEC is a facility at which at least two institutions of higher education offer classes, consisting of a variety of program offerings and multiple degree levels. There are seven RHECs operating throughout Maryland. USM operates three RHECs (Shady Grove, Hagerstown, and Southern Maryland). The other four independent regional centers are coordinated by the Maryland Higher Education Commission, specifically, Arundel Mills, Eastern Shore, Laurel, and La Plata. (HB 1446 – Maryland General Assembly, 2022)

With large numbers of students beginning their higher education journey at community colleges, RHECs may likely be part of the evolving and more flexible future of higher education (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, n.d.). As such, analyzing this innovative and growing model to

understand its organization, infrastructure, culture, and points of conflict, can aid others who might contemplate the creation of such a center.

The Universities at Shady Grove, the largest of the seven Maryland regional centers, provides an ideal starting point for such research. Formed in 2000, USG is a University System of Maryland Regional Higher Education Center that offers upper level undergraduate and graduate education in Montgomery County, Maryland. Nine of USM's twelve degree granting institutions offer more than eighty high-demand degree and certificate programs at the USG campus. Participating USM institutions include: Bowie State University; Salisbury University; Towson University; University of Baltimore; University of Maryland, Baltimore; University of Maryland, Baltimore County; University of Maryland, College Park; University of Maryland Eastern Shore, and University of Maryland Global Campus.

The impetus for USG's creation was the lack of a public four-year institution in Montgomery County, Maryland. "Twenty years ago, a cadre of community leaders came together to brainstorm a solution to what was then seen as Montgomery County's greatest weakness, despite its economic strengths and assets. That weakness was the lack of a public university within the county's borders" (Edelstein & Knapp, 2019). While the county is home to a large community college, Montgomery College, with three locations throughout the county, it lacked convenient access to upper-level higher education that enabled students to complete their degree without having to leave the county.

A beautiful facility existed in Rockville, Maryland where higher education was being offered by University of Maryland, Baltimore and University of Maryland, Global Campus and served as the perfect base model to build a multi-institutional campus to address the community's need. A committed group of Montgomery County leaders, USM officials and a

small, bold group of USG staff transformed this innovative concept into a reality, as USG sprang to life, seemingly overnight, welcoming its first class of 223 undergraduate, daytime students in the fall of 2000 enrolling in programs offered by three partner institutions, University of Baltimore, University of Maryland, Baltimore, and University of Maryland, Global Campus. Despite a chaotic beginning, USG managed to navigate challenging terrain and a variety of conflicts in order to successfully implement this unique multi-institutional collaboration. In the words of one of USG's founding members:

It began to take shape but…the beginning was climactic. Everything was a catastrophe because nobody knew anything. It was unbelievable chaos. You would go in and you would have no idea what horrible thing was going to happen that day. I mean, there were no policies. There were no procedures. It was just, we're going to do it and we're going to do it the best way we know how. And so, all these buildings later and years later, it's successful. It's got its problems, but it's there. That's how we did it. (Interview Transcript, 2022)

Degree programs offered at USG are identified and delivered in close collaboration with the USM institutions, local education institutions, and employer groups to address higher education and workforce needs. USG's mission states that

We are a place of innovation to plan, build, measure, assess and strengthen student-centered pathways for affordable and competitive education, career readiness and student success. Together with our university partners, we play a vital role in advancing workforce and economic development in the region and state. (A 10-Year Vision USG 2.0 Strategic plan, 2022)

Students apply directly to the institution offering their major of choice. The curriculum and faculty are provided by the partner campus and the students' degrees are awarded by the

partner campus. Further, students pay the tuition and fees directly to their home campus. They benefit from the support structure USG provides for students, faculty, and staff (described on page 9) and benefit from specialized USG scholarships, small class sizes, and an array of student life activities customized to the needs of the students (USG at a Glance, 2023).

Currently, USG has a budget of approximately thirty million dollars, with the majority allocated through state appropriations, and approximately two million dollars received through student fees collected from the partner campuses and space usage fees.

USG is unique among the RHECs in the state in its size, in the students it serves, the programs it offers, and the layered partnerships, which form the underpinning of its success in the region. USG is the largest RHEC in the state of Maryland in the number of students it serves. More than 3,100 undergraduate and graduate students enroll in courses offered at USG (USG at a Glance, 2023). It is important to point out that at the undergraduate level, USG serves exclusively transfer students, meaning students only enroll in programs offered at USG after they have completed at least sixty credits or all the lower level prerequisites needed to transfer into the final two years of the undergraduate program.

The USG campus consists of four buildings and two parking garages. The most recent addition to campus, a Biomedical Sciences and Engineering Building (BSE), opened in 2019. This six-level, 220,000-square-foot building more than doubled the enrollment capacity of USG and enabled USG to grow its STEM programming. According to Mildred García, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, she is unaware of any multi-school campus as large as USG. "The idea is appealing, she said, for states with significant pockets of underserved populations, especially in rural areas. It's the way that higher ed's going to have to reinvent itself" (Anderson, 2019).

The USG student population is diverse, reflecting the demographics and workforce characteristics of the region (USG at a Glance, 2023.). Among undergraduates, no ethnic race is in the majority (22% White; 24% African American; 16% Asian; 25% Hispanic; 13% Other) (USG at a Glance, 2023). Many undergraduates are the first in their families to attend college. Most of the undergraduate and graduate students reside in Montgomery County, and 80% of undergraduate students transferred from a community college (USG at a Glance, 2023).

USG has an impressive record of success as 79% of students who transfer to a program offered at the USG campus graduate within four years. This compares to a graduation rate of 55% for transfer students across the University System of Maryland (USG at a Glance, 2023). Additionally, 88% of students who graduate from programs offered at USG are working in the region or are attending graduate school in their intended field of study (USG at a Glance, 2023).

The organizational and governance structure of the Universities at Shady Grove is complex, as follows:

USG Provost Executive Group. The overall policy-making responsibility for the administration of USG is vested in the USG Provost Executive Group (PEG). The PEG is composed of the chief academic officers from just four of the institutions offering programs at the USG campus, UMCP, UMB, UMBC & UB. The PEG is chaired by the USM Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and the UMD Provost. All actions of the PEG are subject to the review and approval of the Chancellor and University System of Maryland (USM) Board of Regents, as appropriate.

Board of Advisors. The Board of Advisors, who are political and business leaders in Montgomery County, serves to advise the Executive Director and the USM about the issues, needs, and interests of Montgomery County and the surrounding region and the role that USG

should play in the county. It is the responsibility of the Executive Director to ensure that the Board of Advisors has an opportunity to review policies proposed by the PEG that will significantly affect USG, and to have its recommendations considered by the PEG as part of the policymaking process.

Executive Director. The Executive Director is the principal operational official of USG. The Executive Director reports both to the USM Office of the Chancellor and to the Provost of UMCP.

Academic Planning Advisory Committee. The Academic Planning Advisory Committee (APAC) serves to provide the Executive Director with advice about academic policy, program coordination and planning, operational needs, and the interests of the participating institutions. It is composed of a representative of the chief academic officer of each partner institution. The representatives are appointed by their respective provosts.

Partner Institutions. The Partner Institutions are the educational institutions providing academic programs at USG. Partner Institutions are financially and administratively responsible for maintaining accreditation; for providing the faculty, academic course content, materials, and instruction; for admitting and advising students; for handling matters of misconduct and academic irregularity occurring in their courses; for meeting guidelines established by the PEG; and for all other matters essential to the administration and integrity of its academic offerings.

University System of Maryland. The University System of Maryland (USM), is the state's public higher education system and consists of 12 institutions and three Regional Higher Education Centers (see Figure 1 on page 8). These entities work in concert to leverage their strengths in order to increase the effectiveness of the system. The USM Office, which consists of the Chancellor and other key staff who advocate on behalf of the USM institutions, has

overarching responsibility for administering USG, including the planning and program coordination for USG as part of the overall statewide development of regional higher education centers. USM ensures that services and facilities at USG conform to the standards and policies of the Maryland Higher Education Commission and appropriate accrediting bodies.

Figure 1

University System of Maryland Organizational Chart
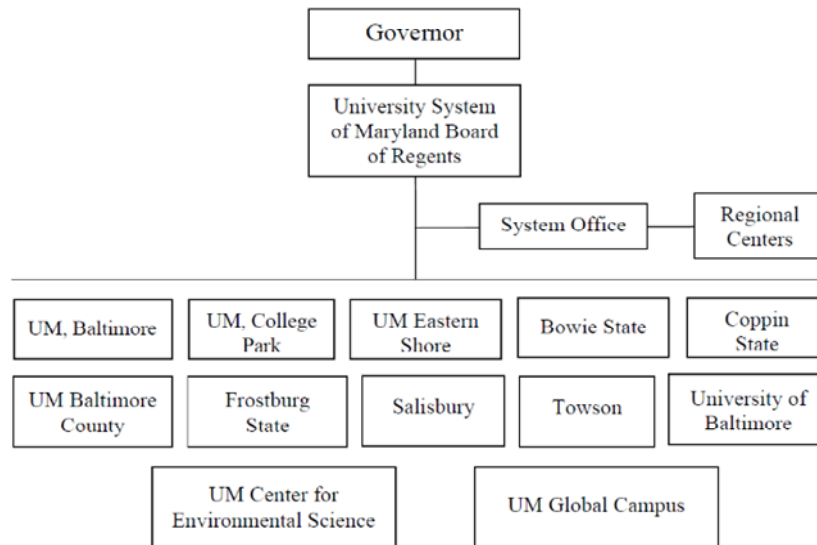
Source: Department of Legislative Services, (2023)

University System of Maryland Board of Regents (BOR). The BOR is the governing body of the USM, consisting of 21 members who are appointed by the Governor. The BOR is responsible for appointing the Chancellor of the USM, who acts as the chief executive officer and serves as chief of staff to the BOR.

University of Maryland, College Park. In 2002, UMCP was established as the coordinating campus for the USG. USG pays a fee to UMCP each year for their support in several areas including business office functions, human resources, parking and transportation, library oversight, and information technology support. This relationship has given UMCP

additional oversight and input into the operations of the USG campus. As a result of this role, all onsite USG staff are actually employees of UMCP. In recent years, the title has changed from coordinating campus to administrative campus.

Universities at Shady Grove Onsite Staff. USG is comprised of approximately 95 staff who work to manage the facility and provide onsite support services for the USG community. In addition to a library, bookstore, cafeteria, recreation center, conference center, public safety and transportation center, and copy center, USG boasts a full-scale student and academic support services center that includes a counseling center, academic support center, career and internship service center, scholarship support, student engagement, recruitment, and student leadership. Students pay a student support services fee through their home campus to help fund these services. The activities, events, and student life contribute to the feeling of a traditional campus experience and students feel they are part of a campus community.

By all accounts, USG has surpassed the expectations placed upon its founding members in 2000 and has become arguably one of the most successful centers of its kind in the country.

> Higher education experts say no other university systems…have satellite programs on the same scale or complexity of Shady Grove…Public universities may still find it useful to examine the Shady Grove model as they look for cost-effective ways to remain competitive, especially as the state investment in higher education remains tenuous. (Douglas-Gabriel, 2016, n.p.)

According to one senior policy analyst at New America,

> This is really smart state policy because it's a way of expanding the options for students without asking each institution to develop and approve new programs. It's a way to

leverage resources and not reinvent the wheel at every state institution (Douglas-Gabriel, 2016, n.p.).

Aged little more than twenty-three years, however, USG is an institution that is still in its infancy when compared with other institutions of higher education in the state of Maryland and must identify and address growing pains as it evolves to meet the needs of its partners and stakeholders.

<div align="center">**Statement of the Research Problem**</div>

Research indicates that institutions of higher education are being called upon to address a growing demand to serve a student body that is becoming more diverse, less privileged, lacking adequate preparation, and coming from more widely dispersed geographical areas. In 1995, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges joined forces with the W.K. Kellog Foundation to conduct an in-depth examination of the future of public higher education.

The result was the formation of a commission comprised of numerous university presidents and chancellors who produced several reports with a series of recommendations that were shared with their colleagues nationwide. In their report titled, "Returning to Our Roots," they noted that, "Access to our institutions will become one of the defining domestic policy issues in coming years…it will become even more urgent as we move into the 21st century" (Returning to our roots: Student access, 1998, p. 17). Further, the commission stated that, "Broadening access is the right thing to do in the name of fairness, and it is the right thing to do for the good of the United States" (Returning to our roots: Student access, 1998, p. 17).

In the ensuing years, institutions of higher education have sought ways to answer this call to action to meet shifting demands through alternative delivery methods to reach all students. Other institutions are relying upon technology to bridge the divide and reach larger, more diverse

audiences, but economic disparities that lead to disparate access to needed devices and broadband have been a challenge for many (Leu & Pugh, 2017; Office of Policy Development and Research, 2016). Many institutions are attempting to address this need through a reliance on higher education consortia and collaborations (Kezar, 2016). "What is most needed for this new era is a change in mindset among higher education leaders: they need to stop thinking that the only path forward is the one that they take alone" (Lundy & Ladd, 2020, p. 3).

In Maryland, one approach to address this need is through the creation of collaborations in form of higher education centers like the largest of them, the Universities at Shady Grove. While this unique collaboration has proven successful by several standards, conflicts have emerged that should be explored through the lens of conflict theory in order to understand their impact on the future growth and success of the participating campuses. There is, however, little research available in the general area of RHECs and no research on the application of conflict theory to the growth and success of RHECs. This research is an attempt to help fill that gap.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore, through the lens of Systems Theory, the nature of the conflicts that exist at USG and to gain an enhanced understanding of why they are occurring and what the resulting impact is on collaboration among the institutions.

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What have been the key types and points of conflict in the initiation, development and maturation of the USG?

2. Why are conflicts occurring?

3. How is conflict impacting the ability of USG institutional partners to successfully collaborate?

The questions are not discrete as they are both related and overlap. The overarching goal of this exploration will serve to create a road map for higher education professionals who wish to successfully enter into unique but complicated multi-institutional collaborations. It can also add to the body of research in the field of organizational conflict as exemplified in cross-institutional higher education partnerships.

Overview of the Research Design

This qualitative research design employed a single, exploratory case study design, focusing on one RHEC, the Universities at Shady Grove, where the researcher is employed as the Chief Student Affairs Officer. The data sources for this research were semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis of reports and other pertinent literature on USG. Expert purposive sampling was utilized in order to identify and interview 17 participants who have a current or former close association with USG and an in-depth knowledge of its operations, activities, and outcomes. In addition to these interviews, the researcher reviewed 13 pieces of documentary evidence, and was a participant observer in 37 hours of meetings and events throughout the duration of the study. Structural and pattern coding were utilized for all three data sources.

Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions of the terms that are relevant to the case study.

Regional Higher Education Center (RHEC)

For this study, the Maryland General Assembly description of a Regional Higher Education Center will be used, "Regional higher education" centers were established by law in 2000 to provide another option for high school graduates seeking further education (Chapter 542, Acts of 2005; Code Education Article, sec. 10-212 as cited in Regional Centers, 2019).

These centers provide access to affordable higher education in areas of the state which have few institutions of higher learning. They also provide courses and programs needed by business and industry in the area served. Since the 1990s, universities and community colleges have collaborated to form most of these centers. (Regional Centers, 2019)

Partner Institution

For the purposes of this study, partner institution refers to the partner universities who offer programming at the USG campus. These partner campuses include Bowie State University (BSU); Salisbury University (SU); Towson University (TU); University of Baltimore (UB); University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB); University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC); University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP); University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES), and University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) (USG at a Glance, 2023).

<div align="center">

Summary

</div>

As noted, there are economic, demographic, and structural forces at play that require higher education institutions to rethink how they serve society. Partnership ventures such as RHECs are uniquely constructed collaborations that can provide education to geographic areas lacking in convenient access to higher education. Collaborations, while needed and often beneficial, suffer from high failure rates. While conflict and collaboration are often studied, there is a paucity of research on conflict and its impact on collaboration within RHECS.

Chapter 1 provides an introductory framework, background for the study, and the rationale for the need to explore this line of inquiry. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth literature review focused on the current higher education landscape, higher education collaborations, highlighting RHECs, sources of conflict, conflict and collaboration, and Systems Theory. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology utilized for the study. Chapter 4 discusses the

methods used for analysis and shares the triangulated results. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the study's results through the lens of Systems Theory, and the study's conclusions, and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter examines the cornerstones of the study, beginning with an understanding of the current higher education landscape. Following this, an overview of higher education collaborations is discussed that focuses on RHECs. Next, relevant sources of organizational conflict and research on collaboration and conflict are discussed. Finally, this chapter will include a discussion of those aspects of Systems Theory that serve as the theoretical framework for the study.

Higher Education Landscape

Between 1968 and 2010, higher education institutions experienced two extended and consecutive periods of expansion (Lundy & Ladd, 2020). The first was a 22-year growth period from 1968-1990, which was the result of a Cold War baby boom that gave the education system a boost in both enrollment and federal spending (Lundy & Ladd, 2020). The second was a period that spanned from 1990-2010 and was defined by a technology explosion fueled by the internet and other advances that helped to expand access (Lundy & Ladd, 2020). This timeframe, which was considered a golden era for higher education, saw increases in demand, students, funding, and led to transformations in research, teaching and student learning (Lundy & Ladd, 2020).

Currently, higher education is in the midst of a new era (2010-current) that is impacted by a decreased high school graduation rate, decreased funding, lagging personal incomes, and an increased need to be accountable for producing meaningful outcomes, specifically a job upon graduation (Lundy & Ladd, 2020). Surviving and thriving in this era will require "a significant shift in strategy for institutions around the idea of collaboration and the development of much deeper partnerships than higher education has ever seen before" (Lundy & Ladd, 2020, p.2).

Higher education institutions are also feeling pressure to address the needs of a changing student demographic that is more non-traditional (Grabowski et.al., 2016, Leu & Pugh, 2017). Students seeking access to college are increasingly diverse in age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Grabowski et.al., 2016). According to a 2017 report produced by the Department of Education, "Reimagining the Role of Technology in Higher Education," a new normal has emerged in the type of student currently enrolling in higher education (Leu & Pugh, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "74% of all undergraduate students have at least one nontraditional characteristic" (Leu & Pugh, 2017). These characteristics include being a transfer student, working full or part time, being a first-generation college student, enrolling in a community college, having at least one dependent, and enrolling in school as a part time student (Leu & Pugh, 2017).

In addition to these shifts, a significant number of American adults are geographically dispersed and lack convenient access to higher education opportunities (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018). As a result, higher education administrators must identify innovative and collaborative approaches to address this growing demand. According to the nonprofit research organization, the Urban Institute, approximately 41 million American adults "lack access to a physical university and, of those, 3 million also lack access to an internet connection suitable for online education" (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018). As the needs of the student community grow more diverse and expand each year, it is critical that universities reimagine themselves to keep pace. "In this time of incredible transformation, higher education has never mattered so much to those who seek it. It drives social mobility, energizes our economy, and underpins our democracy" (Leu & Pugh, 2017).

Adding to these complexities in current and future student populations is the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption it caused to higher education. The pandemic highlighted the vast disparities that exist in the United States and the world, with a focus on socioeconomic and racial inequalities (Simon, 2021, Atherton, 2021, Binkley, 2023). Access to critical supports such as technology, food, digital access, wellness supports, and tutoring support became even more elusive for some members of society (Simon, 2021, Atherton, 2021, Binkley, 2023).

In addition to this realization, many higher education institutions across the country are experiencing a decline in enrollment (Binkley, 2023). What first appeared a temporary anomaly now appears to be reaching crisis levels, with enrollment declines that are the steepest on record since 2018, dropping 8% from 2019 to 2022 (Binkley, 2023).

Tackling these considerable post-pandemic challenges will require higher education administrators to shed traditional approaches to attracting and retaining prospective students in favor of innovative, cost-effective, flexible models of education delivery. According to UNESCO, the challenges facing institutions are too complex to be addressed alone, "Just as collaboration was a cornerstone of efforts to tackle the virus, so universities need to collaborate across borders to find solutions to improving access and equity" (Atherton, 2021).

Higher Education Collaborations

Regional higher education centers are a relatively new phenomenon in the U.S. and, therefore, research on this particular form of collaboration is scarce. As such, a focus on similar types of arrangements, namely higher education collaborations, partnership campuses, and higher education consortia, provides a general and useful picture of collaborations and conflicts that undergird the creation of an RHEC.

Higher education collaboration is not a novel concept as institutions have sought opportunities to collaborate in a variety of ways for quite some time. In fact, there is a known collaboration to have taken part in A.D. 600 via a faculty exchange program between Moorish University and the University of Sankori at Timbuktu (Howard, 1966). Around the time of World War I, interest in higher education cooperation increased as a result of the General Education Board's desire to promote higher education for African Americans (Kreplin, 1973). The Second World War marked the beginning of significant increases in the formation of higher education collaborations, and they have been evolving in various iterations ever since (Kreplin, 1973).

Higher education institutions have many incentives to collaborate, which is why in 1997 a former president of Harvard wrote in *Academic Duty,* "reorganizing higher education institutions for collaboration is one of the primary challenges and has the greatest promise for ensuring excellence in the future" (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

One definition of collaboration is "an effective interpersonal process that facilitates the achievement of goals that cannot be reached when individual professionals act on their own" (Bronstein, L.R., 2003, p. 299). Roschelle and Teasley define collaboration more specifically as "mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together," (as cited in Dillenbourg et al., 1996, p. 2).

Higher education collaborations provide a structure that can aid in solving many challenges by leveraging the resources, skills, and knowledge housed between them (Eddy, 2010; Ebers, 1997, Farmakopoulou, 2002). Collaborations may take a number of forms, including consortia, partnerships, alliances, joint ventures, etc. (Eddy, 2010).

Extensive research has been conducted to determine the goals and desired outcomes individuals or institutions seek when they endeavor to collaborate (Ebers, 1997, Chen 2004, Baldwin & Chang, 2007). Motivators include access to resources, gaining efficiencies, acquiring knowledge and information, and the acquisition of prestige or influence (Ebers, 1997; Chen 2004; Baldwin & Chang, 2007). Additionally, researchers have studied the phenomenon from different perspectives, in order to identify those components required to successfully implement collaborative ventures (Kanter, 1994; Bronstein, 2003; Kezar, 2006; Gieseck, 2012).

Extensive research has been conducted on higher education consortia. A consortium is defined as "An association of institutions for the purpose of improved and expanded economic collaboration to achieve mutually beneficial goals" (Glazer, 1982). Consortia were initially designed to "foster inter-institutional cooperation among a group of colleges and universities for the purpose of enhancing services within a geographic region" (Glazer, 1982). A higher education consortium can be viewed as a form of a regional higher education center.

The current Association for Consortium (ACL) brings together higher education institutions who wish to partner in a variety of areas, including conducting research, collaborating on faculty and student projects, partnering on transportation, technology, and library resources. (Dotolo & Strandness, 1999). However, no literature was located on this group demonstrating a deeper integration of multi-institutional activity as is seen, for example, in RHEC partnerships.

The first known comprehensive study undertaken on higher education consortia was conducted in 1974 by Franklin Patterson, in which he determined that the "rhetoric of inter-institutional cooperation tended to exceed the impact" (p. 95). In other words, he found that

institutions were engaging in consortia on a superficial level rather than embedding them as integral elements of the structure of the institution (Patterson, 1974).

In 1982, Judith S. Glazer conducted a study that examined consortia to determine the rationale for their development at the graduate level. She noted factors that could negatively impact the sustainability of consortia that include resistance from faculty, insufficient incentives, lack of clarity in goal setting, differing level of commitment and quality, and difficulty achieving true cohesion (Glazer, 1982).

In 2007, a qualitative, comparative case study was conducted by a University of South Dakota Ph.D. candidate, which compared similarities and difference among four partnership campuses. (Lee, 2007). The researcher defined partnership campus as "A physical location where two or more institutions collaborate to deliver academic programs and student services" (Lee, 2007). The Universities at Shady Grove was one of the campuses analyzed in this study, as were South Dakota Public Universities and Research Center, University Center of Lake County, and University of Houston System at Sugar Land.

The study found that the four partnership campuses were more alike than different; in particular, they had mission statements that were extremely similar. (Lee, 2007). The differences among the institutions appeared to stem from challenges that were unique to the geographic area where they are located and/or political circumstances. Of note, is a finding that highlights the critical need for the partner campuses to be highly engaged in both strategic and operational aspects of the partnership, noting that "it can be difficult to meld the various motives and goals of the many partners into a single cohesive mission and vision without the support of system or state level administrators" (Lee, 2007, p. 133). Additionally, Lee (2007) emphasizes the essential role of collaboration stating:

To operate at the highest levels of partnering requires a great deal of collaboration, trust,

and mutual support. If the main campuses consider the needs of students, above their own

needs, strategies for course sharing and truly collaborative and transformative

partnerships will emerge. (p. 134)

Lee's study provides a useful addition to the body of literature on multi-institutional

centers, further refining the understanding of how they operate. While he identifies the critical

need to develop meaningful collaboration, his study was not designed to identify what may

prohibit this from occurring. This study, by contrast, offers an in-depth analysis of one of these

centers, USG, in order to identify the conflicts that impact the ability for the partners to

collaborate and to offer a set of recommendations to address these barriers to collaboration.

Collaboration and Conflict

Regardless of the form or nomenclature, undertaking collaboration can be complex and

risky (Prashant & Harbir, 2009). Studies have indicated a fail rate of strategic alliances or

partnership ventures of more than 50 percent (Prashant & Harbir, 2009; Doz, 1996). According

to an article by Harvard University faculty titled "The Two Facets of Collaboration: Cooperation

and Coordination in Strategic Alliances," an inability of the partners to cooperate led to the

ultimate demise of attempted collaborative ventures (Gulati, Wohlgezogen, & Zhelyazkov).

Instead, the authors focus on the role of coordination between partners as a key to success. There

occurs a shift in perspective that addresses the mechanics and creates appropriate and sustainable

structures and relationships that enable the partners to work across boundaries (Gulati,

Wohlgezogen, & Zhelyazkov).

Anytime individuals or universities join forces, conflict is bound to occur. A common

cause of conflict in collaboration lies in the cultural differences found within institutions and

among faculty and staff. Where cultures are not in alignment, difficulties with communication and collaboration will be present (Kelly, Schaan & Joncas, 2002). Another cause of conflict is an imbalance of power among the participating institutions. (McCloughen & O'Brien, 2006).

Higher education institutions engaging in collaborative ventures must successfully align the partnership within the overall context of the mission and structure of each involved institution (Eddy, 2010). They must also successfully leverage resources, have a champion(s) who believes in the effort, and have a decision-making process in place that allows for nimble action and decisions to be reached (Eddy, 2010). Additionally, trust between the participants is a critical key to success (Koza & Lewin, 1998). If a partner perceives that the other collaborator(s) are acting in their own self-interest or acting as a competitor, the collaboration will not flourish (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Another best practice is to have clearly defined guidelines and expectations for the partnership (Doz, 1996). Clarity helps to ensure that the partners understand what is expected of them and, thus, can clearly fulfill their obligations.

While collaborations and consortia have been studied extensively, there is a paucity of literature on one specific type of higher education collaboration, regional higher education centers. Not a single study or article was located that addressed RHECs through the lens of conflict theory. This lack of research was the basis of this study, which seeks to investigate empirically the views of RHEC participants toward potential conflict topics and their impact on collaboration.

Sources of Conflict

Throughout the entirety of USG's twenty-three-year history, conflict has been present. This is neither surprising nor unexpected. By its very construct, one campus that is home to nine different University System of Maryland degree-granting institutions and more than eighty

different degree programs is bound to experience numerous conflicts. There are several definitions of conflict that one can ascribe to but one crafted by William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker in their book, *Interpersonal Conflict,* perhaps best defines the conflict present at USG. "Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011, p. 11).

American psychologist Daniel Katz theorized that conflict arises from three different sources, economic, value, and power (Fisher, 2000). Economic Conflict commonly occurs when the behavior and emotions of the parties are directed at increasing their own gain (Fisher, 2000). Value Conflict occurs when the ideologies and preferences that form the principles of each party are in contrast (Fisher, 2000). Conflicts involving value conflict can be difficult to resolve because of the belief-based rather than fact-based differences. Finally, Power Conflict arises between parties when one party attempts to exercise and retain its maximum influence in the relationship (Fisher, 2000). Conflict engendered by a power struggle occurs when one party elects to assume power in a situation of conflict; this situation does not often result in a win-win outcome.

The description and analysis of conflicts at USG are based upon Katz's work and include those conflicts observed by the researcher and uncovered through the study. While the initial theoretical lens through which the conflict at USG was viewed in existing scholarship was broad and ill-defined, the in-depth single case study on USG resulted in a refinement of the sources of conflict at USG and their impact on the growth and sustainability of this complex multi-institutional collaboration. Through this study, the researcher was able to test Katz's theory

within the USG partnership and to also discover additional, more in-depth, sources of conflict that are unique to USG, as described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Systems Theory

General Systems Theory originates from 1940's biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who described the theory as "a general science of wholeness" in which "its subject matter is a formulation of principles that are valid for systems in general, whatever the nature of their component elements" (Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 37). In other words, rather than concentrating solely on the smaller elements of a system, the theory shifts the focus on the whole system as an interrelated organization or living system. The sustainability of USG rests upon an agreed upon and functioning whole that can endure conflicts among its partner institutions.

According to Kast and Rosenzweig (1972), there are a variety of principles relating to General Systems Theory that helped to guide the study. Five of these principles include the following:

- Social systems are **teleological** and will have multiple goals or purposes (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). In General Systems Theory, systems are purposeful and have a goal. Institutions may have multiple goals as a result of the fact that the institution is comprised of individuals and subunits who may have their own beliefs and goals (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). USG and each of its partner institutions have their own set of goals for USG.

- Within the components of a system, a **hierarchy** is present. Kast and Rosenzweig (1972) state that "A system is composed of subsystems of a lower order and is also part of a supra-system" (p. 450). USG serves as the supra system, and confusion occurs when the hierarchy is not clear and respected.

- In Systems Theory, the system is a set of interrelated subsystems "the whole is not just the sum of the parts; the system itself can be explained only as a totality" (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Kast and Rosenzweig write of systems and **holism**, which was a term first used in 1926 by Jan Christian Smuts who used the term to reflect that "the whole is more than the sum of its parts" (Stevenson, 2019, para. 13). Used in Systems Theory, holism is used to "explain the arrangement or working of a unified whole" and suggests that to fully understand the system, it is important to examine "what brought the whole/parts of the systems together" (Stevenson, 2019, para. 20). The demand for change in public higher education in Maryland brought USG and USM institutions together to create an RHEC. The challenge is whether working as a holistic entity is supported by the partner institutions.

- In open systems, the concept of **equifinality** suggests that a system can achieve the same final result despite a variety of initial conditions, which may be present. As stated by Kast and Rosenzweig (1972), "Equifinality suggests that social organizations can accomplish their objectives with diverse inputs with varying internal activities" (p. 450). In other words, many individuals can shoot a basketball from a variety of different positions on the court and all see the shot go through the hoop.

- Kast & Rosenzweig (1972) note that an open system may attain a state of **homeostasis**, "where the system remains in dynamic equilibrium through the continuous inflow of materials, energy, and information" (p. 450). This may mean that a system may not always return to its original state but may instead return to a state that maximizes its ability to survive and grow.

Systems Theory, which has been adapted by the likes of Kenneth Boulding, William Ross Ashby, and Anatol Rappaport, has its uses in a variety of disciplines, including within organizations. A leading figure in the study of organizational development, Peter Senge, builds on Bertalanffy's work but through the lens of an organization. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge coined the term the "learning organization," which "conceptualizes organizations as dynamic systems in states of continuous adaptation and improvement" (Senge, 1990).

Senge refers to systems thinking as the fifth discipline because it "integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice" (Senge, 1990, p.12). Systems theory helps organizations to fully understand the whole and then to study the relationships among the various parts of the organization. USG must be accepted as a whole in order to legitimize the goals of the partner institutions, and herein lies the source of a number of conflicts. Differences and growth within a dynamic system must not be considered as undue competition.

In the case of USG, the organization is a complex, multi-institution system with conflict identifiable at various levels, both at the USG campus and among groups of stakeholders employed at other USM institutions and located within the community. Utilizing Systems Theory helped to guide an analysis at a macro or systematic level, rather than focusing on one entity alone. It also offered a framework to analyze the points of tension throughout the system that enable conflict to emerge and thrive. Senge stated it is important to look at a larger number of interactions within the organization, beyond those of the individual component. This process reveals where the systems break down and conflicts grow (Senge, 1990).

Senge also emphasized the important role that the individual within an organization has as an actor upon the system. Specifically, he writes of being "concerned with a shift of mind

from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality" (Senge, 1990, p. 69). According to Senge, most efforts to effect change are hampered by resistance created by the cultural habits of the prevailing system (Senge, 1990).

A variety of systems thinking tools exist to aid individuals attempting to employ systems thinking. One such widely used tool will be used for this study. The Iceberg Model is a straightforward tool that argues that observable patterns and events originate from systemic structures which, in turn, stem from mental models, which are often not observable (Cunliff, 2018). In this model, the tip of the pyramid that is observable above the water is representative of a single incident or event that occurred. Just below the top layer, a deeper level of examination may reveal patterns or trends that begin to piece together why particular events may be a pattern (Cunliff, 2018).

A layer below the trend depth is the structure level or the base that supports and forms the behaviors that are found in the higher levels of the pyramid (Cunliff, 2018). At the lowest level of the pyramid, are the mental models or the attitudes and beliefs that affect the way the top levels are understood and processed (Cunliff, 2018). See Figure 4 on page 111.

When an issue, event, or challenge is viewed from the deeper submerged perspective, it involves the personal mastery of our own mental models or our automatic thoughts and how we can alter them (Senge, 1990).

Systems Theory served as the theoretical framework for this study to analyze the conflicts present at the USG Regional Higher Education Center. USG's very existence forces its partner campuses to act outside of their comfort zones and, in turn, promotes an inherent resistance to change. As Meadow stated in *Thinking in Systems*, "Such resistance to change

arises when goals of subsystems are different from and inconsistent with each other" (2008, p.

113). Examining the conflicts present at USG through a systems lens sharpened the analysis of

the conflicts and also aided in the identification of systematic solutions rather than those that

focus on one entity alone.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter provides an in-depth examination of the exploratory case study methodology utilized to explore the nature of the conflicts that exist at USG and to gain a better understanding of why they are occurring and what the resulting impact is on collaboration. This discussion will address the use of qualitative case study, which was guided by Robert K Yin's (author of *Case Study Research and Applications Design and Methods)* Six Step Case Study Model, including the research design, sampling strategy, role of the researcher, ethical considerations, data collection, and biases.

Research Design

The research design provides the blueprint for the overall strategy to be utilized for a study, including the approach taken to collect, measure, and analyze the data (Yin, 2018). According to Yin, "A research design links the data to be collected (and the conclusions to be drawn) to the initial questions of study" (2018, p. 24). There are a variety of general frameworks that could be utilized within the social sciences to conduct research (Willis, 2007; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998).

This research was conducted through an interpretivism paradigm, and addresses the questions through the lens of the individuals who are experiencing the phenomenon, which uncovers a rich and deep understanding through questioning and observation (Willis, 2007). As such, a qualitative methodology was employed because it enabled the researcher to "delve into questions of meaning, examine institutional and social practices and processes, identify barriers and facilitators to change, and discover the reasons for the success or failure of interventions" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p.1372). Qualitative research provides opportunities to explore the

realm of human experience and to gain an in-depth understanding of multifaceted phenomena such as the one that is the focus of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Willis, 2007).

Rather than offer one clear definition of qualitative research, Merriam & Tisdall (2016) provide characteristics that help provide an understanding of the nature of qualitative research. They indicate that of most importance are, "the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive" (p. 798).

Complex multi-institutional partnerships such as USG are comprised of a variety of stakeholders whose thought processes, behaviors, and actions collectively impact the success or failure of the organization. Employing a qualitative approach, the researcher was able to explore these phenomena and acquire a deeper insight into how individuals closely associated with USG experience the conflicts associated with collaboration, why these conflicts are occurring, and how these conflicts are impacting effective collaboration. In addition to the ability to analyze the participants' personal experiences with conflict, a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to examine the USG system, including its structures and processes, in order to gain an in-depth view and analysis of conflicts and their impacts within the USG collaboration.

Case Study Research

Qualitative research takes many forms, and it is critical for the researcher to select the most appropriate strategy to ensure that it is suited to the purpose of the study and achieves desired outcomes (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Willis, 2007). For this study, an exploratory, holistic single case study approach was utilized. According to Yin, it is appropriate to use single case to study a particular phenomenon under certain circumstances (2018). One such situation is when the case is revelatory in nature, or when the researcher has an opportunity to "uncover some

prevalent phenomenon previously inaccessible to social scientists" (Yin, 2018, p. 51). In the case

of this study, as the review of the literature reveals, there has been no discoverable research on

the study of RHECs through the lens of conflict theory and only limited research conducted on

RHECs. The results of this study provide new information in the areas of conflict and

collaboration within such complex multi-institutional educational partnerships as the Universities

at Shady Grove.

      The study was conducted using Robert Yin's six-stage case study process. Yin's text is

widely considered the seminal work for case study researchers. The six-stages of his model, as

depicted in Figure 2 below, are to plan, design, prepare, collect, analyze, and share (Yin, 2018, p.

1).

Figure 2

Six-Stage Case Study Process Model
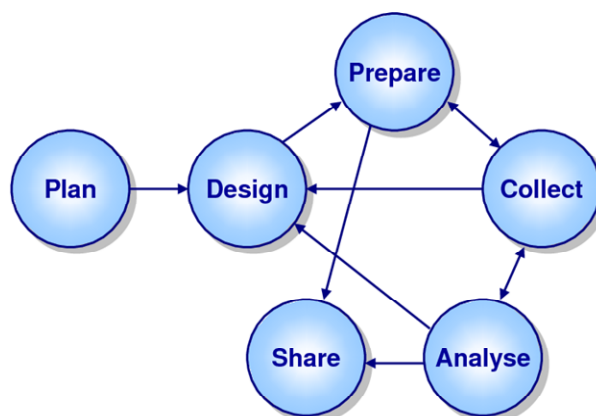
Source: Yin, Robert K. (2018). Case study research and applications. (6th Edition). Sage.

      One definition for case study research offered by Merriam (1998) suggests it is "an

intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an

institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (p.xiii). The goal of the researcher is to collect a

rich set of data, meaning that the data are derived from multiple sources and perspectives and are

relevant to the study being researched. (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2009) defines a case study as "a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (p. 3).

Case study research is considered an effective methodology to explore complicated issues within the context of the real world in which it occurs. It is used in a number of disciplines including health, education, social sciences, business, etc. According to Yin, case study is often the research method of choice when attempting to address the "why" or "how" research questions and when it deals with a contemporary event over which the researcher has little control (2018, p. 2).

In science, the National Center for Biotechnology regularly uses case study research to examine a variety of research areas, including an investigation into the reasons for differences in the rates of recruitment of minorities in asthma research and the formal and informal ways that students gain information about patient safety (Crowe et al., 2011). In psychology, case study is frequently used and, in fact, was famously used by Sigmund Freud to study the private lives of his patients. Some of his studies include "Little Hans" and "The Rat Man" (McLeod, 2014).

In the field of conflict resolution, case study research is frequently utilized to conduct in-depth analysis on a range of topics and in a range of disciplines, including conflicts at interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels (Stake, 1995, Baskarada, 2014, Yin, 2018). One example of case study research utilized in the field of education includes a 2014 study conducted in order to assess the School Resource Officer Program implemented by the Midwest Police Department. The study addresses the differing perspectives regarding the benefits and risks of deploying police officers within schools to keep children safe while worrying that the presence of officers can have a negative influence on students, in particular those in an ethnic minority

group (Schlosser, 2014). Case study findings showed that the various roles a school resource officer must fill are often in conflict with one another, and typically the role of law enforcer often becomes the overriding, dominant role (Schlosser, 2014).

Case Study Limitations

The researcher acknowledged often cited concerns and limitations regarding the selection of case study research as a methodology specifically that it lacks rigor, offers poor generalizability, and requires an unmanageable level of effort (Yin, 2018). Perhaps one of the greatest concerns is that it lacks rigor due to haphazardly constructed studies that do not provide clear detail or evidence and/or demonstrate ambiguous or biased views of the researcher (Yin, 2018). To address this concern, the researcher followed systematic procedures with proper applications, as outlined in the Yin Six-Stage Case Study Process.

Case study critiques also note the poor generalizability of case study, questioning its ability to generalize from a single case that may have a small number of participants and, hence its ability to provide a generalizing conclusion (Yin, 2018). However, according to Yin (2018), "The short answer is that case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes…in doing case study research, your goal will be to expand and generalize theories and not to extrapolate probabilities" (p. 20-21). The researcher addressed this critique by triangulating the study with three data collection methods (interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence) in order to confirm the validity of the process. Additionally, the researcher also linked the case study to a Systems Theory theoretical framework.

Critics also note concerns about an unmanageable level of effort required to conduct case study research, indicating that it can result in a high volume of documents and take too long to

complete (Yin, 2018). The researcher did, in fact, encounter this challenge, as a large number of documents and observations were initially identified and collected; but repeated reflection on the research questions in order to refine documentary evidence and observations to ensure that the data collected were useful helped to minimize this concern. However, it should be noted that when the researcher is able to manage a large data set and align it with study objectives, as was the case with this study, this trove of data uncovered through a variety of credible sources becomes a strength of case study research and not a limitation.

Sampling Strategy

Expert purposive sampling was utilized to select interview participants for the study. Expert sampling is a form of purposive sampling that is used by the researcher when expertise must be gleaned from individuals who have specific expertise needed to address the research questions (van Manen, 2014). According to van Manen (2014), "The notion of purposive sampling is sometimes used to indicate that interviewees or participants are selected on the basis of their knowledge and verbal eloquence to describe a group or (sub)culture to which they belong" (p. 353).

Expert purposive sampling was employed in order to ensure that the individuals being interviewed possessed the required background and expertise about USG, as well as its partnership nuances, in order to appropriately address the research questions. The questions required in-depth knowledge of USG's organizational structure, processes and procedures, opportunities and challenges, and partnership institutional mission and goals.

Relying on her more than twenty years of leadership experience at USG and her extensive, in-depth knowledge of key USG stakeholders and their roles in the development and ongoing operations of USG, the researcher is qualified to verify that participants met the criteria

outlined in the inclusion protocol. The researcher also used this experience to select which observations and documents are most relevant to the study.

Interviewees were contacted via email to inform them of the study and ask for their interest and willingness to participate. Email addresses were either known to the researcher or identifiable on staff directory websites.

Inclusion Criteria

All 17 of the interview participants are individuals who have a current or former close association with the Universities at Shady Grove and an in-depth knowledge of its operations, activities and outcomes. Individuals fell into one of four groups: 1) current or former USG staff, 2) current or former member of one of USG's partner campuses, 3) current or former administrator from USM headquarters, or 4) a member from the USG Board of Advisors. The researcher ensured that participants reflected a range of diverse perspectives and were representative of a majority of USG's institutional partners. Ten interview participants were female and seven were male. In order to maintain anonymity, additional identifying characteristics will not be disclosed.

Exclusion Criteria

Individuals who lack in-depth knowledge of USG or who are not currently or have never previously been associated with USG in a meaningful way were excluded from consideration for the interviews.

Role of the Researcher

The third phase of Yin's Case Study Process, requires the researcher to reflect on the skills and abilities that are needed to successfully conduct case study research and to consider needed steps that must occur prior to beginning data collection. According to Yin, "Good

preparation begins with (1) the desired skills and values on the part of the case study investigator…(2) training for a specific case study, (3) developing a protocol for the study, (4) screening candidate cases, and (5) conducting a pilot case study" (Yin, 2018, p. 81).

Having completed the prerequisites for the Ph.D. Program in Conflict Analysis and Resolution prior to beginning the dissertation phase, the researcher is prepared and well-versed in qualitative research design and case study. In order to become fully immersed in case study research, the researcher reviewed several case studies on a range of topics and fields of study. In addition, the researcher's more than twenty-five years of experience working in the field of student affairs in higher education settings, resulted in the development of strong listening skills, the ability to ask relevant questions, and to stay adaptive and flexible as situations dictate and demand (Yin, 2018).

The researcher is well versed and comfortable with the study domain and has a firm grasp on critical issues associated with USG. Prior to the study, the researcher submitted a new protocol submission to the Nova Southeastern Institutional Review Board to request permission to conduct the study on human subjects. The submission included an overarching protocol for the study, including the majority of the elements Yin suggests for inclusion in the protocol template, specifically, an overview of the study, the data collection procedures, and the protocol questions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential to all research studies and require the researcher to ensure that participants' rights are appropriately safeguarded. The researcher took several actions in order to ensure the ethics of the study:

1. Prior to beginning the study, the researcher obtained approval from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board. Permission was obtained on July 26, 2021.

2. All interview participants were required to complete a consent form prior to engaging in the study interview. The consent form outlined participants' rights, confidentiality, benefits, and risks. Participation was voluntary, as participants were able to opt out of the study at any time.

3. Interview participants' identities were anonymized, and all participants were assigned an identifier, P1, P2, P3, etc. to ensure confidentiality.

4. Interview and observation participants are not identified in the final study report, and quotes were selected carefully to ensure they are unable to be attributed to a particular individual.

Data Collection

In order to create a rich and holistic set of data, a mixture of data methods was utilized. These included 17 individual semi-structured interviews, 37 hours of observation, and documentary analysis of 13 reports or articles pertinent to the study. Combining methods allowed for the triangulation of the data and, therefore, strengthened the construct validity of the study (Yin, 2018). A case study structured according to this approach enabled the researcher to gain multiple perspectives at different levels of the USG collaboration in order to determine not only what types of conflict are present, but also who are the parties in conflict and why are conflicts occurring.

Interviews

Considered by Yin (2018) to be one of the most important sources of data for case study research, interviews are helpful as they suggest "explanations of key events, as well as the insights reflecting participants' relativist perspective" (p. 118). Seventeen individuals were selected by the researcher to take part in an hour-long semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview approach was utilized as it enabled the researcher to maintain some consistency in the interview content covered in each interview, while also enabling the researcher to probe for additional information through follow up questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, Willis, 2007).

An interview protocol, as approved via the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), was followed and included the following steps:

1. Interview participants were contacted via email to request participation in the study (see Appendix A). Twenty-two individuals were contacted, with seventeen responding yes and completing an interview, two declining to participate, and three not responding. See Table 1 on page 40 for an anonymized list of participants. As previously mentioned, the names of all interview participants are not included to maintain anonymity and are instead labeled with an identifier ("P" for Participant and a number randomly assigned). In order to further ensure privacy, they are identified at a very high level as either a current or former USG administrator, USG partner administrator, USG Board of Advisor member, or USM Administrator. USG partner interviewees were representative of six of the nine partner campuses and included institutions of varying size and one Historically Black College or University. Interview participants from this group ranged from director level to university

president. Interview participants represented individuals who currently hold these

roles or formerly served in these positions.

2. Participants were finalized and participation consent forms (see Appendix B) were

    collected via email.

3. Interviews were scheduled and all 17 interviews were conducted via Zoom. The

    Zoom interviews were recorded after permission to do so was received by the

    participant.

4. The interviews were conducted over a three-week period. All interviews were 60

    minutes in length and participants were asked a preset list of questions (see Appendix

    C) via a semi structured format that allowed for follow up questions to be asked.

5. Thank you emails were sent to participants.

 The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for a more fluid discussion

between interviewee and the investigator.

The interviews were recorded via Zoom, and the Zoom transcript tool was utilized.

However, upon review of the Zoom transcripts, it was clear that the transcriptions had many

inaccuracies, which made them difficult to work with. As a result, a transcription service, Rev

Transcription, was used. Rev Transcription is a reputable company that follows appropriate data

safety and confidentiality protocols. Upon completion of the transcription, all transcripts were

checked and updated for accuracy in alignment with the video recording. Following this, the

recordings were reviewed a final time, and observations and noteworthy items were included in

the researcher's journal. Interview transcripts were entered into a computer-assisted qualitative

data analysis software (CAQDAS) program called Atlas.ti, which was helpful when dealing with

a large amount of data.

Table 1

Interview Participant List

Participant Label	Type of Participant	Gender
P1	USM Administrator	Female
P2	USG Administrator	Male
P3	USG Partner Administrator	Male
P4	USM Administrator	Male
P5	USG Administrator	Male
P6	USG Board Member	Male
P7	USG Partner Administrator	Female
P8	USG Partner Administrator	Male
P9	USG Partner Administrator	Female
P10	USG Administrator	Female
P11	USG Administrator	Female
P12	USG Partner Administrator	Female
P13	USG Administrator	Female
P14	USG Partner Administrator	Female
P15	USG Partner Administrator	Male
P16	USG Partner Administrator	Female
P17	USG Partner Administrator	Female

Documentary Data

In addition to interviews, documentary data were used to broaden the context and complete the study. A systematic procedure to review and evaluate documents that derives from both print and electronic sources was used (Bowen, 2009). Several types of documents were identified and reviewed for relevance: administrative documents, media coverage, legislative documents, and reports, studies and reviews conducted on the USG Regional Center. Of particular interest, were strategic reports, documents and reviews conducted about USG, specifically the 2019 Universities at Shady Grove Joint Commission Report. Documentary Data assisted the researcher in corroborating both the information and evidence obtained in the interviews (Yin, 2018).

The researcher's knowledge of the USG campus and the stakeholder groups helped to determine both the type of documents needed and to gain access to them. As the study seeks to examine conflict at USG throughout the duration of its twenty-three year existence, a large

volume of documents was identified. To ensure a manageable outcome, the researcher sorted the

documents according to the central questions prior to review and prioritized documents that help

provide a sense of USG culture, outcomes, and successes and challenges.

The final list of the 13 documents utilized for the study are outlined in the review log in

Table 2 on pages 41-42. The documentary data log notes the type of document collected and the

important variables relevant to the study. Documents not selected were deemed by the researcher

to contain irrelevant content in relation to the study or to lack alignment with the research

questions. The list of documents was analyzed in order to elicit meaning and to develop

empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In order to interpret and give voice and meaning

to the documentary data, the researcher reviewed the log and analyzed it for themes and patterns

that were relevant to the study and provided additional context about the conflict present at the

USG Regional Center.

Table 2

Documentary Data Log

Document Name	Type of Document	Relevant Data
Testimony offered to the Maryland House of Delegates Appropriations Committee Hearing for House Bill 1446	Legislative Document Testimony offered to indicate support for House Bill 1446	Positions related to funding needs for USG.
Maryland House of Delegates House Bill 1205	Legislative Document Maryland General Assembly House Bill #1205 Regarding the Purpose and Funding of USG	Budget Implications for USG.
Maryland Matters Op Ed Article 2019 Titled – "Opinion: After 20 Years, Unique Maryland Campus Stands Tall as Visionary Higher Ed Model"	Media Coverage Document	USG successes and future outlook.
USG At A Glance	USG Document	2023 document outlining key demographic and outcomes data.
USG Reflect, Reimagine, Rebuild Report	USG Document	Report from a USG committee formed to analyze USG's response to the pandemic,

Document Name	Type of Document	Relevant Data
		identify lessons learned, and suggest bold ideas for USG's future.
USG 2.0 Strategic Plan	USG Document	USG's 2020 Strategic Plan that details its mission, vision, strategic imperatives, and goals.
USG Student Services Partnership Taskforce Report	USG Document	USG Taskforce report outlining stakeholder data on services and a new student services model focused on career readiness.
Washington Post Article Titled – "One campus, many schools: A new science building expands the ambitions of an academic hub."	Media Coverage Document	2019 article detailing USG and its expansion with a new Biomedical Sciences and Engineering Building.
Washington Post Article Titled – "Nine universities on one small campus? It's real. It's here. And it could be higher ed's future."	Media Coverage Document	2016 article detailing the uniqueness and success of the USG model.
This is US Podcast, Episode 14, UMBC President, Dr. Freeman Hrabowski Transcript	USG Document	2021 transcript of a podcast, including Dr. Hrabowski's perspectives on USG.
University System of Maryland Fiscal 2024 Budget Overview	Legislative Document	Department of Legislative Services document detailing enrollment impacts on the fiscal health of the USM.

Documentary data were analyzed utilizing an iterative process that included, first, skimming the material, then reading thoroughly with the research questions in mind, then interpreting the documents via content analysis. All documents used for the study were uploaded into the Atlas.ti database and coded and categorized in accordance with coding protocols used for the interview transcripts and observations. A first and second coding was utilized and then grouped into themes for analyses.

The researcher's twenty plus years of employment at USG aided in the identification and locating of relevant documents. However, all documents utilized for the study were publicly available.

Participant Observation

The researcher has been employed as the Chief Student Affairs Officer at the USG Regional Center since the inception of the Center in 2000. This position not only enabled easier access to stakeholders selected for interviews and access to documents but also facilitated her own observations. Because of the position of the researcher at USG, she took a role as a participant observer.

The researcher is a member of the group being studied. The USG Executive Directors (two different Executive Directors were in place throughout the duration of the study), and relevant parties were made aware that the researcher conducted a case study of the USG campus. While observation can occur without knowledge, offering transparency to relevant institution officials is considered the most ethical observation approach (Kawulich, 2005). Serving as a member of the group being studied offers ease of access to documents and stakeholders, as well as an in depth knowledge of the USG campus, but it can also offer the disadvantage of possible participants' unwillingness to be forthcoming and candid with their insights and impressions to a colleague. The researcher managed this potential concern carefully through the correspondence and interview process to make participants feel comfortable and assured of confidentiality. As a result, participants responded freely and candidly, providing a very rich set of data.

In utilizing participant observation, the researcher sought those that relate closely to the research questions and purpose of the study (Merriam, 1998). The researcher observed 37 hours of meetings and events. All meetings and events observed were collaborative in nature and involved representation from multiple USG departments and participants from multiple USG partner campuses. Observing a variety of events and meetings enabled the researcher to witness a range of interactions, discussions, and interpersonal conflict dynamics. It also provided an

opportunity to observe cultural dynamics through regularly occurring events, activities and meetings, such as open houses, partner program director meetings, and welcome events and activities.

The observations were conducted from August 2021 through November 2022. All observed meetings and events were conducted either in-person or virtual through USG professional settings; therefore, all topics were work related and not related to any information that would involve personal content or information about any particular participant. No information gleaned from the observations are included in the final report that would identify any participant individually. Because the researcher is employed at USG, there were no issues gaining access to these events and meetings, and in all cases the researcher was also a participant the activities.

In accordance with the approved IRB protocol for the study, in lieu of collecting individual consent forms from each meeting or event participant, the researcher sought verbal permission from the meeting organizer and the USG executive director to conduct the study and act as a participant observer for the study. The list of meetings and events observed and the associated time commitment for each is indicated in Table 3 on page 45.

Table 3

Participant Observation List

Name of Event/Activity	Type of Observation	Time
USG 2.0 Strategic Plan Roll-Out Summit	USG Event	1 hour
Appreciation Carnival	USG Event	3 hours
USG Open House	USG Meeting	3 hours
Student Services Partnership Taskforce Meetings	USG Meeting	3 hours
USG Program Director Meetings	USG Meeting	3 hours
USG International Night	USG Event	2 hours
USG Student Welcome Week	USG Event	4 hours
USG Reflect, Reimagine, Rebuild Committee Meetings	USG Meeting	6 hours
Women in STEMM	USG Event	3 hours
Pathways & Programs Night	USG Event	3 hours
USG Fest Events	USG Event	4 hours
Campus Resources Information Fair	USG Event	1 hour
Fall Bash	USG Event	1 hour

As a participant observer, a notepad was kept that included brief jottings of observations while in the field. Immediately following the meeting or event, a more thorough accounting of observations was recorded and included a description of the observations, ideas or notes regarding areas to probe further, personal impressions and feelings, and relevant methodological notes. All notes about observations included the following information: 1) meeting/event name, 2) setting, 3) general observations, 4) personal reflection, 5) questions for follow up. All jottings and comprehensive accounts from the observations were entered into the Atlas.ti database.

Similarly to data collected from interviews and documentary data, a first and second cycle coding was utilized to assist the researcher in identifying relevant patterns and themes. Additional detail about the coding process will follow in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Data Security, Privacy, Confidentiality

Data collected in connection with the study are stored securely according to campus policy. The records are maintained and stored at the Universities at Shady Grove campus. All documents are stored via electronic means. The researcher followed the data security protocols as outlined by the University of Maryland, College Park, USG's coordinating institution.

Information obtained was handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law, confided to people who had a need to review this information. Data were coded to remove direct identifiers, and the link to the code is stored in a separate file accessible only via password. Data access is limited to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and other representatives of this institution. If published articles result from the study in a scientific journal or book, participants will not be identified.

All confidential data will be kept securely. Electronic files are stored on a secure server. Documents and hard copy notes are stored in a locked file cabinet. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by deleting all files from the computer hard drive, and any hard copy notes taken will be shredded.

This study involved video recording of interviews. These digital files are available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. The researcher will ensure anyone not working on the research will be prohibited from listening to or viewing the

recording. Interviews conducted via a virtual meeting platform such as Zoom were conducted in a private office space to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

<p style="text-align:center">Assessing Research Design</p>

Critics of case study research often cite the low validity and reliability as deterrents to undertaking this empirical approach. In order to address this concern, four tests have emerged, and are frequently utilized to ensure the quality of case study research (Yin, 2018). The four tests include construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2018). The researcher gave three of these tests explicit attention during the design phase and throughout the study. Internal validity was not considered as it was not relevant for this exploratory study (Yin, 2018). The following are important to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Validity

According to Yin, construct validity includes "identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied" (2018, p. 42). External validity refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be generalized to a broader context, which is a goal of scientific and empirical research (Yin, 2018, Willis, 2007, Stake, 1995). Yin offers three strategies researchers should employ in order to improve the construct validity of a study: using key informants to review the case study report, utilizing multiple sources of evidence, and maintaining a clear chain of evidence (Yin, 2018). This study relied upon all three of Yin's suggestions to ensure its validity – data triangulation, chain of evidence, and use of key informants.

According to Merriam (1998) triangulation involves "using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings" (p. 204). In order to ensure the construct validity of the study, the researcher utilized methodological triangulation, which requires confirmation across three different data collection sources,

specifically interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence (Willis, 2007). The interviews were conducted with multiple (17) participants; there were multiple (13 documents) sources of documentary evidence collected and analyzed, including reports and organizational documents, and 37 hours of observations by the researcher. This trove of data provided the opportunity to provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon, which ensured the methodological rigor of the study.

In addition to data triangulation, the study was designed to ensure a chain of evidence could be maintained in order to enable individuals who review or desire to replicate the study are able to do so (Yin, 2018). The researcher utilized a case study database, Atlas.ti, in order to store all the collected materials for the study. Additionally, two key informants reviewed the case study report.

Research Bias and Reflexivity

It is important to note that all researchers will bring their own perspectives, assumptions, and biases into any research process they engage in (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Willis, 2007). According to Corbin & Strauss, the first thing that a researcher must do when beginning a study is to simply be aware of this fact (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Unlike postpositivist quantitative research, where the research is objective, qualitative research works a bit differently, fully recognizing a subjective approach (Willis, 2007). Willis (2007) posits:

> Qualitative research rejects the very idea that you can be objective and neutral in research. You pick certain things to study because you have an interest. You probably also have an idea about the results and conclusions you will end up with…Recognize your biases and values to the best of your ability and acknowledge them. (p.210)

The researcher is employed by the Universities at Shady Grove, the focus of the case study and, therefore, it was crucial to ensure the potential for research bias was constantly considered and addressed. All interview participants were made aware of the researcher's association with USG.

As an employee of the Universities at Shady Grove since its inception in 2000, the researcher was aware that the topic was personal and that this association with the research subject offered both advantages and challenges. The extensive knowledge of USG that the researcher possesses proved advantageous since the complexity of the USG infrastructure was readily known and understood, as was the historical background and context.

This foundational understanding of the USG background and culture afforded the researcher both easy access to USG stakeholders and relevant documents and a keen awareness of the nuances and complexities of the relationships and structure. The challenge, however, was to ensure that the findings from the three data sources were viewed from an objective lens and not clouded by the researcher's extensive USG background and own perspectives on the research questions. The topic of the study was to uncover conflict, which required an honest, non-defensive posture from the researcher in order to ensure data uncovered were objectively uncovered and reported, without any filter.

The researcher was ever-mindful of this need to engage frequently in her positionality through the use of reflexivity. Reflexivity is:

> an awareness of the researcher's role in the practice of research and the way it is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research processes and outcomes (Haynes, 2012, p. 1).

In order to address bias and to ensure reflexivity, the researcher found journaling to be a most useful self-reflection tool. Keeping a journal throughout the process, from research design to data collection and analysis and write up, helped the researcher to reflect on interview comments, observations, documentary evidence, and thoughts and feelings about the process.

In addition, the researcher regularly reflected on the following questions throughout the research process: "1) What is the motivation for undertaking this research? 2) What underlying assumptions am I bringing to it? 3) How am I connected to the research, theoretically, experientially, emotionally? And what effect will this have on my approach" (Haynes, 2012, p. 8)? Continual reflection on these questions helped the researcher to be aware of how positioning affects research decisions, approaches, efforts, and outcomes (Haynes, 2012).

Utilizing Yin's Six Step Case Study Process was also helpful as a tool to minimize bias. The clear, methodical approach helped to ensure there were no deviations to process that might introduce bias. Interview questions were vetted by trusted peers, as were the research findings and final case study report to identify a possibility for bias. All data were kept in a secure database, and a thorough coding process was utilized to help ensure the voices of the participants guide the research and outcomes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized during the analysis phase of the research study. According to Braun & Clarke, "Thematic Analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (2006, p. 6). The six steps of the analysis process include - Familiarize yourself with the data, Generate Initial Codes, Search for Themes, Review Themes, Define and Name Themes, and Produce the Report.

Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, data from all three data sources, interviews, documentary evidence, and the field observations were entered into the Atlas.ti database. This was most useful as it allowed for data to be easily extracted for analysis and reporting and to be stored for future use.

The data from all three sources were reviewed again and then underwent a thorough first and second-cycle coding process. Coding is a useful tool to give meaning to sections of the data in a way that can be quantified, compared and analyzed. According to Saldana, a code is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (2016, p.4). All three data sources were coded utilizing the same approach.

The researcher employed a structural coding for the first-cycle due to its relevancy to the research collected for this study. According to Saldana, structural coding is particularly useful for studies that involve multiple participants, are exploratory in nature, and use semi-structured data collection procedures, in particular, interview transcripts, as was the case with this study (2016). Considered an elemental coding method, structural coding "applies a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data to both code and categorize the data corpus" (Saldana, 2016).

A hybrid approach that merged deductive and inductive coding was employed to enable the researcher to deductively begin the process with a set of codes that related to the research questions but also then to have the freedom to inductively add new codes and iterate the codes as the process continued (Saldana, 2016). For example, the coding process began with the following three codes that aligned with the research questions: 1) conflicts, 2) reasons for conflicts, and 3)

impact on collaboration. Applied to a section of one interview transcript, structural coding was organized, as follows:

Research Question: What have been the key types and points of conflict in the initiation, development and maturation of the USG?

Structural Code - CONFLICTS

Coded Excerpt – "And I think while we say we all want to be cooperating and we, you know, we say we want to be collaborating, I think the reality is there is still a level of competition at virtually every level, and especially in the time of declining enrollments. These institutions are struggling for their survival and trying to find, you know, find their identity and they're competing for students and enrollments. They're competing for money and they're competing for philanthropic dollars and support and investment by the system and the state and external partners. So, I think there is a really big level of competition, and I think that makes it really hard."

The coded excerpts were then reviewed again for further rounds of coding within it. For example, the coded excerpt above was sub coded, as follows:

CONFLICTS

- Competition for Funding

- Competition for Enrollment

- Competition for Philanthropic Support

Following the first-cycle coding, a second-cycle coding method was employed. Pattern Coding proved a useful second-cycle tool as it enabled the researcher to group the initial set of codes into a smaller number of categories in alignment with the research questions (Saldana, 2016). It aided the researcher in refining the data through another round of analysis in order to

find patterns to assist with the creation of themes and concepts (Saldana, 2016). The end result of this two-step, iterative coding process is comprised of 71 codes, 719 quotations and seven code groups: 1) Goals for USG, 2) Historical Context, 3) Type of Conflict, 4) Why Conflict, 5) Impact on Collaboration, 6) USG Future Outlook, 7) Miscellaneous. These code groups, codes, and quotations result from all three data sources, interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence. The findings will be reported as themes inclusive of all three sources. The resulting coding hierarchy, inclusive of the overarching categories, subcategories, and codes within each category is provided in Table 4 on pages 54-55.

Table 4

Coding Hierarchy

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	CODE
Conflicts *142 Coded Entries*	1. Competition – *62 Coded Entries*	Financial Support & Capital Assets Enrollment
	2. Organizational structure *32 Coded Entries*	Role of Administrative Institution Service Structure Decision-making & Communication Structure
	3. Partner Institution Relationships *30 Coded Entries*	Home Centric View Lack of Support
	4. Difficulty Sustaining Initiatives *10 Coded Entries*	Policy Challenges Staffing and Resources Lack of Buy-in and Incentives
	5. Stakeholder Identity *8 Coded Entries*	Students and Alumni Faculty and Staff USG versus Home Campus
Conflict Reasons *259 Coded Entries*	1. Strained Infrastructure to support Collaboration *89 Coded Entries*	Facilities Management Onsite Support for Students Budget and Human Resources Support Data and Technology Support Marketing and Communications Resources
	2. Absence of Clear Collaboration Framework *88 Coded Entries*	Lack of Clear. Shared goals and objectives Lack of Collaboration Guiding Principles Lack of Clear Communication Framework Lack of Funding and Incentive Model Linked to a Collaborative Structure
	3. Leadership Churn *55 Coded Entries*	Complex, Multi-Level Leadership Structure Constant Need to Reeducate Stakeholders
	4. Lack of Full USM Ownership *27 Coded Entries*	Ineffective/Strained Reporting Structure Negotiation without Leverage Accountability and Oversight
Conflict Impact on Collaboration *101 Coded Entries*	1. Inability to Garner Meaningful Commitment & Engagement *47 Coded Entries*	Lack of Partner Interest Home Campus Needs Trump USG Too Difficult to Get off the Ground Not viewed as a Priority
	2. Inequitable Levels of Partner Engagement and Values *28 Coded Entries*	Same Players at the Table Distrust and Apathy Desire without Equitable Support
	3. Inability to Sustain and Grow Collaboration *26 Coded Entries*	Collaborative Efforts Fizzle Out Inconsistent Funding Source Policies and Procedures Inhibit rather than Stimulate Not Celebrated at all Levels

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	CODE
Historical Context, *61 Coded Entries*	1. Flawed Model at Creation *35 Coded Entries*	Lack of Strategic Plan Lack of Policies and Procedures Absence of a Funding Model Built for Growth Mission, Vision, and Goals
	2. Coercion and Threats *16 Coded Entries*	Deal making Lack of Interest and Excitement Conflict
	3. USG's Creation *10 Coded Entries*	County Need for Four-Year Institution Strong County Support Superb Basic Concept
Goals for USG *45 Coded Entries*	1. Accessibility for High Need Students *24 Coded Entries*	First Generation Students Increasing Diversity Desire to Stay Local
	2. Responsive to Montgomery County Needs *11 Coded Entries*	Need 4-Year Public Education Address Workforce Needs of Region Political Leverage
	3. Differing Reasons *10 Coded Entries*	Grow Enrollment Enhance Brand/Reach
USG Future Outlook – What is Likely to Occur in 10-20 Years *39 Coded Entries*	1. Better Version of Itself *22 Coded Entries*	Greater Presence & Visibility Innovation Test Site National Model Code: Bigger and Better
	2. Four-Year Campus *13 Coded Entries*	USG Stand-alone Campus Merged with Montgomery College
	3. Uncertain *4 Coded Entries*	Unclear Direction
Miscellaneous Codes *72 Coded Entries*	1. USG is Doing Great Things *37 Coded Entries*	Responsive to Workforce Needs Track Record of Student Success Cost-effective Model Complex but it Works
	2. Conflict Management *35 Coded Entries*	Compromise React Rather than Respond Avoidance USM Intervention

Summary

A key aspect of qualitative research is to ensure that the researcher determines the appropriate methodological approach prior to beginning the task. For this study, a single, holistic case study approach was utilized, adhering closely to the protocol outlined in Yin's Case Study Model. Thematic analysis and an in-depth coding process that involved the use of structural

coding for the first-cycle, followed by pattern coding for the second-cycle, aided the researcher in determining a set of themes in order to identify meaningful data outcomes that address each of the research questions, which will be discussed in the final two chapters.

Chapter 4: Results

This study sought to identify the types and causes of conflict present within one complex multi-institutional partnership in order to determine how conflict is impacting partners' efforts to collaborate effectively. Previous chapters described why this phenomenon is important as a topic of study. Higher education is at a critical inflection point, needing to rethink its values to ensure they are filling a clear need to serve students who appear to be indicating that they are prioritizing affordable, flexible higher education that caters to their needs. To do this effectively, institutions of higher education need to collaborate but collaborations are notoriously difficult and fraught with challenges.

This study adds to the body of literature on collaborations and conflict and creates a new line of inquiry on conflict and collaboration at RHECs. This chapter discusses the method used for analysis and shares the triangulated results to the three research questions - what are the conflicts, why are they occurring, and how do these conflicts impact the partners' ability to collaborate?

Model for Analysis

The study utilized an exploratory case study model and Yin's model for conducting case study research. The approach relies on a simultaneous process of data collection and analysis, which enabled the researcher to keep the research questions at the forefront throughout the data collection and assessment processes. The reliance on Yin's Case Study Model and Systems Theory helped to build a solid research framework that resulted in clear and supported outcomes.

Yin (2018) outlines four analysis approaches researchers can utilize when engaged in case study research. This study relied upon the theoretical propositions that not only do conflicts exist at USG but also that they have an impact on the partners' ability to collaborate. These

fundamental propositions and the use of Systems Theory as the underlying theoretical framework

informed the research questions and the literature review (Yin, 2018). Following an extensive

coding process, key themes clearly emerged from data that address each of the research

questions:

1. What have been the key types and points of conflict in the initiation, development,
    and maturation of the USG?

2. Why are conflicts occurring?

3. How is conflict impacting the ability of USG institutional partners to successfully
    collaborate?

The themes are derived from each of the three data sources, interviews, documentary

evidence, and participant observation, and as such the findings are presented by theme and

include evidence from each of the three data sources.

The Conflicts

The purpose of the first research question was to uncover the conflicts that are occurring

within the USG partnership, with a bounded focus on USG itself and its nine academic partners.

As the researcher is employed at USG, the study began with a foundational knowledge that

conflict is present at USG, as is the case in any workplace setting. What is unique, however,

about the focus of this study, is the in-depth analysis and discovery, through a systematic, non-

biased approach, and the lens of Systems Theory, of the particular conflicts and their causes at

the largest multi-institutional RHEC in Maryland. The results from the triangulation of the three

data sources used in the study - interviews, documentary evidence, and observation - identified

five sources of conflict present within the USG partnership in the following five areas: 1)

conflict fueled by competition, 2) conflicts that result from the organizational structure, 3)

conflicts involving the identity of stakeholders, 4) conflicts that result from the relationship

between USG and its partner campuses, and 5) conflicts caused by the inability to sustain certain

initiatives. There was a total of 142 coded entries among the three data sources that related to this

research question. Each of these conflict areas will be described in greater detail through

excerpts from the evidence collected from interviews, documentary data, and observations to

support each finding.

Theme 1: Conflict Fueled by Competition - *"We're just out here on a limb."*

Higher education institutions have a valuable role to perform in helping to shape society

and in contributing to the country's economic strength and social well-being (Teague, n.d.).

While these goals are important and lofty, ultimately, higher education institutions are businesses

that must be profitable in order to be successful, sustainable, and grow. The partners at USG

must ascribe to this fundamental principle of business while also being driven by the need to

meet disparate societal goals. They are part of an educational ecosystem that competes regularly,

primarily for enrollment and funding and USG is no exception. Indeed, both of these competitive

elements are not only present at USG but also are complicated because of its unique multi-

institutional structure. As previously described, USG's structure is complicated, large, and multi-

faceted. With nine academic partners, more than 80 degree programs, a multi-layered

governance structure, and differing missions and goals, USG is unique and complex. Conflict

that exists among these partner institutions can be more pronounced when it occurs under a

shared roof, including conflict that is fueled by competition. There were 62 coded entries related

to Competition.

Competing for enrollment can serve as a catalyst, compelling institutions to be

productive, efficient, and high quality. Institutions have departments full of recruiters, financial

aid officers, and communications specialists working assiduously to identify the perfect combination of enticements to convince a student to choose them. Post-pandemic, however, this has become increasingly challenging, with enrollments on the decline at many institutions, thus making competition especially fierce as some institutions, both across the country and at USG, are fighting for survival. At USG, this competition for enrollment becomes more pronounced as they are sharing the same geographic recruiting territory. In the words of one interviewee:

"These institutions are struggling for their survival and trying to find, you know, find their identity and they're competing for students and enrollments. I think there is a really big level of competition, and I think that that makes it really hard."

According to another:

"Right now we're on an enrollment cliff, our numbers are really, really poor for spring…We need students here right now. And, frankly, they're not coming like they used to."

These comments were validated through documentary evidence, including this passage from the University System of Maryland Fiscal 2024 Budget Overview:

Between fall 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2022, undergraduate enrollment across USM institutions has declined 5.2%, or 6,859 students, with only three institutions experiencing an increase in fall enrollment… When breaking undergraduate down enrollment by student category, transfer students decreased by 1,506 students, or 7.9%, since fall 2019, with the largest decline (1,941 students) occurring in fall 2020. (USM Fiscal 2024 Overview, 2023)

And

USM provides access to its institutions through three Regional Higher Education Centers (RHEC) – University at Shady Grove (USG), USM at Hagerstown (USMH), and USM at Southern Maryland (USMSM). From fiscal 2018 to 2020, full-time equivalent student (FTES) enrollment at the RHECs declined 5.5%, or 135 FTESs…of which USG accounted for 128 FTESs of the decline, while USMH grew by 14 FTESs. The decline in fiscal 2019 and 2020 may be attributed to pandemic and the challenges associated with remote learning. (USM Fiscal 2024 Overview, 2023)

This problem of competition, which exists everywhere, and, as has been noted, can be a healthy force, is exacerbated when the competitors share a USM designation, geographic area, and the same physical location, as succinctly stated by the following interview participants:

"I think a lot of it just, it plays out in front of us at USG. Right. Because we're asking nine institutions to compete on the same campus."

And

"I don't know how, how to avoid it (competition)…how to make it so that we don't and in part, I think because the system doesn't really act like a system all the time in that regard. So, we can talk about systemness, but we still compete with each other, so we're looking over our shoulder…all the time and…until we behave as one thing, it's going to be difficult."

Greater competition and scrambling for enrollments can lead to conflict, requiring some partner campuses to draw from USG's applicant pool in order to prioritize filling home campus seats, thus leaving programs at USG vulnerable:

"I think declining high school graduation enrollments, declining students means we have a smaller applicant pool…the numbers at the community college are 20 some percent

below what they were a few years ago. Several years ago. And, and the trend is not,

doesn't look like it's going up. So, universities themselves are competing with each other.

The four year schools are competing with the regional centers. And I think, I mean, and

I'm just looking at the numbers and I'm thinking, I bet you every regional center is

experiencing this conflict with the main campus."

And

"And so, I feel like we're just out here on a limb."

In addition to competition for enrollment, academic institutions at USG and USG itself

find themselves in a constant and never-ending battle for funding. While enrollments bring in

revenue for the partner campuses, the financial support received at the state level for staff,

operations support, and for capital projects is vitally important. The conflict arises when the

partner campuses feel USG's very presence takes away from their home campuses bottom line.

Perhaps one of the biggest funding battles is waged over acquisition of capital assets, as stated by

one research study participant:

"Why does Shady Grove have some of the capital assets that it has relative to other

institutions? It's not even its own place. I can't believe we have this. I mean, there's

obviously great, great heartburn within the entire system as to why you've got this 180

million building sitting on campus and why it's not on their campus. So, I think finances,

because I think every dollar that goes to USG is a dollar that other institutions, the

system, see is directly coming out of their bottom line."

There were several comments made about USG's flawed funding model and the way

funding is perceived to be allocated in absence of clear rules or a clear framework which breeds

distrust and skepticism, as indicated by one official:

"I think you have to be clear about where certain funds are coming from…committing to what the system's committing to and what Shady Grove was committing to. I mean, in our case [USG], we didn't really have much of a funding stream. We had, you know, a base model from the system, and then we had, you know, a tiny fraction of some student fees. But even that didn't make sense as we went along…So I think the financial model is really important because that's where people's, I think that's where a lot of their paranoia and fear came from…because you're the biggest, you must be getting more than me."

In addition to comments about the inadequacy of USG's funding model and inherent competition for resources between USG and the partner campuses, there were also several comments about the inconsistency of how funding is allocated by USM and if there is an accountability mechanism attached to funding, as illustrated by the following comments:

"I think it takes the system being consistent in how they're going to deal with funding and where the funds go…and where does it go back to and how much do you have to demonstrate what you did or didn't do. I mean…how are they evaluating what's being done and what's not being done?"

And

"I think the system got better at it, but it's never, to my knowledge, you know, been totally said, here's the bible of how the financial models are going to work and how we can allocate resources."

In addition to these data collected through documents and interviews, data obtained through observation also validates this conflict theme. In particular, during a 2023 USG Open House for prospective students, the researcher spoke to and overheard several comments from partner participants expressing concern about declining enrollments and their ability to meet

projections for the fall 2023 semester. One administrator from a USG partner campus remarked directly to the researcher that "at this rate, I don't expect to meet projections for the fall semester, especially if [the home campus] continues to prioritize filling their seats over filling the seats here [at USG]" (Observation from USG Open House, 2023).

Theme 2: Conflicts that Result from the Organizational Structure - *"You better be a damn good real estate agent."*

The organizational and governance structure for USG is complex and was thoroughly detailed in Chapter 1. With such a complex and layered structure, it is unsurprising that conflict is present. There were 32 coded items in the data that noted conflicts related to the organizational structure. Three areas within this theme proved worthy of inclusion in the findings: the role of the coordinating/administering institution, the service structure, and decision-making/communication.

Chapter 1 described the role UMCP assumed in 2002 as the coordinating campus for USG. While in recent years, the name has changed to administering campus, the role has essentially remained the same as UMCP provides support in several key areas of operations, including business office functions, human resources, parking and transportation, library oversight, and information technology support. UMCP also maintains additional oversight and decision-making regarding USG operations. Conflict in relation to this role was noted by the following participant:

> "I think what was flawed was…that too much of a concession was made to College Park in the creation. And so, there was this very confused reporting relationship where the director of the center reported to the provost at College Park, which was not unreasonable provided the some of the infrastructure structure, support, et cetera, had cost. But…I

think the absence of a budget to promote, to build programs and the reporting

relationship…really was flawed. And I think Shady Grove has struggled to overcome that

initial very serious flaw in the model."

And

"I really think that, you know, for us to, to be successful, people can't see us as an

extension of College Park. I think that we really need to be labeled as system."

And

"There's always some, what shall I say jealousy, envy of College Park as the hundred-

pound Gorilla in the system."

Documentary evidence validates this underlying concern regarding the role UMCP plays at USG

through its role as coordinating institution, as indicted in an attempt to shift USG's relationship

with UMCP from a management type relationship to one that is more administrative in nature, as

indicated in the passage below:

"UMCP's role and responsibilities as the "managing" institution for USG should be

clarified to reflect that of an "administrative" institution, and the services it provides in

that role negotiated and monitored through contract" (Joint Commission Report, 2019).

Also noted in Chapter 1, was information about the USG's organizational and governance

framework and the services provided by USG staff, designed to serve students, faculty and staff

at the USG campus. In regard to service delivery, there are comments related to services

provided and how they complement or compete with those being offered by the partner

campuses. This sentiment was expressed by one high level official, as follows:

"I think one of the big overarching conflicts was, or is, what is the array of services that

USG provides to students relative to what the institutions provide themselves? I think at

every level people have called that into question. I think many will grudgingly admit that Shady Grove has been more successful…But I don't necessarily think they ascribe that to the model."

Additionally, documentary evidence validates the concern regarding possible duplication of services offered by partner campuses and at USG, as follows:

USG's practice of providing personalized academic, counseling, and support services to all students regardless of program should be reaffirmed. At the same time, the processes used to prioritize those services, along with the roles and responsibilities of the regional center and the partner institutions in carrying them out, should be clarified so as to enable services to be leveraged across multiple programs and to avoid unnecessary and costly duplication of or overlap in services. (Joint Commission Report, 2019)

There were also comments made in reference to USG's ability to maintain a high level of support during shifts in USG's goals and vision, as is the case currently since USG is in the process of implementing its new strategic plan, USG 2.0:

"Making sure that we are serving our students fully at this time. That we're not doing so much with this planning, that we're ignoring what's happening here and now, and making sure that they're having a full experience."

Other comments were noted by interview participants who expressed concern about USG's ability to grow, expand, and be innovative, as follows:

"You better be a damn good real estate agent when it comes to basic operational components like operations, facilities, IT, communications, how you're selling yourself, and how you're marketing resources. Because in order to expand that real estate or attract

more renters/partners, that foundation must be solidly built. But the problem at USG is

that the solid foundation isn't here at USG, it hasn't been fully built."

In such a complex governance structure, with so many layers, it is not surprising that issues

surrounding the locus of decision making arose, with partner campuses feeling USG is forging

ahead without bringing them to the table. USG, they said, wants to take ownership in certain

areas where they feel USG should serve as a facilitator instead:

"There's some decisions that are made at a USG level where I think you know,

institutions are like, well, we should have been at the table, or who is being represented at

the table?"

And

"USG thinks it should own it and it shouldn't, and instead should be a facilitator, a

connector, and maybe help with grant, but clearly say you own this one, you own this

one, it can still benefit the whole collaboration."

This concern that was expressed by some during the interviews was corroborated during field

observation at a meeting with partner program administrators. They expressed their concern that

decisions were being made by USG without consulting them, for example, the decision to

discontinue the annual USG Graduation Celebration.

Theme 3: Conflicts Involving Partner Institution Relationships – "Out of sight, out of

mind."

The relationships between the partner staff who work onsite at USG and the partner

campuses at their home base of operations is yet another complicated and interesting dynamic at

play, one that can often be very beneficial and supportive, but at other times offers challenges

and conflicts to be managed. It should be noted that many of the USG partner campuses are

located a good distance away from USG with UMES located as far as 150 miles, and UMCP the

closest at a distance of 30 miles. Also, each campus has its own distinct brand and culture that is

different from that of USG. These differences are noted as challenges and conflicts related to

partner institution relationship challenges and were identified in 30 coded entries of the research

data. One interview participant offered the following:

> "I think the biggest conflicts that I've had over the years is the difference in the home
>
> campus. What my school wanted and expected, and their…to be honest, their (home
>
> campus) centric view of the world."

And another added:

> "The presidents and the provost and the deans and the faculty are very focused on their,
>
> the, the campus where they are. Right. So, here's this thing that's 30, 40, 60, a hundred
>
> miles away with a handful of students. So, it shouldn't be surprising that they don't, it
>
> doesn't get much attention."

One partner campus representative added the following:

> "There might be some decree coming down…saying, all students will do this thing, and
>
> we're sitting there going, doesn't compute for us. It doesn't make sense for us. Our
>
> students won't need to do that, or would never need to do those kinds of things…And so
>
> it's not necessarily the bump up against the rules of USG, it was more about the realities
>
> of a different campus and different needs of our students and the, the dictates from the
>
> home campus."

Another noted a lack of support from their home campus that led to conflict that was felt directly

by students and faculty:

"It never seemed to me that there was eye to eye good organizational development about this is what we're going do together and this is how it works, and these things are compatible. And as we went through anything…there was always a level of distrust that you could just feel. And so, things were never easy and could change from day to day. And so, students started to get frustrated and in conflict, as did directors, faculty were frustrated, you know, so the frustration, the lack of it, the feeling of a lack of support then just sort of snowballs and builds a level of concern or conflict across multiple stakeholders."

Partner institution representatives who want to engage and pilot something new at USG, can sometimes be discouraged by a lengthy approval process or red-tape, as described below:

"It's difficult when, you know, somebody like myself or a program director wants to do something here at Shady Grove, but then has to jump through, you know, so many hoops, be it with policy, procedure, whatever. Back at, you know, as far as their department or, or main campus."

It should be noted that there were some supportive comments offered by some interview participants regarding the high level of support they receive from their home campus, but even in these cases, they noted that there were challenges, as offered below:

"We're lucky because our institution really is invested in the operations down here, and yet it's still a, a bit of a struggle across different departments for folks to really fully understand. And I get it, it's complicated. The why and the how down here. I think the why is more broadly understood across most of the core partner offices in our home campus. The how we do it is still problematic, right? When it comes to processes and making sure that everything's moving smoothly and seamlessly."

One study partner participant summed it up most succinctly:

> "Out of Sight, Out of Mind."

Theme 4: Stakeholder Identity – "Who are you and whom do you belong to?"

USG provides a sort of home away from home for the students, faculty, and partner staff who take courses, teach, and work there. Many students, for example, may not set foot on their partner campus' home location, except to attend their graduation ceremony, spending their time acclimating to USG and developing friendships and connections there. Likewise, among faculty who teach at USG, many of whom are adjunct faculty and live and work in Montgomery County also spend the majority of their time on the USG campus. This situation, however, is viewed as problematic at partner campuses that want to ensure that students do not suffer from mistaken institutional identity. Partner institutions want USG students, faculty, and staff to clearly identify themselves with their own campus. There were 8 coded entries in the data related to this area of conflict:

> "One of the things that I've heard the whole time we've been there is, I heard it last week as a matter of fact that, you know, the students think that they're USG students, not [home campus] students. And, and vice versa, right...I think that kind of binary nature of that is problematic. I don't think it should be. I understand it, and it, it goes back to identity, you know, who's claiming the student instead of what does the student claim how are   we claiming the student and how, how does that run into each other?"

One participant succinctly stated:

> "Another point of conflict becomes identity both within the institutions and with the students. So, who are you and whom do you belong to?"

In regards to the relationship with faculty who teach at USG, the partners have generally wanted USG to take a very hands-off approach, as shared by the following USG official:

"I would say that would have occurred related to faculty. But Shady Grove was discouraged from moving in that direction at all in any level. So, there was never, there was never a true ability to serve the faculty. And I, and I think that's been missing. And I think the faculty have suffered, and I think our students have suffered…"

This perspective was also identified in the documentary data, as follows:

Support and engagement of the faculty who teach at USG has historically been coordinated primarily in siloes through each USG partner institution, with some support being provided through USG service centers. This approach can lead to disjointed USG on-boarding experiences, confusing communication channels, and inconsistencies in the levels of awareness about the supports and opportunities provided at USG. (Student Services Partnership Taskforce Report, 2022)

USG partner institutions have also closely guarded access to their alumni from programs offered at USG. Interview participants noted their difficulty in obtaining alumni data and establishing meaningful connections with them. As noted earlier, students who attend programs at USG often feel a sense of connection with the campus, staff, and faculty at USG and so while having an opportunity to stay connected to their partner campus via USG would be appealing for many, it is seen as threatening to some at the partner campuses, as shared by the following participant:

"I think one of the examples was, we're trying to do something with the alumni. You know, when we had that, we had some interest in trying to connect our USG students with USG, always recognizing that they're graduates of whatever university. That was a

major, major source of conflict because my alumni association saw it as a great threat.

And so that was a big conflict."

The issue of alumni engagement was also addressed in a Student Services Partnership Taskforce

Report, as follows:

More than 12,000 students have graduated from programs offered at USG in the past 20

years. Many of these students have opted to reside and work in Montgomery County and

the region. Stakeholders have expressed a need to provide activities and services at USG

in order to maintain a connection with these alumni. (2022)

Regarding this battle for identity, the following comment discusses the decision to discontinue

the annual graduation celebrations, hosted by USG to provide students an opportunity to

celebrate with the students, faculty, and staff at USG who have accompanied them on their

educational journey:

"I think [USG] acquiesced to the institutions…and gave up on doing the graduation event

because people felt that that was competing with their graduation. And so, you know, so I

mean, I think there's a real battle for identity."

This data point was corroborated during field observation. During a meeting attended by partner

staff, in which the researcher was a participant observer, several partner administrators shared

their discontent regarding the decision to discontinue the USG Graduation Celebration, and their

concern that USG may be headed in a new strategic direction that may erode the student

centeredness it had become known for. Additionally, since students take classes at the USG

campus and build connections and relationships there, there is a desire to celebrate this

culminating achievement with their USG peers, staff, and faculty. The Graduation Celebration,

however, had been historically frowned upon by many home campus administrators, who felt the

event conflicted with the Graduation Commencements held at the home campus, as was validated in the interview comment shared above.

Finally, is a sentiment regarding the overall conflict between the merging of institutional identity with one that USG is crafting for itself:

> "The first is the conflict between institutional identity. So, you know, each of us at our university campuses focus very much on what our identity is in the state. USG also needs to focus on that identity for itself as a campus, as an institution. And I think that creates, you know, there's an automatically a…conflict between those two things."

Theme 5: Difficulty Sustaining Initiatives – *"…brilliant ideas…have fizzled out"*

A final theme emerged from the data regarding the difficulty in sustaining multi-institutional initiatives. There were 10 coded items in the data related to this particular source of conflict. As a multi-institutional partnership campus, USG must rely upon collaboration to achieve virtually any task or initiative. But, as the data indicate, forming and sustaining these initiatives can prove challenging for a variety of reasons, including policy challenges, lack of appropriate staffing and resources, lack of a collaborative infrastructure, and lack of acknowledgement or incentive to sustain and grow these efforts. Several comments were shared in this regard, including:

> "There have been wonderful things that have emerged in pocketed sort of ways, right? Like CIPES [Committee for Interprofessional and Interdisciplinary Education Strategies] and, you know, that allow for inter-institutional collaboration, but they haven't been able to be sustained. I don't know all the why behind that."

An additional comment was made regarding attempts to engage in Inter-professional Education initiatives and courses, as follows:

"One of the problems we have when we tried to do IPE [Interprofessional Education] was if a faculty was teaching a course from (a home campus program), that faculty time and resource use was not recognized, particularly, was not reimbursed, was not seen as important in, in the work that people were doing. It was sort of like, you're doing this sort of because you're committed to it and you really want to do it because you believe in it and not because it's seen as important or, or something. And it's like, oh, kudos to you. Isn't that wonderful? You did it, pat on the back. But really no resource was given."

Also in regards to Inter Professional Education work:

"…the credit allocation was a struggle trying to get recognition across different schools and universities. I mean, that always created a problem and I think that's why we did programs for a while and then they didn't continue because it was really a commitment on the faculty's part to make it happen. But…I don't think the institutions were committed to making it happen. Like if a faculty member came along and wanted to do it and made it happen, great. But there was no real support from the institution to make it happen or to sustain it or to keep it going."

Another person noted lost opportunities given the complexity of attempting to determine whom to work with and how to navigate the system to move forward, as follows:

"There's just so many opportunities I feel are just not being taken advantage of, missed whatever, and that IIR [Inter-Institutional Registration] has been a problem for a long time. And I, at one point, someone else had asked me about it, and that, just trying to go through, just trying to process find the person who was in charge…I spent so much time trying to figure this thing out…it just seemed way too complicated for something that should be streamlined."

And

> "Something as simple as in inter institutional registration just runs into a brick wall at USG. And it doesn't have to, but because of this broader policy approach…part of the conflict that that is created there is, could be addressed through, through a policy shift that would make space for shady grove or for the regional centers…"

A final comment regarding the challenge of sustaining new collaborative initiatives was shared by a participant from an academic partner, as follows:

> "Lots of work to be done. And partly again, because some brilliant ideas have come up, but all of the university obstacles, USG obstacles, the lack of systems to allow it to happen, they fizzled out. So, and then I think after two or three challenges, like some people have gone, well, we can't, we can't be innovative because we don't have the methodologies to go forth and deliver it…"

Documentary evidence summarized this area of conflict, as follows:

> With nine institutions on one campus, there is huge potential to cross disciplines and truly collaborate, however, it is clear that there is also much work to be done from an infrastructure standpoint to ensure that a leadership model, internal operations, funding model, processes and procedures, and decision-making structure is in place to fully and robustly support collaboration that truly results in innovative practices and results. (R3T Report, 2021)

Why the Conflicts are Occurring

Following an enhanced understanding of the types of conflicts USG confronts, the researcher analyzed the reasons for them. Utilizing Systems Theory as the theoretical framework

aided the researcher in ensuring that the questions and resulting data set were viewed through a holistic lens. More about Systems Theory integration into analysis will be shared in Chapter 5.

Data collected through the three sources, interviews, documentary evidence, and participant observation revealed four themes that address the research question – why are the conflicts occurring? There were 259 coded entries among the data sources related to this research question. The four themes include: 1) absence of a clear collaboration framework, 2) strained infrastructure to support collaboration, 3) leadership churn, and 4) lack of USM ownership. Segments of the coded data will be shared to illustrate the rationale for each of these themes.

Theme 1: Absence of a Collaboration Framework - *"What is that incentive? What's the win-win?"*

USG's beginning in 2000 was nothing short of miraculous. It began with the backdrop of a relatively newly formed University System of Maryland, which was created just 12 years prior through the merger of five University of Maryland institutions and six members of the State University and College System of Maryland. At the time of USG's inception, this fledgling entity was still finding its way, learning how to work together and build some measure of trust. In the words of one of the interview participants, "There was a great deal of competition between those organizations for money…and there was a great distrust. So, there was no record or history of cooperation or collaboration at any time…and as a matter of fact, they looked upon each other with great suspicion."

When the decision was made to address a political need to provide upper-level higher education to Montgomery County, Maryland, through the opening of a multi-institutional USM campus, some of these institutions were thrust into an environment that would force the issue.

One USG founding member shared the determination to launch USG, despite a lack of a strategic

planning framework:

> "I think there were two ways of doing this. One would have been to develop a strategic
>
> plan for Montgomery County and have all the institutions give their input, and then
>
> 10,000 years later you would have had a strategic plan, or you just do it…I mean, there
>
> were no policies. There were no procedures. It was just we're going to do it and we're
>
> going to do it the best way we know how. And so, all these buildings later and years later,
>
> it's successful. It's got its problems, but it's there. So, that's how we did it."

Another shared that:

> "Everything was done so very quickly to demonstrate that we have multiple institutions
>
> there, but there was no infrastructure."

Twenty-three years later, while experiencing a multitude of operational successes,

including the recent creation of a new strategic plan and the establishment of a variety of policies

and procedures, USG appears to continue to struggle to find its footing in regard to the creation

of a seamless, efficient collaboration framework. Specifically, several factors were identified

during the data collection phase as reasons for why conflict continues to be present at USG,

including: a lack of clear, shared goals and objectives; a lack of fundamental principles to guide

and evaluate collaboration; the absence of a clear communication framework to provide

mechanisms for the partners to engage; the lack of both a funding model and an incentive model

that are built for USG's collaborative structure. There were 88 coded entries among all three data

sources related to this reason for conflict at USG.

A key first step in any collaboration, is to clearly articulate the mission and vision of the

partnership, which USG has recently done through its revised strategic plan, USG 2.0. While it is

unclear just how strongly the partners buy-in to USG's updated mission and vision, the data indicate that the partners and staff continue to seek clarity around what does it mean to be a partner, what are the clear benefits and expectations of being a partner, and what are the agreed upon accountability measures to ensure success? According to one participant:

"You know, it's just one of those things, again, without having a set of defining principles that light the way and then to collectively define success it is difficult to ensure we are all buying into the same thing and headed in the same direction. Success means something different to everybody. And so, it becomes really hard to get everybody on the same page."

And according to another:

"There needs to be more dialogue or detail working out what is it we're really talking about it and how are we really going to deliver it? And so that's your, this is what it looks like for every university to give 10% because I can't get my head around what USG is asking for."

And

"And then I, again, just my opinion, but I think having more of a structure and an organization and an agreement to say, this is what you get to be a part of. These are the things we're going to do, but these are the things that will be required of you if you want to be a part of this partnership. And, and ways to hold each side accountable."

And another simply stated:

"So, what is that incentive? What's the win-win?"

One interview participant, when asked about a willingness to collaborate and buy-in to USG's new mission, replied:

"I don't think that USG can stand on its soapbox all day long and say, well, you have to, I

don't have to, it's not my goal it's your goal."

Additional comments were shared in relation to the current nature of the organization as one that

is siloed, and not currently built for collaboration, adding:

"We are so siloed. We're so siloed. So that's where I really, I'm being completely honest."

Documentary evidence also noted a need to address the siloed nature of the institution, as

follows:

Currently, USG is more reflective of a collection of entities sharing space in one

centralized location. This will require the partnership to identify its shared goals and

create the space and structure to enable the partners to develop an interdependence that

leverages their skills, abilities, expertise, and experiences. (USG R3T Report, 2021)

In addition to challenges involving a lack of clarity and articulated goals, collaboration principles

and clear definition of the benefits of engagement, an additional reason for the conflicts at USG,

is the lack of a unique funding model characterized by partnership. The current funding model

has not proven to be a success. According to one administrator:

"I think it takes the system being consistent in how they're going deal with funding and

where the funds go and who does the funds come to, and where does it go back to and

how much do you have to demonstrate what you did or didn't do. I mean…how are they

evaluating what's being done and what's not being done?"

Another interview participant offered:

"I think another flaw was there was no real incentive for institutions to come to Shady

Grove, because there really wasn't a…we later changed this, probably not as much as we

should have, but there was no budget."

Other participants reflected on the more global reasons they feel higher education is simply not built for collaboration:

"I think one of the barriers is, and I think this is, and this is a higher ed thing. I mean, institutions of higher learning in the United States are focused on trying to brand and build their own specific identity. And so, I mean, that's what they do. That's how they continue to build their business model."

And

"I think inherently higher education has not learned to be collaborative and work together in a unique way to solve an issue."

And, finally:

"You know, collaboration is hard and it, it can fail in the, in the best of environments, you know, let alone one that perhaps, you know, the infrastructure is, is too loose, you know, not as well defined. And so that is a great cause for concern."

Theme 2: Strained Infrastructure to Support Collaboration – *"We're behind the eight ball."*

USG works diligently to keep up with the demands of its partners to fulfill the variety of service and infrastructure support needs of the various stakeholder groups. An observation to be noted by the researcher as accurate is in regards to the passion, work ethic, and drive of the individuals who work at USG, both those who are USG staff and those who are partner staff who work onsite at USG. This observation was corroborated in the documentary evidence reviewed for this research, with one report highlighting, "The staff at USG are nimble, adaptive, and able to effectively function in a dynamic environment" (USG R3T Report, 2021). They are a remarkably hardworking group who strive to provide excellent supports while working within this complex infrastructure, which often finds them understaffed and under resourced.

There are several elements of the infrastructure that the data identified as necessary to be maintained or enhanced in order to ensure USG is well-equipped to serve the USG community. There were 89 references to the strained infrastructure among all three data sources. It begins with a robust base of operations to provide the basic needs and supports of students, faculty and staff, including high functioning facility management, onsite supports for students, food services, information technology support, library services, human resources, budget support, events management support, communication and marketing support, and data management. This was supported by the documentary evidence which states:

> The Commission found the following: Personalized academic and student support services are viewed by USG students, faculty, and staff as integral to the success of USG students and must remain a core aspect of USG's student -centered model and identity…the ability of USG students to access personalized academic, financial, and student support services was a critically important contributor, and perhaps the most important contributor, to the success of USG students and the success of the center in carrying out its mission. Such services are designed to meet student needs and maximize the likelihood of their success. (JCR Report, 2019)

These baseline supports that undergird collaboration must be offered effectively, efficiently, and with high-quality. In order to do this. USG must be resourced and staffed appropriately, as indicated by several interview participants:

> "It's really hard with a skeleton crew to really successfully pursue kind of what I see as multiple missions and not saying, this is our mission. This is the one thing we do, and these are all the ways we support it."

Another participant spoke to the need for better planning to ensure the needed support elements and resources can be in place prior to new program arrival, as follows:

"We went through some great planning there, but what we didn't do is we didn't really understand what the needs were going to be of these, of these programs. We just said we want those programs, but we really, we never really sat down and look back, what are those needs going be when they come here over the next year or the next two years, so that we could staff appropriately. What we always find ourselves doing, we bring them in and then we say, you know, I need staff. We need staff. We can't support them the way they need, you know…and then we're behind the eight ball."

Another interview participant stated:

"I think we are demonstrating that we have limped along…they sort of talk out of both sides of their mouth in a way…they really don't want to have to pay to have Shady Grove to get any bigger or provide infrastructure. But…the infrastructure is not built for growth. Our budget is not built that way. As students grow or student needs grow or faculty needs grow, we don't have a mechanism to grow our budget in any way."

Documentary evidence highlighted the lack of a comprehensive database, a critically needed infrastructure component, in order produce meaningful outcomes data, as follows:

Sharing of data among institutional and pathway partners to fully assess the success of the USG partnership, identify patterns and trends, and track student progress and success all along the pathway and beyond. In addition to a partnership agreement to greater data sharing, USG lacks a comprehensive database and, therefore, the ability to produce meaningful longitudinal outcomes data. (USG R3T Report, 2021)

Theme 3: Leadership Churn – "You've got to reeducate everybody, all the time."

Chapter two provided an overview of the governance structure and the many layers within the USG organization. To be effective, a partnership such as USG must ensure that the many individuals within these layers understand what USG is, what the benefits of engaging in the partnership are, and garner a commitment to engage and deploy effort and resources to make it successful. This includes individuals at the highest level of the partner institutions, including the president, provost and vice president for student affairs, and the staff within the departments, including the deans and department chairs. It also requires that staff and faculty at the implementation level understand, buy-in, and embrace the value added benefits of participating at USG. Also critical, are the staff at USM, beginning with the chancellor and his leadership team. Legislators must also be included in this group.

All of these individuals are part of the USG collaboration chain and are important links to ensure success. Keeping this extensive list of leaders sufficiently informed, connected, and excited about USG is a full-time job, and when done well, can lead to committed partners and advocates and serve as a powerful tool for growth. The challenge, however, is in both the effort it takes to fulfill this task and the consequences of the inevitable high levels of turnover in these positions over time. Turnover can have harmful consequences for USG if it results in the loss of a trusted partner and advocate. This can put USG in a vulnerable position as a new leader needs to be educated about USG and may or may not see the value in the USG collaboration.

There were 55 coded entries in the research database that touched upon this challenge, including the following comments:

"One of the real challenges that USG has is the constant churn of leadership on campuses. Just when you get a provost or a president to understand something at

Salisbury or Towson or wherever they are, they change, you know, and that's just a part

of the place."

And

"There are so many levels of leadership, right? And decision makers from the board to

our executive director to the chancellor…the institutional presidents. And there's not, in

some cases, it's not really clearly defined. You know, who trumps who and who actually

makes the final decision here? Who gets to decide this? So, it makes for a really

unpredictable environment where you might start something and then stop something. Or

you might, it might take long time, a long time to get decisions made because they have

to go through so many people. And I think a lot of times we lose clarity."

Multiple additional comments were mentioned, including these comments from one high level

official:

"If we're not investing in taking the time to educate people on what this is and why it's

valuable and why it's important and get people engaged, then when…the president leaves

or a leader leaves, they could just decide, I don't want to be a part of this. And it could all

fall apart. But if it's more entrenched and ingrained that this is of value that we have all

bought in, this is not an individual commitment. This is a, a county and a statewide

commitment from the top down, then I think it's much more likely to thrive and continue

and not be in jeopardy when things change at the leadership level."

And

"This becomes like four dimensional chess because the institutions aren't necessarily the

only deciders there either, right? Because then you've got to get into departments, you've

got to get into to deans. And so then you have to wonder who's motivated at that level?"

It was widely understood by the interview participants how much this leadership churn impacts USG and can lead to conflict:

> "I've been struck with how leadership at the institutional levels really can drive partnership forward or stymie it."

And

> "Everything can be going along just fine. And then a new person comes along and either you start from scratch or you lose it."

And

> "There is a massively complicated leadership ecosystem that USG relies on. I think the success of some programs at USG are all about the leadership from that main campus."

One of many examples of leadership transition that could impact USG operations occurred in June 2022 with the retirement of revered president of UMBC, Dr. Freeman Hrabowski. Dr. Hrabowski was a leader who saw the value of having a presence at USG and was committed to growing and sustaining UMBC enrollment, as evidenced through the resources and staffing devoted to UMBC's operation at USG. With each leadership transition, especially at the presidential level, there is always a concern that transition could lead to a shift in perspective in the value of the collaboration with USG. During a 2021 podcast hosted by USG Executive Director, Dr. Anne Khademian, Dr. Hrawboski shared his thoughts about USG:

> What I will tell you is we started small, under 50 students, and now we've got hundreds and hundreds and want to go to thousands. And the fact is that we were interested in that footprint in the state of Maryland. It gives us more presence. It allows us to reach incredibly talented students. (This is Us Podcast Transcript, Episode 14)

And he further added

> We had enjoyed beginning to bring the faculty senate to meet on the USG campus…to
>
> say, this is us. This is us. You know, we are very proud of that. And I can say this, I told
>
> my colleagues, when we go to USG, let's own it. Let's just own it…Now I don't say that
>
> with arrogance, but we are proud…it's a lovely campus. The students are so special, so
>
> grateful coming from so many backgrounds, bringing such richness and strengths from
>
> their backgrounds, appreciative, you know, and, every time I'm there, they're loving to
>
> tell me I'm a UMBC student here at USG, you know, I love that. I really do. I think it's a
>
> great model. (This is Us Podcast Transcript, Episode 14)

Finally, while leadership change is not exclusive to USG, it was acknowledged by
interview participants that USG is a unique partnership environment that does come with
reeducation challenges that may be heightened within USG, as expressed by the following
interviewee:

> "There's no place else that looks like this. And so, anytime you're going see change, the
>
> next person that comes in the door who has to engage, like you've got to reeducate
>
> everybody all the time."

Theme 4: The Role of USM – "The system is responsible ultimately for Shady Grove."

Early in USG's development, USG contracted with UMCP to become the Coordinating
Institution. That change in oversight stipulated that the Executive Director at USG would have a
dual reporting relationship to both the Chancellor of USM and the Provost at UMCP. That
bifurcated leadership approach took some of the power and focus away from USM and gave it to
one of the nine participating partners at USG. As discussed earlier, this caused several issues for
USG and the partners, but it also diffused USM's role and shifted the relationships at USG.

Several participants noted the challenge with this reporting structure and the need for USM to take a more prominent role at USG, both in the leadership structure and with other aspects of USG's growth and development. There were 27 coded entries in the data that referred to this reason for conflict. According to one participant:

> "I really think that, you know, for us to be successful, people can't see us as an extension of College Park. I think that we really need to be labeled as system."

And another stating:

> "The system is responsible ultimately for Shady Grove, the Chancellor's office. But I don't think the system office has taken the kind of ownership of its success that needs to take place."

Many shared the sentiment that in order for USG to achieve its true collaborative potential, it needs to be dictated or mandated by USM rather than negotiated in a piecemeal approach:

> "I think that's a tough it's a tough culture to dig into and really takes the leadership to, you know, say, you know, here, here's the deal and you can play or you cannot play."

Participants also expressed the USG challenge of attempting to be responsive to workforce needs by growing existing programs or adding others when they, in fact, have no control over the institutions and must rely instead on their willingness and desire to do so. USG must engage in often lengthy negotiations with partners that often result in little or no action. As expressed by one participant:

> "I think there is this tug on USG to be so responsive to the community but to do so USG must leverage something that is very difficult to leverage because you don't own it. You know, it's not your thing to leverage. And so, all of that has to be done at a very slow methodical pace."

And

> "I'm not sure exactly how that would happen other than through system. But, you know,
> if people are, if it's clearly articulated and defined what the expectations of both partners
> are and there's regular check-ins and they're held accountable to that, I think we would
> have a greater chance at success. And I think people would be more invested and more
> engaged and it would be more of a true collaboration."

One participant felt the most recent strategic plan developed by USG, in partnership with USM,
should have been fully developed and owned by USM in order for it to have the kind of buy-in
and support needed from the partner campuses:

> "I think this is a structural flaw. I think the, the Chancellor's Office ought to take the lead
> in developing a strategic plan for shady grove."

Additional comments were offered that linked the lack of USM ownership and oversight to
issues with partner equity and speed of decision making, sharing:

> "I still think the power players are the ones winning out, making the majority of the
> decisions, having the greatest impact. And that's really hard to control unless it's
> completely controlled by system."

And

> "Will the chancellor in the system hold everyone accountable and enforce that? So, it's,
> you know, so you don't have power plays and you don't have people trumping other
> people. I think that lack of clarity and that multiple levels of leadership, you know, in
> some ways it's great to have all those minds at the table, but it also makes for a big mess
> and makes for very slow decision making."

As identified in documentary evidence via the Joint Commission Report to the Maryland General Assembly, while the commission charged to examine USG operations, including leadership and decision-making, discussed the topic extensively, they were unable to reach a consensus about a clear leadership direction for USG. This highlights the complexity of leadership challenges at USG and the potential need for USM to assume a greater role.

> Finally, the Commission debated at length a number of recommendations that were put forward at various points in response to the leadership, governance and decision-making needs and issues highlighted above. While Commission members were not able to reach complete consensus on these "potential" recommendations in the time allotted, there was significant support for and agreement on the appropriateness of many of them. (Joint Commission Report, 2019)

Impact on Collaboration

With an understanding of the types of conflicts USG is addressing and some themes that suggest why these conflicts may be occurring, the researcher collected data in an attempt to discover, through the lens of Systems Theory, the impact these conflicts have on USG and its partners as they strive to develop a meaningful collaboration.

To summarize previous findings, five key conflict themes were identified: 1) conflict caused by competition, 2) conflict caused by gaps in understanding/support by the home campus, 3) conflict caused by stakeholder identity issues, 4) conflict caused by USG's organizational structure, and 5) conflict caused by difficult sustaining initiatives. In addition to identifying these areas of conflict, the following four themes were identified to understand why this conflict might be occurring: 1) lack of a clearly defined and communicated collaboration framework, 2)

strained infrastructure to support collaboration, 3) perpetual churn within leadership at all levels, and 4) lack of USM ownership and leadership.

With these findings as the backdrop, the researcher collected data to determine the impact of this information on collaboration efforts at USG. Three key themes emerged among the three data sources via 101 coded entries in the research database: 1) inability to garner meaningful commitment and engagement from partners, 2) inequitable levels of partner engagement, and 3) inability to sustain and grow collaboration. Relevant excerpts from the data sources are utilized to describe these themes further.

Theme 1: Inability to Garner Meaningful Partner Commitment and Engagement -
"They've got to want to play…they've got to see the value."

USG's history is full of examples of the tactics and methods utilized by founders and USM to populate a newly forming USG partnership. Mostly, coercion and political deal making were employed to "encourage" partners to offer programming at USG, as well as assurances that their home campus will not suffer as a result of their participation. For example, in the words of one founding member,

> "the partners argued that we will [participate], we understand, but the condition for participation is money. If you give us money, because we don't want to defer, we don't want to use our resources to support this regional center. You have to give us new resources that don't compromise the resources we already get for our on-campus programs."

Without this coercion and deal making, USG may not have gotten off the ground and there is evidence to suggest that this has improved with some institutions seeing the clear value of being present at USG. According to one research participant, "Some programs I think love to

be there and they're doing well. And some programs feel that they have to be there and continue to be frustrated with that." However, it is not clear that the needle has moved enough for USG to be a highly sought after location of choice to offer programming. According to one interviewee:

"I don't know if Shady Grove would've gotten off the ground if there hadn't been people from institutions feeling they were forced to come…but that's not going to hold out for the long term."

Another participant took the view that it is the institutions that need to change their mindset and approach to engagement at USG stating:

"It's the institutions who have to change. They have to change their mindset. Bring the right people. They have to want to play. They have to see the value."

Another participant made the point that it is not enough for the partners to simply listen and learn about the new model USG is laying out and simply stay quiet or not express concern. They need to actively engage:

"USG is a model that doesn't exist any place. I need people to positively affirm that you're on board with this. I don't need you to just not say no because effectively that's as good as a no."

Many participants spoke about a lack of clarity defining goals and alignments and the challenges that confusion can pose both for the USG staff and the partners:

"I think ultimately that's one of the challenges that each institution is kind of coming in here with perhaps their own agenda and their own reasons for being here…there's some who are really interested in being a part of a true partnership and there are others who prefer to work more independently and just appreciate the opportunity to bring education

here. But they want do things in a very proprietary or independent way and you know, aren't really interested in what I would call probably a true partnership."

And:

"I feel like we, our goals are maybe too broad, that our mission is maybe too complex and that we, you know, we're trying to really be highly successful on three or four different paths, you know, supporting workforce and providing access and, and I don't know, you know, serving as a data hub or identifying best practices or being this model for the county. So, they're all great things, and…there's a lot of overlap…"

Documentary evidence reinforces the need to ensure there is a clear balance between USG's mission and the missions of the partner campuses and a need to address conflicts that arise in this area, as follows:

How can USM, USG, and USG's partnering institutions ensure that an appropriate balance exists between USG's mission to represent and respond to the needs of Montgomery County and the region while also addressing the needs and interests of USG's institutional partners in meeting their USM and specific institutional missions? How should conflicts between these competing missions/needs be resolved? (JCR Report, 2019)

The willingness and desire to collaborate are present for some, but there must be a clear structure in place to guide and manage it. According to one participant:

"One of the things that makes us a strong operation is that, of course, yes, we need to promote our programs. We want to grow our programs, we want our…students to be well served as they should be. And we desperately want to do that in partnership and collaboration."

And:

> "USG is phenomenal. And the student services that have been provided historically have been great, but we're not, we're not really working together. And so, we're not being genuine. I don't feel good about that."

The desire among institutional partners to focus on the goals, identity, and future of their home campus is strong and impacts their desire to want to engage at USG, as shared by another participant:

> "I know that there will be some institutions who sort of want to protect what they own. And this is the way we do things, and this is the way we're going to continue to do things. And so, you know, regardless of the building blocks…they may not be willing to step up to those building blocks. And so then, you know, that then becomes their decision, their choice."

Another participant added:

> "And you're trying to mediate the institutional pull to protect itself, because cooperation requires that you have to accommodate, you have to change, and you have to meet your partners. You have to find ways of collaborating that may be different from what you do on your home campus. So, the pull has to be strong enough for them to want to put the energy in to do that."

Institutional and policy challenges discourage partners from wanting to engage in collaboration, as described by one partner participant:

> "To be honest, my school does not encourage our students to take credits anywhere else because the money does not come back to us. It's the tuition thing and who gets to collect it. You know, follow the money. If the tuition costs have to be shared, or don't come

back to us at all, why would we encourage our students to take a program and generate

tuition for another program?"

The conflicts over incentives and rewards for collaboration were also addressed by the following

participant:

"A lot of them don't think that way. They aren't rewarded that way for collaboration.

They're not recognized that way. Some campuses, a few figured out how to…reward that

and how to, not necessarily monetarily, but reward that in different ways."

One participant remarked that there seems to be universal agreement on one of the USG 2.0

strategic initiatives involving the career readiness of students. But this agreement seems to

extend in words only as no clear agreement has been reached about what partnership in this

initiative clearly means, as follows:

"I think all of them have bought into the benefit of having career readiness be embedded

in their programming. I believe they've bought into that…but we haven't asked them to

do anything about that…My impression is they still think of it as, you know, it'll still be a

voluntary type of thing. You know, students will have access to be able to do X, Y, Z, but

I'm not sure all of them will demonstrate the ability or desire to embed it and it will be

interesting."

Theme 2: Inequitable Levels of Partner Engagement – *"…it's often the same folks who are

at the table."

Outlined in the section above is the impact of conflicts occurring at USG on the

willingness and desire for USG partners to fully embrace and commit to the collaboration. In this

section, the challenges move beyond their willingness to participate and address their ability to

participate, given various inequities that may exist in campus size, resources, staffing, and

infrastructure issues. Excerpts from the data provide evidence to support this challenge, as indicated by the following participant:

> "My observation, you know, it is seen that there are certain power players such as University of Maryland, College Park, UMBC…UMB, the schools that are larger, that have more of a financial investment, who have larger enrollments, they seem to continue to hold the power in terms of making decisions and setting direction and setting strategy. They have more voices at the table. They seem to have more, more of a circle of influence. They have more leverage in some ways, they have more credibility."

And:

> "I mean, you don't hear about some of the other ones, you know, unless it's in your face, College Park, everybody hears that because it's kind of everywhere and it's, you know, it's our, our web address. Like, you know, like everything is through UMD. You don't really hear about Salisbury, you don't hear about Eastern Shore. You do if you go to an event where they're like, oh, these are the people from, you know, Eastern Shore that did it. But I don't think we have a lot of cross exposure of the smaller programs."

Another added:

> "If you look at an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) or our smaller schools like, you know, Towson and Bowie and Salisbury, they just don't have the same capability or ability in terms of bandwidth or investments, you know, financial bandwidth to invest in the organization. And I think it's much harder for them to be as engaged and behave more of a powerful seat at the table. So, I, I do think the larger institutions have, have exuded much more significant power and have been the decision makers. And I

think it's sad, but I think the other institutions in many ways, get kind of left behind and

don't receive the level of support that they should."

And:

"But at the larger level, when it comes to financial investment and what academic

programs are coming and who gets how much or what facilities and how many

enrollments can they get, I still think the power players are the ones winning out, making

the majority of the decisions, having the greatest impact."

Documentary evidence validates these sentiments:

The voices, experiences, and visions of ALL community stakeholders must be

empowered, recognized, and integrated as inclusive, essential threads when weaving the

decision-making processes and designing the operational infrastructures to support USG

2.0. (R3T Report, 2021)

There were several references made to the informal and challenging processes staff need

to follow to secure participation in collaborative activities and initiatives. Typically, it begins

with the creation of a collaborative idea or initiative, broadly communicating the idea/initiative,

seeking a willing partner to pilot with, negotiating participation with interested parties, piloting

and assessing the idea/initiative, developing a proof of concept, sharing the outcomes and then, if

successful, attempting to identify other partners who may want to get on board. This process is

lengthy, time consuming, and often results in the same programs coming to the table to

collaborate, as illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

"I'm mindful because UMCP, UMB, and UMBC have some of the larger footprints from

a student perspective standpoint. You know, it's often the same folks who are at the table.

And then you hear from, you know, when you do run into folks from smaller institutions,

well, I didn't know about this, or we weren't at the table, and again, I don't know what the

level of investment there is."

Another participant went further and described a kind of favoritism that develops among those

who have the ability and resources to engage in collaborative activities, as follows:

"I think sometimes we, staff-wise, make the institutions that are partners with us, we

make their views more prevalent than those that are not as active and so I think, so not

only size differentials, but favoritism. I'll call it, perceived favoritism…I think in our

interest to build things, sometimes we build things that favor the people that are

participating, rightly so. But it may not then encourage others. And the others may feel, I

can't get into the, the cool club or the club that's doing the actual work. I think sometimes

our structures in the interest of being a startup have not been built so that we could scale

for all."

Another interview participant, also referencing the need to partner with whoever is willing, had

this to say:

"I don't think that method has changed or will change in the near future because it's the

one mechanism we have to get the ball through…you know, it's just like, take who we

can get to partner with us and then try to build something that is helpful."

And another added:

"…you put a call out and people come forward to participate in programs that you have if

they're interested, but…you usually get the same players over and over."

Participants also discussed the challenge of scaling collaboration and the idea of contributing at

some agreed upon level:

"The other part of it is, you know let's say we can actually quantify this and say 10%, you know, I mean, 10% of College Park and UMBC and UB looks different than 10% from Salisbury. Great. So, I think there is a there's a scale challenge to be considered, you know, in thinking through those sorts of things. Some of the institutions just don't have a very big footprint there."

Theme 3: Difficulty Sustaining and Growing Collaboration – "There's not enough time and there aren't enough people and there's not enough money."

Developing and building a unique, multi-institutional collaboration such as USG is a remarkable feat and the concept itself is innovative, efficient, and cost-effective. According to one high-level academic representative, "I think the basic concept was superb… I think the concept of building it as an upper division and graduate center in partnership with Montgomery College was brilliant." Sustaining and growing it, however, is another matter altogether. The areas of conflict previously mentioned have an impact on the ability of this remarkable collaboration to be sustained and grow, specifically in the areas of staffing, time, and funding, as identified through the data collection phase. Excerpts from the data highlight these challenges, including the participant below who spoke to these infrastructure challenges and impacts, as follows:

"I think some of it's really simple, but some of it's just the bandwidth. People are kind of in survival mode somewhat, so they're doing what needs to be done every day. But I think people are a little limited in feeling like they've got the time and the space to just, you know, be creative and collaborate with our partners and try out some new initiatives and pilot some things."

And

> "Of course, the barrier's time. You know, we're all juggling 10 things. And, you know,we
>
> have our, our main campus responsibilities and we want a presence at USG and we want
>
> to be involved in committees there. But it's time, and it's, how do we find that balance?
>
> That's what I think is the biggest barrier."

Another participant pointed out the impact of infrastructure challenges on collaboration:

> "The channels and the appropriate infrastructure aren't in place to really allow USG
>
> effectively from a capacity standpoint, staffing standpoint to address sustainably what
>
> those structural issues are. Because there's not enough time and there aren't enough
>
> people and there's not enough money."

Several individuals highlighted inadequate staffing and the pressures placed upon USG staff to

be immediately responsive to stakeholder needs, as follows:

> "I mean, there are just so many elements in there that you know, departments are under
>
> the gun to, to produce… So, the conflict there, you know, is I need what I need when I
>
> need it, and, and I'm not open to compromise because I need this now."

Several participants referenced, in addition to the lack of a collaboration framework, a lack of

sustainable funding that led to the phasing out of a collaborative initiative that had proven

successful:

> "You know, it was really, we were doing some really interesting stuff, but we weren't
>
> getting the funding. And then it's, how do we get money to pay the students? And, you
>
> know, just things like that when you can't get the funding easily, it just sort of falls by the
>
> wayside. The CIPES committee [Committee for Interprofessional and Interdisciplinary
>
> Education Strategies] was just kind of a committee, you know, there was no, no real

solidity to it. We always talked about trying to make it a center or something that was more grounded, you know, if there's a center of academic innovation, and we could have CIPES something that's more, has more oomph to it. But it just, it was a committee."

And

"The funding model would have to be completely changed. Completely changed. We'd have to revamp that...right now, everyone's kind of working within their silos, even within their funding model…that would be priority number one."

Participants also expressed a need for centralized USG support to assist with funding support in the form of grants, as follows:

"I don't know if this is a high priority but something…having someone that looks for funding to support faculty endeavors and special things. We want to be a testing site…having something onsite that actually looks for those kinds of opportunities to get really good funding for some of these things that we could test."

In addition to interview data, documentary data corroborated these sentiments:

The lessons these challenges teach us are that without partnership and service agreements, clear communication on expectations that are reinforced, transparent priorities, professional growth opportunities, clear ownership responsibilities, and a consistent decision-making process, we are caught in a cycle where decisions are not final, information is inconsistent, processes are continuously re-invented, and turnover is unavoidable. (R3T Report, 2021)

And

Over the past few years, there have been concerns about the financial sustainability of USG. General funds comprise an increasingly larger portion of its state-supported budget,

growing from 84.0% in fiscal 2018 to 91.9% in the Governor's proposed fiscal 2021

budget, while institutions continue to subsidize programs offered at the center. In

addition, a steady enrollment decline has led to concerns regarding whether the new

Biomedical Sciences and Engineering building will be fully utilized. (HB 1205

Document)

Chapter Summary

Through a review of 13 relevant documents, interviews with 17 individuals with in-depth

knowledge of USG, and the researchers own observation, the resulting data uncovered five

primary areas of conflict present within the USG partnership, which result from four core

fundamental organizational elements, all of which appear to pose significant challenges as the

partners' attempt to engage in meaningful collaboration. See Figure 3 below for a graphic

depiction of these interconnected elements. This causal connection between conflict and

collaboration was used to develop a collaboration path forward to ensure initiatives can be

sustained and thrive for many years to come. Chapter 5 will further this analysis through a

discussion of these findings through the lens of five principles of systems theory that are most

relevant to this study.

Figure 3

USG Conflict & Collaboration Overview

Categories of Conflict	Why Conflict is Occurring	Impact on Collaboration
➢Competition	➢Absence of a Clear Collaboration Framework	➢Inability to Garner Partner Commitment & Engagement
➢Organizational Structure	➢Strained Infrastructure to Support Collaboration	➢Inequitable Levels of Partner Engagement
➢Partner Institution Relationships	➢Leadership Churn	➢Difficulty Sustaining & Growing Collaboration
➢Stakeholder Identity	➢Ownership Confusion	
➢Difficulty Sustaining Initiatives		

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

"This is the biggest bumblebee I've ever seen. The fact that it flies at all is amazing."

This chapter discusses the study's results through the lens of key Systems Theory principles, namely teleological, homeostasis, equifinality, hierarchy, and the iceberg model. The researcher's conclusions will be shared, as well as the significance of the study, the study's limitations, and recommendations for further study.

Discussion

USG is an innovative, multifaceted system of collaboration that is comprised of nine distinct academic institutions, each with its own identity, culture, brand, and mission. While complex and imperfect, this partnership has been successful, as indicated by a 2019 report by the Maryland Joint Commission:

> With respect to the charge, implicit in the Chancellor's charge, to determine how effective USG has been, to date, in achieving its mission and to help identify, if possible, the elements central to that success, the Commission found the following: The Universities at Shady Grove is a USM success story that should be recognized and celebrated within the USM and Maryland. By almost any measure examined by the Commission, USG was shown to have had tremendous success delivering on its education mission, particularly as it relates to transfer student access.

The partnership has resulted in more than 15,000 graduates over the past two decades, many of whom may not have achieved this important milestone if not for the existence of USG. So, while complex and imperfect, USG works. However, as the research identified, there are several conflicts that require attention at a systems level in order to ensure this collaboration can be sustained and grow.

Conducting this study through the lens of Systems Theory provided an in-depth, holistic perspective on the conflicts, and it served as a useful guide in analyzing the findings. In particular, four of the systems theory principles as identified by Kast and Rosenzweig (1972), and outlined in Chapter 2, were utilized: 1) systems are teleological and will have multiple goals or purposes; 2) an open system may not always return to its original state but may instead return to a state that enables it to grow and survive or homeostasis; 3) a variety of paths can lead to similar ending points or equifinality; 4) within the components of a systems a hierarchy is present.

Each of these principles will be discussed in relation to the data in order to arrive at a series of recommendations aimed at assisting multi-institutional collaborations to be successful in achieving their partnership goals.

Teleological

Kast and Rosenzweig indicate that social systems are teleological, meaning that they will pursue numerous goals in large part because they are comprised of discrete members who belong to subunits of a system (1972). While this multiplicity of goals is expected, the system should determine the "final state of output setting" (Kumar, 2021). In the case of USG, research indicated a variety of motivations for the partners to join the partnership, including: a need to serve Montgomery County, a desire to address the accessibility and affordability of higher education, access to the county's employer community, a need to increase campus diversity, a need to increase overall enrollment, and other political motivations to be responsive to state and county leadership. However, as the data show, early in USG's development partner institutions were pressured to join the ranks.

As Systems Theory suggests, the presence of multiple goals within a system is not surprising but there is a need to reach agreement on the final output, in the case of USG the larger overarching goal. In the words of the following study participants:

"Having a more clearly defined mission in who we are would give us an advantage in terms of being able to better market who we are to students, to the community, to our partners…and would give more of a defined picture."

And

"I think I would do a little bit more of, you know, what are the real needs? What's the why? Why are we doing this? And how are we going to respond to those needs and ensure that we're successful? Whether it's the access piece or the workforce piece, you know, which one is really the main reason why we're here, and how do we support that?"

As a result of the triangulated data from this study, as viewed from the lens of Systems Theory, it is recommended that multi-institutional collaborations, such as USG, should 1) clearly define and communicate the benefits of participating in the collaboration. Coercion to participate may fill the roster initially, but it will not help sustain or grow the partnership over time. 2) Partners should agree upon a shared mission, vision, and set of annualized, measurable goals for the partnership.

Homeostasis

Systems Theory suggests that the most effective organizations, then, are those that are able to adapt to the changes occurring in the environment (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Open systems may not always return to their original state but may instead return to a state that enables them to grow and survive, or homeostasis (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). As Chapter 2 outlined, there are compelling reasons for the USG partnership to pause and address the systemic,

structural challenges identified in this study in order to ensure that it can survive this tumultuous, post-pandemic moment in higher education. As mentioned above, the first step involves gaining clarity about the benefits of participation, the mission, vision, and shared goals and objectives that guide partnerships. In doing so, the partners need to be willing to reduce their belief and their reliance on their own unique institutional identity. They must stop siloed thinking and behavior and adopt a model that can leverage the strengths of all in order to create a unique, efficient, effective collaboration. They must recognize the shortcomings of their traditional, siloed model. According to documentary evidence:

> Core to many of these bold ideas is USG's need to abandon a more stagnant model of coexistence (9 institutions functioning disparately in shared space) in favor of resolutely developing and moving toward a dynamic and fluid operational model that is built upon a robust system of shared governance (at all levels) and that both supports and encourages true collaboration resulting in dynamic outcomes that serve the collective whole. (USG R3T Report, 2021)

And one academic partner stated:

> "I think you have to get people in the room and go over a lot of these guiding principles and… you have to document them. I think you have to write them down and have everybody sign on and agree that these are our guiding principles and as best we can, knowing there's exceptions, but as best we can, we're going to operate under this methodology. And then how are we going to address things as we change, as we grow?"

And another interviewee offered the following:

"I want to work together with the institutions here. I want USG to work with us to

determine how we can best meet our students where they are right here, right now and

that's going to require…a little bit of institutional shedding."

In order for collaboration to occur, however, the partners first need assurance that there is

in place a collaborative framework and organizational structure that will enable and support

growth, transformation, and reward boldness. Success and its accompanying rewards need to

flow from supportive operational and administrative structures. Data from this study support a

recommendation for multi-institutional collaborators to: 1) create a collaboration framework with

guiding principles and accountability mechanisms that shape and guide how the partners

collaborate within the USG ecosystem, and 2) evaluate and address the organizational

infrastructure to ensure it is capable of sustaining the partnership. This requires addressing the

following critical operational elements - the funding model, staffing model, communications

framework, facilities management, student and faculty service model, information technology

support, and data systems. Both the researcher and a number of the interviewees observed that

both institutional bureaucracies and the current structure of USG often inhibit the development

and sustainability of new collaborative initiatives.

Equifinality

According to the principle of equifinality, a system can achieve the same final result

despite a variety of initial conditions. As stated by Kast and Rosenzweig (1972), "Equifinality

suggests that social organizations can accomplish their objectives with diverse inputs and

varying internal activities (p. 450). For example, as noted by a number of interviewees, inequities

exist among the partners regarding access to resources or system inputs. As such, it is important

for multi-institutional systems like USG to consider a collaborative structure that accounts for

these differences. Allowing flexibility and adding supports, including financial support, for those

programs that may need them, will allow institutional partners to share and achieve mutually

agreed upon objectives. According to the following study participant:

> "If there was a way to have the structure be a bit more equitable so that all the institutions
>
> would have more of a seat at the table than just the power players."

Collaborators do not always come to the table with equitable levels of resources, stature, and

abilities, as is the case at USG, but a strong collaboration framework will ensure that partners are

treated equitably, regardless of the varying levels of input each brings. As such, it is imperative

that the collaboration framework and guiding principles address this challenge. All partners must

feel seen, heard, and cared for.

Hierarchy

As described in chapters 1 and 2, USG is an institution comprised of many subsystems,

including the institutional partners, their home campuses, academic departments within partner

campuses, and USG departments. It is essential, therefore, that the USG organization is well-

structured to ensure maximum functionality. As a result, the chain of hierarchy must be clearly

defined, as should the delegation of authority (Kumar, 2021).

In multi-institutional collaborations, partners must understand the hierarchy and

accountabilities because the former is inherent and the latter is created. As the data indicated,

lack of clarity in acknowledging and clarifying hierarchy can lead to resentment, distrust, and

apathy. At USG, the data identify three key leadership areas that should be addressed, including

how to manage leadership churn, the role of the administrative campus, and the role of USM.

There were multiple references within interviews and documents to the challenges and

conflicts regarding leadership; in fact, it was the third most coded category in the data, including

the following: "Clear roles and responsibilities, authorities, and accountabilities (RRAA) are

necessary for effective and efficient management" (Joint Commission Report, 2019).

And

> "People are not going to do it out of the goodness of their heart. They have their
>
> priorities, their campus where they sit geographically. And so, it's going to require more
>
> directive than coaxing. I don't think coaxing will ever get Shady Grove to where we all
>
> want to see it get."

And

> "I don't see any dynamic that's going to change unless the model is modified…I see no
>
> reason why anything is going to change until campuses are more directed and
>
> incentivized to build programs at Shady Grove, for the most part, they are not going do
>
> it."

Four specific recommendations to address these issues, include, 1) reexamine USG's

reporting authority and consider assigning to USM full ownership and oversight of USG, 2)

through the Chancellor, garner the support of the presidents from participating partner campuses

through an accountability structure, 3) through the presidents, institutionalize USG within the

home campuses, and 4) increase USG's authority to buy programs and work in partnership to

ensure that established accountability mechanisms are being met.

Iceberg Model

An additional finding from the data relates to how conflict management is handled within

this complex partnership. The purpose of the study was to identify the conflicts and discover why

they are occurring to determine how they are impacting collaboration. The aim was not to learn

how this complex partnership addresses conflict (this could be the topic of future research);

however, because there were 35 coded data items that relate to conflict management, the

researcher feels compelled to share some of these comments, through the words of the interview

participants, as follows:

> "Folks are brought together quickly and…I think sometimes there's more of a tendency to
>
> react than to respond. So, what I see playing out at USG when it comes to conflict is of
>
> course things are going to happen. Not everyone's going to be on the same page. And so,
>
> you know, natural mode of operation is to bring the folks together to talk through, okay,
>
> how can we solve the issue at hand?"

And

> "Where I've seen problems is that sometimes the ability to change whatever those
>
> structures that might be underlying the issue or the processes, there aren't sustainable
>
> efforts put in place to fix the issue. Like, it's react. There's a difference between reacting
>
> and responding. Responding really means you've looked at the whole picture you know,
>
> and you're taking a whole bunch of elements into account."

And an additional comment:

> "There was conflict avoidance, there was trying to identify individual, what are the
>
> specific relationships? How do I appease one of the partners or one of the entities and try
>
> to build it that way? And so, I at least get, I may not get alignment with everybody, but I
>
> get alignment with somebody."

And the following succinctly stated comment:

> "We react, we react, we react."

One useful systems tool to aid analysis of conflict is the Iceberg Model in Systems

Theory. See Figure 4 on page 111. As described in Chapter 2, it is a useful tool often utilized to

help individuals make a connection between observable issues or conflicts and the underlying

factors that are the hidden causes of the conflict or problem (Cunliff, 2018). There are four levels

of the model that represent the levels of a problem from a superficial, observable level to a

deeper submerged, structural level.

For example, research identified that one of the collaboration challenges at USG is

inequitable level of participation among partners in events, activities, and initiatives. At the

observable level, this might present itself as a problem defined by a lack of participation in a

particular event, something like an open house event. Just under the water line at the pattern

level, a noticeable trend may be noticed that shows this same partner also does not participate in

other USG-wide events and activities.

At the next level, the structure level, an understanding of how events are connected to

one another is observed. For example, that particular partner may not be able to attend USG-

wide events because they are not appropriately staffed in order to attend events while also

attending to the basic operational needs of their program. Finally, at the mental model level of

the iceberg, sitting below the structure, is the most submerged part where underlying beliefs

about a problem are found (Cunliff, 2018). This area is considered the foundation of the system

and the place where beliefs, values, and opinions exist (Cunliff, 2018). In the example, the

partner may not consider its lack of engagement in collaborative events or activities at USG an

issue because the home campus leadership does not place a value on their attendance and

encourages them, instead, to focus solely on running their academic program, thus operating in a

silo.

Figure 4

Iceberg Model

Source: Baskarada, S. (2014). Qualitative Case Study Guidelines. The Qualitative Report,19, 1-18.

Multi-institutional partnerships, such as USG, must carefully consider the underlying structural forces and mental models that impact collaboration. This study uncovered several conflicts at the underlying structural and foundational levels that are negatively impacting collaboration.

USG Conflict and Collaboration through the Lens of Systems Theory

Conducting this in-depth, single case study through the lens of Systems Theory provided an opportunity to examine conflicts at a deeper, systemic level and, therefore, lead to the identification of foundational levers of change that can enhance the partners' ability to collaborate. Figure 5 on page 112 illustrates the findings and conclusions from the study.

Figure 5

Core Elements of USG Conflict & Collaboration Analysis

Core Elements of Conflict & Collaboration Analysis

Categories of Conflict	**Why Conflict is Occurring**	**Impact on Collaboration**
➢Competition	➢Absence of a Clear Collaboration Framework	➢Inability to Garner Partner Commitment & Engagement
➢Organizational Structure	➢Strained Infrastructure to Support Collaboration	➢Inequitable Levels of Partner Engagement
➢Relationships with Home Campuses	➢Leadership Churn	➢Difficulty Sustaining & Growing Collaboration
➢Stakeholder Identity	➢Ownership Confusion	
➢Difficulty Sustaining Initiatives		

Relevant Principles of Systems Theory

➢ Teleological
➢ Equifinality
➢ Hierarchy
➢ Homeostasis
➢ Iceberg Model

Systemic Change: What is Possible?

➢ Clearly Defined & Communicated Benefits of Participation
➢ Formalized Agreement on Mission, Vision, Goals, & Guiding Principles
➢ Collaboration Framework & Implementation Strategy to Include:
    o Funding Model that Enables USG to Buy Programs & Ensures Equity
➢ Infrastructure Framework
➢ USM Assumes Full Ownership & Responsibility
➢ USG Embedded into Partner Campus Culture

Significance of the Study

The higher education landscape is changing. Demographic shifts, technological advances, and shifts in public policy are enabling more students to seek higher education and more jurisdictions are demanding accessible and affordable options to help level the playing field (Grabowski et.al., 2016). Higher education administrators must be willing to amend the traditional model under which they operate in favor of innovative solutions. Development of collaboration and consortia have been approaches undertaken by higher education institutions to create efficiencies, develop new models, and achieve outcomes but many of these have been thwarted by conflicts that hinder success (Prashant & Harbir, 2009).

A new and evolving approach to extend the reach of the brick and mortar universities is found in the creation of RHECs, which allow multiple institutions to offer programming at select and needed locations in rural areas where no other physical colleges or universities are located. RHECs come in many sizes and configurations and are located throughout the United States. Their complex infrastructures, however, make them ripe for conflict that can threaten their formation, evolution, and longevity. The Universities at Shady Grove, the focus of this study, is one of the more complex educational partnerships of this type, given the large numbers of institutional partners and programs as well as the mix of onsite support services offered. While the presence of conflict is expected and even welcomed to ensure growth, healthy competition, and innovation, it can also, if not identified and managed, lead to an inability to thrive.

While RHECs are growing in popularity, little academic research has been conducted on these academic collaborations and none was found that was conducted through the lens of conflict theory. Specifically, examining the conflicts present at USG through a systems lens help to sharpen the analysis of why they occur and help to identify systematic solutions, instead of

those that focus on one institution or entity alone. The recommendations will aid researchers and administrators who seek new arrangements in order to reach their goals.

RHECs can play an important role in ensuring that more individuals who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education have an opportunity to achieve their educational goals. As institutions consider opening these centers in other jurisdictions across the country, this study will help to identify potential sources of destructive conflict and, thereby, help create a solid foundation that be replicated for success.

Results can continue to guide USM policy on RHECs. They can also guide local legislators in the formulation of needed legislation to address those conflicts at the county and state levels that can derail an RHEC. Additionally, conflict practitioners can gain valuable information on how best to identify and address conflict in an RHEC at various stages of its development. The study provides a possible clear framework that administrators can follow to guide them through the successful implementation of an RHEC.

Study Limitations

Despite the strong outcomes of the study, it is important to identify its limitations. USG is comprised of nine academic partners, and although attempts were made to interview at least one participant from all nine partners, three institutions were not included in the interviews due to schedule conflicts, declined interviews, or lack of response. However, among the remaining six partner institutions, there was strong representation according to school size and diversity. In addition, among all three data sources utilized for this study, all nine of USG partners were represented. Furthermore, while the use of a single case study provided a rich, contextualized understanding of the topic of the study, this exclusive focus on USG limits generalizability.

Conclusions

This case study was designed to take an in-depth look at one regional higher education center, the Universities at Shady Grove, to identify conflicts that exist among USG and its nine partners, to determine why these conflicts are occurring, and to identify the impact these conflicts are having on the partners' ability to collaborate. Based on the triangulation of data collected from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence, this researcher identified five categories where conflict is present at USG: 1) conflict caused by competition, 2) conflict caused by gaps in understanding/support by the home campus, 3) conflict caused by stakeholders' identity issues, 4) conflict caused by USG's organizational structure, and 5) conflict caused by difficulties sustaining initiatives.

In addition to identifying these areas of conflict, the following four themes were identified to understand why this conflict might be occurring: 1) lack of a clearly defined and communicated collaboration framework, 2) strained infrastructure to support collaboration, 3) perpetual churn within leadership at all levels, and 4) lack of USM ownership and leadership.

The researcher then determined the impact of this information on collaboration efforts at USG. Three key impacts emerged: 1) inability to garner meaningful commitment and engagement from partners, 2) inequitable levels of partner engagement, and 3) inability to sustain and grow collaboration.

Finally, the researcher utilized four key principles of Systems Theory in order to arrive at a series of recommendations. The key principles of Systems Theory employed were: 1) systems are teleological and will have multiple goals or purposes, 2) open systems may not always return to their original state but may instead return to a state that enables it to grow and survive or

homeostasis, 3) a variety of paths can lead to similar ending points or equifinality, 4) within the components of a systems a hierarchy is present.

Recommendations

Based upon the research conducted for the study, including the researcher's observations as a participant in the study, there follows a set of recommendations to assist multi-institutional collaborations to transition from a culture that results in siloed work to one that facilitates collaboration. These recommendations are, as follows:

1. Clearly define and communicate the benefits of participating in the collaboration. Coercion to participate may fill the roster initially, but it will not sustain or grow the partnership over time. Institutions of higher education are competitive by nature; hence self-interest dominates many of their initiatives and allocation of resources.

2. Partners should agree upon a shared mission, vision, and set of annualized, measurable goals for the partnership. It was clear that a number of the interviewees representing partner institutions were not clear how to define "success." So, what are they being asked to do?

3. Create a collaboration framework with principles and accountability mechanisms that shape and guide how the partners collaborate within the USG ecosystem. Ensure there is a support mechanism in place to ensure smaller collaborators feel seen, heard, and cared for. We all like to be part of a group that cares about us.

4. Evaluate and address the organizational infrastructure to ensure it is capable of sustaining the partnership, including attention to such critical operational elements as, the funding model, staffing model, communications framework, facilities

management, student and faculty service model, information technology support, and data systems. Nobody wants to join a sinking ship.

5. Reexamine USG's reporting authority and consider assigning USM full ownership and oversight of USG. Interesting to note is that USG has transitioned from an RHEC where institutions resented centralized USM control to one where collaborations may be enhanced by more centralized leadership and direction.

6. Through the Chancellor, garner the support of the presidents from participating partner campuses and establish an accountability framework to ensure engagement. The current USG strategy involves seeking partners' engagement via a piecemeal approach, attempting to obtain interest and agreement one partner at a time, for each collaborative event, program, or activity. This approach is time consuming, inefficient, and not sustainable. Additionally, success is not measured the same for all institutions at USG, and this should be reflected in strategic planning documents.

7. Through the partner presidents, institutionalize USG within the home campuses. This, of course, is the "win-win" for USG, is the key to its continued growth, and the mechanism to address leadership churn.

8. Increase USG's level of authority to buy programs and work in partnership to ensure established accountability mechanisms are being met. This is a critical component, since virtually all interviewees spoke to the need to develop a new funding model.

These findings, while focused on the USG partnership, are applicable to similar entities attempting to form an educational collaboration. The recommendations on how to develop a pathway to support institutional collaborations can help partnerships that are in the early phases of development. USG provides a framework that outlines key structural elements that must be

considered regardless of the complexity of the proposed collaboration. While it is possible to build in these foundational features after-the-fact, as USG is now grappling with, it is more difficult to "change the rules" on the partners post creation than to begin with an agreed upon framework. Bait and switch does not work in trying to develop collaboration.

Strength in Numbers

The phrase, strength in numbers, is one that most of us have heard at some point. According to Merriam-Webster, it is "used to say that people are safer/stronger when they are in a group" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Collaboration, when developed and implemented successfully, leverage the strengths, resources, and knowledge of partner entities to accomplish ambitious goals, create a competitive advantage, and address complex challenges in the whole, not only in the parts.

The focus of this study was on conflict and its impact on collaboration, and as such, the findings focus on areas and instances of conflict. However, during the course of the study, data were also identified that offer encouraging and optimistic thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions about the USG partnership. Participants in the study expressed optimism about a number of new developments, including USG's new strategic plan, staffing enhancements, the creation of the first diversity, equity, and inclusion office, and steps taken to attempt to improve USG's funding model. Interview participants expressed the following sentiments about USG:

> "It's such a unique concept that has so much positive, there's so many positive outcomes. And people are always excited to hear like, wow, you can work with other universities, you can put all of your heads together. You can create different, you know, styles of education. Which I think is really what we need."

And

> "I think whatever the hurdles, USG is very good at being creative in finding ways to accomplish goals."

And another interviewee added:

> "I think it's easy to say all of the things that USG could be doing better and to miss some of the things that have been very successful."

As previously noted, the individuals interviewed for this study represent different institutions, are employed in varying professional areas, and serve at different levels of administration, from director level to the highest levels within the University System of Maryland. Despite this diversity of background, there was a fair amount of consistency regarding the thoughts and perspectives shared concerning the conflicts that exist within the USG partnership, the reason they are occurring, and their impact on the partners' ability to collaborate.

While the interview participants were adept at identifying areas of conflict, many did so with an air of acquiescence, hopeful that change was possible, but somewhat doubtful it could occur given the deeply entrenched siloed educational ecosystem in place and the variety of challenges posed by such a complex multi-institutional infrastructure. Hence, when asked to share their thoughts in response to the question - "If you could look 10-20 years into the future, what do you believe USG will look like?" - interview participants were mixed in their responses with nearly half expressing optimism and the other sharing a belief that USG may not exist in its current form.

Interview participants expressing optimism about USG's future felt the USG partnership could learn to successfully leverage the strength of this collaboration to achieve its goals, with one interview participant stating, "I'd love to have it be seen as a spotlight or a beacon of how

transformative higher education could be in working together in a true partnership." Another

participant added, "I'm still pretty optimistic that it can come together, and it can be even bigger

and better."

There were other participants, however, who felt that USG was potentially headed in the

direction of becoming a stand-alone campus or perhaps merging with the local community

college to form a unique four year institution in Montgomery County, including the following

participant:

> "Probably the best answer would've been to create another institution of higher learning
>
> as a standalone institution and call it, whatever you want to call it, Montgomery County
>
> University, because then it would've aligned more closely to what the traditional higher
>
> education system looks like. And you could have really been more responsive to the
>
> community."

Regardless of the perspective offered for USG's future, all agreed that attempts should be made

to address the structural, root causes of conflict present at USG in order to give it every

opportunity to continue its trajectory of success. According to documentary evidence:

> As USG moves toward the rebuilding stage of the pandemic, we must strive to ignore the
>
> instinct to revert to the way things were. Instead, we must engage, listen to, enlist, and
>
> empower individuals and leaders from the ground up, support and scale their best ideas,
>
> and collaboratively rebuild USG to be genuinely inclusive, truly dynamic, and more
>
> strategically and organically adaptive in its operations and services. If we learn from and
>
> invest in the important lessons gleaned from the pandemic, we will be better prepared for
>
> a consistently evolving future that lies ahead. (USG R3T Report, 2021)

And

> "In order to successfully transform USG to meet the moment, the partners must strive to deepen the partnership to evolve from coexisting in a shared space to the development of a true and deep collaboration." (USG R3T Report, 2021)

One of the interview participants added that USG's roots do not run so deep that change cannot yet occur:

> "There's enough heft behind us, you know, that we've learned and that we've grown and we're still new enough. We're not so established and rooted like some of our traditional campuses where, you know, real change is really difficult because the roots run too deep. But Shady Grove, we have roots, but they're not so deep that change can't still occur."

The success of higher education will require academic partners to work together to expand opportunities during this next evolutionary period. The good news is that USG is well-positioned to address this shift - with an impressive track record of success in serving non-traditional students who represent the majority of those in the system; an RHEC within a high-quality system of higher education in the State of Maryland; a remarkable and wealthy county with supportive leadership and an impressive employer community; and strong partnerships with regional feeder institutions.

Two lingering questions, however, need to be addressed, 1) will the partners acknowledge, collectively, the challenges that threaten to impede the success and sustainability of this unique, mutually beneficial collaboration? And, 2) will they take the necessary action needed in order to realize the potential of this model?

This researcher shares the optimistic viewpoint, that the USG partnership can leverage their "strength in numbers" to address these key structural elements and, consequently, realize

the vision laid out in USG's Strategic Plan – "Inspiring and leading educational transformation to serve all learners and to support a thriving, equitable, economy" (USG Strategic Plan, 2020).

Recommendations for Further Study

Through the course of this study, several areas of further study were identified. This study looked at a single RHEC but studies could be conducted to replicate the findings of this study at other RHECs and compare conclusions. In addition, this study focused on determining the types of conflicts present at USG and why they were present, but it did not delve deeply into how conflicts were addressed. This could be another area of study that would be of interest to conflict practitioners and to individuals interested in collaboration.

USG is an open system and, therefore, relies upon several external stakeholders. This study was bounded by a focus on USG, its nine academic partners, and the USM office. Further study could be done on the relationships between USG and its external partners, Montgomery College, Montgomery County Public School System, and the employer community, to name a few.

USG's complexity lends itself to a variety of interesting research, for example an analysis to identify conflict internal to USG's operating departments, namely how they identify conflict, conflict management, and the impact of conflict on performance.

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Appendix A: Participant Email Invitation

Request to Participate in a Research Study
Inbox
Dear Participant.

I hope you are well. I am reaching out to you through my role as a doctoral candidate in the Conflict Analysis and Resolution program at Nova Southeastern University. I am conducting interviews as a part of my dissertation research study to explore, through the lens of Systems Theory, the nature of the conflicts that exist within the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) partnership and to gain an enhanced understanding of why they are occurring, and what the resulting impact is on collaboration.

I am reaching out to request your participation in my study as a subject matter expert given your direct knowledge about and experience with the USG, its mission, organization, and role within the University System of Maryland. The interview will be conducted via Zoom for one hour. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to the research and findings could lead to greater understanding of the kinds of conflict that can derail multi-institutional academic collaborations, such as the USG. As administrators consider engaging in these centers in other jurisdictions across the country, the results of this study could help identify sources of destructive conflict in order to avoid replicating the conflict and, thereby, help create a solid foundation that can be replicated for success.

Attached you will find an informed consent form, which includes additional details about the study. Before interviews are conducted, participants are invited to sign a consent form highlighting their rights, such as the right to withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any negative consequences, and other pertinent information related to the nature of the study and the ethical conduct of the study, including information about participant identification, potential study risks, and information confidentiality.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me. If possible, I would like to conduct the interview next week. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Robyn Dinicola
Doctoral Candidate, Nova Southeastern University
Department of Conflict Resolution Studies
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences
Rd936@mynsu.nova.edu

Appendix B: General Informed Consent Form

Appendix B: General Informed Consent Form

NSU Florida
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796
PHONE: (954) 262-5369

General Informed Consent Form
NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled
The Universities at Shady Grove Regional Higher Education Center: A Case Study in Conflict &
Collaboration

Who is doing this research study?

College: Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Principal Investigator: Dr. Ismael Muvingi, Ph.D. George Mason University, M.A. University of Notre Dame, LL.B. University of Zimbabwe, LL.B. University of Rhodesia.

Site Information: The Universities at Shady Grove, 9630 Gudelsky Drive, Rockville, MD 20850

Funding: Unfunded

What is this study about?

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use.

- The purpose of this research study is to explore, through the lens of Systems Theory, the nature of the conflicts that exist at the Universities at Shady Grove and to gain an enhanced understanding of why it is occurring and what the resulting impact is on collaboration.
- Research indicates that institutions of higher education are being called upon to address a growing demand to serve a student body that is becoming more diverse, less privileged, lacking adequate preparation, and from more widely dispersed geographical areas. Many institutions are attempting to address this need through a reliance on higher education consortia and collaborations.
- In Maryland, one approach to address this need is through the creation of Higher Education Centers like the largest of them, the Universities at Shady Grove. While this approach has proven successful by several standards, conflicts have emerged in this unique collaboration that should be explored in order to understand their impact on the future growth and success of the partnership campus. There is little research available in the area of Regional Higher Education Centers and no discoverable research in the areas of conflict theory and Regional Higher Education Centers.
- Regional Higher Education Centers could play an important role in ensuring more individuals who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education have an opportunity to achieve their educational goals. As administrators consider opening these centers in other jurisdictions across the country, the results of this study could help identify sources of destructive conflict in order to avoid replicating the conflict and, thereby, help create a solid foundation that can be replicated for success.
- Results could be utilized to guide University System of Maryland (USM) policy on Regional Centers. They could also guide local legislators in the formulation of needed legislation to address conflict that can make a Center vulnerable to forces that seek to derail the structure and outcome. Additionally, conflict practitioners could gain valuable insights about identifying and addressing conflict in Regional Higher Education Centers that could be replicated in other types

Page 1 of 5

of complex collaborative arrangements.

Why are you asking me to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this research study because you have direct knowledge about and experience with the Universities at Shady Grove campus (USG), its operations, mission, organization and role within the University System of Maryland. This study will include approximately 50-110 people.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be asked to engage in one interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be conducted virtually. A follow-up outreach, either via email, phone or virtual meeting platform to clarify information received in the first email or to follow-up on information received from other participants, may be conducted.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:
As a participant in the study, you will be asked to complete an interview that will last no longer than one-hour in duration. The interview will be conducted via Zoom. You were selected for this research study by the principle investigator for your in-depth, first-hand knowledge of the Universities at Shady Grove, as described above.

Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life. Most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, you feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, you have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview

What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study but you may request that it not be used.

What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will help educators understand the impact conflict has on the ability to effectively collaborate at regional higher education centers, like the USG.

Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

How will you keep my information private?

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. Data will be coded to remove direct identifiers and the link to the code will be stored in a separate file accessible only via password. Data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely. Electronic files will be stored on a secure server. Documents and hard copy notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by deleting all files from the computer hard drive and any hard copy notes taken will be shredded.

Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?

This research study involves audio and/or video recording of the interview. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording. Interviews conducted via a virtual meeting platform such as Zoom will be conducted in a private office space.

Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:
Dr. Ismael Muvingi, Ph.D. George Mason University, M.A. University of Notre Dame, LL.B. University of Zimbabwe, LL.B. University of Rhodesia can be reached at (954) 262-3023.

If primary is not available, contact:

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PHONE: (954) 262-5369

Urszula Strawinska-Zanko, MA, Social Psychology, PhD, Experimental Psychology can be reached at (954) 262-3041.

Research Participants Rights
For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790
IRB@nova.edu

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

All space below was intentionally left blank.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796
PHONE: (954) 262-5369

NSU Florida
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:
- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research

---

Adult Signature Section

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

_____ _____ _____
Printed Name of Participant   Signature of Participant   Date

_____ _____ _____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining   Signature of Person Obtaining Consent &   Date
Consent and Authorization   Authorization

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

During the interviews, the researcher will seek to gain insight into the three research questions. 1) What have been the key types and points of conflict in the initiation, development and maturation of the USG? 2) Why are the conflicts occurring? 3) How is conflict impacting the ability of USG institutional partners to successfully collaborate?

The questions will vary based upon the position of the interviewee and follow up questions may be asked, as needed. Specific questions include the following:

1. Please share how long you have been affiliated with the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) and what specific role you played?

2. What do you believe are the goals of your institution for USG? Or What do you believe are the goals for USG?

3. Do you think the institutional partners have compatible goals for USG?

4. Conflict is found in any organization and can be constructive and/or destructive. What were the conflicts, if any, related to the development/ongoing operations of USG and can you provide specific examples?

5. Do you believe there are systemic or structural barriers at USG that support or impede collaboration with partner institution and USG support staff?

6. If you could create a new regional center from ground up, what components would you deem most essential to its success?

7. If you could look 10-20 years in the future, what do you believe USG will look like?