Playing Darts in the Dark: How are Chamber of Commerce Leaders Aligned for Greater Effectiveness?

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Playing Darts in the Dark: How are the Chamber of Commerce Leaders Aligned for Greater Effectiveness?

by

Robert J. Rohrlack, Jr.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration Muma College of Business University of South Florida

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Keywords: Leadership, Advocacy, Convening, Competition, Self-Promotion

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DEDICATION

This research paper is dedicated to those who surround me to be my God-given best. My mother and late father, Suzan and Robert Rohrlack, Sr. Two smart people. My brother, Steven, his wife Linda, and their family. Every day, simply Godly people. To my sons, Robert, III, Stephen, and Thomas, you each, in your way, provided Godly inspiration. Also, to my wife, Susan. You amaze and bless me daily. Your patience in this process was heaven-sent, and I love you.

“And this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.” Genesis 28:22. Pillar and Stone Strategies.

Each stone is vital to the pillar’s strength, and each of you is vital in my life.

Go, tell it on the mountain over the hill and everywhere, go tell it on the mountain . . .
acknowledgments

One of the essential lessons learned in the process of completing this dissertation is that no one completes this task alone. To my committee: Moez Limayem, Steve Oscher, Joann Quinn, and Sunil Mithas, thank you for your patience. I appreciate your help and guidance. To Grandon Gill, you stepped in at just the right time. To Michele Walpole and Lauren Baumgartner, your good humor and constant shepherding of the students and professors were vital to us all. There are more people to thank, but knowing when to stop is as important as knowing when to go.
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ABSTRACT

This paper researched what the United States chamber of commerce paid Executives and the volunteer Chairpersons identified as the factors influencing their chamber for effectiveness. There has been little research on chambers of commerce in the U.S. This study adds to the small amount of research available, working to establish baseline information for research to continue this ubiquitous industry. We conducted 24 interviews, 12 paid Executives, and 12 volunteer Chairpersons at chambers of commerce in 11 states. They were asked to identify factors that make their chamber more effective or inhibit their chamber from being effective. The interviews were coded, resulting in 36 identified factors consolidated to in 17 identified factors. The five most identified factors influencing chamber of commerce effectiveness by these leaders were: Leadership, Advocacy, Convening, Competition, and Self-promotion. The factors were the same for the two groups of leaders; however, they were in a different priority order. One unexpected finding was the lack of discussion about the mission of the chamber or the strategic plan. Without a plan for an organization, it is difficult to know if they are effective or only busy. Before coding the interviews, the mission and strategic plan were anticipated to be elements identified in the interviews.

The study of these factors provides direction for the chamber of commerce leaders to structure their organization for greater effectiveness.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

With over 7,000 chambers of commerce (ACCE 2019), there is a chamber in almost every incorporated community in the United States. Despite their ubiquity, whenever I approach businesses about joining the chamber for which I am CEO, I frequently hear comments and concerns along the lines of “I do not know what a chamber of commerce does,” or “The chamber of commerce was a big deal to my grandfather, but not to me,” or “I do not have time to come to meetings, so why should I join?”

Each of these comments is a reflection on the perceived effectiveness of chambers of commerce within the U.S. business community. In this chapter, I consider each in turn since they serve as motivation for the specific research presented in this study. In many ways, these concerns derive from the way chambers are structured. That particular structure, in turn, has come about as a function of how they have evolved in the U.S. For this reason, as I address each concern, I also some provide some background on the purpose and structure of chambers and how they have matured to their present form.

Having considered the concerns, I then summarize the specific questions to be explored in the study. Finally, I outline the organization of the dissertation, chapter by chapter.

Common Concerns Relating to Chambers of Commerce

As motivation for the current study, I begin by considering the comments and concerns presented in the previous paragraph. Each, in its own way, reflects poorly on the perceived effectiveness of chambers of commerce in general. For the purposes of this research, I define
effectiveness as follows: *the level of accomplishment in a task or process that leads to improved organizational performance or impact.*

- “I do not know what a chamber of commerce does.”

If a chamber of commerce is effective, its impact on the community should be visible to both members and non-members within that community. Unfortunately, confusion regarding the role and structure of chambers of commerce is widespread. Conceptually, as shown in Figure 1, a chamber is a type of organizational form that falls under the broader category of associations—groups of entities or individuals organized around some common theme or cause. Whereas most business associations are focused on a particular industry or issue, a chamber of commerce is geographically focused and works on a very diverse variety of issues impacting the region’s business climate. This diversity can serve to obscure the chamber’s impact. For example, when a new business locates into the community, who is to say what role the local chamber’s activities played in the decision and its implementation?

![Figure 1: Association vs. Chamber of Commerce](image)

Within the U.S., chambers of commerce have adopted an organizational form that can produce further confusion. The typical U.S. chamber is organized around a structure that divides
responsibilities between professionals, paid to run the organization and led by an executive, and a volunteer board headed by an elected Chairperson. The job description for a Chairperson includes different duties depending on the community. Generally, the job description will include the following:

- Preside over the meetings of the executive committee and board of directors.
- Works with the executive on operations for the chamber’s success.
- Be a spokesperson for the chamber.
- Represent the chamber at appropriate events in the community.

For the executive, typically a paid professional with the title of “President and CEO” or “Executive Director,” the job description generally specifies duties that include:

- Develop and implement strategies to achieve the goals set by the board of directors.
- Manage all staff of the organization.
- Work with the chairperson and board of directors to achieve the purposes of the organization.
- Be the representative of the chamber to the community.
- Oversee the financial health of the organization.

Other duties may be added or deleted for both positions over time, as determined by the board of directors.

The division of responsibilities in the typical U.S. chamber of commerce can produce very different perceptions of the chamber’s role. Chairpersons come and go, potentially leading to abrupt changes in focus. CEOs serve in their role longer, yet must still respond to the requirements set forth by the volunteer board, who supply the chamber’s resources. Very little
literature exists relating to the unique challenges this relationship presents. Contributing to this scant body of research was an important motivator for the current study.

- “The chamber of commerce was a big deal to my grandfather, but not to me.”

Another concern commonly voiced concerning chambers of commerce is that they have become an anachronism, that they may have been important in the past, but have lost their relevance. To understand how the change occurred, it is useful to take a quick look at how U.S. chambers have evolved and the roles they have played in the past. Understanding this evolution is useful for two reasons. First, as is discussed in Chapter 2, much of the chamber literature is quite dated; understanding the degree to which chambers are continually evolving explains why these past findings cannot necessarily be considered relevant today. Second, historical findings (including those from the literature) are contrasted with insights gathered from interviews with chamber leadership in Chapter 5 to examine the changing nature of chambers.

**Origins of Chambers of Commerce**

Chambers of commerce existed in various formats long before the beginning of the United States of America. Long-distance commerce and trade can be traced to 6,000 B.C.E. The earliest form of a business association dates to about 3,300 B.C.E. Historical records offer evidence of a government-connected board of trade existing over 4,000 years ago. There is documentation of trade dealing with dispute resolution 1,800 years ago when two tradespeople disagreed with the outcome of their business dealing and the amount to be paid (Mead, 2014). The earliest recording of the term “chamber of commerce” was in Marseilles, France, with an organization established in 1599. It would be 169 years later that the first chamber of commerce in the Americas was established: the New York Chamber of Commerce.
When chambers of commerce first emerged, the industries and activities in each chamber’s region tended to be dominated by local commerce. Where trade was involved, it tended to be focused on a small set of goods and carriers. The early days of the New York Chamber of Commerce provide an example of how such a focus led to effectiveness. The case that follows illustrates focus in two important dimensions: a long-term focus with respect to mission and a serial focus on specific issues. It is also instructive to note how the focused activities of the chamber allowed it to overcome long-term disputes within its membership regarding whether the colonies should separate from Great Britain up until the actual outbreak of war.

*An Early Example: The New York Chamber of Commerce*

The New York Chamber of Commerce was established in 1768. At the time, New York was one of the top four active seaports in the colonies, along with Boston, Newport, (VA), and Philadelphia. The four ports were competing for the growing market in Great Britain. The twenty business owners who gathered in New York City for “promoting and encouraging commerce, supporting industry, adjusting disputes relative to trade and navigation (Friedman 1947, p. 140). and procuring such laws and regulations as may be found necessary for the benefit of trade in general” decided that their port needed support from the business community. Stated another way, the business leaders of New York did not like that the other ports were gaining market share faster than they were growing their market. The chamber’s focus, therefore, became one of maintaining New York’s position relative to the three other major east coast ports.

Even as events led up to the Revolutionary War, the chamber persisted despite the fact that more than half of its directors sided with the Tories and wanted to maintain relations with
Great Britain. The divided chamber of commerce focused on resolving several specific issues as they arose.

The chamber also took on issues that were good for commerce in general. The New York Harbor was an active area, busy but with navigational problems. The chamber was the organizing entity driving the placement of buoys in the harbor to improve navigation. Better navigation of shipping lanes meant goods could come and go faster and promote commerce. This campaign proved to be so successful that the chamber started a shipping line of vessels and seamen to increase activity for the port, improving its stature relative to other ports.

When the Revolutionary War became the main activity for these port cities, it had an impact on the chamber of commerce. The New York Chamber of Commerce was dormant for four years as the business community of New York was divided on which side to take in the war. After independence was won, the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York was re-established in 1784 by the State Legislature to “confirm the rights and privilege thereof” after many of their original members had returned to the city after the war. Because of the divided membership during the war, they sought state authorization to organize as a sign of unity to the new country. The chamber has existed and prospered since then.

Evolution of the Modern U.S. Chamber of Commerce

U.S. chambers generally worked as a group of all volunteers until after the Civil War. Once the country stopped trying to separate from itself, the focus shifted to improving the economy. Chambers were often expected to take the lead in achieving this objective. Communities began to understand that they needed full time, paid staff to move forward. The chamber of commerce career was born out of a desire to achieve larger goals.
As was the case in the earlier example, chambers were found to be particularly effective when they focused on specific goals. For example, the first attempt to create a shipping lane through Panama failed due to a lack of funds and to obstacles preventing completion. After the United States supported the war that led to the creation of the country of Panama from Nicaragua, it was the Cincinnati Commercial Club and the New York Chamber of Commerce that drove the support for the commerce project that shortened shipping times and created the Panama Canal.

To support the emerging aviation industry, the City of St. Louis helped Charles Lindbergh and was forever memorialized as he flew “The Spirit of St. Louis” on the first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Decades before that great accomplishment, it was the Savannah, Georgia Chamber of Commerce that insisted the Atlantic Ocean was not too vast to cross for modern steam-powered transport, as was the common belief at the time. To prove that the Atlantic was capable of being crossed, they supported the first steamship to cross the ocean. Similarly, the first commercial airline flight, from St. Petersburg, Florida, across Tampa Bay to Tampa, established a new form of travel and an industry that made the world a smaller place. That flight was partially underwritten by the St. Petersburg and Tampa chambers of commerce.

All these efforts took leadership to convince the community of their importance to the greater community good. There are many stories of bold actions from chambers of commerce across the country. Some involved taking business risks to increase opportunity. Others were gimmicks for publicity, such as the Atlantic City, New Jersey Chamber of Commerce’s initiation of a swimsuit competition to drive tourism, later to be renamed the Miss America Pageant.

From the early days of the chambers of commerce struggling to keep a local economy flourishing in the 1700s to today, with over 7,000 chambers of commerce in the United States,
chambers have established themselves as a part of the fabric of the United States local economy. According to Chris Mead (2014), author of *The Magicians of Main Street, America and its Chambers of Commerce 1768-1945*, from the Revolution to World War II chambers, “manage(d) significantly to influence the country’s politics, physical infrastructure, culture, and economy. Usually, they did that without attracting a great deal of attention” (p. 5).

Today, the proclivity of local chambers towards working outside of the spotlight may hide their actual effectiveness. When superimposed on top of a business world of rapidly growing scope and complexity, it is not altogether surprising that some businesses perceive that the day is past for chambers of commerce.

• “I do not have time to come to meetings, so why should I join?”

Contrasted with the focused roles played by chambers of commerce in the past, the effectiveness of today’s chambers is often called into question. The chamber of commerce, according to critics, is an outdated business model and has not kept up with the changing technology in the business world (Periu, 2013). Absent clear evidence of chamber impact, what incentive does a business have to join?

A variety of explanations for the decline in the perceived relevance of chambers of commerce have been offered. Chambers are thought to have a disconnect between what companies today want and what chambers provide. The idea is that chambers are using an outdated operating model, causing them to struggle as membership organizations (Periu, 2013). Despite the continued existence of many chambers across the U.S., their perceived role as the leading voice for improving the community has declined from its historical peak. Indeed, many chambers struggle to demonstrate effectiveness to the business community (Barley, 2010).
Technological change forms the basis of another explanation for the perceived decline in chamber influence and effectiveness. The reasoning goes that the increase of technology used to connect businesses to each other and customers reduces the need for networking events (Groves, 2016), an important tool used by past chambers to bring members together. Technologies that connect businesses across vast distances and enable activities such as remote work and shopping also lead to questions regarding the continuing benefits of associations organized around local geography. If the distance doesn’t matter, why organize around a region?

A third explanation involves a perceived change in the nature of the economy. Since the era of the “Great Recession” that started in 2007, the engines of growth are perceived to have shifted to a more entrepreneurial and start-up business economy. The start-up business culture resulted in chambers of commerce being viewed as less relevant or even unnecessary for success. Taking that view further, “there is not a benefit or necessity to join the local chamber of commerce” (McKown, 2018).

**Research Questions**

Because there is very little research that is specifically focused on chambers of commerce, there are many questions around chamber effectiveness that could be posed, and many stakeholders that could be considered. For the current research, chamber leadership was chosen as a focus. While there would be many potential benefits to including a broader set of stakeholders—particularly businesses that have chosen not to participate in their local chambers—working with existing leadership seemed to offer the greatest potential opportunity both for information gathering and for rapid impact. Chamber leadership was also expected to be the stakeholder group most likely to be interested in the findings.
To better understand what makes a chamber of commerce effective, the current study examines what factors chamber leaders perceive lead to chamber effectiveness. The study is built around two research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the perceived factors influencing the effectiveness of chambers of commerce in the United States?

Through a series of interviews and a set list of questions, both volunteer and professional leaders of a variety of U.S. chambers of commerce were asked to identify the factors that make their chamber effective. The answers offered insights into how they strategically plan and position their chamber to be effective in their community.

**RQ2:** How do these identified factors impacting effectiveness vary between the Executive and the Chair of a chamber of commerce in the United States?

With two leaders for a chamber, it is vital to have an alignment for the organization to be effective. The theory is that the Executive’s vision would likely involve a long-term perspective, matching his or her expected occupancy of the CEO role. The Chairperson’s shorter term, typically one year, might be expected to emphasize more near-term activities. As a consequence, it would not be surprising if their perceptions of the factors leading to effectiveness differed. This question, therefore, seeks to identify how the two roles align in their perception of the factors impacting effectiveness.

The factors identified in the study should be of interest to chamber leadership seeking to be more effective in delivering value to their local business community—both professionals and volunteers. Equally intriguing are those factors that the leaders interviewed do not identify as being important. These may offer a potential opportunity to rethink how chambers position themselves.
Organization of the Dissertation

In subsequent chapters, existing research is summarized, the methodology explained, and results are presented and discussed. The organization of the document is as follows:

Chapter Two reviews the limited literature available on chambers of commerce. Most of the existing body of research considers general membership and studies chambers of commerce outside the United States. Because these non-U.S. chambers have a very different history and organization from those in the U.S., the chapter begins by exploring the different types of chamber models in order to justify why the subsequent review is limited to U.S. chambers. The review also identifies areas that the relevant studies have identified for future research.

Chapter Three describes and explains the methodology of this study. I conducted qualitative research, guided by the research questions, built upon acquiring chamber leadership perceptions of chamber effectiveness through interviews and subsequent coding.

Chapter Four presents the key findings of the study. The characteristics of interview participants are summarized, after which the themes extracted from coding each interview are provided and analyzed.

Chapter Five discusses the findings and presents specific analyses related to the research questions, including how the insights acquired in the present study support and diverge from prior research and how the views from professional and volunteer practitioners both align and differ.

Chapter Six presents the conclusions of the study and offers recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There are multiple chambers of commerce in all 50 states in the U.S., with an aggregate membership in the millions. Paradoxically, research directly related to chambers of commerce proved to be scarce. Specifically, the chamber of commerce industry in the United States has not had much research attention in the available literature. The research available most often resulted in cursory discussions about the chamber of commerce industry. One researcher asserts, “Despite the major surge of research interests in business organizations … through the 1980s and 1990s, less attention was focused on the challenging role of locally based bodies as chambers of commerce” (Bennett, 1995, p. 253). My own survey of the literature confirms that the lack of chamber research continues to this day, almost 25 years after Bennett documented the deficit. Compounding the problem, much of the research that relates to chambers deals with chambers outside of the U.S. I, therefore, begin the chapter by considering appropriate boundaries for the literature to be considered, with a particular emphasis on describing the separate evolution of the U.S. and international chambers. Based on this analysis, I argue that the appropriate scope of the review is, should be, and has been limited to U.S. chambers of commerce. In the remainder of the chapter, key findings from the U.S. chamber literature are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary table of the most significant results reported in the literature.

Scope of the Literature Review

Within the body of research relating to chambers of commerce, a closer analysis found there was a surprisingly small amount of research, often anecdotal, on chambers of commerce worldwide. Even less research has been specifically focused on chambers in the United States.
Bennett (1995) points out that most association-related literature focuses on the characteristics of national business associations as opposed to regional organizations such as chambers. During the period of the 1980s and 1990s, there was increased research on European business organizations (Bennett 1995), with little attention being paid to local U.S. chambers. To understand the limitations which a non-U.S. focus presents, we briefly consider the different models under which chambers of commerce are organized around the globe.

**Chamber of Commerce Models**

One important finding derived from the broader literature was the existence of distinct types of chambers of commerce. Because of the stark differences between these types—which tend to be distributed according to national boundaries—there is little reason to expect findings to generalize consistently across types.

There are several models of chambers of commerce in the world. The five most common types of the chambers of commerce are Public Law, Angelo-Saxon (Private Law), Continental, Asian, and Eurasian models.

The Public Law chamber is organized based on government order or rule. The government has the authority to appoint staff, approve budgets, and delegate functions. Membership is mandatory and treated like a tax on the business. This style of chamber originated in France in the 1550s.

An Angelo-Saxon (Private Law) chamber, which originated in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1700s, has voluntary membership and does not perform public functions. There is no provision for mandatory payments from the government for support. There is no legislative provision to name, assign territory to represent or specific function of operation for the organization. Generally, Private Law chambers operate in the opposite fashion of Public
Law chambers. There has been a trend in Europe for countries that have operated with Public Law chambers to begin transitioning to Private Law chambers. This change is causing significant disruption in the chamber of commerce industry. In Spain, for example, the conversion became official from one day to the next day. During the year that followed, 28,000 chambers of commerce employees lost their jobs due to budget reductions. In the Netherlands, the conversion was deemed unsuccessful. The local chambers, when required to operate as Private Law chambers of commerce, failed financially. Currently, the surviving chambers are the American Chambers of Commerce in the Netherlands. These “Am-Chams” are focused heavily on international trade between the region and the United States. A local focus on business climate is not on the agenda for most “Am-Chams”.

**Continental Model** chambers originated in Germany in the 1880s and are a hybrid of the Public Law and Anglo-Saxon chambers. This type of chamber operates as a Public Law chamber. However, the members—not government authorities—elect the board and leadership. They have mandatory membership and serve in an advisory capacity to the local government. Another combination of more than one chamber model is the **Asian Model**. This chamber format, which started in Japan in the 1950s and quickly spread into Southeast Asia, requires some, but not all, businesses to join.

The most recent evolution of the style of the chamber of commerce is the **Eurasian Model** chamber of commerce, originating in Canada in the 1990s under the Act of Chambers of Commerce of Canada. This model chamber operates under Public Law, has a voluntary membership, and has no governmental financial support. It rules by self-governance but has no advisory status with the government.
In the search for literature relevant to chambers of commerce in the United States, the different models of chambers were a critical factor in the research identified as relevant to the topic. The literature focused on research related to the Anglo-Saxon model of chambers of commerce, particularly in the United States. Where potentially relevant research existed for Anglo-Saxon models in other areas, particularly the UK, it was also examined. The distribution of the chamber of commerce models is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Chamber of Commerce Organization and Legal Models by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODEL</th>
<th>PUBLIC countries</th>
<th>ANGELO-SAXON countries</th>
<th>CONTINENTAL countries</th>
<th>ASIAN countries</th>
<th>EURASIAN countries</th>
<th>TOTAL countries</th>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>72</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Center for International Private Enterprise

Search Protocol

The literature search strategy was to identify work specific to the chamber of commerce industry in the United States, with a focus on understanding how chambers can be effective in their local community. The search for literature on chambers of commerce included assistance from the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) and the University of South Florida research librarians.

The literature search for U.S. chambers of commerce found little directly related information on either Marketline Advantage and Market Research sites. As a follow up on both sites, the term “local Chambers of Commerce” found no matches. Chamber of Commerce membership models were also used to search for relevant research, with no results.

In another effort to broaden the search for relevant material, the same search criteria were used to search Google Scholar. The initial searches identified a significant number of articles. The list
was scanned and filtered for the date of publication. The remaining information was reviewed and narrowed to searches in *ABI Inform Global*, which is particularly focused on business-related research, and *JSTOR*, based on its large repository of over 2,000 journals with full-text access. The most significant relevant results were found on *JSTOR*. The identified articles were on a variety of topics related to chambers of commerce. Unfortunately, many of the related articles were also dated—most published from the 1920s-1970s. While these were deemed to be of low relevance to chambers in the current business climate, they were a potential source of insights on how chamber business strategies have evolved over time. The age of the material could also signal a declining research interest in chambers. That decline in interest could, in turn, serve as evidence that perceptions of chambers of commerce effectiveness were waning, as described in the introductory chapter.

The findings from the articles identified through the protocol just described are now summarized.

**Review Findings: Main Topics Related to Chambers of Commerce**

In the literature reviewed for this study, it was possible to identify topic groupings for the information about the chamber of commerce. The priority was to identify research related to chamber of commerce effectiveness. The results were segmented into one of four identified topics: advocacy, general membership, influence, and leadership.

**Advocacy**

The literature on chambers of commerce from an advocacy viewpoint discusses how chambers have focused on protecting or establishing a favorable business climate. Bennett (1995) referred to this as the chamber’s efforts to advocate for the “legitimated interests” of the community. These interests were typically identified through a process of chamber board
member deliberation. This advocacy helped chambers establish as leaders in the community, according to Bennett.

The process of establishing a policy agenda and how a chamber of commerce identifies “legitimated interests” is examined by Crawford (2015) in his study of how chambers of commerce in America became leading advocacy organizations. The social structure of a chamber of commerce was identified as potentially problematic for the organization as it identified advocacy issues. The diversity of the membership could cause differing views on the priorities impacting the business community. Some will argue that this diversity is what makes a chamber advocacy position more persuasive. However, Crawford identified the U.S. chambers as developing and adopting the philosophy of cooperation over competition. Crawford took issue with the research that classified chambers as being only business advocacy organizations with little concern for the community. There were three characteristics of the chamber of commerce advocacy in his study:

1. First, chambers are made up of businesses in a geographic region and focus on the interests of the region. In this regard, they differ from associations, which focus on the industry they represent.

2. Second, chambers in America can draw a direct connection to the “American nationality” as Crawford identifies it, by virtue of their efforts to shape economic principals and congressional legislation.

3. Third, chambers have created the platform for cooperative citizenship that has shaped ideologies impacting private sector development and the local public good. This last characteristic Crawford identified as having the most significant impact on influencing how other external organizations focus their work.
Crawford (2015) continued his analysis of chambers by identifying their ability to change and adapt their identified areas of influence as issues develop. While some may view this adaptability as a lack of commitment to a given issue, Crawford viewed this as an example of cooperation of the business community for the greater good over personal desires. There is a challenge of balancing staying current on issues but needing to be consistent for long term policy development.

Consistent with Bennett’s research, Dawley, Stephens, and Stephens (2005) cited advocacy as a connection causing both the staff and volunteers to be committed to the chamber where they are employed or volunteer. In their research, they further noted a key difference: the staff focuses on data, and the volunteers tend to focus on taking a position based on their opinion. The researchers further propose that the commitment of the volunteer is stronger when they can relate to the importance of the issue to the chamber. Crawford’s (2015) study reinforced this point where he took the theory further to chamber volunteers, concluding they are doing their civic duty by being active in advocacy to shape “economic principles and congressional legislation” (p. 234).

How a chamber of commerce acts to attract members for the specific practice of advocacy work is examined in a study identifying how chambers become “peak organizations” in their community (Barley, 2010). This study equated the ability to be influential as that of being identified as a “peak organization”—defined as being a leading organization in its field and beyond. According to his research, there is an excellent opportunity for a chamber of commerce to gain “peak organization” status through advocacy.

frustration with government. Three-quarters of the respondents were pessimistic about a commitment to limited government and private property rights. *Fortune Magazine*, one year later in 1976, surveyed Fortune 500 CEOs and found 35 percent believed that “government was the most serious problem faced by business in general” (p. 782).

**General Membership**

General membership research topics tended to cluster around four areas: the chamber’s community context, power dynamics, leadership, membership benefits, and planning for the future.

**Community Context**

The memberships of a small community chamber of commerce and a large community chamber of commerce were researched by Bennett (1998) to understand how they gain membership from their community. His study focused on a small chamber in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. and a large chamber in Southwest Britain. He concluded that large communities have a more difficult time recruiting and retaining members due to greater diversity. The homogeneous nature of a smaller community creates the opportunity for a chamber of commerce to thrive. They can identify the programs that are the priority for the business community and gain membership engagement. When contrasting the small community chamber with its large community counterpart, the smaller chamber membership was driven by social reasons, while the large chamber membership was more interested in the committee structure and gathering for a purpose to achieve a goal. Bennett reports that the larger community chambers in Britain tend to maintain a 20-30 percent market penetration, significantly lower than what is present in smaller communities. The chamber’s ability to create a sense of “club” will draw businesses to want to join out of a concern to not be left out of the activities.
Brockmann and Lacho (2015) asked the question: What is the benefit of joining the local chamber? They focused on the reason businesses joined a small community chamber of commerce and contrasted that with a business that joined a large community chamber. The results were somewhat predictable. Smaller chambers were more social than larger chambers with many networking events. Small chambers worked on community issues with the belief that a better community translated into better business. In contrast, larger community chambers, according to the authors, had a more bureaucratic method of operation with standing committees that focused on the issues of the community served.

The vital role that a chamber of commerce served in the community was discussed by Miller (1958b p307). He examined how chamber leaders in the United Kingdom tend to have less influence than chambers in the United States. He further noted how business leaders tend to have a higher social status in the business community in the United States. In contrast, community leaders in the United Kingdom tend to be sourced from universities and leaders in law, medicine, and higher education.

**Direction**

Schulze and Blumberg (1957) cited the chamber’s unique ability to be the recognized place for community leaders to gather. Because of the variety of business power elites that engage with their local chamber, the authors cite chambers as having the potential to be the power elite organizations in a community. While this is a simplistic view, a chamber that is well organized and focused on the betterment of the community can, over time and consistent in its actions, establish itself as a leading organization in the community.

Burke, Borucki, and Kaufman (2002) researched how a natural attraction to the group gathering for a psychological connection influenced chambers of commerce. The social,
psychological, and multiple stakeholder constructs were studied. The authors concluded that the three constructs were complementary as chamber members will gather and influence each other for impact.

**Membership Benefits**

The Schapiro Group (2012) was engaged by ACCE and the Western Association of Chamber Executives to study the economic value of joining a chamber of commerce. The study was an update of research conducted in 2007, and the results were compared to identify potential trends. The original results were favorable to chamber membership and showed that belonging to the local chamber of commerce was an effective business strategy. The areas of favorable results in 2007 had declined a few percentages by 2012. Continued assessment of consumer views is required to determine if this is a trend impacting chamber value or if it is unique to that period.

Noel and Luckett (2014) examined the benefits and perceived value of small business membership in a chamber of commerce. They investigated a chamber in Southwest Florida and identified four factors: credence, social benefit, both internal and external, and special treatment. Some members wanted to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Others wanted special treatment for their dues and expected a practical experience. Both types of members reported higher satisfaction with the chamber when their desired outcome was perceived to have been delivered.

**Planning for the Future**

On his consultant company website, Flint (2019) provided a white paper about his view of the future of the chamber of commerce. He suggests that a chamber of commerce needs to focus on offering more technical training to be successful in the long term. Technical training is
different from the traditional networking and membership growth type programs of a chamber. With the diversity of the business community changing every day, chambers need to appeal to a broader, more diverse membership. Specific technical training would apply to all businesses when strategically targeted. The article challenges chamber executives to focus on the internal development of their chamber to be better prepared to affect the external environment where they operate.

**Influence**

Research on chambers relating to U.S. and U.K. chambers of commerce explored two distinct types of influence: informal influence, largely of a social nature, and formal influence, through recognition by government or regulation.

**Informal Influence**

The local chamber of commerce is organized to be an agency of influence for the business community, according to Bennett (1995). There are several reasons identified in his research on the study of Private Law chambers in the United States and Great Britain. He asserts that the primary reason businesses join their local chamber of commerce is for networking purposes, or, as Bennett refers to it, the sense of community. Bennett notes early in his research that there have been gains in business organization research, but these gains have not included research on chambers of commerce. The limited research has proven to continue to be the case almost 25 years later. “Despite the major surge of research interests in business organizations in Europe through the 1980s and 1990s,” he writes, “less attention has focused on the changing role of locally based bodies as chambers of commerce” (p. 253).

Bennett (1995) points to the work of Mancur Olson, who first published work on the collective action theory in 1965 (Olson, 1971). Olson takes the position that groups, such as a
chamber of commerce, have difficulty achieving results when working for the public good. He theorizes that there will always be those individuals that will not join the groups while strategically planning on benefitting from the work of the group. It should be noted that this phenomenon is not unique to the group dynamic of a chamber of commerce. The potential for those looking for a “free ride” should not diminish the effort of the chamber to be impactful.

Olson also contrasts specific vs. collective benefit. The perceived benefit of chamber membership depends on the purpose of the business joining the chamber. That purpose generally falls into one of the two groups: specific benefit realizes a positive gain for the specific business, or the collective benefit represents a positive gain for the aggregate group.

Most of the remaining research on chamber influence was published many decades ago. For example, Miller (1958a) proposed that the most influential leaders in a community will work together to influence public policy (public good) through decision making groups where other like-minded leaders will join. The leaders’ focus is not on the majority involvement. They are focused on results. In this study, Miller compared a Pacific Northwest U.S. city to a Southwestern English city. In both cases, the clique proved to be robust and influential. Miller outlined his view that the chamber of commerce influence is related to the labor unions in the same market. Unions, according to the author, are more organized, but the chamber of commerce has a more significant influence. Miller believed this was due to the varied nature of the industry mix of membership. Miller also found that a chamber will have a company leader involved in a high-level position while the next tier down in the company leadership engages in the actual activities of the chamber. This dual involvement appeared to increase chamber effectiveness.
Schulze (1958) considered the negative side of local power structures, citing a chamber of commerce example. He theorized that the effort to join a power structure was more self-serving and lacking sincerity. He pointed to an interview with a local manufacturing company executive, in an unidentified location, that stated that the local chamber of commerce officials were “falling all over themselves trying to do anything we want” (p. 7) and that it made him uncomfortable. Conversely, another business leader felt it was the responsibility of company leaders to reside in the same city as their business location. He believed that a company leader needed to be engaged and be a part of the community.

*Formal Influence*

In the United Kingdom, Frasier (1973) studied how chambers of commerce were originally established as Private Law chambers, yet later had official accreditation added as a legal requirement for a chamber. He explains how the 1970 Devlin Commission study identified the lack of an organized system to represent a business in Great Britain. The commission considered implementing a Public Law system for the U.K. but concluded a Private Law system was best suited for the business community. The additional step taken by the commission was to have required certification for organizations wanting to call themselves a chamber of commerce. This added legal weight to the chamber’s influence.

In the United States, no similar certification process for chambers exists. A state may have regulations, but the regulations tend to lack the enforcement authority of the U.K. process. For example, in Florida, state statute 501.973 “Chambers of Commerce” specifies what is required to be a chamber of commerce. The penalties for violating the statute are weak and rarely enforced.
The certification process in the U.K. has resulted in fewer chambers of commerce. On the other hand, those that exist tend to play a more significant, if unofficial, role in community decision making. The process of being an accredited organization has kept only the most interested organizations involved. This factor, according to Frasier (1973), was the decisive decision to keep U.K. chambers Private Law organizations.

Contrasted with the historical legal perspective taken by Frasier, ACCE, the premier membership organization for the chamber of commerce professionals, took a broad view of the topics chambers should consider for the future in their study, “Horizon Initiative: Chambers 2025 (ACCE, 2015). As a matter of background, ACCE developed a collaborative project to identify the broad areas of focus required for chambers to remain relevant to the year 2025 and beyond. The project involved chamber of commerce professionals across North America working together to identify priority issues and suggest ways for a chamber to determine how to handle related issues in their community. The original report identified eight areas of priority impacting chambers. From technology to global commerce, generational shifts, resource alignment, and leadership, the topics were presented in a way to encourage consideration by each chamber. The report stressed the unique role both staff and volunteers serve at a chamber of commerce, “Few professionals or volunteers can say this: “I work or volunteer in an organization that makes a difference for everybody else. The unique position for those who toil and serve in chambers and similar economic-civic entities is that you can understand and interact with all the challenges and excitement” (ACCE, 2015, p. 52).

Once the original Horizon Initiative report had been published, there was feedback that one element was missing. ACCE took this feedback, conducted additional research, and produced a supplemental publication in 2016. That report focused on the ninth priority:
government. This element, unlike the others, was critical of the subject and provided direct instruction for the chambers. The government, according to the report, was not leading, and chambers needed to step up and take the leadership mantle or continue to be frustrated with the elected people in government.

Leadership

Perhaps the most prescient insight into the relationship between the chamber of commerce and leadership in the community comes from a speech given nearly a hundred years ago. Given by the President of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce (Brown, 1922), the speech seems to be a precursor to the ACCE study with his focus on the role of the chamber to be the leader for better community operations. The speech is unique and still applicable to the current political environment. Brown’s thesis was that the industries (businesses) have a responsibility to maintain economic balance in the community. He began by stating that an injustice done by an employer to an employee is an injustice to the public. This call to leadership beyond the organization was a responsibility and duty of the chamber of commerce, according to Brown. His elements for productivity were all focused on the responsibility of the employer except for one. Workers must be responsible for the productivity they deliver for the employer. The remaining factors, wages, hours worked, conditions, open shops, and information were all employer responsibilities. These elements would help keep relations good between worker and employer. Company leaders were assumed to be actively involved in the chamber of commerce in Brown’s era. With the employers as members of the chamber of commerce, the chamber should maintain a role to ensure a productive environment was in place for the community. Brown believed the chamber was in a unique position to work on the elements for a better community.
Continuing the theme of the business community’s responsibility to shape the local community for better, Barnes (1924) discussed how the chamber of commerce was responsible for leadership for the greater good. As the former (volunteer) president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Barnes made the argument that the character of the chamber was the reflection of its membership and how it cared for the community. At the time Barnes wrote his article, the essential element for commerce was establishing and protecting distribution channels. Barnes argued that the timely process of distribution was paramount to each community. The leaders needed to focus on their community, working smoothly with other communities for the timely flow of products to the market. He took this point to the extreme: that this responsibility is the most important of all for chambers. Whether or not they were doing this well would impact the chamber membership—as companies follow those who lead.

A more recent study focused on internal chamber leadership roles. Stephens, Dawley, Stephens (2004) researched how an organization can have influence, becoming stronger primarily from volunteer activity. They stressed that their study shows that the size of the board does not play a significant role in participation. Despite their research, in my experience, most chamber executives would argue that the board size does matter. Most believe a smaller board is more impactful than a large board of directors. Still, the authors claimed that the motivating factor for volunteer engagement was the intrinsic motivation of being a part of improving the community. That may be a bit simplistic. The large board makes it easier for someone to be present but not engaged with the group as they can blend in among the larger group. To combat this situation, according to the authors, a chamber can create an emotional attachment to the organization resulting in greater board engagement. The chamber that can engage their board to be involved will have a stronger leadership position in the community.
Analysis of Gaps in the Literature

Notably absent from the very limited chamber of commerce literature is research relating to assessing chamber effectiveness. Research is also lacking information on how a local chamber can become a more effective organization. The only exception is in articles that discuss influence and power in a community (Burke et al., 2002). In these cases, chambers of commerce are mentioned as a brief reference point, not the main topic of the study. Furthermore, when a chamber of commerce is the focus of the study, the chamber in reference is often a British chamber of commerce, not one in the United States. As mentioned previously, for historical and legal reasons, such research may not be relevant to U.S. chambers.

The pattern of the literature references chambers of commerce as entities with influence on issues in the community they serve. Why a business joins and why it may choose to remain a member is not studied beyond gaining personal influence. A more in-depth study of how businesses utilize membership both for business gain and to work on community issues would be useful to the chamber of commerce industry. Unfortunately, the current research on chambers does not even help to determine what questions to ask. For this reason, the current study focuses on how chamber professionals and volunteer leadership identify and implement strategies to make their chambers effective. The long-term goal, well beyond the scope of this dissertation, would then be to use the findings to study effectiveness from the members’ perspective.

Key Findings

The key findings from the literature that I considered are summarized in Table 2. Later, in Chapter 5, I consider how these findings and observations map to the themes that emerged in the interviews with chamber leadership, described in Chapter 4.
Table 2: Key Findings from the Literature by Topic Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Historically, chambers have tended to avoid the spotlight in their activities</td>
<td>Mead (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Motivation</td>
<td>Volunteers and professional leaders have very different motivations for participation in a chamber.</td>
<td>Dawley, Stephens, and Stephens (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership Motivation</td>
<td>Members significantly differ in the degree to which they prioritize the common good and personal benefits of membership</td>
<td>Olson (1971), Bennett (1995), Noel and Luckett (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>Even where members have competing interests, chambers have been effective in seeking consensus, but one way they achieve this may be through encouraging members of like-minded business leaders, although there is also a tendency of members to adapt to consensus views through the influence of other members.</td>
<td>Miller (1958), Burke, Borucki, and Kaufman (2002), Crawford (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Small chambers and large chambers operate differently; small chambers tend to be held together by social ties, large chambers tend to be issue driven</td>
<td>Bennett (1998), Brockmann and Lach (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber Influence</td>
<td>Social status is an important driver of U.S. chamber influence, both within and external to the community. Advocacy is an important way through which a chamber increases its influence.</td>
<td>Schulze and Blumberg (1957), Miller (1958), Barley (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Chambers face an inherent tension in the need to achieve both consistency and adaptability.</td>
<td>Crawford (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber Boards</td>
<td>Some research suggests that chamber board size does not seem to influence effectiveness, although practitioners disagree with the finding.</td>
<td>Stephens, Dawley, Stephens (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Involvement</td>
<td>In the U.S., chambers have emphasized that businesses were taking responsibility for their communities. They have resisted certification or accreditation by the government. Influencing government is seen as an increasingly important chamber role.</td>
<td>Brown (1922), Barnes (1924), Frazier (1973), Barley (2010), Crawford (2015), AACE (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
<td>The influence of a chamber is impacted by the degree to which the local market is unionized; as the percentage of unions grows, so does the role of the chamber in providing a balancing force.</td>
<td>Miller (1958)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology is reducing the need for face-to-face networking; with globalization, regionally based organizations are becoming less important</td>
<td>Groves (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Chambers are becoming less relevant over time</td>
<td>Shapiro Group (2012), Periu (2013), McKown (2018), Flint (2019)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study identifies the factors perceived to influence chamber of commerce effectiveness through interviews with subject matter experts, those closest to the chamber operations. The data gathered consisted of interviews with the most senior Executive professionals and volunteer Chairperson at a chamber of commerce. The interviews were analyzed and coded to identify themes among the individuals interviewed. These themes reflected factors relating to current industry effectiveness and factors identified for future strategies.

Research Design

This study is a qualitative study, which is a study that “describes a common meaning for several individuals of their shared lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). The purpose of phenomenology is to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 75). The process used for this research focused on how chambers of commerce work to be effective in the community served. The broad research question “What are the perceived factors influencing the effectiveness of chambers of commerce in the United States?” guided the research. Also considered was what strategies a chamber employs to be more productive and impactful, as identified by both senior staff and leading volunteers.

Typically, a study of this type will vary in size from three or four individuals interviewed up to a group as large as 10 to 15 participants. This study included almost double the number of participants, with 24 individual interviews. There were two ways the interviews were
categorized. One category had two groups of twelve individuals each in it (Executive and Chairperson). The second category divided interviewees into four groups according to characteristics of the region being served, with six individuals in each group.

**IRB Review and Approval**

Early in the research process, there was a question of whether the study required a review from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of South Florida. Because the study would include interviewing “subject matter experts” on their opinions of chambers of commerce and its effectiveness, there was discussion among the dissertation committee and the director of the program if an IRB approval was necessary. The conclusion was that the IRB review would most likely result in an IRB exemption but that it warranted IRB consideration. In March 2019, the IRB determined this study met the criteria for an exemption from the federal regulations (IRB # Pro00039560) (Appendix 1).

**Third-Party Support**

To increase the likelihood of having chamber leaders be open to help with the research, two professional organizations were approached to obtain their non-financial support for the study. The Florida Association of Chamber Professionals (FACP) gave immediate support for the research on chambers of commerce. In March 2019, a visit to the ACCE headquarters in Alexandria, VA, was held to meet with the staff liaison and explain the research project and obtain their support for the study. After some discussion about the purpose of the research and its intended outcomes, ACCE agreed to lend its support to the study. They agreed to be listed as supporting the study during the solicitation for interview participants.
When contacting chambers to participate in the study, the lead investigator included the University of South Florida, FACP, and ACCE logos to help assure third party endorsement and build credibility (Appendix 2).

**Selection of Study Participants and Data Collection**

The ACCE has over 1,200 chambers of commerce members and over 7,000 employees of these chambers listed as members from North America and dozens of other nations around the world. Within the ACCE, Community Peer Groups (CPG) consist of members divided according to community size and characteristics. Membership in a CPG requires an additional dues investment, and the four community size groups have an aggregated total membership of 444. CPG membership varies considerably across the four groups. The smallest community size, the Hometown Chamber CPG, has the largest membership with 197 members listed. That is over twice the membership of each of the other groups. The next largest group, Emerging Cities, has 86 members. The smallest membership group is next, the Major City CPG, with 80 members, followed closely by the Metro Cities Chambers CPG with 81 members.

*Acquisition of Interview Subjects*

The list of the members in the CPGs is available for the ACCE members on the ACCE website (www.acce.org). Four lists were reviewed for potential chambers to interview.

*Pilot Interviews*

The first round of interview requests was to chambers with which the researcher could identify a personal or professional connection. The goal of this approach was to increase the likelihood of their agreement to participate. The research started with the pilot test chambers, then Hometown, and Emerging chambers. Eight separate chambers were contacted during the
pilot phase. The email was personalized and included a brochure on the USF DBA program. The email asked them to consider participating in the study and that there would be a telephone call to follow up with any questions.

One chamber Executive was removed from consideration between receiving the initial email and the follow-up phone call. Three chambers did not return multiple phone calls attempting to connect. It had been pre-determined that attempts to include a chamber in the study would cease after sending a maximum of two emails and placing a maximum of three calls attempting to connect with the chamber Executive.

One chamber Executive was willing to be interviewed, but the Chairperson at the same chamber insisted on receiving the questions before the interview. He had been told he could not receive the questions in advance as it could skew the results. In this case, the chamber not included in the study.

One chamber had to be eliminated halfway through their interview process. The chamber Executive and Chairperson agreed to participate in the interview process. The Executive interview was completed, but the Chairperson’s interview could not be scheduled. That Executive’s interview was omitted from the results of the study. The arduous process of getting one of the two required interviews from a chamber proved to be a valuable lesson. All interviews with a chamber Executive or Chairperson were not conducted unless both the Executive and Chairperson agreed to and scheduled an interview, and a consent form was signed and returned. This new practice helped the process proceed smoothly.

**Study Interviews**

A review of the four CPG members targeted in including chambers that were unique based on the different state of residence and that had not already had an interviewed chamber in
that state for the study. There was an effort focused on including as many different states as possible to participate and stay on the schedule to complete the interviews on time. Of the fourteen chambers interviewed (including the pilot tests), there were chambers interviewed from 11 states. One state had two chambers interviewed, not including the pilot tests.

At the halfway point with the interviews with the first two CPGs, the process started with scheduling the next two CPGs. As with the first wave of interviews, there were some chambers more willing to participate than others.

Ultimately, the interview acquisition process resulted in 14 chambers of commerce with complete interviews. With the Executive and the Chairperson of each chamber being interviewed, this led to a total of 28 interviews. After removing the pilot test interviews, there were 24 interviews in the study, a total exceeding the number considered acceptable for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The anonymized list of participant roles is summarized in Table 3.

Locations of chambers studied in the research, by state, are presented in Figure 2.

**Pilot Testing Process**

The first email for a pilot test of the questions was sent to two chambers of commerce in Florida. Both pairs of chamber leaders agreed to participate. The first set of interviews was with a chamber in the Emerging Cities CPG. The second set of interviews was with a Metro City CPG chamber of commerce. The four interviews were recorded and transcribed following the same process used later in the study. The Rev software app on a mobile phone was used to record interviews. When completed, the interview was given a code name, timestamped, and then sent to Rev for transcription. Typically, the transcriptions were returned within 24 hours.
Table 3: Participating Chamber Interview Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Chamber</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 1</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>HE1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>HC1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 2</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>HE2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>HC2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 3</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>HE3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>HC3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging City</td>
<td>Chamber 4</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>EE1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>EC1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 5</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>EE2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>EC2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 6</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>EE3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>EC3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Cities</td>
<td>Chamber 7</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>JE1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>JC1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 8</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>JE2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>JC2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 9</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>JE3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>JC3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro Cities</td>
<td>Chamber 10</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>TE1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>TC1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 11</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>TE2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>TC2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamber 12</td>
<td>Exec</td>
<td>TE3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chairperson</td>
<td>TC3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo12 software, which supports coding and running queries that can be used to determine topic themes and areas of interest for the interviews.

The pilot testing of the questions proved helpful for several reasons. Initially, the pilot test questions had been reviewed and edited with the help of the dissertation committee. As questions were asked subsequently during the phone interviews, there proved to be a need for additional explanation. Some of the pilot test questions seemed ambiguous to the person
interviewed. Based on this feedback, these questions were reworded to make them reliable in acquiring the same information.

During the discussion, there were times where one or two questions seemed to be redundant. One question might lead to a discussion that included information that would also apply to a future question. The repetitive questions were retained in the interview. This decision was based on the observation that although the person interviewed would agree a later question was redundant; nevertheless, he or she would then respond to the later question with more detailed information. This approach, therefore, proved to be a valuable way to get a more in-depth response from each person interviewed for the study.
Interviews

The interviews tended to run longer with the Executives than they did with the Chairperson. On average, the Executive interview lasted 37 minutes. The interview with the Chairperson lasted 29 minutes. The difference appeared to be due to the Executives talking about their job while the Chairpersons talked about their volunteer responsibility. The typical Executive, being more involved with the whole operation of the organization and could talk in great detail about the chamber functions and challenges. The typical Chairperson, working at a different level within the organization, spoke in more general terms.

Including the pilot test interviews, the interviews occurred between 26 March and 5 June 2019. The interviews were conducted via phone except for one Executive interview. This single interview was conducted in person while attending a national chamber of commerce conference. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in the same manner, so the in-person interview did not appear to impact the results of the interview or the study.

Coding

The coding of the interviews was performed in the Nvivo12 software. The style of coding the interviews was an emergent style format. A list of likely topics was created before the coding of the interviews began, and new topics were added as they emerged in the interview coding process.

During the interviews, each person was encouraged to discuss any topic relative to the question that they felt was appropriate. Often during the discussion, they would elaborate on a point and then venture into another point during the same answer. Each person interviewed identified a priority topic or set of topics that they felt strongly about, typically based on an
experience at their chamber. They spent considerable time explaining the importance of their chamber as the organization that represented the interests of the business community.

When completed, codes were consolidated where it was possible and was logical. With over 35 raw topics of influence identified, the consolidation was possible to fewer but related topics. The consolidated topics were examined to compare the results of the chamber Executives and the Chairpersons.
CHAPTER FOUR: KEY FINDINGS

In this chapter, we present the participant characteristics and describe the factors identified through the coding process.

**Participant Characteristics: Executive vs. Chairperson**

The Executives interviewed for this study had diverse backgrounds and broad ranges of experience. The Chairpersons who participated in this study represented small, medium, and large companies, both public and private. They also represented a cross-section of business sectors involved with the local chamber. They had a wide range of experience as a volunteer with their chamber of commerce.

Two Chairpersons had assumed their role earlier than expected due to their predecessor not completing their term on office. There was one Chairperson who had stayed in the Chairperson role for three years. The typical tenure at this chamber was two years, but his successor could not step into the role when it was time, and the next person in line stated they could not assume the role early. The sitting Chairperson agreed to remain in place for one additional year. One chamber Chairperson was in the unique position of having served as the paid Executive at another chamber of commerce in a previous career outside the continental United States. She had become a successful entrepreneur and rose to a leadership role in her chamber of commerce. One other Chairperson had a successful previous career as a senior staff person at a regional economic development council. This experience was closely related to the chamber staff role. She believed this experience helped her understand the role of the Executive at a chamber of commerce.
Demographics

The age range was from 30-69 years old (Figure 3). Of the 24 interviews conducted for this study, 17 were male, and seven were female (Figure 4). Seventeen participants were Caucasian, three were Black, and one was Hispanic. All but one of the individuals interviewed has at least a college degree (Figure 5). Tenure of the Executives had a wide range, from three months on the job as CEO to over 20 years as CEO and 45 years in the chamber of commerce industry (Figure 6). The average tenure as Executive in their current job was eight years.
Executive vs. Chairperson Topics

The interviews were conducted in a conversational format allowing for interpretation of answers to be confirmed and elaborated on when necessary. The Executives generally referred to multiple topics in their interviews. The Executives averaged 39 references per interview while their chairpersons averaged 21.1 references per interview. The same topic could be mentioned more than one time, and each mention counted as a reference. It occurred when the person interviewed believed the multiple mentioned topic was essential to their views on the factors that influence chamber the of commerce effectiveness (Table 4).

Table 4: Average Topic and References per Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Executive</th>
<th>Chairperson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The average number of topics per interview</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of the Executive and the Chairperson interviews led to identifying the five most discussed topics of influence on effectiveness based upon two criteria:

1. How often the topic was mentioned among the chamber of commerce leaders interviewed (Frequency).
2. The length and depth of the discussion of a topic the person spent talking about a topic.

If a participant mentioned the topic in passing or spent considerable time discussing the topic in-depth, it was included in the identification of the factors. The topics most mentioned by the chamber of commerce Executives and Chairpersons are discussed below.
Coding Results

When coding the 24 interviews, each specific topic discussed in an interview was assigned a code. A reference was counted each time an identifiable topic was mentioned. A reference could be one sentence or multiple paragraphs. The response determined the length of the reference. Originally, there were 35 different significant topics identified that could be characterized as factors of interest. For those factors, there were 722 separate identified references.

There were also eighteen topics that did not appear to be related to any other topics, and that were mentioned infrequently. The list of less frequently mentioned topics did not justify being combined and were not included in the analysis. Examples of unique topics that were mentioned but did not have a broad discussion across the interviews were “budget,” “public/private partnerships,” “special interests,” and “workforce.” All were common topics for a chamber, but they were minimally discussed.

The complete list of topics identified as a factor influencing the chamber of commerce effectiveness is in the appendix.

Topic Consolidation

After the first round of coding, a second coding exercise was conducted to identify where combining related codes could be possible. After combining topics that were closely related, the 35 total topics that influence the chamber of commerce effectiveness consolidated to 17 topics. The third round of topic review was conducted to verify that there were no additional possible topic combinations available. These steps resulted in 17 topics that at least one other topic combined with. There were several combined topics with one or more topics combined.
Most Influential Topics

As the coding proceeded, a list of the most commonly referenced topics was established. For both Executives and Chairpersons, the same five topics made the top of the list—albeit in different orders. The findings related to each factor on the list, presented in Table 5, are now discussed.

Table 5: Five Most Influential Topics with Combined Sub-topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five most influential topics with merged sub-topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP: influence, staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADVOCACY: politicians, board, special interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONVENING: network, relationships, volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPETITION: other organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELF-PROMOTION: communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leadership

The topic mentioned the most as a factor influencing chamber of commerce effectiveness by chamber Executives and Chairpersons was “Leadership.” In the interviews that mentioned this topic, it was discussed in diverse ways. The coded topics of “Leadership” and “Influence” were combined to analyze this factor of chamber effectiveness. The analysis resulted in 89 mentions in the interviews of the 24 participants.

Interview Highlights Relating to Leadership

EC1 mentioned that he wanted to see his leaders working behind the scenes and not concerned about receiving credit. He pointed to the chamber leadership needing to identify political leadership that understood the nature of business. “We have some people on our city council that could not read a P & L if their life depended on it,” said EC1.
According to Executive JE1, to have new potential community leaders get involved with the chamber, a climate of inclusivity was important. He mentioned the “de-facto expectation” that new leaders in the community should take on roles of involvement, and they are doing it not to advance their position or their business but to help advance the community. During the discussion, he made the point about how the chamber is the lead organization for the community and should not be for personal self-promotion.

TE1 Executive explained how he had worked for years to position the chamber as the “go-to” organization for addressing problems. When approached by a government organization for a private-sector financial bailout for a specific issue, TE1 pointed out that the requested solution for help would not solve the overall problem, but it would only temporarily address the issue. The chamber took a more in-depth look at the issue. They determined that the only way “…to have some kind of reasonable fix to the structural deficit was to change state law which [his organization’s] advocacy committee caused to happen.” This leadership action addressed the cause of financial distress and allowed the government leaders to solve the issue with the changing laws.

Conversely, weak leadership was a point of frustration for some of those interviewed. EE1 Executive pointed out the lack of follow-through from his board a negative impact on the organization’s leadership for the community. “I ask the board, who has just passed a position unanimously, to write a letter to the editor of the local paper. ‘Oh, I cannot do that!’ will be the response. When I offer to write it for them, they will point blank say, ‘I am not going to step out in this.’ [It is] Very frustrating.” Leadership must be willing to take the [political] position and follow up on supporting the decision of the whole. EE1 concluded by stating, “Leadership, vision, articulation is certainly, I think, what it takes” [to lead].
This point was reinforced by HE1 Executive, who pointed out the need to rally people for a potential issue for the chamber to support. There was frustration as he stated he did not know whom he would go to for help. There was no power structure in the community. He had identified the problem impacting his chamber from being the leader and that it was more significant than the organization. He stated the community operated in a diffused way, and it was impacting the community's progress. He hoped to change that with the chamber organizing the effort.

With a different view, one chamber saw the role of the chamber as much stronger in impacting the community and justified that the chamber is a strong influence. Executive JE1 felt strongly that the chamber was in the best position to be the leader of the community for legitimate reasons. He also believed that the chamber of commerce is the organization that represents the community and, specifically, the business community that is impacted by every decision the government makes. “We are the only ones that, truly everything that affects the community—affects the business community—rightly or wrongly. Also, only the business community has the funds, the financial power to make the things happen outside of taxing authorities.” This bold stand was descriptive of this chamber of commerce as the organization was in a strong leadership position. Other organizations came to them for advice and assistance. He went on to describe his leaders as, “…never taking status quo for granted, they are never satisfied, they are always pushing for us to do things better and they are in the foxhole with us.” The last part of his statement stood out compared to the frustration some other chamber executives mentioned. By including that volunteers were in “the foxhole with us,” he was implying that the staff was willing to deliver more and work harder because they knew they had
the backing and support of their volunteers. His point was that leadership is more than a position; it includes action.

Because he made such a strong point about his leadership support, there was a follow-up question asked about his leaders. After mentioning the typical volunteer leader characteristics of position in the company, volunteer time, positive reputation in the community, he added that he wanted influencers that “people just really want to go rub elbows with.”

The leadership position became stronger for a chamber of commerce when the organization was able to translate that leadership into influence. One Chairperson theorized that a chamber must continually work on being influential, or it will stagnate. He suggested that a chamber that works to stay, “inside the box,” will stagnate and see its influence and leadership fade. He, on the other hand, pushes his board and executive committee to think as if there were no box. Taking that philosophy one step further, chamber Executive JE2 stated her chamber volunteers want her publicly stating that the chamber is leading by being the “Chamber of Influence.” This strategy focused on the frustration of having several small chambers in the region and wanting to differentiate her chamber from the others. She added that she feels the continual pressure to position her chamber not just as the chamber of influence but also as the organization of influence among the other chambers of commerce and be the leader in the community. A crowded market of business focused associations created a sense of pressure to hold on to the leadership and influence position for the chamber she leads.

In the Metro CPG, one TC2 Chairperson saw the role of the chamber to be influential by inclusion rather than by privileged position. To be an influential leading chamber, he worked to help diverse groups understand that they wanted to be the chamber that listened to diverse opinions as they shaped policy for the community and served a leadership role. He had
strategized with the Executive at his chamber to reach out strategically to the community in all areas and listen. This proactive outreach had achieved progress in the organization being influential. TC2 Chairperson also acknowledged that it was challenging to be inclusive and listen to a diversity of opinions and to avoid the appearance of ignoring any group when taking a position. Follow up, and communication was vital in managing the inevitable frustration that would occur.

Leadership and influence were essential to all the organizations, but the leadership teamwork and follow up were also essential. One Executive, EE1, pointed out that he had once been left to handle all the negative response to a chamber position with no back up from his board. After that experience, when his organization was next working on a critical policy issue, he reminded the board of the negative experience and that he would lead on an issue relevant to the board only if he is not alone. “The minute I see that nobody is behind me, I am not doing another thing. I am trying to bring them along.” EE1 Executive said.

EE2 Executive was direct with his desire to be the most influential organization in his community. “We want the chamber to be the center of influence, and what that means is that in big issues of the day, [the] community leaders, elected officials, they all look to the chamber and ask us how to handle this and what the chamber thinks of this [issue].” Working to be the organization that is identified as the community leader was a clear position for this chamber. EE2 Executive went on to talk about the difficulty of a chamber of commerce in defining the value of membership to some businesses. This Executive was new to the chamber of commerce industry, and previously had the perspective was that the chamber was always a “big pillar of the community and something you just were going to be involved [with as a member].” However, he had come to realize that the chamber is seen differently in the current business environment.
He did not expect to get a reaction as often as he did from people who were wary of the chamber. Indeed, many people wondered about the rationale behind a particular policy position and why a business should get involved.

This skeptical view of chambers was also mentioned by a Hometown CPG Executive. HE1 discussed that as the membership was aging, the older business leaders were looking to the next generation to get involved and start leading. As these leaders shifted responsibility, the next generation tended to be more hesitant to get involved with the chamber. “The days of someone working hard for two or three years in their business and then be eligible to join the chamber” is not the same environment chambers work in today.” The value proposition of joining the chamber of commerce is a regular part of the organization’s work. Chamber Executive HE2 pointed to proof that his efforts to overcome the skepticism were successful. He had been told his chamber was the “un-chamber.” He saw that comment as a positive result of his efforts to “have an individualized touch that many chambers…I think when they get to a certain size, they do not see the importance of it.”

HE2 pointed out that in his region, the community leaders not involved with the chamber tended to be parochial. He pushed back on that by openly stating that business does not care about government jurisdiction lines. “People want to make money, and it goes across government lines. It is hard to be that way sometimes, but it is important.” Pushing back on parochialism added to the chamber being a leader and more influential. The openness gave an impression of confident leadership.

JE2 Executive stated that she wanted her board to be the community influencers. That was more important to her than their serving on committees. “I want influencers at the table. I want them to make me think bigger than the day to day [of running a chamber].” Her ability to
count on her board for influential leadership discussion was valuable to her organization being successful.

JE3 Executive talked about her chamber conducting structured surveys to know the community views on issues. “It [a survey] will help you in your effectiveness to lead as you get behind things that are important to the community, but it will also help you in knowing how to get things that are unpopular done.” Strengthening influence with more knowledge was her point. Additionally, she mentioned the fact that strengthened her chamber was known for conducting the surveys helped their influence. Survey respondents were eager to have their opinion known by the chamber. The chamber was viewed positively as being the organization that took the time to survey the community. The effort of surveying by the chamber had unintended positive results. An independent organization conducted a survey of businesses in this chamber’s region. The purpose of the survey was to determine who the voters trusted. JE3 pointed to her chamber’s survey efforts as a reason they were trusted.

In the Metro CPG, TE1 Executive was more philosophical. This Executive stated that it was always more useful to have companies work together to address challenges in the community; the outcomes were better than one company could achieve alone. He also thought it was rare that an individual can change the community by themselves. “There are very few [technology entrepreneur] Elon Musks out there, and even he is not very good at it.”

Emergent Leadership Themes

The key themes that emerged from the leadership-related interview content are summarized in Table 6. Where the interviewees appeared to be in general agreement, the sentiment is labeled as “consensus.” Otherwise, specific positions are identified.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sentiment</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>Consensus:</td>
<td>JE1: he wanted influencers that “people just really want to go rub elbows with.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chamber should be a key influencer in the community.</td>
<td>JE2: stated her chamber volunteers want her publicly stating that the chamber is leading by being the “Chamber of Influence.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>TC2: saw the role of the chamber to be influential by inclusion rather than by privileged position.</td>
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<td>EE2: “We want the chamber to be the center of influence.”</td>
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<td>JE3: mentioned the fact that strengthened her chamber was known for conducting the surveys helped their influence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Consensus:</td>
<td>EC1: He pointed to the chamber leadership needing to identify political leadership that understood the nature of business. “We have some people on our city council that could not read a P &amp; L if their life depended on it.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chambers should take an active role in politics</td>
<td>JE1: believed that the chamber of commerce is the organization that represents the community and, specifically, the business community that is impacted by every decision the government makes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>HE2: “People want to make money, and it goes across government lines. It is hard to be that way sometimes, but it is important.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>TE3: the chamber needed to be more proactive in selecting candidates for public office</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EC1: “I would like to see them [the chamber] behind the scenes actively recruiting elected officials. Getting people in the pipeline.”</td>
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<td>Table 6 (Continued)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Politics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consensus:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding of community needs</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Position:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chamber understands business community needs</td>
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<td>EE2: in big issues of the day, [the] community leaders, elected officials, they all look to the chamber and ask us how to handle this and what the chamber thinks of this [issue].</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Position:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community needs are diverse and hard to determine</td>
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<tr>
<td>JE3: talked about her chamber conducting structured surveys to know the community views on issues. “It [a survey] will help you in your effectiveness to lead as you get behind things that are important to the community, but it will also help you in knowing how to get things that are unpopular done.” TC2: acknowledged that it was challenging to be inclusive and listen to a diversity of opinions and to avoid the appearance of ignoring any group when taking a position.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership role</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Position:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chamber should be an acknowledged leader in the community</td>
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<tr>
<td>JE1: “We are the only ones that truly [understand] everything that affects the community—affects the business community—rightly or wrongly. Also, only the business community has the funds, the financial power to make the things happen outside of taxing authorities.” TE1: had worked for years to position the chamber as the “go-to” organization for addressing problems.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Position:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chamber should be present but not necessarily the leader across the range of initiatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>JE1: he does not want to be at the head of every table he gathers around when meeting with other groups. He explained his strategy by stating, “We ought to have a seat at every table, but we don’t need to eat at every meal.”</td>
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**Advocacy**

Advocacy was the second most mentioned factor topic that influences chamber of commerce effectiveness in the interviews. There were 85 separate “Advocacy” mentions in
coded discussions with chamber leaders. Analyzing the interviews more in-depth for what makes a chamber of commerce effective, there was staunch support for the role the chamber serves in advocacy for the business community. The topic of advocacy was one of the issues most discussed by the respondents, with 70 coded mentions of the importance of their organization being pro-active in advocating to the government on the issues affecting businesses. When “advocacy” was combined with “politicians” in the coded comments, the interview participants mentioning this topic increased to 79 coded mentions.

*Interview Highlights Relating to Advocacy*

EC2 Chairperson mentioned that “the advocacy piece and having a voice for the members is going to set us apart from other chambers in the community, and other organizations.” The advocacy effort established chambers as active and leading organizations. The same executive mentioned that “if we are their voice in front of [local government] and when they’re doing something that we don’t feel is good for business it will allow us to go up there and say with authority, ‘the membership of [chamber] is against this position.’” Several chamber executives repeated this view. HE3 Executive went as far as to state that “the most effective effort within our chamber is advocacy…we started the chamber because a lot of business owners felt like they do not have a voice at [the] city or state level.” The point that this Executive was making was that there was not an active business advocacy group in the region with a strong position. A relatively new chamber started because there was a desire for a stronger voice for business in the community. The Executive discussed how the local government was at first resistant to their involvement. She said her chamber was persistent and consistent, which signaled to the government that they were not going away. After a few years’ efforts, the chamber became known as the voice for business in the region.
EE2 Executive mentioned that the membership did not have the time to watch government activities as they were busy running their businesses. “We are the voice of business because they don’t have the time to sit and watch city council meetings or county commission meetings. We can be their eyes and ears and their conduit with government officials.” This role of the chamber tends to create the practice of members going to the chamber for connections to government officials. That value of connection by the chamber is a characteristic of effectiveness for the members.

Executive EE1 firmly stated, “I think part of the effectiveness is, chambers have to be bold and loud. They have to fire a shot over the bow [of local government] occasionally.” Being pro-active and aggressive was being productive and showing leadership, in this Executive’s opinion. Of the 12 chamber Executives interviewed, ten discussed “Advocacy” as necessary to their organization serving as the voice of business. There was a total of 36 individual mentions of “Advocacy” among the Executives. The Hometown CPG Executives made the most comments on advocacy. The Metro City Chamber Executives mentioned the efforts of advocacy the least. These larger community chambers viewed their role as more of a partnership with the government. They regularly met with the government and established a relationship that resulted in a partnership on issues. The two interviews that did not mention “Advocacy” as an issue were one isolated Hometown CPG interview and a Metro City interview. The specific Hometown CPG chamber was a relatively new organization bringing the community together. As the organization matures, “Advocacy” will likely become part of its activities. The Metro City Chamber Executive had a unique world view on the chamber’s activities. While some would refer to their activities as advocacy, this Executive viewed the activity as a civic responsibility to be engaged and working alongside government institutions for a result in a better community.
He led the position that the advocacy role was more trying to get someone to agree with their point. He believes his chamber should be a “solution partner” rather than an “advocacy organization.”

EE1 Executive took a similar view. The government organizations and the chamber were focused on community improvement and needed to be working together rather than merely advocating. This Executive stated that they are the voice of business. He added that this was not just connecting members to members, but also to make sure, “the connecting is always organized around driving some type of broader growth and prosperity for the city and region that we serve.” This Executive wanted to work together for a better community rather than just a voice of business.

TE1 Executive discussed the strategy of being cooperative with the government to work on issues affecting the business community: “I think a closer relationship on many issues sometimes makes the tough discussions go more smoothly later on.”

Several chamber Executives mentioned the lack of understanding among elected officials of how business and commerce works. This concern stressed the lack of understanding elected officials have of the free market system, and businesses’ need for profit to succeed and grow. TE3 specifically called out the local government and his chamber of commerce needing to be more proactive in dealing with a challenging environment: “The business community in [city] is going to have to figure out [what to do]. The anti-business perspective has taken control of [the] local government.” His fellow CPG member went farther to state that the chamber needed to be more proactive in selecting candidates for public office: “A stronger set of skills in our public elected officials would help a lot,” a fellow Executive from a Hometown CPG Executive, HE1, mentioned. She pointed out that people were getting elected who had “great thoughts and ideas”
but lacked an understanding of business or finance: “So, it’s a lot of forced ideas as opposed to working with our business community.” Chairperson EC1 echoed this sentiment. He mentioned the need to recruit people to serve in elected office: “I would like to see them [the chamber] behind the scenes actively recruiting elected officials. Getting people in the pipeline.”

Chamber Chairperson JC2 stated that they have a regular question they ask the government to consider when deliberating an issue. “They have to be able to answer the question because we are going to ask, ‘How does it affect the business community?’” The expectation is to get answers based on facts rather than on beliefs or feelings.

One Executive specifically mentioned the responsibility chambers have if they are going to engage in advocacy work. EC3 mentioned that public policy work is very effective. She said, “over the last couple of years, we’ve been able to lead the way on topics important to our area.” The consistency was necessary to work with the government. The ability of the government to consistently know where the chamber, representing the business community, stood on issues helped the advocacy work to succeed.

Consistency was important, as was the process to communicate to the membership of the chamber what was being accomplished by the advocacy effort. EC2 Executive pointed out the need for the chamber to “take note, keep records on the things that they have actively lobbied for or against.” This record-keeping documented the effectiveness of the organization to the membership.

Chairperson EC2 saw two reasons for the chamber to do work in “Advocacy.” As other Executives and Chairs mentioned, the importance of protecting the business environment was one reason. The additional reason mentioned by EC2 Chairperson was how a wrong business decision made by the government could result in a negative view of the chamber: “If elected
officials have agendas that are contrary to the business community and it could negatively impact our effectiveness. We must stay in front of that.” If the chamber could not prevent a wrong business decision made by the government, the membership of the chamber may conclude that the chamber was not an effective organization by preventing the decision.

EC1 Chairperson mentioned the role of the chamber being both an advocate for issues and to show support for elected officials when they made the “right” decision. “One of our big things is to give our elected officials maybe not a backbone but back up. When they make tough decisions at the right times, we are there for them.” This willingness to face the criticism with the elected officials when there is agreement enhanced their leadership and effectiveness as an organization. EE1 Executive mentioned the importance of pointing out positive actions as well as criticizing the negative actions of local government: “We don’t agree with 100% of what the City Council does, and when we don’t agree, we let them know it. However, I think it’s just as important as when we do agree, that we also let them know.”

When mentioning that the efforts for advocacy are not just showing up at public meetings and speaking about “pro-growth” issues, TC2 Chairperson connected his chamber’s effectiveness to the ability to “articulate a legislative agenda in a way that our political leaders understand and are thinking about pro-growth, pro-neighborhood agendas as they develop their own legislative/political strategies. For us, this has taken on a whole new meaning and become a major focus of our efforts.” Recognizing the responsibility to articulate the positions made his chamber stronger and more impactful when they spoke publicly.

TC3 Chairperson spoke of the need to have confidence in the chamber advocacy efforts: “We think our unique value proposition is [that] we are the voice of the [city] businesses as it relates to the local government.” He acknowledged that there are other groups in his region but
that his chamber was the most diverse in its membership and the most significant organization based on members and budget.

_Emergent Advocacy Themes_

The key themes that emerged from the advocacy-related interview content are summarized in Table 7. Where the interviewees appeared to be in general agreement, the sentiment is labeled as “consensus.” Otherwise, specific positions are identified.

**Table 7: Advocacy Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sentiment</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Focus   | **Consensus:** Principal target for advocacy is government, particularly local government | EC2: “if we are their voice in front of [local government] and when they’re doing something that we don’t feel is good for business it will allow us to go up there and say with authority, ‘the membership of [chamber] is against this position.’”  
HE3: “the most effective effort within our chamber is advocacy…we started the chamber because a lot of business owners felt like they do not have a voice at [the] city or state level.”  
EE2: “We are the voice of business because they don’t have the time to sit and watch city council meetings or county commission meetings. We can be their eyes and ears and their conduit with government officials.”  
EE1: I think part of the effectiveness is, chambers have to be bold and loud. They have to fire a shot over the bow [of local government] occasionally.  
TE3: “The business community in [city] is going to have to figure out [what to do]. The anti-business perspective has taken control of [the] local government.”  
EC2: “If elected officials have agendas that are contrary to the business community and it could negatively impact our effectiveness. We must stay in front of that.”  
EC1: “We don’t agree with 100% of what the City Council does, and when we don’t agree, we let them know it. However, I think it’s just as important as when we do agree, that we also let them know.”  
TC3: “We think our unique value proposition is [that] we are the voice of the [city] businesses as it relates to the local government.” |
| Relationship with government | **Position:** Relationship should be cooperative, helping governments learn | EE1: The government organizations and the chamber were focused on community improvement and needed to be working together rather than merely advocating. 
TE1: “I think a closer relationship on many issues sometimes makes the tough discussions go more smoothly later on.” 
Metro Executive: viewed the activity as a civic responsibility to be engaged and working alongside government institutions for a result in a better community. He led the position that the advocacy role was more trying to get someone to agree with their point. He believes his chamber should be a “solution partner” rather than an “advocacy organization.” 
EC1: “One of our big things is to give our elected officials maybe not a backbone but back up. When they make tough decisions at the right times, we are there for them.” This willingness to face the criticism with the elected officials when there is agreement enhanced their leadership and effectiveness as an organization. |
| **Position:** Chambers should strive to keep the local government in line | EC2: a wrong business decision made by the government could result in a negative view of the chamber. “If elected officials have agendas that are contrary to the business community and it could negatively impact our effectiveness. We must stay in front of that.” 
JC2: they have a regular question they ask the government to consider when deliberating an issue. “They have to be able to answer the question because we are going to ask, ‘How does it affect the business community?’” The expectation is to get answers based on facts rather than on beliefs or feelings. |
| Need for consistency and transparency | **Consensus:** Both are critical to chamber effectiveness | EC3: consistency was necessary to work with the government. The ability of the government to consistently know where the chamber, representing the business community, stood on issues helped the advocacy work to succeed. 
EC2: pointed out the need for the chamber to “take note, keep records on the things that they have actively lobbied for or against.” This record-keeping documented the effectiveness of the organization to the membership. 
HE3: her chamber was persistent and consistent, which signaled to the government that they were not going away. |
Convening

The third most mentioned topic that influences chamber of commerce effectiveness was a chamber convening people or groups. The leaders interviewed mentioned, “Convening,” “Relationships,” and “Networking,” a combined total of 79 times in different interviews.

*Interview Highlights Relating to Convening*

The chamber of commerce is a recognized networking organization. Critics will point to chambers as being only social clubs or after-hours events and networking mixer-cliques. When discussing what convening looked like for his community, JC3 Chairperson defined successful convening as being “in cooperation with various constituencies within the community.” His list included construction, universities, neighborhoods, minority groups without a strong presence in the community and business. Based on the comments of those working in and with chambers, the chamber Executives and their volunteer Chairperson, these convening events are far more than just a social gathering. There is an element of bringing like-minded groups together for cooperation.

Additionally, convening groups that typically do not cross paths to get to know each other better for the greater good benefits all involved. Lastly, “Convening” for networking for business purposes can make the business community stronger. Whatever the purpose, the chamber of commerce is a natural resource for connecting and “Convening” businesspeople. JE2 Executive saw “Convening” and “Collaboration” as essential elements of his organization’s success. Related to chambers of commerce, “Collaboration is the process of working with those who have a like-minded mission to improve our community for business purposes or quality of life. Also, [working] with people that you might not [typically] collaborate with on certain issues; I think that is really important.” She acknowledged that it is not always a natural or
straightforward process. It takes proactive attention to work: “Finding some issues of mutual importance that you can work on with people that you might not normally work with is positive for everyone involved.” When the opportunity presents itself, JE2 Executive saw her chamber as being responsible for convening the appropriate parties for a discussion. TC1 Chairperson pointed to a cooperative ecosystem or groups needing each other to be successful. He stated, “Having effective collaborations with other organizations in town who share our priorities but bring different capabilities to the table [is essential]. I’ve told [Executive] I don’t think we’ve ever done anything alone. The idea of we’re the platform for the business community to collaborate, which is what I think we are, we need collaborators.”

EC2 discussed how she had, as Chairperson of her chamber, brought groups together, but some of the groups left, feeling uncomfortable. She did not accept that as the final decision. She gathered her board, and they proactively took topics to the groups they had reached out to previously. Meeting with them in their area proved to be an example of her chamber’s sincerity. Convening has an element of struggle. “It is always the struggle. How do we make sure participants feel valued and not marginalized?” asked EC2 Chairperson.

JC2 Chairperson had a vision of what he wanted for the chamber industry. He wanted “to see the chamber of commerce be truly the number one economic business organization within communities across the country. I think you’d really get a lot of great work done as they networked together.” This Chairperson thought with a broad vision for the chamber of commerce industry across the country.

At the Metro CPG group level, TE2 Executive acknowledged that his chamber took the risk of focusing on quality over quantity of the membership. This new focus would impact whom they convened for successful efforts in the community: “We gulped when we said we
would probably be half our size in five years, and we are now half our size five years later. However, we are more profitable, more impactful, our retention numbers are through the roof, and we have very, very satisfied members.” His chamber is focusing on adding the highest quality value of convening on issues and networking opportunities to bring the business community together. The members that stayed with the chamber were willing to invest more in their belonging to the chamber benefit from the increased quality of the services. This Executive added that “our business model is to have high touch, high level of engagement with our members so that they are delighted.”

JE1 Executive talked at great length about his efforts to work with as many distinct groups in the community as he could to make a connection with his chamber. His focus was on organizations the chamber had not worked with previously. He made the point to stress that he does not want to be at the head of every table he gathers around when meeting with other groups. He explained his strategy by stating, “We ought to have a seat at every table, but we don’t need to eat at every meal.” JE1 Executive used this analogy to make the point that he did not expect something back from every organization whom he met with; he only wanted to be able to be a part of the conversation as often as possible.

The topics of the chamber of commerce “events” and “convening” were closely related. There was a common sensitivity among the Executives that their chamber events be successful and not viewed as the traditional, mediocre food, no content to the program, everyone gets an award type of event. EE2 Executive pointed out that while they focused on having value at their events, it was difficult to define the value to a broad audience: “It is often in the eye of the beholder. I think many of our members see the value in the good old-fashioned networking and the events we host.” TE2 Executive pointed out that he also focused on having value at his
events. He stated that his chamber was strategic with their events and wanted specific connections to occur: “On connecting members with members, there is value for all parties.” His point was that he wanted to make sure some of the gathered group did not feel salespeople were inundating them or that the salespeople did not conclude there was only an audience of their counterparts. He added, “the connecting is organized around driving some kind of broader growth and prosperity for the city and region we serve.” The focus was on being the convening organization that was working on improving the community.

The smaller CPG chambers viewed events that bring the business community together as crucial to their effectiveness. The process of combining social networking with meeting at a new business or discussing critical community issues for their organization was essential to them. HC2 Chairperson pointed to their events as having value to the members. “It’s a networking and getting to know others in the area [experience]. A chamber Executive, EE3, pointed out that his chamber “[does] over 192 programs or events in a calendar year. All of those events are designed to either educate our members, get them connected with other business owners, or get them connected to consumers.” Every event had a specific purpose or purposes.

In many communities, groups have formed for the sole purpose of networking for a sales lead referral. Some chamber executives view these organizations as a duplication of the chamber of commerce model. HE3 Executive took a measure of ownership for these networking groups becoming a reality: “I think they are a byproduct of chambers not fulfilling the networking component effectively [in their community].” Several chamber executives mentioned these groups, but none saw them as a threat or hurting the chamber business model. The view in the aggregate can best be explained by JE2 Executive, who stated, “I’m less concerned about networking groups. They’re going to do their own thing. They’re going to filter in and out. I
think being a chamber of commerce, as long as we always are a convener, bringing people to the table, we will not have to compete necessarily with those that are pure networking groups.” A chamber of commerce is an active networking organization but is many additional sources for the business community. He added, “That [networking] is a component of chambers. The differentiator is putting them across the table, knowing whom to put in a room when a decision comes up, which you just don’t get with your peer networking groups.”

As technology has continued to be a part of people’s personal and work lives, the impact on the chamber of commerce was discussed by several of those interviewed. While they did mention they had developed strategies and programs to take advantage of technology to broaden their brand outreach, none saw technology as a concern to their chamber of commerce. One chamber Executive, HE2, discussed how technology and social media would not replace the chamber of commerce. “I think we will continue to see some event transition to social media style events; I do not think chambers are not going to be here in the future due to technology. I know everybody gets up in arms when you say chambers aren’t relevant. I think the idea of a chamber is very relevant. I think the actions of how they operate and how they execute can be viewed as not very relevant.”

A chamber executive from a market known for innovative technology developments stated that business is still a people-to-people operation that provides chambers the opportunity to be effective and impactful when connecting. EE2 Executive stated, “even in this day of technology and social media and different means to sell, a good portion of people still like to do business with people they know. The best way to get to know these people is through coming and spending time with them. I hear from members weekly and monthly who say, ‘I built my business on the chamber’ or ‘I wouldn’t be here without the chamber,’ or ‘I was about to go
bankrupt when I came to the chamber.’ People helping people is an in-person business. The ability of a chamber to use networking, but not rely on it for their success, will be a productive chamber of commerce in the future.”

**Emergent Convening Themes**

The key themes that emerged from the convening-related interview content are summarized in Table 8. Where the interviewees appeared to be in general agreement, the sentiment is labeled as “consensus.” Otherwise, specific positions are identified.

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sentiment</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Value</strong></td>
<td><strong>Consensus:</strong></td>
<td>Chambers must focus on events that deliver tangible value to participants. TE2: focused on having value at his events. He stated that his chamber was strategic with their events and wanted specific connections to occur. “On connecting members with members, there is value for all parties.” EE3: his chamber, “[does] over 192 programs or events in a calendar year. All of those events are designed to either educate our members, get them connected with other business owners, or get them connected to consumers.” Every event had a specific purpose or purposes.</td>
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<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td><strong>Position:</strong></td>
<td>Emphasizes the like-mindedness of participants. JE2: “Collaboration is the process of working with those who have a like-minded mission to improve our community for business purposes or quality of life. Also, [working] with people that you might not [typically] collaborate with on certain issues; I think that is really important.”</td>
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<td><strong>Position:</strong></td>
<td>Emphasizes diversity of participants. EE2: focused on having value at their events; it was difficult to define the value to a broad audience. EC2: Convening has an element of struggle. “It is always the struggle. How do we make sure participants feel valued and not marginalized?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inclusiveness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Position:</strong></td>
<td>Chambers need to be inclusive. TC2: acknowledged that it was challenging to be inclusive and listen to a diversity of opinions and to avoid the appearance of ignoring any group when taking a position. Follow up and communication were vital in managing the inevitable frustration that would occur.</td>
</tr>
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Table 8 (Continued)

| Inclusiveness | **Position:** Chambers need to focus their attention on members that work to provide value | TE2: acknowledged that his chamber took the risk of focusing on quality over quantity of the membership. This new focus would impact whom they convened for successful efforts in the community. “We gulped when we said we would probably be half our size in five years, and we are now half our size five years later. However, we are more profitable, more impactful, our retention numbers are through the roof, and we have very, very satisfied members.” |
| Technology | **Consensus:** Although technology is being incorporated into chamber activities, it is not a threat to chamber survival | HE2: discussed how technology and social media would not replace the chamber of commerce. “I think we will continue to see some event transition to social media style events; I do not think chambers are not going to be here in the future due to technology. I know everybody gets up in arms when you say chambers aren’t relevant. I think the idea of a chamber is very relevant. I think the actions of how they operate and how they execute can be viewed as not very relevant.” EE2: “even in this day of technology and social media and different means to sell, a good portion of people still like to do business with people they know. The best way to get to know these people is through coming and spending time with them. I hear from members weekly and monthly who say, ‘I built my business on the chamber’ or ‘I wouldn’t be here without the chamber,’ or ‘I was about to go bankrupt when I came to the chamber.’ People helping people is an in-person business.” |

**Competition**

There are many ways a chamber of commerce experiences competition. Competition with other organizations for funding and membership are just two examples. The combining of coded topics “competition,” “funding,” and “other organizations” resulted in 73 separate mentions in the interviews with the study participants. The not-for-profit industry has many organizations competing for funding and volunteers to help fulfill their mission. By narrowing the focus to
competition for chambers of commerce, several points emerged during the coding of the interviews.

*Interview Highlights Relating to Competition*

HC1 Chairperson took the long-term view of dealing with competition. He pointed to a chamber that “can’t see through that parochialism. So, we’ve struggled with that, to how to kind of fix that. In some regards, we’ve just kind of said we’re not going to let that bring us down. We’re going to keep doing what we’re doing, and that [other] organization will probably cease to exist.”

EE3 Executive compared the current environment for competition with what she experienced a decade ago at her organization: “It just hits you in the face that different from ten years ago or better, you did not have a plethora of similar types of entities. Also, you didn’t have any of the online business clubs.” Her comments had a tone of frustration as she went on to explain that many of the business groups are a little more than multi-level marketing organizations posing as networking or business clubs.

The opposite view of competition emerged from two interviews. One Executive, EE1, acknowledged that his chamber was the “big dog” in the not-for-profit sector in his region. This strength helped his organization be the leader and be able to gather the other groups together and control more of the agenda: “We don’t see them as a threat, and so we’re reaching out more right now.” Conversely, chamber of commerce Executive JE3 expressed frustration with the potential of being overshadowed by a chamber in a larger market nearby. JE3 Executive expressed that “Our location to [the larger city and chamber] is the 500-pound gorilla. I mean, if we’re not aligned with them on an issue, there better be a darn good reason why we’re not, or
we’ll get steamrolled.” For chambers of commerce close in proximity, being able to work well together while identifying their own unique identity can be an arduous process to navigate.

Both Executives and Chairpersons mentioned the abundance of chambers in the area. EC3 Chairperson discussed how to work together. He identified that it was better to work on regionalizing, rather than consolidating under one governing umbrella: “We are having talks now with them to see if they are interested…but make sure that we all maintain a local identity because they are important to the areas they’re in.” Identifying the need for better coordination among the organizations while recognizing the unique characteristics of the sub-regions can complicate the effort of speaking with one voice without anyone feeling slighted. In several interviews, there were comments about representation overlap. EE2 Executive stated, “There’s a lot of overlap as well and probably a lot of redundancy. That makes it very challenging because you do have a lot of overlap in membership.” Membership is challenging to maintain when businesses identify the overlap. They can become fickle and change memberships as they identify different issues each organization prioritizes from year to year. When there are multiple chambers of commerce serving a community, the quality of service and operations is affected. JE1 Executive pointed out that some of his fellow executives may not be suited for the role they are currently serving as a chamber Executive. The quality of the service provided by the chamber could have an impact on the image of other chambers: “With all the chambers in our extended region, I’d say 40-50 percent are one or two-person shops. We have a lot of people getting put into chamber executive roles with little to no experience. They have no staff, no money, yet they’re expected to learn the job while also fighting the politics.” He mentioned that he had been recommending to their state chamber association the need to have manager-in-training programs for the good of the chamber profession.
On a positive note, one chamber Executive mentioned the abundance of chambers and how well they worked together. “There’s nine of us chambers here. We all get along really well. I don’t know that any of us view each other as competitors. When I read some of the stuff online about chambers stealing members, or talking bad about other chambers, I’m like, gosh, I can’t even imagine that,” stated HE2 Executive. His rural region had identified a way for the chambers to co-exist without conflict. He believed that regular communication with each other helped the working relationship be strong. A chamber Chairperson reinforced the communication point. JC1 Chairperson pointed to the recent efforts for “better communication, and ultimately, I think, better coordination between the different organizations.” He mentioned that it has not always been a priority to communicate and coordinate among the chambers. He did not see the chambers as competing. Instead, he believed there needed to be better collaboration: “We do not always do a good job of articulating the differences and the importance of each chamber. Better communication, and ultimately, I think better coordination between the different organizations will make all of those involved more impactful and effective.”

When a chamber had identified a need in the community that they were working to address, it built the organization’s effectiveness and reputation in the community. When a chamber is impactful, others want to be a part of it. Two Executives mentioned the problem of copycat programs impacting their effectiveness. EE1 Executive pointed out that “We do something successfully, and the next thing we know, another group in town is copying that. We had to kind of keep in front of that all the time. I’ve learned not to be nervous about those efforts.” His lack of stress over copycat programs is due to his observation that they are typically not professionally staffed and have no set structure. He pointed out that they tend to come
quickly and go quickly. His chamber’s staying focused and dedicated to the effort helped them succeed.

TE1 Executive shared the same philosophical view of the copycat programs. He credited the not-for-profit sector for this activity as many organizations are struggling to expand their services and budget: “If my organization suddenly decided that a new strategic initiative or project was top of our charts, I guarantee [that] within two years, five other people would be saying they’re trying to do it, too. It’s that nature of the not-for-profit business.” This Executive mentioned that his focus was to address the initiative more prepared, staffed, and funded than any other group that may address the issue. If his chamber volunteers were not able to do that, they would not place the issue on their agenda.

Competition from another business-focused not-for-profit in the community was an identified concern from some of the people interviewed. It is not uncommon for a chamber of commerce to have a department focused on business recruitment and expansion. In some communities, a separate entity will be the organization to lead this activity. In some regions, the two organizations work well together, and in others, they may not work well together. Several Chairpersons and Executives mentioned the economic development recruitment organization as having a negative or complex impact on their activities. While he pointed out that there was no friction between the two organizations, HE2 Executive mentioned that there were some companies in his region that had decided to invest in the economic development organization (EDO) that recruited new businesses to a community and did not join the chamber. He stated that “People know the chamber has an established brand, we’re broader in what we do.” The companies that want to focus solely on new businesses coming to town can tend to become involved in the EDO and decline chamber involvement.
EE2 Executive pointed out that his market had many business-focused groups wanting the businesses in the region to be involved with them: “You have not one but four chambers; then you have the EDO of the [region]. They could be viewed as a competitor because some of the things they do are similar in structure to what we do.” His Chairperson echoed his concerned when she pointed out that “The EDO is an issue for us because they tend to dominate the political environment.” Earlier in the interview with both leaders at this chamber, they acknowledged that their organization was in a rebuilding phase after several years of not being an effective organization. This history was a contributor to the weak position they were currently experiencing. It points to the need to be working on organization effectiveness continually, or it will diminish due to a lack of attention.

Conversely, one Chairperson specifically discussed the strong relationship she believed her chamber had with the local EDO: “We tend to work really well with them. Our EDO sees the benefit of our partnering to get things done.” A chamber of commerce and an EDO are interdependent on the other's work. A chamber works similar to a product research and development or product innovation department of a corporation. The EDO is like the product marketing and sales department. In this example, the product for both groups is the community or region they serve.

The most strategic view of competing chambers was a comment by a chamber Chairperson who had her sights on the long-term strategic work required to be an effective organization. She acknowledged that it was challenging to work together with all the competing organizations but was determined to focus on her organization improving in all that they did as a chamber: “As much as we play well with everybody else [it is] because that is how we’re running our organization. We take the high road, and we partner, and we do things that we can,
but at the end of the day, they’re our competitors [for members].” She added that she always encouraged her chamber’s Executive to have a good relationship and have the best product and service available for business.

The ability to have open communication with other organizations is a method of preventing competition from becoming a distraction to a chamber of commerce. JE2 Executive pointed out that she uses communication to identify how the organizations can work together: “I try to find at least one thing where we can agree. In our case, we identified the expansion of a roadway as impacting several organizations in the area. We all agreed that something needs to be done. Okay, so we got an agreement. Now, let’s talk about how we’re going to get it done.”

A frequent need to address an issue brought the organizations together, but it started with identifying and communicating the problem and how it impacted each organization. Adding to the discussion that an effective chamber of commerce is proactive in their communication with others, JE3 Executive pointed out that she is working to “be very proactive about what we’re doing and how we communicate as much as we can.” She wanted to make sure organizations she worked with on her initiatives were a part of the process, which created the environment where her chamber was an effective and inclusive organization.

Talking about communication as a philosophical position, TE1 Executive pointed out that it is “Always worth keeping an open mind around seeing opportunities with other organizations where you can work together, and the boards of the organization understand why it makes sense.” A fellow CPG Executive, TE3, echoed his view of working together to avoid competition: “We have tried, with some effectiveness, to engage in common ground discussions and appreciating when we have different perspectives on things but, showing common face whenever it’s appropriate and possible.” Both Executives were at the largest most effective
chamber in their respective regions. They proactively worked with the sub-market chambers to show a coordinated effort and work for a united voice for business.

*Emergent Competition Themes*

The key themes that emerged from the convening-related interview content are summarized in Table 9. Where the interviewees appeared to be in general agreement, the sentiment is labeled as “consensus.” Otherwise, specific positions are identified.

Table 9: Competition Themes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Organizations</td>
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Table 9 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other Chambers</th>
<th><strong>Position:</strong> Chambers working together present an opportunity</th>
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<td></td>
<td>HE2: “There’s nine of us chambers here. We all get along really well. I don’t know that any of us view each other as competitors. When I read some of the stuff online about chambers stealing members, or talking bad about other chambers, I’m like, gosh, I can’t even imagine that.”</td>
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<td>TE3: “We have tried, with some effectiveness, to engage in common ground discussions and appreciating when we have different perspectives on things but, showing common face whenever it’s appropriate and possible.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JC1: pointed to the recent efforts for “better communication, and ultimately, I think, better coordination between the different organizations.” He mentioned that it has not always been a priority to communicate and coordinate among the chambers. He did not see the chambers as competing. Instead, he believed there needed to be better collaboration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Development Organizations</th>
<th><strong>Position:</strong> Chambers commonly find themselves competing with EDOs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EE2: “You have not one but four chambers; then you have the EDO of the [region]. They could be viewed as a competitor because some of the things they do are similar in structure to what we do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EC2: “The EDO is an issue for us because they tend to dominate the political environment.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HE2: mentioned that there were some companies in his region that had decided to invest in the economic development organization (EDO) that recruited new businesses to a community and did not join the chamber.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Position:</strong> A chamber can leverage relationships with EDOs to make both more effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HC2 discussed the strong relationship she believed her chamber had with the local EDO. “We tend to work really well with them. Our EDO sees the benefit of our partnering to get things done.” A chamber of commerce and an EDO are interdependent on the other's work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Self-Promotion**

Self-promotion seems simple, but it tended to be an uncomfortable role for a chamber to take on for itself. It was the fifth most identified factor for chamber effectiveness. Bennett
(2005) states that chambers of commerce could see stronger membership retention by “creating greater awareness of chamber services…focusing on key reasons for a business membership.” The study participants mentioned their chamber’s efforts in self-promotion or communication of their accomplishments 47 times in 24 interviews. A chamber typically will defer credit for its accomplishments to volunteer or governmental partners to gain cooperation and support for the future. The disparity of “Self-promotion” being mentioned 26 times less in the interviews than “Competition” was an interesting contrast identified in the study.

*Interview Highlights Relating to Self-Promotion*

With the business environment in a constant state of change, the lack of self-promotion can be detrimental. One chamber Chairperson, HC3 stated it bluntly: “Well, I just don’t think a lot of people know what a chamber does.” A Chairperson in the Major CPG echoed his comments. JC2 expressed that “the value proposition for our chamber of commerce is significant, it’s worth being a part of the chamber. I think we still have, and I believe a lot of chambers have an identity crisis, in other words, knowing what we really do.” He added that chambers could miss the value of their contribution as a whole and then wonder why businesses are not engaging with them. “I think that you can never take for granted how important recognition of an organization is. I spend a lot of time keeping the chamber relevant in the minds of our community. It’s the constant promotion of who we are,” stated JC2.

Executive EE3 acknowledged that her chamber needed to promote their activities better: “We’ve started something new. We try to message very clearly what differentiates us because as far as other chambers and other groups, all of them do events of some sort.” She had recognized the need to tell her chamber’s story proactively to the business community. She added that it
was not a one-time effort. “Repetition is the key to learning, and you have to tell them early and often, again and again, what you’re doing and how well you did it.”

The initiative for self-promotion of the chamber directly was juxtaposed by comments from JE3 Executive. She first pointed out that a chamber can “tend to be very self-effacing and don’t toot our own horn, and you can’t do that because people will conclude that you’re doing nothing if you don’t tell them about your results.” This Executive then proceeded to lament the lack of a relationship with the media in her community, and that resulted in the media not covering her chamber and its efforts to be effective: “It’s a third party telling your story for you, and it's stronger coming from them. We’re not getting that right now, and it’s frustrating.” It has become a focus of her chamber to build a relationship with the media for future benefit. JE1 Executive was more to the point with his comment: “Sometimes I think we’ve got to tell our story a little better.” His Chairperson saw his role as fulfilling a specific function of the chamber self-promotion. JC1 saw his role as “kind of serving as an amplifier of the positive aspects for the members of the chamber.”

Executive JE1 also expressed the value and the role of the chamber of commerce but felt chambers often missed their opportunity to take the position of being the leaders in their community: “Chambers have the appropriate relevance and appropriate lane to run in; they drive their communities forward. We don’t always seize that. We don’t always live up to that.” This missed opportunity was more than just missing a chance to point to the chamber’s effectiveness. It impacted the continual work to establish the chamber as an effective leader in the community or region it served. The importance of making sure the business community will “understand what resources are available to them and for them as members of the organization,” according to
JC1 Chairperson, “is vital to the chamber being effective in the community. Resources not utilized, no matter how beneficial, are worthless.”

There was one specific Executive who mentioned that his chamber does tell their story to the community well. EE1 Executive explicitly stated that he felt that “We toot our own horn, and I think a lot of chambers don’t do that.” He acknowledged it is not typical for a chamber to point out its successful accomplishments consistently, but he saw the importance of doing it for his organization. He later added that it is part of the chamber’s vision to communicate its accomplishments: “It’s the vision that we have for the community, and our ability to communicate the vision is the leadership of our chamber.” This specific tie of communication to the vision and accomplishment of the chamber is vital to the community understanding the chamber's contribution to the betterment of the area.

Emergent Self-Promotion Themes

The key themes that emerged from the convening-related interview content are summarized in Table 10. Where the interviewees appeared to be in general agreement, the sentiment is labeled as “consensus.” In the case of self-promotion, a strong consensus appeared to exist across the major themes that were identified.

Table 10: Self-Promotion Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sentiment</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Awareness | **Consensus:** The public tends not to understand the many roles a chamber plays, a problem that sometimes extends to chamber members | HC3: stated it bluntly, “Well, I just don’t think a lot of people know what a chamber does.”
JC2: “the value proposition for our chamber of commerce is significant; it’s worth being a part of the chamber. I think we still have, and I believe a lot of chambers have, an identity crisis, in other words, knowing what we really do.” |
## Table 10 (Continued)

| Awareness | **Consensus:** The public tends not to understand the many roles a chamber plays, a problem that sometimes extends to chamber members | JC1: The importance of making sure the business community will “understand what resources are available to them and for them as members of the organization is vital to the chamber being effective in the community. Resources not utilized, no matter how beneficial, are worthless.”  
EE1: “They [the members] don’t see a lot of the behind the scenes things that we do. I don’t think [they] appreciate that.” |
| Visibility | **Consensus:** Chambers need to do more to make themselves and their accomplishments more visible | JC2: “I think that you can never take for granted how important recognition of an organization is. I spend a lot of time keeping the chamber relevant in the minds of our community. It’s the constant promotion of who we are.”  
EE3: acknowledged that her chamber needed to promote their activities better. “We’ve started something new. We try to message very clearly what differentiates us because as far as other chambers and other groups, all of them do events of some sort.” She had recognized the need to tell her chamber’s story proactively to the business community. She added that it was not a one-time effort. “Repetition is the key to learning, and you have to tell them early and often, again and again, what you’re doing and how well you did it.”  
JE3: pointed out that a chamber can “tend to be very self-effacing and don’t toot our own horn, and you can’t do that because people will conclude that you’re doing nothing if you don’t tell them about your results.”  
EE1: explicitly stated that he felt that “We toot our own horn, and I think a lot of chambers don’t do that.” He acknowledged it is not typical for a chamber to point out its successful accomplishments consistently, but he saw the importance of doing it for his organization. |
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter looks at how the findings from the participant interviews relate to the two research questions posed at the beginning of this dissertation and two additional questions that emerged over the course of the interviews. It then considers one factor that could be related to chamber effectiveness but remained largely unmentioned: the role of the chamber’s mission and strategic plan. From that, it turns to an analysis of how the findings from the participant issues diverge from the historical record of U.S. chambers and from the limited literature on chambers. Finally, some of the limitations of the research are identified, along with possible directions that future research could take.

Key Questions

There were two research questions initially identified as a focus for this study, presented in Chapter 1 as RQ1 and RQ2. In addition, comments made in the interviews raised two additional questions worth discussing. In this section, we discuss the implications of the findings for each of these questions.

**Question 1: How do the local chamber of commerce Executives and Chairperson define “effectiveness” for their organization?**

During the interviews, this proved to be a puzzling question for the chamber of commerce leaders. Most Executives and Chairpersons defined effectiveness by discussing member retention and the financial strength of the organization. They did not discuss the impact of the organization on the community when addressing this question. The member retention and financial health of the organization are secondary data points reflective of the effectiveness of the
chamber as a business entity. The American Society of Association Executives (2006) states that “Profit is one means of measuring success, not the means.” They go on to state that “Remarkable [organizations] make a practice of aligning their products and services with their mission and keeping members at the center of their universe.”

How the chamber is impacting the community it serves is measured by the results of the actions of the organization. The lack of mention of a chamber’s strategic plan or mission statement, discussed later, points to an organization that may have achieved an informal agreement with respect to its purpose and desire to be productive but lacks documentation to that purpose that has been discussed, planned, and agreed to by a governing body by the chamber.

**Question 2 (RQ 1): What are the perceived factors influencing the effectiveness of chambers of commerce in the United States?**

The five leading factors impacting chamber of commerce effectiveness, based on the coded topics identified in the interviews, are the factors the professionals and lead volunteers identified as impacting the effectiveness of their organizations. In order of most discussed in the interviewing coding process, the five most discussed factor topics were “Leadership,” “Advocacy,” “Convening,” “Competition,” and “Self-Promotion.” Within these topics, several themes emerged. These are summarized in Table 11.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sentiment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>Chamber should be a key influencer in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Chambers should take an active role in politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding of community needs</td>
<td>Some respondents took the position that the chamber understands business community needs whereas others indicated that their community needs were diverse and hard to determine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 11 (Continued)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td><strong>Leadership role</strong></td>
<td>Some respondents indicated that the chamber should be acknowledged leader in the community while others stressed that the chamber should be present, but not necessarily the leader, across the range of initiatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advocacy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>Principal target for advocacy is government, particularly local government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Relationship with government</strong></td>
<td>There was some debate regarding whether the relationship with government should be cooperative, helping governments learn, or whether the chamber’s role should be to keep the local government in line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Need for consistency and transparency</strong></td>
<td>Both are critical to chamber effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Convening</strong></td>
<td><strong>Value</strong></td>
<td>Chambers must focus on events that deliver tangible value to participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>Some respondents emphasized the like-mindedness of participants while others emphasized their diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Inclusiveness</strong></td>
<td>Responses were split between the chamber’s need to be inclusive and the benefits of focusing their attention on members that work to provide value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Technology</strong></td>
<td>Although technology is being incorporated into chamber activities, it is not a threat to chamber survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Other Organizations Forming</strong></td>
<td>The number of other organizations and associations that overlap some chamber functions is proliferating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Other Chambers</strong></td>
<td>Responses were split between concerns about other chambers competing for membership and influence and responses indicating that chambers working together present an opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Economic Development Organizations</strong></td>
<td>Responses were split between the view that chambers commonly find themselves competing with EDOs and the view that a chamber can leverage relationships with EDOs to make both more effective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-promotion</strong></td>
<td><strong>Awareness</strong></td>
<td>The public tends not to understand the many roles a chamber plays, a problem that sometimes extends to chambers themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Visibility</strong></td>
<td>Chambers need to do more to make themselves and their accomplishments more visible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Question 3: How do these factors align among each Community Peer Group?**

When investigating each Community Peer Group, the discussion consistently mentioned the top five overall factors in detail. Both the Executive and Chairperson commented on each factor during their interview. The results point to the factors having an impact on all community sizes for a chamber of commerce. The amount of variation across different peer groups was minimal and less than expected.

The ability to work on these issues was addressed slightly differently among the CPGs. Across all CPGs, “Leadership” and “Advocacy” were the top issues mentioned. Only the Major Cities CPG had “Convening” appear more frequently than “Advocacy.” The goal to be the voice for the business community was prevalent among all CPGs. Part of that role is the ability to bring various business views together to advocate for the whole. All four CPGs commented on the importance of serving these dual purposes of convening and advocacy.

There was a standard connection underlying the top three factors. Each relates to the importance of the chamber of commerce being engaged in the community effectively. Advocacy must include the process to engage with those who influence policy or those who can influence those making policy decisions. Convening is the process of bringing together. To convene interested groups is a factor that also required a chamber to engage the community. A reputation for leadership in the community or region will enhance the effectiveness of both “Advocacy” and “Convening” activities.

It is interesting to note that “Leadership,” “Advocacy,” and “Convening” are factors that describe the chamber’s ability to reach outward. In contrast, the factors of “Competition” and “Self-Promotion” involve responses to environmental threats: the threat of others impinging on...
the chamber’s effectiveness and the threat that the confusion relating to the chamber’s activities will cause it to become ignored.

**Question 4 (RQ2): How do these identified factors impacting effectiveness vary between the Executive and the Chair of a chamber of commerce in the United States?**

This question examined the alignment among the professional staff leader and the volunteer leader. The alignment is closely related to some identifiable variances. Using the same factor topic consolidation as discussed previously, both leaders identify the importance of “Leadership” and “Advocacy” as important factors influencing chamber of commerce effectiveness. While the total references to these two factors were close, the Executives saw “Leadership” as the most crucial factor, and the Chairpersons saw “Advocacy” as a slightly more critical factor for the chamber of commerce effectiveness. Both chamber leaders, in the aggregate, saw the same importance of “Convening” interested parties in the community as an essential factor to their effectiveness. The connection pointed to a strong alignment between the two leaders. The argument can be made that the practice of “Convening” is “Leadership” and can be an element of “Advocacy.”

The executives saw “Self-Promotion” as the next factor of chamber effectiveness. The Chairpersons saw the “Competition” as the next essential factor. Understanding this difference would be a revealing study for future research on chamber executive and chairperson alignment. The two leaders’ views on these two factors could reveal insight that may be beneficial to chambers in their planning.

**The Missing Ingredient: Mission Statement and Strategic Plan**

The unexpected discovery of this study was the lack of discussion of a “Strategic plan” or any mention of the chamber mission statement from the team of leaders at the 12 chambers
interviewed. “Strategic plan” was mentioned in only five interviews for a total of seven mentions out of over 700 coded references. “Goals” was mentioned once in only one interview, and “mission” or “mission statement” was not mentioned in the 24 interviews.

Comments from Interviews

Given the nature of the interview questions, it was revealing how few mentions there were of strategic plans and mission statements among the Executive and volunteer Chairpersons interviewed. The first question of each interview was, “How do you define effectiveness for your organization?” The organization's strategic plan would have been an appropriate part of the answer to explain the effectiveness of the chamber. That was not the case based on the coding of the interviews. TC3 Chairperson answered the question by asking, “Okay, you know nobody knows the answer to the question, right?” His answer spoke to the chamber profession overall and his organization’s strategic focus that the chamber industry was struggling to answer the question about how to measure effectiveness. Another chamber Chairperson, TC2, responded, “Well, I think that is the most important question, the effectiveness of any chamber. For us, we define….” He then explained the complexity of the community where his chamber served and many participants that need to be involved in the strategic planning process. He did not define “effectiveness” for his organization and did not mention a strategic plan or mission statement. One Chairperson, JC3, stated that his chamber took a different approach than having a strategic plan in place for his chamber: “I think the chamber probably will see more of a kind of public-private partnership that we can develop to be more effective rather than the chamber just coming out when needed to say, Gee, here’s what we would like to do; does anybody want to get on board?”
Recognizing the need for a strategic plan rather than going from issue to issue without a plan is the first step toward developing a strategic plan. Another chairperson mentioned how strategic plans could be cumbersome to work with at a chamber. TC2 stated that “sometimes our needs, our perspectives, and therefore the positions we take on chamber policy and chamber programs and chamber strategy, it’s like herding cats to get everybody on board. The time delays do not allow us to be as nimble, in my opinion, as we need to be.” This philosophy that the chamber is too fast-paced to have a strategic plan brought a Benjamin Franklin quote to mind. Franklin said that “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.”

An alternative perspective is that a chamber of commerce without a plan is prone to lose focus. The professional-volunteer governance model employed by chambers makes them prone to shift priorities from one unrelated issue to another each year with a changing board of directors and a new Chairperson. The importance of a consistent plan that the board follows will serve as a foundation for the chamber of commerce to focus on being successful. One executive referred to the work of ACCE in the Horizon Study. “I pulled out their words and phrases. I thought, dog-gone it, if these things are tested, I’m going to start using those words. So, I was impressed,” declared EE1 Executive.

A unique perspective of strategic planning was expressed by HE2 Executive, who boldly stated, “We don’t really do any annual plan report. My board chair went through and read the highlights from the past year. I looked out at the crowd, and it was like blank stares.” His statement raised the question that if you had not clearly stated a plan and goals of a measurable period, how did activities matter? HE2 Executive also commented about his concern for the chamber of commerce industry, worrying that “chambers are going to keep spinning their wheels. I don’t think we’re going to see collective growth. I think we’ll see some [chambers]
grow, and I think we’ll see some shrink, and we’ll see some stay the same.” He added, ‘I feel like chambers are falling behind serving a percentage of the business population.” His concern with the future of chambers and acknowledging that some will succeed and some will not, was particularly interesting considering he did not deliver a plan and measurables to his membership.

Searching related topics in the coded interviews, the codes “goals” and “measurable” did not appear much in the interviews. Only one interview mentioned “goals” once, and two interviews mentioned “measurable(s)” for a total of five mentions. JC3 Chairperson believes each chamber will need to determine its course based on their community. “Each chamber is going to have different goals and different objectives based on their community needs and other criteria and their view of themselves and impacts…of the community.”

TC2 Chairperson indicated that the key to long-term success of chambers across the country will be coming up with the “secret sauce” depending on demographics and other issues relevant to the area. His point was that chambers would all identify the unique deliverable they bring to their community, and it will not be the same deliverable from chamber to chamber or community to community. Chambers will need to specialize for their region. The Chairperson did not explain how they would implement creating a strategic plan once they identified “secret sauce.”

**Potential Role of Chamber of Commerce Mission Statement**

According to Webster’s Dictionary (2016), a mission statement is, “something that states the purpose or goal of a business or organization.” In the context of chambers of commerce, a mission statement can be referred to when needing to keep the organization on track and not going off on an issue that sounds good but does not fit the mission of the chamber. When a promising idea comes up but does not seem to “fit” the organization, assessing the idea against
the mission statement can prevent personal agendas from creeping into the discussion. For the Executives not to mention the mission statement was identified as an indicator that chambers might need to focus on their purpose and strategy. The fact that none of the Chairpersons mentioned the mission statement is concerning. Absent such a statement, the year to year focus of the chamber may change as the Chairperson changes—typically on an annual basis.

As noted in the history of U.S. chambers, the ability to focus on a specific goal, situation, or project has been a key to chamber effectiveness. In today’s complex world, such a laser-like focus on specific activities may not be possible. Nevertheless, a well-crafted mission statement may provide the focus a chamber needs, particularly if incorporated into an equally well-crafted strategic plan. Since chambers of commerce are organizations with many volunteers and staff, the need for a mission statement would seem to be relevant to the organization staying focused. Prolonged searching on the website can leave an impression of the organizations' mission not being relevant. In a few cases, the chamber in question had to be contacted to ask for its mission statement when it was not on their website.

**Potential Role of Chamber of Commerce Strategic Plan**

Leblanc and Fraser (2016) edited a series of essays in their book on board governance. They edited a broad discussion on board responsibilities and how to structure the board of directors for a corporation, non-profit, or not-for-profit organization. There is an extensive discussion about the responsibilities of a CEO. This discussion included hiring a CEO, evaluating the Chief Executive, and planning for a smooth transition to new leadership. Concerning the responsibility of developing any strategic plan to guide the organization's effectiveness, Leblanc and Fraser (2016) mentioned a study documenting that 35 percent of over 836 membership organizations Executives had given their boards a grade of C, D, or F in
strategic development efforts. Leblanc and Fraser stated that this “evidence in the frequent absence of long-range planning items on board agendas” (p. 714).

Related to that discussion, Spence (2005) discusses having a [strategic] plan as the “step-by-step set of plans and goals to move the organization from where it is today to the decided future you have created” (p. 32). Spence also points out that a good plan starts with a baseline. It is an “honest and thorough assessment of your organization based on key indicators…the measures you choose will depend on your industry and your unique organization” (p. 31). Both books discuss strategic planning from a business, not a chamber of commerce, perspective. Nevertheless, their points are applicable, and the limited recognition of the strategic plan’s role stood out in the participant interviews.

**Contributions to the Literature**

As has been mentioned several times, the literature that deals with U.S. chambers of commerce is scarce and mostly dated. The current study contributes to that literature by bringing in a current perspective. In doing so, there are several interesting areas where my research diverges from what has previously been written.

With respect to the history of chambers, today’s chambers no longer have the luxury of focusing on positioning the region relative to a very narrow set of competitors, or to focus on single issues individually, as they come up—both of which were important contributors to the early New York chamber’s success. Similarly, none of the interview participants described high profile projects of the sort that gave visibility to chambers from the middle of the 1800s to the middle of the 1900s. Instead, today’s world appears to be more complicated. To the extent focus still remains, much of today’s focus appears to be on ensuring that local governments do not enact policies that are misaligned with local business interests.
With respect to the chamber research literature, some significant departures from what was previously reported were observed in the interviews. Table 12, constructed by taking the findings summarized in Chapter 2’s Table 2, identifies areas of consistency and divergence from the past literature.

Table 12: Comparison of Interview Findings with Literature and Historical Perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Interview findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Historically, chambers have tended to avoid the spotlight in their activities.</td>
<td>Chambers need to promote themselves, their successes and continually educating the public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Motivation</td>
<td>Volunteers and professional leaders have very different motivations for participation in a chamber.</td>
<td>Contrary to what was expected from the literature and my expectations, the Executive and Chairperson perspectives were quite congruent. Interviews suggested considerable communication between the two roles, which may explain the similarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership Motivation</td>
<td>Members significantly differ in the degree to which they prioritize the common good and personal benefits of membership</td>
<td>Personal benefits appear to be given greater weight. While chambers must still deliver value to members, it is delivered in different ways. Networking opportunities are mentioned most commonly, but education and special topics are also cited as a source of value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>Even where members have competing interests, chambers have been effective in seeking consensus, but one way they achieve this may be through encouraging members of like-minded business leaders, although there is also a tendency of members to adapt to consensus views through the influence of other members.</td>
<td>Two camps continue to exist regarding the importance of like-mindedness vs. that of accommodating diverse needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Small chambers and large chambers operate differently; small chambers tend to be held together by social ties, large chambers tend to be issue driven.</td>
<td>Similar to the literature, small community chambers tended to function on building community among businesses; large community chambers function as change agents in the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chamber Influence</th>
<th>Social status is an important driver of U.S. chamber influence, both within and external to the community. Advocacy is an important way through which a chamber increases its influence.</th>
<th>Influence on local government policy is now the clear focus of influence. Social status is barely mentioned.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptable</td>
<td>Chambers face an inherent tension in the need to achieve both consistency and adaptability.</td>
<td>The need for consistency and staying on message appears to dominate the interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamber Boards</td>
<td>Some research suggests that chamber board size does not seem to influence effectiveness, although practitioners disagree with the finding.</td>
<td>There is a universal belief among executives that board size should be reduced to increase effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Involvement</td>
<td>In the U.S., chambers have emphasized that businesses are taking responsibility for their communities. They have resisted certification or accreditation by the government. Influencing government is seen as an increasingly important chamber role.</td>
<td>The need to influence local government policy is almost universally mentioned in interviews. Business taking responsibility is a much lesser theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
<td>The influence of a chamber is impacted by the degree to which the local market is unionized; as the percentage of unions grows, so does the role of the chamber in providing a balancing force.</td>
<td>Unions were not even brought up as a significant topic in the interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology is reducing the need for face-to-face networking; with globalization, regionally based organizations are becoming less important.</td>
<td>The interview consensus was that technology could be incorporated into some chamber activities, as appropriate, but that face-to-face contact was still central to chamber activities and was unlikely to diminish in importance in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Chambers are becoming less relevant over time.</td>
<td>There was no clear sense that chambers were becoming irrelevant, although it was clear that it was increasingly difficult for chambers to communicate their mission.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the interviews, the past practice of chambers avoiding the spotlight has been replaced with a need to become more visible. Part of this may be a consequence of the need to operate in today’s substantially more competitive and complex environment. When discussing
the activities of their chamber, most Executives mentioned that the community is often not aware of the efforts of the chamber. Chamber Executive EE1 stated, “They [the members] don’t see a lot of the behind the scenes things that we do. I don’t think [they] appreciate that.” When the members and community do not have a clear understanding of what the chamber does, they may question why they should spend their resources with a chamber and will be hesitant to get involved and benefit the chamber.

Establishing individual benefits of membership also appears to be supplanting “the greater good of the community,” although both motivations still exist. The same can be said about accommodating diverse viewpoints, a hot topic today, as opposed to seeking like-minded participants.

Certain topics that were deemed important in the literature, such as the need for chambers to counterbalance unions, were not even mentioned by the interview participants. On the other hand, the need for chambers to inform, and perhaps rein in, the activities of local government was mentioned by virtually every participant. Some of these reactions may be explained by the relatively small sample of participants interviewed. A better explanation may be the changing environment. In the U.S., at least, the role of unions in manufacturing has declined dramatically over the past 50 years; in fact, the main area where unionization has grown is in the government itself. Meanwhile, the government’s involvement in business activities continues to grow. Somewhat surprising, the participants interviewed did not express significant concerns about the impact of technology on chamber activities; they reported being confident in the importance of face-to-face engagement. While it is true that more and more of our daily work and personal needs get accomplished online, there is still the need for human interaction. The need to be
connected in real-time with face to face communication is still something people desire for certain aspects of conducting business, a view universally taken by chamber leadership.

That perception may be somewhat driven by the tendency of chamber members to be older. It may well be that technology will present a greater threat as millennials, and later generations come to dominate upper management ranks. Supporting this age-based analysis, in the interviews “young professionals” were discussed only eight times and only in six interviews. Furthermore, several chamber executives using technology for virtual convening and enhanced communication. While recognizing its potential to have a negative impact on the chamber, most believed that they had identified the best strategy for using technology.

Similarly, few participants questioned the overall relevance of chambers. Instead, they seem focused on their ability to do more of the same, as further evidenced by their attachment to consistency. For example, when asked what they would want to do if the cost of the action was not a part of the effort, the Executives and Chairperson most mentioned adding staff to accomplish more for their chamber or building their chamber building. Pointing to the businesses that get involved in a chamber of commerce, “membership” or “volunteers” was rarely mentioned. Here again, the responses may be driven by the nature of the interview participant pool.

There is one area where today’s chambers are very consistent with past chambers. The role of the chamber of commerce as the voice of business in the community they represent was almost a universal statement. Each organization, across all four Community Peer Groups (CPG), mentioned the role of being the organization that speaks on behalf of the business interests in the community.
**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

As is true for all research, there are always limitations and ideas that surface for potential follow up research projects. I now consider these.

*Limitations*

The analysis of 24 interviews from 12 chambers of commerce covers a representative group by following the ACCE Community Peer Group definition. Using this ACCE defined CPGs to put the organizations into peer groups provided the resource to include chambers from a variety of market sizes. Expanding the number of Executives and Chairpersons interviewed would provide additional detail on the factors impacting chamber of commerce effectiveness. Most of the participant chambers were from the Eastern United States. There were three chambers from the Mid-Western/Mountain Region of the U.S., but none from the West Coast of the country or the region between the Mid-West and Eastern regions of the country. There were attempts to include chambers from those regions, but lack of response and timing prevented their inclusion. The sampling of chambers from the CPGs of ACCE was not random. The selected CPG membership was invited to participate in the study one chamber at a time, in alphabetical order by CPG.

Further in-depth study of chamber Executives and the Chairperson would be beneficial. Attempting to interview or survey all members of the ACCE Community Peer Groups could potentially provide more in-depth results. Conversely, it could prove, at some point, to reach information saturation.

All the interviews, except for one, were conducted by pre-scheduled telephone conversation. While it was possible to pick up on tone and inflection of points during the conversation, interviewing the one participant in person provided subtle non-verbal indicators.
that were not possible via a telephone conversation. Conducting additional interviews in person could have provided more abundant information. The Executive interviews were richer in information and were all longer than the interviews with the Chairpersons. Possible re-phrasing of the questions for the Chairpersons could result in more in-depth conversations.

**Future Research Possibilities**

This study serves as research on an entity that is impacting almost every community in the United States, the local chamber of commerce. Further investigation of the Community Peer Groups within ACCE can be useful to study further the factors influencing chamber of commerce effectiveness. A broader research group by a survey of the CPGs can look deeper into the uses chambers face in their daily efforts to be leaders in their community. Additional research on how chambers of commerce can be effective can translate to a more prosperous community or region with the chamber of commerce leading the success. What each chamber can identify as the factors impacting their effectiveness and, then, strengthening those factors will determine their effectiveness in their community.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

There is no identifiable universal measurement accepted by the chamber of commerce industry in the United States. Anyone can gather a group together and start an organization with “chamber of commerce” in the name. Because there is not a widely accepted system of measurement, it is difficult to assess a chamber’s effectiveness.

This research study provided a snapshot of the chambers of commerce in the United States. The objective was to identify how a chamber can be an effective organization. The experiential views of the Executive and Chairperson of the participating chambers offered a perspective not previously studied. The perspective of these two sets of leaders provided many insights, both concerning how today’s chambers differ from the chambers of the past, and how they might be positioned for future effectiveness.

In this concluding chapter, chamber leadership insights into how the environment is impacting their efforts are discussed. The unexpected degree of coherence between volunteer and professional leadership is then examined—a highly positive finding of the study. The need to anchor activities to each chamber’s mission statement and strategic plan is then proposed. Finally, I end with some specific recommendations to chamber leadership.

**Changing Environment**

During the first 200 years of their history, successful U.S. Chambers of Commerce exhibited clear focus. They were able to focus on a relatively small set of competing communities. They were able to focus on individual issues as they came up. They were able to focus on specific projects that seemed to offer significant benefits to businesses and their
communities. The growing complexity of today’s environment makes such focus difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

There have been significant changes over the past thirty years to the local and global economy affecting chambers of commerce in the United States. Technology has made the world a smaller place to conduct business and communicate. Work can be accomplished without leaving home, thanks to technology. We can communicate and process transactions in seconds when it previously took days or even weeks. People have a cell phone with as much technological power as the computer at work or in their home. This technology started social media, which increased our ability to communicate instantly. However, it also threatened the chamber of commerce role as a networking organization. Businesspeople started to question why a chamber of commerce was necessary. Everything that a chamber offered was available online. If someone wanted training on employee hiring, they could go to their favorite search engine and get instantly connected to thousands or more resources. If someone is interested in finding a company that can perform a service or delivers a specific item, they can do their own research on the world-wide-web to find thorough reviews of companies. Why would anyone need a chamber?

The chamber of commerce has also seen the business and community environment where they operate become crowded with other organizations working on similar business issues. Economic development/business recruitment, downtown or other submarket marketing entities, entrepreneurial assistance, tourism, and minority business development are some examples of specifically dedicated groups that have created organizations to focus on the advancement of the above topics. Many chambers of commerce work on these and other critical issues impacting the community.
The continuing turmoil of the current political environment was an identified source of division in the community when it was necessary to be working together. How each chamber of commerce could work to be more of a unifying entity was a struggle several organizations mentioned briefly during their interview. In the early days of chambers, as in the example of the New York Chamber of Commerce presented in the introduction, clear focus was able to overcome massive divisions within the membership, such as whether or not to declare independence from Britain. Lacking such focus, how can a chamber hope to convince stakeholders on different sides of political battle lines to work together?

Differences between Leaders

The process of conducting the interviews with the chamber of commerce Executives and the Chairpersons from the same chamber gave an insight into the differing perspectives on chamber effectiveness within the same chamber. I had expected these differences to be quite stark.

The interviews with the most amount of information and the most useful information for this study had a unique characteristic. In these circumstances, both the Executive and the Chairperson unknowingly spoke about the other person individually as a critical factor to the chamber being successful. They each believed the other had strong leadership skills required that made the chamber more successful. The Chairperson who mentioned the Executive as a factor for success tended to speak to the Executive’s strong interpersonal skillset and length of time on the job. Several times the Executive was labeled as being a leader that the Chairperson considered to be “The Chamber of Commerce” in the community. The Executive's leadership was at the level they were not distinguishable from the organization itself. This identification meant that the Executive was the leader of an active chamber. While this mutual respect for
leadership is impressive, both the Executive and Chairperson of a chamber of commerce did not articulate how they defined effectiveness for their chamber of commerce. The identifiable elements of effectiveness must be articulated for the chamber to be successful. The leadership of the chamber must advocate for the organization in strategic self-promotion to be effective.

**Unfulfilled Role of Mission and Strategy?**

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the research was that among the five factors perceived to contribute to a chamber of commerce effectiveness—leadership, advocacy, convene, competition, self-promotion—there appeared to be a missing element: a clear mission and strategic plan. Without a mission to guide priorities, how can a chamber decide among the many activities it could pursue, and items to put on its agenda? Without a strategic plan, the organization is set on a course to flip from one priority to another without goals to measure their accomplishments and effectiveness.

If the chamber of commerce has a good story to tell about what it has done, it needs to tell the story loudly and often, as there are many competing voices in the community that want the business community’s attention. This effort will help the chamber convene the related organizations in the community to work together. It also helps the chamber be stronger for effectiveness when dealing with competing forces for current member and potential member attention and investment. The measurements the chamber uses to measure its effectiveness needs to become an often-repeated set of criteria that the chamber repeats to the staff, membership, and community. When the community can associate the criteria successfully with the chamber, it will be considered effective.

Discussing how chambers are working to be effective organizations in their community showed an industry succeeding while at the same time struggling to be useful for the community.
or region served. The Executives or Chairpersons all left an impression of wanting their organizations to be effective. The ability to articulate what effectiveness would look like and how to achieve it proved to be difficult to explain for all participants. Some were able to articulate the desire in a way that gave an indication of their chamber being a “peak organization,” as previously discussed. To be the “peak organization,” the chamber had to have a significant impact on the community that was followed by other organizations.

**Implications for Practice**

A standard perception of chambers of commerce is that they are strictly created for networking. The findings in this study can be useful to a chamber of commerce Executive or Chairperson looking to develop a strategic plan and direction for their organization. While chambers need to embrace that they “own” convening, the most effective convening is more than networking and takes place in the context of other activities. These activities include leadership development, advocacy, addressing competition in a constructive manner, and self-promotion. For leadership development, nearly all the interviews showed Executives and chamber Chairpersons working together to develop each other. Effective leaders also focused on the convening other chambers and related associations to identify shared goals and work together effectively. Another particularly important aspect of leadership involves facilitating group activities and helping to find the consensus needed for the chamber to advocate effectively.

One of the most critical influences on the business climate of today’s communities is local government and regulations. Effective advocacy needs to take into account the needs of multiple stakeholders who may have very different perspectives on issues impacting business. From the interviews, it is clear that both cooperative and adversarial approaches to the
government have been tried. In the long run, however, chambers will need to establish a working relationship with local government if their recommendations are to have any impact.

Addressing competition has many facets. It can involve competition from other regions, competition from other associations, competing demands of stakeholders and for stakeholder participation, and competition for time and resources across many possible priorities that demand chamber attention. It can even involve determining who are competitors and who are allies. The most effective chamber leaders first seek to identify and emphasize areas of common interest, no matter what form the competition takes, before acknowledging inevitable competition frictions. To quote one chamber Chairperson, “As much as we play well with everybody else because that is how we’re running our organization, we take the high road, and we partner, and we do things that we can, but at the end of the day, they’re our competitors.”

One of the ways that the research findings of this study differ from those of prior research is in the need for self-promotion. With so many competing associations, stakeholders, regions, and priorities, the laid-back philosophy of the chambers of the past is no longer effective. To the contrary, many of the leaders interviewed felt that chambers had lost their identity as the center of influence through not being proactive in explaining their effectiveness. The key here is to make others aware of the chamber’s impact without minimizing the role played by other associations and stakeholders.

Probably the most significant finding from this research has been that chamber leadership is not aware of or undervalues the power of a mission statement and strategic plan. The biggest danger facing today’s chambers is a loss of focus. Without focus, activities such as advocacy, addressing competition, and communicating its successes will either be diluted or even ineffective. The mission statement and strategic plan can direct the chamber’s performance focus
towards results and outcomes benefitting the community, rather than an annual count of activities. They can substitute for the narrow focus on competing regions, sequential issues and high visibility projects that captured earlier chambers focus. Crafting a mission statement and creating a meaningful strategic plan is not easy. The research suggests, however, that focus is needed if chambers want to continue to thrive. Together, the mission and plan can help chambers regain the consistency that is required for long term impact.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
Appendix 1: IRB letter

3/18/2019

Robert Rohrlack, Jr
Muma College of Business
10017 New Parke Road
Tampa, FL 33626

RE: Exempt Certification
IRB#: Pro00039560
Title: What are the factors influencing Chamber of Commerce effectiveness?

Dear Mr. Rohrlack:

On 3/17/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that your research meets criteria for exemption from the federal regulations as outlined by 45 CFR 46.104(d):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF HRPP policies and procedures.

Please note, as per USF HRPP Policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in ARC. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the
change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant an Amendment or new application.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D.,
Chairperson USF Institutional Review Board
Appendix 2: Logos and Letter Requesting Participation

{DATE}

Dear:

I am the President and CEO of the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce in Tampa, Florida. I am working on a research study investigating the effectiveness of the chamber of commerce industry. Would you consider participating in my research for my dissertation for part of the work for a Doctor of Business Administration degree? I am studying at The University of South Florida, a Preeminent Research University located in Tampa.

The bulk of my research is interviewing chambers of commerce executives across the United States seeking subject matter expert views on issues impacting chambers of commerce effectiveness. I am asking for the participation of the top Executive and the Chairperson from the same chambers of commerce to be interviewed to discuss chamber of commerce effectiveness.

Using the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) Community Peer Groups (CPG), for a segmentation guide, I am investigating what the representative participants in four different CPG’s view as the factors influencing effectiveness.

It is critical to the research that the Executive and the Chairperson from the same chamber of commerce participate in the interviews. Because of your involvement in the ACCE Community Peer Group, your chamber has been identified as a chamber of commerce of interest. The study results will be beneficial to chambers of commerce as they work to be effective organizations in the community they serve. Both ACCE and the Florida Association of Chamber Professionals support this research.

The interviews will be conducted by telephone. The two leaders’ interviews at each chamber should take place during the same week, but not at the same time. You and your chairperson will be interviewed separately. There are a series of opinion questions I will use for all interviews. The interview should take between 30-45 minutes to complete.

My goal is to establish a baseline on chamber research and identify future research opportunities on chambers. All identifiable information will be kept confidential.

I will follow up with a telephone call in a few days to answer any questions and, hopefully, gain your willingness to participate. I have attached some information on the USF Doctor of Business
Administration program for your review. Please let me know if there are any questions, I can answer ahead of my call to you.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Bob Rohrlack, CCE  
USF DBA Cohort 2019  
P.O. Box 420, Tampa, FL 33601  
STUDY NUMBER: 00039560
Appendix 3: List of Coded Topics

Topics Coded from Executive and Chairperson Interviews

1. ACCE
2. Advocacy
3. Board
4. Budget
5. Communication
6. Competition
7. Convening
8. Effectiveness
9. Events
10. Funding
11. Future
12. Goals
13. Influence
14. Leadership
15. Measurable
16. Membership
17. New Project
18. Networking
19. Organization
20. Other Organizations
21. Politicians
22. Public/Private Partnerships
23. Relationships
24. “Seen One Chamber…”
25. Self-Promotion
26. Special Interest
27. Staff
28. Strategic Plan
29. Technology
30. Ten-year forecast
31. Threats
32. Vision
33. Volunteers
34. Workforce
35. Young Professionals
Appendix 4: Interview Script

Name: __________________________ Date: ________________
Chamber: __________________________ Phone number: ________________

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research on chambers of commerce in the United States. This interview is part of the fulfillment of my research for a DBA degree at The University of South Florida. I am researching what chamber of commerce Executives and their volunteer Chairperson, as subject matter experts, identify as the factors that influence chamber of commerce effectiveness. This interview is being recorded and transcribed for accuracy. However, all information will remain individually confidential, and results will be only be reported in the aggregate for the study. No participant or chamber will be identified by name in the study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

These questions are specific to your chamber of commerce or the community your chamber serves. With that in mind:

1. How do you define “Effectiveness” as it relates to your Chamber?

2. Which of your chamber of commerce activities do you view as the most effective? Why?

3. What factors in the community impact your activities for greater effectiveness? Why?
   (For prompting, if needed: networking, skill development, advocacy, business growth)

4. Are there factors that prevent (or in any other way impact) your chamber from having greater effectiveness? Why?
   (For prompting, if needed: competition from other organizations, economy, politics)

5. Not considering any budget implications, what factors would enable your chamber of commerce to be more effective?
6. Are there any organizations in the market that your chamber competes with or otherwise has the potential to impact your effectiveness?

________________________________________________________________________

7. What factors inhibit your organization's effectiveness? What are your strategies to minimize or eliminate those factors?

________________________________________________________________________

8. Any other comment on the factors that impact the effectiveness of your chamber of commerce?

________________________________________________________________________

9. What is your vision of the chamber of commerce industry ten years in the future?

________________________________________________________________________

10. Is there anything else you would like to add to the discussion?

________________________________________________________________________

NOTE: There will be follow up questions based on responses during the interview.

The following questions are for aggregate census data for the study, again, no personal data will be share specific to any one person. All data will be anonymous and reported in the aggregate.

11. CENSUS QUESTIONS

CEO:
  a) Years in the chamber industry: ___________________________
  b) The previous industry worked (if applicable): ________________
  c) Years at the current chamber: ___________________________
  d) Number of FTE’s: __________
  e) Male/Female
  f) Age group: 30-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, 70+
  g) Education background: __________________________

CHAIR:
  a) Years member at this chamber: ___________________________
  b) Years serving in volunteer leadership of any capacity at the chamber: ___________________________
  c) Chair’s term of office is how long: ___________________________
  d) Your role in the employer company: ___________________________
  e) Employer number FTE’s: ___________________________
  f) Male/Female
  g) Age group: 30-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, 70+
  h) Education background: __________________________