Coping with the Reality of MSU’s Closure

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# Abstract

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The paper investigates how faculty of Mountain State University’s School of Business are coping with the University’s closure. The stages of coping and effective coping strategies are identified. The loss of a job is one of the most difficult events that one will face in their lifetime. This research is applicable to anyone who may experience the involuntary loss of a job. Nonparticipant observations and interviews were utilized to better understand how faculty are coping. The research found faculty are coping with the closure of the University and the loss of their jobs by progressing through the stages of grief similar to the stages experienced during the loss of a loved one. The paper identified coping strategies which may benefit others who face a loss of employment. Findings were organized into specific themes which include stages of grief, faith, opportunities, and preparation.

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# Coping with the Reality of MSU’s Closure

# Introduction

On June 28th, 2012, the Higher Learning Commission voted to withdraw accreditation from Mountain State University (MSU). Less than one month after the HLC’s decision, a massive layoff was announced. The University cut the workforce by approximately 50-percent with administrative, faculty, and staff positions eliminated. Employees were given a sixty day notice through the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act. Two additional rounds of layoffs followed leaving the institution with approximately 65 employees out of nearly 350.

The University was the largest private college in the state of West Virginia. Even though traditional on-campus enrollment had declined, the rapid growth of the online programs allowed the University to continue to grow. Despite the sluggish U.S. economy with many organizations downsizing or restructuring, the faculty felt secure in their positions. As a result of the HLC’s decision, middle-aged faculty and those nearing retirement are now facing unemployment. These individuals will be faced with a job search in an area where there are few opportunities for those with their level of education and experience.

The impending closure of Mountain State University has been an emotional time for the faculty, staff, and students of the University. Many have described the emotions as being similar to those experienced with the loss of a loved one. This qualitative research study attempts to understand how faculty are coping with the closure of the University and the loss of their jobs. The paper seeks to identify coping strategies which may benefit others who face a loss of employment.

Triangulation was utilized in the data collection of this qualitative study to provide multiple sources of data. Nonparticipant observations and interviews were combined to see and hear the participants. According to Marshall & Rossman (1995) triangulation can be used to “corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research in question” (p. 144). Triangulating multiple sources enhances a study’s generalizability and strengthens the study’s usefulness for other settings (1995).

This topic was of interest to me as I am employed by Mountain State University. The past six months have been extremely difficult for me both professionally and emotionally. It is my hope that this research can benefit me, my colleagues, and others who may face a similar situation in the future. There is abundant research available on coping with job loss, however, there was little research involving a qualitative study incorporating the stages of grief experienced by the employees during a business closing.

# Literature Review

Unemployment, divorce, and the death of a loved one are thought to be the most stressful and personally difficult events that one could face in their lifetime (King, 1993). Grieving is a natural process experienced in “all significant changes, losses and life transitions, including bereavement and divorce” (Blau, 2008, p. 530). Individuals may experience a loss of self-esteem, loss of daily routine, loss of purposeful activity, loss of income, and loss of predictability and sense of security (1993).

Holmes and Rahe, who conducted research on the relationship between stress and illness, compiled a list of 43 life events that people commonly feel are stressful, in that they “require a person to make psychological adjustments in order to adapt to the event” (Holmes & Rahe, 1967, p. 1). Being without a job through a layoff, unemployment, or firing, is considered major life-events according to the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Experiencing a major life-event requires some degree of adaptation, change, or coping (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Work is an economic necessity for most; however, it can be so much more. With more hours spent at work than at home, a job becomes a “major component of one’s personal identity” (Blau, 2008, p. 530). According to Gowan and Gatewood (2001), work provides “structure of time, contact with others, and a sense of identity” (p. 278).

According to Stafford (2011), “Shock. Anger. Sadness. Reaction to a job loss can mirror reaction to a death. People often move through predictable cycles of grief.” (p. 22). Studies conducted by Blau (2008) found the grieving stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, exploration, and acceptance based on Kiber-Ross’s stages of dying.

## Stages of loss

### Shock

A feeling of shock or denial is the first emotion experienced after receiving the news of a job loss or closing (Blau, 2008).

### Anger

The employee feels betrayed and is overcome with anger (Blau, 2008).

### Bargaining

The employee believes if they had done X or Y, the situation would be different (Brown, 2008). The employee may try to make a deal or bargain to avoid being laid off (Blau, 2008).

### Depression

The employee is overcome by feelings of sadness and withdrawal (Blau, 2008).

### Acceptance

The employee is at peace with the situation and is ready to accept whatever comes (Brown, 2008). Richardson (2001) emphasizes acceptance does not mean you agree with the company’s decisions, however, you have decided to move on with your life.

The speed at which individuals move through each stage is unique to each person. Individuals may fluctuate between the stages before firmly reaching acceptance (Brown, 2008).

## Plant Study

A study was conducted by Gary Blau of Temple University (2008) on employees of a pharmaceutical company after announcing the plant would either be closed or sold within 2 years. The plant was later closed. Some employees lost their job while others were acquired by the competitor. The study found the denial, bargaining, and depression stages significantly decreased while acceptance increased over time.

## Coping Strategies

Thomson (1997) defines coping strategy as the “attempts made by individuals to eliminate stress-producing factors (stressors) in their environment or to minimize the effects of these factors” (p. 74). With problem-focused coping, the individual attempts to control or manage stress by directly altering the situation. With emotion-focused coping, the individual attempts to “regulate responses to, and decrease the effects of, a stressful situation” (p. 74). McCarty (2009) offers the following suggestions 1) never doubt yourself or your abilities, 2) stay connected/network, 3) contact a job search company and utilize online job searches, 4) volunteer and use your skills and strengths for others, and 5) find other income through freelance or piecemeal jobs. Clark (2011) recommends 1) assessing skills, 2) making a list of certifications and credentials, 3) build your network, 4) job search online, 5) spend smart, 6) communicate with friends and family, 7) do an ego check, 8) take a mental health break, and 9) count your blessings.

## Coping with job loss

According to Gowen and Gatewood (2001), “job loss ultimately impacts overall well-being, outlook on life, and self-esteem” (p. 279). To combat these negative reactions, individuals can utilize several coping strategies.

### Reassessment

Losing a job can cause people to focus on the negative aspects of the job loss. King (1993) believes the initial shock can cause “tunnel vision”. However, a job loss can be seen as an opportunity forcing individuals to pursue other options. King (1993) advises people to “debrief the circumstances and events leading up to the loss of your job”. Brown (2008) advises people to avoid making quick decisions regarding employment opportunities as this “is a perfect opportunity to reinvent yourself and your career” (p. 10).

### Finding an Outlet

Seeking healthy ways to deal with anger, resentment, and frustration, will help dissolve ill feelings. Physical exercise, volunteering with civic organizations, or enjoying hobbies can help individuals let go of the bitterness and anger (King, 1993). These activities provide opportunities to re-evaluate and reflect to regain perspective (Brown, 2008).

### Support

Individuals may face the debilitating emotions of “shame, embarrassment, anxiety, and fear” (HR Focus, 1993, p 12) when coping with job loss. The emotional upheavals suffered by the employee may have a ripple effect on other family members including his or her spouse, partner, children, and extended family. Gowen and Gatewood (2001) believe social support is critical as family and friends can play a role in finding employment opportunities and stress “social support encourages individuals to maintain an optimistic attitude during job search” (p. 284). Richardson (2001) explains “you will need people to listen and provide a safe haven for you to vent, cry, or express your fears and concerns” (p. 56).

# Methodology

I had low expectations before the data collection. I was confident my colleagues would support my educational pursuit; however, considering the topic, I was doubtful they would be eager to discuss their feelings.

## Description of Setting

The setting for my research was the School of Business at a private institution of higher education in southern West Virginia. The School of Business is located on the 3rd floor of Carter Hall on the main Beckley campus. Faculty offices, two computer labs, seven classrooms, restrooms, and a faculty lounge are located on the 3rd floor.

As a result of the loss of accreditation, only students enrolled in the teach-out plan are permitted to enroll in courses. There are a limited number of traditional classes this semester with the majority of the faculty load comprised of online classes. Therefore, few students enter the building.

*O.C. During a typical semester, the student traffic would be much greater. In past semester’s it was customary to see students meeting in groups in vacant classrooms, faculty engaging with students in the hallway, and students visiting faculty offices. I feel the decreased interaction with students plays a role in the mood.*

## Description of Subjects

There is an administrative assistant, seven faculty (including myself), and the Dean in the School of Business. The faculty participating in this study have from 1 to 41 years of experience teaching at the institution. The School of Business has one professor specializing in each of the following content areas: marketing, legal studies, business and office management, management and finance, accounting and finance, computer information systems, and management. Faculty teach both traditional classroom courses and online courses utilizing the Blackboard course management system.

## Description of Process

A letter of permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Dean of the School of Business. Marshall University’s IRB Research (Protocal) application form was submitted to gain approval to conduct interviews with School of Business faculty. Exempt review was requested as the study posed no more than minimal risk to the participants. In addition to the application form, an abstract, curriculum vitae, certification of successful completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Human Research Curriculum, informed consent form, letter of permission from the Dean, copy of interview questions, and the principal investigator’s curriculum vitae and CITI certificate were submitted to the IRB.net secure web-based system.

Once approval to conduct qualitative research was granted by Marshall University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), I was required to complete the IRB process at Mountain State University. Completing two separate processes to obtain approval from both organizations was lengthy. The approval letters from both organizations are available in the Appendix.

*O.C. I assumed the IRB process at MSU would be granted based upon the approval by Marshall University. This was not the case. I was required to complete the MSU IRB application and submit all required documentation for MSU.*

Once approval was received from MSU’s IRB, I sent an email to School of Business faculty to request their participation in the research. The email described the purpose of my research and included the letter of approval from the institution’s Institutional Review Board and a copy of the interview questions. The faculty quickly responded and scheduled times for the interview. Five of the seven faculty and the Dean agreed to participate in the study. I did not receive a response from one instructor. He was out of the office during the time interviews were scheduled.

*O.C. I was pleasantly surprised at the response rate. In the IRB application, I stated I would interview 4-6 faculty. I was hopeful I could obtain 4, however, I doubted I would be able to interview 6.*

## Quality

Validity was strengthened through the use of triangulation where multiple methods of data collection were utilized (Creswell, 2009). According to Bogdan and Biklin (2007) multiple methods “lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena you were studying” (p. 115-116). Silverman and Marvasti (2008) explain the combination of observations and interviews allow “sources to corroborate each other” (p. 157).

# Interviews

Interviews were conducted with five of the seven faculty and the Dean. Interviews were scheduled on Tuesday, November 27th and Thursday, November 29th. Interviews were conducted within the department and were approximately 15 minutes in duration.

During each interview, I explained my purpose in conducting the study. A copy of Marshall University’s Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study was provided. Each participant reviewed the document, placed their initials on each page, and signed the last page. Once their consent was obtained, I proceeded with the face-to-face interview. Notes were taken during each interview. The following questions were asked during each interview:

1. There are several stages of loss with a layoff similar to those you experience after losing a loved one: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Which stage are you currently in?
2. Which stages have you experienced?
3. What coping strategies have helped you deal with this situation?
4. How do you stay motivated to work each day when you know the end is near?
5. Where have you found support?
6. Have you found the silver lining in this experience?
7. What has been the most disturbing part of this experience?
8. What advice would you give others on how to survive a layoff?

## Summary of Individual Responses

The following is a summarization of the individual interview sessions. The subject responses are based on researcher notes taken during the interview.

### Participant #1

Sex: Female

Years of service: 24

Location of interview: faculty office

1. She is currently between the anger and acceptance stages of a layoff.
2. She has experienced all stages of layoff – shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
3. The most effective coping strategy has been discussions with coworkers. Many of the discussions ended with tears shed. She also found peace in prayer.
4. She stays motivated for the students and believes they deserve the very best.
5. She has found support from her family, church family, and coworkers.
6. She is confident there will be a silver lining in this experience, however, at this time; she hasn’t found the silver lining.
7. The most disturbing part of this experience has been the feeling that it is so unfair and there is nothing that can be done.
8. She recommends to those who may face a layoff to keep a resume updated, keep skills updated, do not give yourself completely to your job, and to give the best you can, however, walk away at the end of the day. She further explained that she had missed important family events as a result of working and was determined to never let work take her away from her family again.

*O.C. Participant 1 was in tears by the conclusion of this interview. She has over 25 years of employment with the institution and it is obvious this is more than a job. She has devoted her life to this school. Her son is employed by the institution and is the sole-provider for his family. With two small children, he may be forced to relocate to obtain employment. Participant 1 is a great woman of God.*

### Participant #2

Sex: Female

Years of service: 14

Location of interview: faculty office

1. She is currently in the anger stage of a layoff. She believes the institution should not be closing and it could have been easily prevented.
2. She has experienced the anger and depression stages.
3. As a coping strategy, she has been realistic and realized for the past 1 ½ years the school could lose accreditation and close. She has made preparations.
4. Her strong sense of responsibility to the students has allowed her to stay motivated. This character trait has kept her focused.
5. She has found support at home from her husband, an aunt, and coworkers.
6. She has found the silver lining in this experience. She has now been provided with an opportunity to do something different. She was comfortable in her job and did not have any intentions of seeking employment elsewhere. She now has this opportunity to begin a new chapter in her life.
7. The most disturbing part of this experience has been the level of uncertainty for the past 1 ½ years since the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) placed the institution on Show Cause. The uncertainty continues as faculty, staff, and students await the HLC’s appeal decision.
8. As advice to others facing a layoff, she advises people read the signals and be aware of what is going on with your business. Employees should be aware of the level of business so they can anticipate a layoff. If there is a chance, get ready financially, pay off bills, save money, and get a resume ready. The more prepared a person is, the better they can handle a layoff.

*O.C. This participant requested additional time to consider her responses to the questions. She seemed to appreciate the opportunity to discuss her feelings. This interview almost seemed to be therapeutic. Her eyes appeared to fill with tears during a couple of the questions. Overall, she appeared to accept the situation and was ready to seek other opportunities. She provides health insurance for her household. The loss of insurance coverage has been a major concern.*

### Participant #3

Sex: Male

Years of service: 1 year

Location of interview: faculty office

1. He is currently in the anger stage as he still has some bitterness.
2. He has experienced shock, anger, and depression.
3. Looking for other opportunities and going through the exercise of seeking employment has helped him cope with this situation.
4. He stays motivated for the students. He believes the actions taken by the University have focused on the students.
5. He has found support from colleagues.
6. The silver lining in this experience has been the focus on the students and promoting the best interests of the faculty.
7. The most disturbing part of this experience has been watching bureaucracy in action. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) doesn’t put a face to decisions and deals with people as numbers.
8. He advises other to come to a point of acceptance. He is not sure how each person gets to that point as each person’s experience will be different. He described this experience as a loved one being killed by a drunk driver. This act is completely out of your control.

*O.C. I had previously described the past few months as being similar to watching a loved one die a slow death. However, his description seemed to be a better analogy. It appears the actions of the former President caused this situation. The faculty and staff are facing the ramifications even though they did not have any control of the situation.*

### Participant #4

Sex: Female

Years of service: 8 years

Location of interview: faculty office

1. She is currently in the acceptance phase of the stages of loss.
2. She has experienced anger.
3. As a coping strategy, she has continued with her life.
4. She has not been motivated to work each day.
5. She has found support in talking to coworkers.
6. She has found a silver lining in this experience. She will no longer have travel expenses from her daily commute and will enjoy lower fuel costs.
7. She has found the continued lack of communication, the heavy teaching load, and the alarming information released by news media to be the most disturbing part of this experience.
8. She would recommend not letting a layoff rule your life and would advise others not to obsess about the situation as it is out of your control.

*O.C. Participant 4 retired from the state of West Virginia several years ago. She plans to retire again when the University closes. Her future is financially secure and she plans to enjoy retirement. Since her financial needs are met, she appears to be much more relaxed about the situation.*

### Participant #5

Sex: Female

Years of service: 14 years

Location of interview: faculty office

1. She is currently in the anger stage.
2. She has experienced shock, denial, and anger.
3. As a coping strategy, she has paid off bills to eliminate financial hardship.
4. She stays motivated with the possibility the HLC’s decision will be overturned during the appeal process.
5. She has found support in her family and immediate coworkers.
6. The silver lining of this experience has been she has been forced to look for other opportunities.
7. The most disturbing part of this experience has been the constant delays, no information and the lack of substantial effort by the Board of Trustees.
8. As advice to others, she recommends getting finances in order and always looking for other opportunities.

*O.C. It appeared Participant 5 had started packing her office. There was a box partially packed with notebooks in the floor. The walls of her office are covered with pictures of her horses and framed certificates received from SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise) and other faculty accomplishments. She has created extra shelving on the walls above her desk and bookcase which are filled with nick-nacks. She has a small office filled with years of memories to pack.*

### Participant #6

Sex: Female

Years of service: 41 years

Location of interview: classroom

1. She is in the bargaining phase.
2. She has experienced shock, denial, and anger.
3. Her family and her faith in God have allowed her to cope with this situation.
4. She has been motivated to work each day by her love for her job. She has been blessed with good health and has only missed 4 or 5 days in 41 years due to poor health.
5. She has found support from her coworkers, family, and through her Christian faith.
6. At this time, she hasn’t found a silver lining in this experience.
7. The most disturbing part of this experience has been the ripple effect on the city and her coworkers.
8. As advice to others, she recommends staying positive and having faith in God. She shared that she always expected to retire from the institution.

*O.C. Participant 6 has over 40 years of teaching with Mountain State University. She was very emotional during the interview. This has been her only place of employment. She mentioned her faith in God numerous times throughout the interview. Although she was sad, she appeared to be at peace****.***

# Nonparticipant Observations

Nonparticipant observations were conducted on numerous occasions throughout the data collection period. The faculty offices are located in two small areas on the 3rd floor of Carter Hall. I observed the actions and conversations between faculty within their individual offices and in the reception area where the administrative assistant is located. Additional observations were made in the faculty lounge.

On Tuesday, December 4th, a team from MSU represented the institution at an appeal hearing with the Higher Learning Commission in Chicago, IL. A number of faculty and staff held a prayer vigil in a chapel on campus during the appeal hearing. Several faculty stopped by the desk of the administrative assistant several times throughout the day to see if she had heard anything. The Dean of the School of Business was one of the team members representing the institution and she had promised to call with an update at the conclusion of the hearing. Two faculty stated they were nervous and unable to eat breakfast on the day. There were discussions about how the University would proceed if the HLC’s decision was overturned.

*O.C. Many appeared nervous on the day of the appeal hearing. They anxiously awaited news from the appeal team.*

One faculty member has been busy packing her office this past week. Her appearance has changed. Denim is permitted on dress down Fridays; however, she has been wearing denim throughout the week.

*O.C. She is the only instructor I have witnessed packing her office. It appears she has accepted the situation. She is always dressed professionally and it surprises me to see her dressing down on a regular basis.*

Historically, during the week of Thanksgiving, the Administrative Assistant decorates the office for Christmas. Wreaths are placed on each faculty office door and a Christmas tree is decorated in the reception area. As of December 7th, there was no sign of the Christmas season in the common areas or in faculty offices.

*O.C. I overheard the Administrative Assistant comment that she thought decorating for Christmas would be too difficult emotionally as this would be the last time she would put up the tree. I assume she made the decision to avoid an emotionally difficult task. This surprises me as she continues to hope for MSU to win the appeal.*

On Wednesday, December 7th, the physical plant was collecting the departmental coffee pots. Faculty were sad to see be without, however, they quickly discussed how to obtain another coffee pot.

*O.C. The faculty appeared to joke about the missing coffee pot stating they would rather give up toilet paper than the coffee pot.*

On Friday, December 9th, an employee recognition luncheon was hosted for current employees and those who were previously laid off. Many employees who are no longer employed by MSU came back for the event. I witnessed many employees wiping tears as they watched a video of current and former employees at various University functions over the years. After the Interim President’s wife brought a tearful goodbye message, faculty and staff rose to their feet and clapped in support.

*O.C. I can see people are at a much better place than they were several months ago. Spirits appear to be higher and people seem to be stronger. It appears many are reaching the acceptance stage.*

# Description of Findings

At the conclusion of the action research, the findings were organized into the form of themes or categories. The following themes appeared to be consistent throughout the research:

## Faith

The employee’s faith, or lack thereof, in a higher power was obvious during the action research. The employees who profess to be Christians have held on to their faith and found comfort in a higher power. They consistently found support in their faith and time in prayer was an effective coping strategy for them.

## Stages of Grief

The qualitative study supports the literature review identifying stages of grief during job loss. Each participant in the study clearly experienced stages of grief similar to those experienced when losing a loved one. The stages experienced and the length of each stage appeared to fluctuate depending upon the individual. Each grieving process was unique to the individual.

## Opportunities

While devastating, the involuntary loss of a job forces individuals out of their comfort zone. The participants in the study were comfortable with their jobs. Seeking other employment opportunities was not of interest to them. They will now have an opportunity to seek other employment options which is somewhat frightening and exciting.

## Preparation

The participants in this study felt preparation eased the stress of the situation. Financial security through increased savings and paying debts will make the transition to a significantly reduced income much easier. The participants encouraged others to be prepared for a job search by honing skills and having a current resume or curriculum vitae.

# Conclusion

The research found faculty are coping with the closure of the University and the loss of their jobs by progressing through the stages of grief similar to the stages experienced during the loss of a loved one. The paper identified coping strategies which may benefit others who face a loss of employment.

If I were doing this study over again, I would conduct the study differently. I would like to expand the research by conducting an online survey utilizing Survey Monkey incorporating faculty from all disciplines at Mountain State University. The final survey question would solicit volunteers for an in-depth interview. The Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale could be incorporated into the study. A survey could increase the reliability of the research.

Future researchers could study the cycle of grief from the point a layoff is announced until the employee reaches the acceptance stage. Additional research could explore the length of each stage of grief and identify if and how each coping strategy affects the cycle.

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