


# Chapter 4

## When the Institution Closes: Navigating Job Loss and Identity in Higher Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines the loss of identity felt by faculty whose positions are eliminated due to program prioritization or college closure. Using personal narrative as a reflective framework, the author explores the emotional and psychological effects of this loss, drawing on academic theory from sociology, psychology, and management. These theories offer insight into the deep connection faculty have with their profession, helping explain why the involuntary separation from an academic position can be traumatic. They also shed light on the emotional states that faculty members might experience during this time. Understanding the process of loss may help affected professors navigate the transition to a new identity more effectively.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Faculty and staff across the country are acutely aware of the challenges facing higher education, including the “demographic cliff” and the growing number of college closures. I believe it is also important to understand the people behind program eliminations and institutional shutdowns—to learn how faculty feel and how they are coping with the loss of their positions. I was a professor at The College of Saint Rose, which closed in 2024. What follows is part of my personal story. It

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explores why I identified so strongly with my role as a Saint Rose professor and how I felt when that identity was lost. While this is my story, I believe it reflects what many others in my position have experienced after losing their academic roles. It is important to share the stories behind the program cuts and closures—the stories of people who are displaced, frightened, and angry.

In the past ten years, over 100 colleges and universities in the United States have either closed or merged. More closures are expected in the years ahead. The coverage of these events is often quite similar. Reports typically note that the institution provided an excellent education to generations of students but was unable to overcome declining enrollment, strained finances, and demographic changes. The closing institution promises to assist students in transferring to other schools and to help employees with job placement. While these reports focus on financial and enrollment data, they rarely capture the lived experiences of those directly affected. They document what has happened, but not what it feels like to lose an academic home, a professional identity, and a sense of purpose.

Narratives can be powerful tools for presenting academic concepts. Like Kübler-Ross (1969), Norris (2016), and Bonanno (2019), who illustrated their research through the stories of their respondents, I share my own experience, specifically, the sense of loss I felt after the announcement that The College of Saint Rose would be closing. At the time, I was fully immersed in that experience and did not view it through an academic lens. Nearly a year later, the closure of Saint Rose still occupied my thoughts. Writing this piece prompted me to draw on the theories I teach in my classes. It helped me understand why I identified so strongly with my role as a college professor and offered insight into the complex emotions that accompany institutional loss.

In what follows, I adopt a similar structure, interweaving my personal story with academic frameworks. I find it beneficial to present students with the evolution of theory in each discipline. For example, in my change management course we began with Lewin's Change as Three Steps model (Lewin, 1947) and move on to Lippitt et al. (1958), then Kotter (1996), and then Hiatt (2006). I think that it helps students to see how theories develop over time, to see that 60 years later the essence of Lewin's ideas can be found in Hiatt's work. Similarly, Maslow provides the foundation of motivation theory, and his work continues to influence thought today. To my mind, there is great power in seminal works. I found them to be the most helpful in processing my own Saint Rose experience, perhaps because they form the foundation of my academic knowledge.

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